



# Code Name: Grizzly (Infinitum)

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**Category:** Romance, Suspense, War

**Description:** Other than my mysterious and possibly fatal medical condition, my life is simple.

I wear my police uniform with pride, and protect my city with integrity. I make sure my dad and sister are safe and happy. And I love Sylvie.

She's everything I've ever wanted in a woman. Crazy smart, adorably nerdy, beautiful, and literally the girl next door. However, four words uttered from her lips spin my world into chaos. Despite her betrayal, I still want her. In my life, in my heart, in my bed. But I'd never tell her that.

My anger awakens a beast that grapples for control. I can't give in, or nothing will ever be the same. When a secret organization concealing heinous crimes against humanity comes for us, nothing will stop me from protecting Sylvie. If they get their hands on me, though, I'll suffer a fate far worse than death.

I have no choice but to unleash the deadly Grizzly inside of me and trust Sylvie will guide me home before it's too late.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:43 am*

One.

New Essex, 6600 inhabitants. This was it. She had arrived, finally!

Driving for almost five days from New Jersey to get to this town had been a challenge, but she succeeded. It had been a fucking hell, but it was over now.

Good for you, Dakota! You did it! You pushed yourself through fear and uncertainty and you accomplished your goal. Or the first of them. She had a list, but it started with arriving here.

She drove calmly to enter the town and gazed around with a big smile. This seemed to be a beautiful place, indeed. Like a postcard, hills and woods surrounded the town. The colors of nature were astonishing: rich browns, deep greens, creamy yellows, soft reds, and brilliant whites.

She rolled the window and breathed, and the cool air filled her lungs. Fresh, unpolluted, invigorating. The smell of pines and wood was everywhere, a subtle reminder she wasn't in the big city anymore.

This had to be the main street. There were several stores with American flags flashing, men in hats and boots, and women flashing their floral dresses. Like a western movie set.

Except this was the real thing, of course. There were a lot of ranches in the area, and cattle breeding was the primary activity. She knew this when googling the name of the town.

Dakota did a lot of research on the web since she found she had a lost grandma who owned a farm in this exact place. Four months had passed since she was aware she had a mystery relative.

The old letter she found in her mother's attic had saved her from despair and sadness. Dakota lived alone in a big house she had inherited from her mum. She had died two years ago from a heart attack.

So unexpectedly! She was alone for the first time. Well, except for Sebastian. Her mother never told her about other relatives or a different life.

They had always been the two of them. Dakota was heartbroken and lost when she died. She could only gather her mum's belongings in boxes and hid them in the attic.

The night she knew her fiancé cheated on her with her best friend, she had had a nervous wreck, and she hid in the said attic to cry, drink and shout till her throat was a wreck.

Sebastian, the fucker, had been her first love, her friend, her rock! Or so she thought. And Sally, her bestie! Ex-bestie now, of course. Both lying rats laughed at her.

Deep down she had known, she realized after grieving for hours. She had ignored all the red flags. The way he covered his phone when reading the messages, how they looked at each other, how she was always in the middle, like a third wheel that Sebastian accepted,

Dakota found out the ugly truth by pure chance. On Sebastian's birthday, she wanted to do something special for him. The surprised one was her when she walked into both of them, sleeping together in his bed.

Dakota was wordless, and she felt as if a knife had stabbed her right in her heart. She

didn't face them. Instead, she let them sleep while she swallowed her feelings and left.

But they knew. She had left the gift on a chair next to Sally's panties. She blocked them both, and to be fair, they didn't explain themselves or said they were sorry. Dakota imagined they were relieved they didn't have to face her. Cowards!

A coffee shop, right there. She needed her caffeine shot in a vein, so she stopped herself from bringing back the past, and parked the car. She walked to the place and waved back at the people who smiled at her or saluted with a hand in their hats. People were friendly and polite here.

She was used to walking around in a hurry, always with a goal in mind, ignoring the rest of the world, but this wasn't the way people were in small towns. She had read some blogs, of course. She was a control freak who needed to know in advance what was going to happen and how she had to behave.

This was so far beyond her usual way of doing things. This... This spontaneous journey to meet a woman who claimed to be his father's mum was the most uncertain thing she had done in... Ever.

Her ex-fiancé was right; she was a boring person. No, not at all. He's the asshole, cheating bastard, her mind told her. You're doing the right thing. It's family.

She entered the coffee shop and gazed around, and then walked to a table next to a window. It was a cozy place, spotless, and the curtains and tablecloths were bright and clean.

A blond middle-aged woman smiled at her from the counter.

"I will be right there, honey. Coffee?"

“That would be great, thanks.”

She saw the woman delivering baked goods from a tray to an exhibitor. They looked yummy, and her stomach grumbled.

“And one of those, please.”

The woman nodded and put one cupcake on a plate, and they brought it to Dakota and poured her a cup of steamy coffee.

“These chocolate and orange cupcakes are to die for. I’m Marge, honey. Can I get you something else?”

## Page 2

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“Mmm,” she said, while sipping the sweet coffee. “No, thank you. Well, except...” She got a little nervous. She had to ask for directions. That was the smart thing to do, of course.

Her only information to get to her grandma was a name and a town. The letter she had found was brief. Ten or twelve sentences were full of kindness to Dakota’s mother, however.

The lady offered her shelter and money and asked about the baby. Dakota imagined her mother hadn’t answered the lady, because she would have remembered getting to know her.

Her mum took her secrets to the grave.

“Spill it, honey. I can see you are a bit of a worrier.”

She looked at Marge with surprise, but the woman had a kind smile on her face and didn’t say it meanly. She surely was used to people talking to her.

“I’m not from here,” Dakota said.

“I can tell. This is a small place.”

“I was wondering if you could help me find someone.”

“I know a bunch of people. That’s the thing with small towns. We know each other well. Who are you looking for?”

“Mmmm, her name is Peggy. Peggy Sue...”

“Peggy Sue Simpson?” Marge frowned.

“Yes! Do you know her?”

“Who doesn’t? The woman is a damn institution here in New Essex.” Marge smiled.

“Is she?”

Okay, that was good to know. It was a relief. She had thought finding her grandma would be much more trouble.

“She is, and she lives on a farm close to town. Hers is a beautiful place. She grows vegetables, makes goat cheese, and more. A hard-working lady.”

“Is she old?” she asked, truly curious now. It was obvious Marge admired her grandma, and although she didn’t know her yet, that made Dakota feel good. Like proud, or something.

“Mmm, that’s hard to say. Seventy, seventy-five, perhaps. But tell me...”

“Dakota,” she added. “Dakota Simpson.”

The lady’s eyes widen, and Dakota shrugged.

“I know, weird. Pretty sure she’s my grandma. Funny story, really. I found a letter in my mother’s attic...”

“You’re Peggy Sue’s granddaughter? Oh, my... This is... This is...”

Marge seemed a little overwhelmed, both hands on her hips, her eyes like x-rays on Dakota. Then she smiled and nodded.

“You have Peggy Sue’s eyes, you know? Those beautiful green eyes. And your hair... I loved your mum’s strawberry blond tone.”

“You knew my mum,” she said in awe.

“I did, honey. Fiona. Is she...?”

“She died two years ago. Heart attack,” she answered, and bit her lower lip to avoid mopping, but the woman rushed to hug her.

Dakota widened her eyes in surprise, but she allowed the embrace, and she finished hugging Marge back. She felt good, the kind woman pampering her. She hadn’t known how starved for human touch she was.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, honey. Peggy Sue will be so sad. But she will be happy too. She always wanted to reach out to you.”



## Page 3

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“I hadn’t got a clue of anything. I didn’t know I had a family.”

“Yes, darling, but your mother never wanted her to meet you.”

“What about my father, her son?” Dakota asked. “What happened?”

Did her father live? Her mother had always been reluctant to talk about him. Dakota imagined there was a very sad story below the secrets.

She had to know everything because she was starving for the truth. She felt like on standby in her life.

She couldn’t go forward until she didn’t put all the things of her life in the place they had to be. Her present was shit, and she had to disentangle the past.

Then she would face her future. That was the plan.

“That’s not for me to tell you, dear.” There was despair on Marge’s face, but a decision too. “I will drive you to Peggy Sue’s farm, and you could meet her and ask her about everything.”

“Do you think she would like to see me?”

“Sweetie, Peggy Sue is going to shine. There will be a lot of tears, I can tell. But it will be great. I’m so happy you made your mind and came.” Marge hugged her again, and Dakota grinned.

She had felt scared and doubtful, but everything seemed to be working in her favor now.

## Page 4

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Two.

Marge was a terrible driver, or at least a fearless one. Dakota tried not to worry while the truck bounced on the layered narrow road, and she grabbed the safety belt with both hands.

The woman took the ninety degree curves as if she was driving a Formula 1 in a world championship. It was insane!

She was glad the road was rather isolated and nobody seemed to drive at this time of the day. Farmers, ranchers, and cowboys were probably working, thank god.

“Peggy Sue lives a bit further, honey, but I’m stopping at Sullivan’s hut for a minute. You see, I have to deliver those groceries to Ted.”

She pointed to the big box she had put on the bed of the truck. “The poor man has a broken leg, and he cannot drive or ride to get them. His brother Rex asked me for help, but bringing him things from time to time is all I can do just now.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Dakota said. “He must be grateful. People are friendly here.”

“Well, that’s the right thing to do. You will see if you stay, people here care about the others. Most of them, at least. Neighbors and friends are as important as family. Sometimes, more important, because we’re nearer.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She put her hands to stop her face from smacking against

the window when Marge stopped the car abruptly.

She looked around and saw they were by the driveway of a beautiful cabin, a wooden one.

It was a nice house in the middle of the woods, peaceful and full of good energy. The right place for a wounded man to heal, surrounded by nature, she thought. Balance and quiet were important.

“It was fucking time you showed up with my groceries, Marge,” a deep masculine voice yelled. “What took you so long, old lady?”

Dakota opened her mouth in disbelief and then jumped when Marge yelled back before getting out of the vehicle.

“Old your ugly horse, Ted.”

“Don’t you dare insult Thunder, Marge! He’s the most sensitive horse in the state. You will hurt his feelings.”

Dakota turned her head to find the biggest man she had ever seen. Damn! She probably would have found him intimidating if she had met him alone. He was so tall and bulky!

But he walked clumsily with the crutches, and his wide grin was friendly. Besides, the kindly and careful way he hugged Marge told Dakota he was a kind of a softie.

The gesture swept any threat Dakota could have felt. He has to be 4 inches above 6 feet, and he was all muscle, but his smile and sparkling eyes were kind.

“Let go of me, lazy cowboy!” Marge told him, and she walked back to grab the big

box from the truck, and rushed inside. “I brought you enough canned food to last to next week!” she said.

“I was afraid you would say that,” he yelled. “What happened to your homemade food? I was hoping you would deliver me some of your tasty meals to freeze. You know I can pay you, mean lady. I have been your best customer for years!”

“I’m sorry, honey, I’m struggling to get my coffee shop opened. I had to fire Timothy.”

“He ate and drank more than he worked...” he said.

“He did. But Beth is ill, too, so...”

“I’m screwed.” He sighed.

He had ignored Dakota the whole time, and perhaps he wouldn’t have looked at her if she hadn’t snorted.

But she couldn’t avoid it when she saw the big man pouting, as if trying to charm Marge.

“Well, well, what do you have there, Marge? Who’s this fine lady?” He got nearer, using his crutches without much trouble, and then he was staring at her face, almost invading her personal space. She stared back, frowning. “Lady, are you making fun of me? Laughing at a minus valid?”

Dakota blushed and stammered.

“Nooo... That’s... That’s not what...”

He tilted his head, and Dakota felt mesmerized by his hazel eyes. He wasn't handsome in a traditional way, although his features were... interesting.

## Page 5

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Jet black hair, square jaw, wide nose, and enormous hands. She didn't know why she noticed that, but she did.

One of them was grabbing a crutch, and the other rested on his thigh. A tree trunk thigh. The one which wasn't plastered.

“Do you like what you see?” His cocky grin almost made her choke. She was staring at the guy like a creepy woman! Shame on her!

“Leave Dakota alone, Ted!” Marge came back and rushed to the driver's seat. “She's not one of your conquests.”

“Dakota, mmm? Beautiful name.” He leaned to her again, his head almost into the truck. “Friend of yours, Marge?”

“She is now. Peggy Sue's visitor,” she added and winked at Dakota, who felt a warm emotion wrapping her heart when hearing Marge saying they were friends. Crazy, they had just known.

“Interesting. I like visitors. They cheer up the town,” he said and smiled at Dakota, but then gazed at Marge again. “Marge, I need help like yesterday! Did you put a sign offering the job, as I told you? I'm struggling here. Brad left for San Francisco three days ago, and Rex has his hands full with Marie and the baby.”

“I ran the voice, Ted, but you know this isn't easy. Farmers are hiring right now, hands are busy... And nobody wants to take care of a big baby like you! You shouldn't have fired Sarah Jane and Penelope.”

“Damn, woman! You’re killing me! You know I had to. They were rude and lazy. I need real help. Besides, they tried to grope me and cornered me every time they could. I’m not a prude, but even a sexy cowboy has boundaries.”

Dakota giggled, and she covered her mouth with a hand when he stared at her with an offended look. Bad Dakota, she shouldn’t smile. Harassing people was bad!

“That you’re not, nope. But I told you, you shouldn’t put yourself on a silver tray for them, big guy.”

“I didn’t! Just because I like to walk naked in my room doesn’t mean I’m available. I’m not a cheap whore!” he said, and Dakota nodded.

And then swallowed hard. Walking around naked? Wow! Would this be a custom here?

“Stop the drama, llama,” Marge said.

“So unfaithful. Just because a couple of sad women ran a rumor.” He sighed, and Dakota stared at him. Then he snorted, and Marge snorted back.

They were kidding. They surely had a weird sense of humor. Puff. Well, not naked then. Pity. No, no, she shouldn’t think about that.

“I’m sorry, Ted, you know I love you, but you’re a pain in the ass. I cannot help you! If you hadn’t messed around so much the last couple of years, married men and insecure bachelors wouldn’t see you as a menace to their women. You would have found help in the blink of an eye.”

“Nonsense. Please, I’m begging you... Find me an assistant. I’m out of clothes, starving, dying of boredom, incapable of facing my physical therapy exercises alone.”



Dakota looked at them, talking to each other as if she wasn't there, and an idea formed in her mind.

One thing-to-do in her list was to get a job. She had resigned to her work in the office in a spontaneous act when she decided she wanted a different life.

Perhaps faith had something to do with the information she was getting now.

"I think I will be around for a while. I need a job. I could help you, Mr..."

"Ted, honey. Just Ted. Wonderful idea. I accept," he grinned, and Dakota nodded.

Okay, that was easy. See? She could be spontaneous and get a reward.

"Mmm, I don't think you should rush to..." Marge said.

"Marge, Marge, tsk, tsk," he said. "You know me."

"That's exactly why I..."

"Honey, you're hired. Peggy Sue lives two miles away from here. I'm sure it will be easy for you to be here early in the mornings. 8 o'clock. We can discuss your salary and duties tomorrow. Thank you!" He waved and Marge started the engine, sighing.

"Okay, you've just known our most famous inhabitant. The cocky and reckless Ted Sullivan, bull rider champion in 2019 and 2020."

"Bull rider? Seriously? Is that even a job?" She frowned, and Marge laughed at her surprised look.

"Oh, yes, darling. You're in a whole new world! Things are rather different in the

west. You'll see. That man is a charmer, by the way. Be careful if you don't want to finish with your heart broken."

"I just need a job," she said. "I've just broken with my fiancé. I'm not in a mood for a relationship, nor looking for one."

"Good to know. Seems to me you have had a lot on your plate."

"Yeah... I hope I can straighten my path from now on. I'm..." She sighed and smiled at Marge. She had just met the woman, but she was kind. "I think all will be different."

"You'll find your grandma is the sweetest woman alive. She will help you, honey. Trust me."

Dakota sighed. She needed a break from sorrow and cheating people in her life. That was why she left everything behind. She was about to face a part of her life she ignored, and she was as nervous as expectant.

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Three.

Ted walked to the barn slowly. Walking on crutches was a nightmare and he hated it, but he didn't want to split and break his good leg. That would be his ruin!

He breathed deep to settle his temper that ran thin lately. It was his damn fault he was stuck in this hut, bored and sour, eating from cans and watching reruns of his favorite series.

If he only hadn't been so stubborn and had listened to his older brother Rex! But no, he had to do it his way, hadn't he?

That young bull Rex wanted to castrate had smashed Ted's right leg when he cornered it. Who could blame the animal? They were trying to cut its jewels.

Open fracture of the tibia. He went through surgery and he had a long, straight metal rod inserted into the center of the bone to keep the bone straight and stable, and a cast to use for the first weeks.

Next week, it would be replaced with a removable brace. It will take him months to recover. He would heal faster if he rested and didn't put too much weight on the leg, the doctor said.

And he needed physical therapy. Easy to say, but oh, so hard to accomplish for a cowboy and a bull rider as Ted was. He was restless thinking about all the things he should be doing, but he wasn't.

Like helping Rex on the ranch. His fracture had been bad news for him but for his brothers, too. Sweet Marie, her sister-in-law, was about to pop her child.

He would be an uncle! Rex was going mental with the prospect. The bastard had his hands full and his mind was a mess. He could barely work these days.

Brad, the middle brother, was in San Francisco to record with his former band. He had been a country singer for years, but he had left that life behind till his partners called him.

Their new singer had had a diva tantrum, and they fired him. Brad didn't want to go, but they had begged it was for a good cause. They were recording a solidarity album and all the proceeds were for cancer research.

So Brad traveled and he would be there for several weeks. Ted was on his own. That would be great if he wasn't so dependable on people. He couldn't drive around or ride his horse, and he refused to call Rex or Marie anytime he needed something.

Spencer, the Sheriff, Billy, the foreman of Sullivan's ranch, and Marge visited and helped him how they can. But as he had told Marge, he needed a person in the house during the day.

He reached the stall where his stallion was. The animal nickered, avid to get its treat, and Ted put some oat in a bucket and fed it.

He patted its head and stroked its mane while the appaloosa ate, focusing on the peace of mind he felt just for being around the animal.

"Soon, Thunder. We will ride again. I miss our afternoons over the hills. We will have to mend a lot of fences when I am recovered." The horse moved its head gently and Brad smiled.

He cursed when he felt a sharp pain in his thigh. He had to stop moving around, so he returned to the house, using the crutches properly to support his weight.

It was warm and cozy inside, and he sat on his favorite couch. The hut he lived in since Rex and Marie got married was located in the south part of the ranch. It was one of the best places in the world.

The second one was any place where he could ride a bull and feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins and the public roaring. Those few seconds of glory when he faced wildness and animal power were exhilarating. Dangerous.

It was quite an irony he had been injured working at home and not during a championship. He sighed. He was so bored. He wasn't a talkative man, but he needed socialization.

At least something good had happened today. He had hired help. He grinned. Would that pretty babe show herself tomorrow? He hoped so.

She was a pretty tiny thing, all flustered and big eyes when Marge and he joked and talked shit. Those baby blue eyes were beautiful, and the curly light brown hair was a delicate frame for her rounded face. Cute, indeed!

Peggy Sue's visitor, Marge said. Weird. The old lady was the kindest woman he knew, but he thought she didn't have a family. Her only son had died ten years ago, and she had been a widow for decades.

Dakota, that was the visitor's name. His new assistant's name, he said to himself. He had to think about her duties and salary. Rex would help him with the papers and shit. He didn't know a thing about hiring and dealing with employees.

But he surely needed the woman to cook, do the laundry, clean, and do things like

that. She could drive him into town, too. The idea made him smile. He had to share the news. He got his cell phone and sent Rex a message.

Me:Hi, big bro! How are things going?

He had to wait a good half an hour to get an answer.

Rex:Marie is napping, so this is as peaceful as a thumb in a baby's mouth.

Ted snorted and shook his head.

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Me:Enjoy your last weeks of freedom and peace, old man. When Marie delivers my niece, your life will be hell!

Rex:I cannot wait, asshole. What's up?

Me:I hired help. I will visit you with her tomorrow to deal with the papers.

Rex:She? I can only hope she's over sixty.

Me:Not a chance. She's over twenty, indeed. I think.

Rex:Who is she? Didn't you learn your lesson with the last two girls?

Me:This is different. She's new in town. Peggy Sue's guest.

Rex:I knew there was something weird. Poor girl doesn't know what she is getting herself into.

Me:She will. Marge was driving her. But I will show my best side, I promise. I need help here, bro. Don't worry!

Rex:I won't. I have better things to worry about. Marie is up. Bye.

Ted stood and walked to the kitchen, and opened the box Marge brought. Green beans, corn, tomatoes, soup, spaghetti and meatballs, tuna.

Oh, homemade cookies! God blessed that woman! He bit one and sighed with

pleasure. Pure heaven!

He poured himself a coffee and took the feast to the living room. The laptop was just on and he searched for the video of the last rodeo he took part in, and then he selected the last mount he did that night.

He sat comfortably and saw himself on the back of that crazy bull, Mad Max. Damn animal! He needed all his strength and courage that afternoon. The animal was a beast; over 2 thousand pounds of muscle exploding in the arena, bucking and twisting.

Ted did his best to stay aboard the twisting bull, his hand wrapped around the flat rope and his legs trying to stay glued to the bull's sides. Mad Max made its best effort to throw Ted to the ground, but he stayed in control, and when the eight seconds finished, he got an amazing score.

He won, and the public went nuts. God, he missed the competition already. He lived for that. Nah, he told himself. Life was bigger than that.

He saw it now. He loved the rodeo adrenaline, the excitement, the energy, the exposure, the fame, but those emotions were running thin lately.

That was the reason he had come back to live with his brothers and work on the ranch. He was taking his time to reorganize his life and goals. He was 28, still young, but he had been around rodeo championships since he was eighteen.

He had broken several bones; he had hit his head a few times, and he had won more than enough to have financial security for years.

He returned because he needed it, but because of Rex's needs, too. Rex had handled things smoothly for the last fifteen years, but when Ted and Brad returned, both for



different reasons, they saw his older brother hadn't got a social or love life.

He lived for work. Someone had to manage the ranch, and it had been obvious it had to be Rex. However, there was plenty of work and space for the three of them.

Fortunately, when Rex had time, life sent him a sweet and beautiful lady who caught him easily and had him on his knees. Ted smiled. Marie was perfect for his grumpy brother.

Ted didn't think he needed to settle down. There were so many pretty women living their lives and sharing their love. He wanted his own family, a wife, and kids, but that can wait till he was mature enough. When he was forty-something, probably.

Life was to enjoy, and if he was going to stop entering competitions as a regular thing, he could spend most of his spare time making women happy. He had a magic stick for that! He chuckled. He had to avoid that kind of silly comment in front of sweet Dakota.

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Four.

Dakota had little time to think or got anxious before arriving at Peggy Sue's farmhouse. When Marge turned to drive the last five hundred meters towards the house, she could only look at her surroundings.

It was beautiful! There were trees on both sides of the path and they were exploding with fruit: pears, peaches, apples.

She saw there were berries, too. And pumpkins, and calves, and ducks. Chicken. A horse. Wow.

The house itself was like a classic photograph of the west: a wooden cottage in white and blue, and there were flowers everywhere.

“This is amazing!”

“Peggy Sue has lived here for thirty years, honey. She and his husband bought this land when there was nothing except an old barn. They built the house, planted the trees, and worked hard. When her beloved died, she sold half of the land, but worked harder. She is fierce. Come on, it's time for both of you to know each other.”

Dakota followed Marge and stood quietly two meters behind. The lady knocked on the door loudly, and then she shouted,

“Peggy Sue, I brought you the biggest gift, dear. Where are you?”

“Coming!” Dakota held her breath when she heard the voice, and then she moved her head to see.

Peggy Sue was a short lady with a lot of wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, and her white hair was short.

Dakota saw the same green of hers staring back. She was cleaning her hands using the apron she had on when opened the door.

“Hello, Marge! Nice to see you! I was hoping you will visit me. Hello there!” She moved to wave at Dakota, a welcoming smile widening her mouth.

“I intended to pass yesterday, but I’m having a rough week. But I had to come today. You’ll see... Aren’t you going to let us inside, dear?”

“Oh, of course, silly me!” The old lady giggled, but her stare was glued to Dakota. “I’m sorry, dear, what’s your name? Do I know you?”

“Dakota, Madam. I’m sorry if we disturb you. I asked Marge about you, and she...”

“Nonsense, sweetie. I love visitors. I am rather lonely these days. I have Sam, but he doesn’t talk too much. Men,” she rolled her eyes.

“Sam is the man who helps with farm chores,” Marge said.

“Bless him,” Peggy Sue said. “Can I get you a tea, honey?”

“That... That would be nice,” Dakota said, now sitting on a comfortable couch. She didn’t know what to say, or how to ask what she was here to know.

What if it was too much for the old woman? She looked fragile, in a way. Dakota

knew nothing about her, except Marge said she would love to have her here. But what if Marge was wrong?

“I will handle the tea. Peggy Sue... This is important, my dear. This is what you have been waiting for.” Marge caressed the old lady’s hand, and Dakota moved on her seat.

Peggy Sue opened her mouth, shut it, and stared at her in awe, her lower lip trembling. Then she put her hands on her face and tears exploded in her eyes. Dakota widened her eyes.

“You’re Fiona’s daughter, aren’t you?” Dakota nodded, and then Peggy Sue stood and came to her of a sudden, and hugged her tightly, sobbing.

Her soft hands, small and a little stiffed, caressed Dakota’s cheeks. That was when Dakota realized she was crying, too.

“I’m... I’m Dakota,” she stuttered. “I... I think I’m your granddaughter, but...”

“Of course, you are, my dear,” the old lady said fiercely, nodding and pulling Dakota to her chest. “You’re the best gift this old lady could have received ever. My child, I had lost all hope.”

“I didn’t know you existed till I found a letter two weeks ago. My mother... She died two years ago. She never... She didn’t...”

“Of course, she didn’t tell you, dear. Fiona swore she had no family when she left. She was alone, hurt, and pregnant. She had lost every motive to stay or trust my son, or even me. It’s a sad, sad story, Dakota.” The green eyes were shiny and lost in the past, but then Peggy Sue shook her head. “But you’re here now. You came.”

“I had to. I found out about you in the worst moment of my life, and it gave me hope for a new beginning.”

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“My dearest! Have faith, Dakota! You’re not alone anymore, my child. I’m here for you. Oh, my...” She smiled, although tears still covered her eyes. “Good Lord forgave me for my faults and gave me time to mend my mistakes. Thank you, thank you Lord!” she closed her eyes for a while.

“Ladies, you’re breaking me!” Marge brought a tray with a teapot and three mugs. She was sniffing. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” she asked Peggy Sue, and the old lady nodded.

“Fiona’s hair and the eyes of my family. My son’s mouth and nose.”

“My mother never showed me a photo of my father,” she said, and her grandma stood and walked to get a portrait.

Dakota saw her father for the first time: a handsome man with shaggy brown hair, deep green eyes, and a killing smile.

“My son. A wild one. We raised him well, or so we thought. But he wanted too much, too soon. He hurt your mother, he hurt me, and he didn’t live enough to regret and change. He died young in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry,” Dakota said in an automat response.

“It was a long time ago. I was stubborn and acted when it was too late. I should have stopped Fiona and helped her. Help you.” There was so much sadness in her voice.

“You didn’t know Fiona was pregnant or that your son would be so cruel with her,”

Marge said, but Peggy Sue shook her head.

“I should have known. But I was blind to my son’s faults. When he told me about Fiona, she had left the town and nobody knew a thing about her. I gave her mother a letter. I tried to reach her, but she never answered, or came back. That letter you found... Your mother’s mum must have sent it.”

“You mean I have more relatives?” The idea was exhilarating. She had thought of herself as alone in the world, and now...

“Well, I don’t know. Your mum’s family moved years ago. They sold the farm and moved to the East. Nobody has heard of them since then,” Peggy Sue said.

“So, Fiona never told you about them, either?” Marge asked with a frown. “Wow. That girl...”

“They bumped her, Marge. Don’t you remember how tight they were? How strict? Fiona had nothing, and she had to start a new life from zero, on her own.”

“Our world of two. She used to say that. We don’t need anyone. We have each other. Until we haven’t,” Dakota said, and it was as if something imploded in her insides.

She burst into tears and sobbed for a long time. She hadn’t mourned her mum entirely. She had had to go on, to be strong.

“Oh, dear, I hate knowing you were so sad and lonely! But this is the time to let those tears flow. Clean yourself from sorrow. Take your time. You’re safe here, with me.” Peggy Sue talked with fierce passion. “We will work to build the relationship we both deserve.”

Dakota had so many questions; so many emotions flew through her. But Peggy Sue

was right, she had to mourn her past life.

She was in a good place, with the right person. The only one she needed right now.

“Yeah... I think I can do that.” She smiled, and relief went through her body. She was here to heal, to know about her past. To understand her mother’s path and decisions. “There’s so much I need to know. I have felt mad and disappointed. My mother...”

“She did what she could with what she had. Let’s not guilt her for her pain and decisions. It wasn’t easy to be in her shoes. I blamed myself for my blindness and my selfishness for so long. But that won’t bring her back, nor my son. We will help each other, Dakota.”

“I like that. Can I...? Can I stay here? I...”

“That’s a must, my dear! I have plenty of room. I’d love to have you here for as long as you wish. This is your house, my dear child. I wrote my last will years ago. You will inherit this farm.”

“What? But...” Dakota stared at Peggy Sue with astonishment. “But you didn’t know me...”

“You’re my granddaughter. I knew you were somewhere.”

“It would have been a shock if...”

“Yes, I can imagine. But things were different, thank God. You’re here.”

“I am,” she nodded.



“Let’s accommodate you, dear. We can go on talking later. And tomorrow, and the day after...”

“Dakota took a job on her way here,” Marge smirked. “As Ted Sullivan’s help.”

“What?” She looked at her. “Why would you do that?”

“I resigned from my former job. I need to do something, and the poor man needs help. I felt compelled,” she said.

“Oh, boy. I see. Ted can be a real charmer, can’t he?” Peggy Sue giggled. “That’s okay, I think. I like you socializing and rooting here.”

Dakota thought that could be a little early for that. She was a city girl. She didn’t know if she would stay here after dealing with her past.

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Five.

“Go away! I’m sleeping!” Ted yelled and put a cushion over his head.

Whoever was by the door had to be a pain in the ass, for sure. He didn’t want visitors.

“What time is it?” he groaned and threw the blanket away when attempting to reach his phone on the coffee table. Then he opened one eye. 8.15 am.

He scratched his nose and looked at the window. Bright light. He sighed and stretched.

He was lying on the three-piece sofa Brad had bought for him to rest downstairs. He could get to his room upstairs if he did an effort, but it would mess with his recovery.

Not going to happen. He was stubborn, but not a dumbass. He knew better than to disobey the doctor’s advice.

So, 8 o’clock. That was late; he usually got up at 6. But Billy had been here yesterday, and they had drunk and talked until 11 pm.

By the time he closed his eyes, it was 12, and he felt tired. That explained his sour mood and hell of a morning breath.

He sat on the mattress and then moved to the side, one hand lifting the hurt leg. There was another knock on the front door.

“Come in! It’s open,” he yelled. He supposed it was the sheriff or one of the ranch’s hands. It sure wasn’t Rex, because the bastard didn’t knock. He just rushed inside and started pestering him about something.

When the door opened carefully and Dakota’s face appeared, he remembered he had hired her. And he told her to be punctual and fresh to help him.

He smiled at her, and his hand went to his hair to smooth it. The intense red of her cheeks and her gaze flying to the other side of the room made him frown.

Then he remembered he was in his underwear.

“I can come back later,” she said shyly.

“No, no! I overslept! But I will be ready and dressed in a minute. I’m not used to receiving my help almost naked, I assure you.” He leaned to get the blanket, but then one crutch slipped and he almost fell to the ground.

Dakota rushed to help him, and she picked up the crutch and gave it to him, and her eyes were glued to his face.

He smiled to his insides while looking at the flustered lady’s attempts not to stare at his bottom half of the body.

“Thank you, Dakota. I’m heading to the bathroom. I’ll be decent in two minutes. Could you get me a clean pair of jeans and a Henley? My room is the first by the stairs.”

“Certainly. Would you like me to prepare breakfast?”

“Oh, honey, that would be great.”

“Okay. Nothing fancy, but I can cook scrambled eggs or an omelet.”

“That sounds like heaven to me. I’ve only had coffee and cereal since my brother Brad left. I’m kind of useless in the kitchen.”

He got to the bathroom and made his business, and then hit the shower. He proceeded cautiously, first taking the cast off, and moving truly slowly when cleaning the area.

The last thing he wanted was to slip and break another bone. He was humming one of his favorite songs when Dakota knocked and then entered.

“I leave your clothes here, on the stool,” she said and rushed outside. Ted chuckled. The shower curtain was thick, but he imagined the sweet lady had entered with her eyes closed.

His groin stirred a little while he thought he enjoyed disturbing her a little. Behave, Ted. She can help you. You don’t want her to run over the hills because you’re a horny bastard.

He whistled and took his time putting the jeans on, although he had changed all his pants to fit his new status. When he entered the living room, the smell of food hit him and his stomach growled.

He felt ravenous. He walked to the kitchen and stopped by the doorway.

She was short, 5.2 feet, he thought, but she was fully curved. Nice breasts, tiny waist, wide hips, rounded ass. Perfect!

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She glided from the counter to the oven, and there was coffee, scrambled eggs and the cookies Marge brought yesterday on a plate.

“Wow, this is like a buffet,” he nodded, and she smiled at him. A dazzling smile that almost brought him to his knees.

Goodness! The woman was pretty, but when she smiled... She was astonishing. Don't go there, Ted! She's the help you need desperately. You don't want to ruin this.

“It's just coffee, oatmeal, eggs... Standard breakfast,” she answered, lowering her eyes and working to bring him the plates and the mug of strong liquid he drank eagerly.

“Is that okay? I didn't know if you liked it sweeter or...”

“Perfect. Just I like it, strong and black. Have one with me and we can discuss your duties.”

She nodded and poured herself coffee, but she added sugar and cream to hers. She sat in front of him and pouted when blown to cool the liquid.

Tempting lips too, the upper bigger with the bow perfectly drew. Charming. He cleared his throat and then ate a mouthful of oatmeal and then drank more coffee.

“Well, Dakota. Thank you so much for giving me a chance. I know Marge must have warned about me a lot, but I swear I can behave like a mature man. I'm kind of charming and handsome, but I can control my charm when I want to,” he winked at

her and she laughed.

“Cocky, aren’t you?”

“Oh, that word again. I’m just conscious of my strengths. Kidding here, sweet. I need your help, as you can see. Mostly to feed me and help me move around. I’m a bit of a mess with clothes and objects, so you’ll have to order and do my laundry.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“You’ll be hired by the ranch. We have to go to Rex, my brother, and he will handle the papers and the legal stuff. I hope you can drive my truck.”

“I can drive, yes, although you’ll see I am a cautious driver. Not a suicidal one, as Marge.”

He chuckled when saw her shivering.

“That woman is a menace, but she is gold. Tell me, Dakota, are you staying at Peggy Sue’s home?”

He was curious now. She hadn’t told him anything about her. She didn’t impress him as a dangerous person or anything like that, but he should know more about the person who was going to share his days from now on.

“Yes. I’m...” she stopped for a while as if dealing with something in her head. “She’s my grandma.”

He widened his eyes.

“Really? That’s new. I thought Peggy Sue didn’t...”

“I discovered she was my grandma just fifteen days ago. My mother... She left town when she was young and pregnant...”

“Peggy Sue’s son was your father then...” He frowned, trying to remember the man. He was a kid when the car accident happened. He remembered his parents were sad because of Peggy Sue.

“He was. I didn’t know him. He rejected my mother, and she ran away. Kind of...” she added, her eyes on the table. He could see how tense she was in the way her fingers squeezed the mug.

“Sad story, then. I...” He felt like a dumb-ass. “You just met your grandma yesterday. You should be with her. I apologize. I pushed you hard to hire you. I apologize. Go to your grandma. I will handle...”

“No, that’s okay, really. I enjoy working here. It distracts me. I have a lot to think about, and I think better when I can get a little distance. My grandma and I will have a lot of time to know each other, to bond... I intend to be around for a while.”

“Good to know,” he nodded. It was. He stared at her while drinking his coffee. She had to be facing a lot of emotions right now. Some good, others not so much. Dealing with him was a bonus.

He grinned, thinking of this. He could be sympathetic and kind. Even funny. He knew he was easygoing, and it wasn’t just a facade.

He liked making people laugh and have a good time. Okay, he liked to make ladies happy, too, but that was him being wild.

“We will go to the ranch house now. I will introduce you to my big brother and his sweet wife, Marie. She’s pregnant. I will be an uncle in a few weeks.”

“Oh, that’s huge. Congratulations!”



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“Well, thank you, although Rex thinks I will be a messy uncle. The man is a little grumpy, I warn you.”

“That’s okay. I worked in an office dealing with all kinds of people. I assure you I can manage odd, grumpy, angry, funny, cocky, whatever...”

“Uh, that sounds like shit to me! Big cities and their crowds are living hell, I’m sure.”

“Sometimes,” she nodded.

“I have traveled a lot and stayed in fancy places. I have even partied at nightclubs and had dinners with beautiful sophisticated women at amazing restaurants...”

“I bet you had,” she said, her mesmerizing eyes staring at him and a smirk on her lips.

“But I always ran like hell after doing my act. Whatever it was. I always tried to give the best of impressions. For the cowboy community to be proud of. You know, some women have this... fantasies about cowboys.” He raised his eyebrows in a meaningful gesture.

“I see,” she said, and then she snorted. “I can see you trying to do your best effort to sustain those fantasies.”

“You know it. Now, this was wonderful.” He finished eating the eggs, and then he stood and she helped with the crutches. “We are going to the ranch. You will be amazed. It’s a beautiful place.”

“The town and its surroundings are amazing. That was the first thing I saw. And my grandma’s farm is so cozy.”

“I like it very much. Peggy Sue worked hard to maintain it. Life on a farm is filled with early mornings and endless chores, but she never complains. She did what she had to do to make it work. And his berries are the best in the region. Now you work for me. I’m sure she will send me her famous pies.”

“Perhaps. You have a sweet tooth, I see,” she smiles sweetly.

“I love a treat. Don’t you?”

“I’m always struggling with weight,” she confessed. “I tried not to eat sugary food.”

“Honey, you’re gorgeous,” he told her, and she blushed. He wasn’t intending to charm her. He was being him. Honest, blunt. “I don’t think you need anything but see yourself as most men see you. Yummy,” he smirked.

“You keep nothing to yourself,” she said, biting her lower lip.

“No, not. I say what I think. Unless I realize it’s rude or it can hurt someone. But I think you need to know you’re beautiful. And don’t take this too seriously. This is not me trying to get in your pants, Dakota. Pinky swear.” He raised his pinky finger, and she shook her head, a smile plastered on her face.

He grinned. She seemed flustered but happy. He liked it.

Six.

Dakota pulled away and drove home. Peggy Sue's home, she thought. She sighed. She had been through deep emotions and feelings yesterday.

Since she found the truth about her past and her ex-fiancé, to be fair. She compelled herself to go on no matter what.

She focused on leaving Sebastian and her friend behind, and to find her grandma and the half of her life she didn't know she had.

Meeting Peggy Sue and knowing what had happened to her mother shocked her. Her sperm donator had been a real bastard.

She debated with conflicted feelings since she arrived. She was happy because she met her grandma, and the lady was loving and caring. She told her she had been eager and hopeful for the last twenty years.

But she felt sad, too, because she thought she was to blame for her mother's sad life. Her mum had lost the man she loved and her family when being pregnant.

Dakota lived more than two decades clueless. She had been mad at her mum when she found the letter, thinking of her as selfish and uncaring, even cold. She had blamed her mum for blocking her from meeting her father's family.

Now she understood. Her mother had been heartbroken and had had no one to care about her or help her. She had to rebuild her life from ashes with a baby.

She had never showed Dakota an inch of regret or sourness. Her mum had loved her to pieces, and this knowledge broke Dakota's heart. How lonely and isolated she must have felt!

Peggy Sue helped her to understand this when she showed herself angry at her mum. She wasn't to blame, my dear. She was hurt, badly. She only received hate and humiliation from those who had to care for and love her. She was strong and fierce. She raised you without poisoning your heart and gave you the best.

I know she tried her best, Dakota said.

She loved you so much, my dear. Forgive her, her only fault was proud, perhaps. Who could blame a woman for that? She protected you, I'm sure. From pain and uncertainty, from deception and rejection. I know I waited for you, but I cannot lie. My son... He wasn't a good man, and he didn't deserve your mother's sacrifice or you.

Her grandma told this with tears in her eyes. She had loved her son, but she was well aware of his faults, although perhaps later than she should.

Peggy Sue's words helped Dakota to open her eyes and heart, and her mother shined again in her mind and heart.

She was eager to know more about Peggy Sue and build the loving bond they should have shared since she was born. It was a chance she wouldn't lose.

But it was so intense, so consuming. She knew she couldn't be around the whole time.

She needed space, time to process her thoughts and feelings, and so her new job was a blessing.

It was 4.15 pm, and she was coming back after spending eight hours with the cocky cowboy.

She was driving his enormous truck because he had offered it, and when she said no, he ordered her to take it.

I don't need it. It's not as if I'm going to drive it, Dakota. I'll feel better if you use it. I trust you; you showed me you can drive just fine.

She smiled when remembering his words and all the things they had shared.

He was easy going and there wasn't a bit of shyness in his body. His toned, bulky, muscled, mouth-watering body.

She shook her head and tried to make her mind go for a less dangerous path, but it was hard.

The first day of work, when she entered the house and found him only in his boxers, her gonads had exploded. He was gorgeous! Marge's and Peggy Sue's words had popped into her mind: Ted is a player, dear. Don't let her charm you.

But then he had been casual and natural, and he didn't look at her like he was trying to impress or seduce her.

He had overslept on the couch and he said he was sorry. Then he asked her for clean clothes and accepted her offer to prepare him breakfast.

The awkward situation evolved, and she tried to be helpful. As she should.

It didn't matter that she had felt flustered the whole time. She could manage him, and she was sure he appreciated her efforts.

It was hard to be alone in a big house with a broken leg.

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She thought his brothers should have supported him more. He had been careless about it, though. They were busy, and he understood.

She had driven him to the ranch in the morning after she helped him up and rearrange the driver's seat. This made her more aware of the height difference between them.

She was plump and voluptuous, but short, and he had laughed at her fussing around the seat.

Rex Sullivan was an imposing rancher, stoic and serious, but she liked him, especially when she saw the tender way he took care of her pregnant wife, Marie.

A sweet and welcoming lady who showed her surprise when Ted introduced her as his new housekeeper. Dakota looked at her with confusion, but he had been all smiles.

“Rex, Dakota is new in town. She's Peggy Sue's granddaughter, and she is a city girl. She will help me with the house and food, with my leg, and she will be my designated driver for the next weeks. I want you to pay well, bro. You know I can be a real pain in the ass.”

“That's an underestimation.” Rex had chuckled, but Ted dismissed his words. They were closed and gave shit to each other.

“Dakota, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm relieved Ted will have some help. We're tying but...” Rex caressed Marie's belly and Dakota saw the immense love in his eyes.

“I’m having a rough couple of weeks,” Marie sighed. “I need to stay at home and take care of my high blood pressure. Eat healthy, not salt. Exercises. Rex is my rock, but he has to handle the ranch, too.”

It was a lot, of course. Dakota felt bad. She had thought of them as selfish.

“Marie, Rex is lucky,” Ted said. “He has to kiss the ground you walk on. Make him swear, honey. He doesn’t deserve you. I told you when it counted, I can be more helpful and fun, but you made your choice, lady.”

These words made Marie snort, and Rex punched Ted in the shoulder.

“So full of yourself, little bro,” Rex said. “You’re lucky I’m going easy on you. You broke your leg just to stay at home watching your videos of past glories. It took one small bull of the ranch to show the town you’re weak, and you’re full of shit.”

“So jealous.” Ted sighed. “Do you understand now, Dakota? I’m a star, but my stubborn brother doesn’t care. When I recover, I will show you my greatness, asshole. Now, we need to talk business.”

“I have the papers ready. We can change anything you want, Dakota. The salary is the highest we can pay because I’m aware you will have to handle a lot of crap.” He winked.

“Well, thank you,” she said. The playfulness was refreshing, and when she finally finished the formal part, she was happy.

The salary was more than good; it doubled her former job! She could save a part since she hadn’t had to pay for rent or food. If she had to move, that would be helpful. She didn’t know how things will go on in New Essex, although she had hope.



However, she had lived in big cities all her life. She didn't know if she could get used to the small-town life.

She would take these months ahead as the opportunity to rebuild herself and her future. She would allow new people in her life.

What could she lose? She had trusted people she had known for years, and they had betrayed her. She had expected nothing from Marge, Peggy Sue, and the Sullivan, and they were giving her a lot.

A place to live, a job, money, friendship, and the opportunity of family. That was huge. She had shown herself in a battered car, and she only had to tell Marge her name for her to help to find Peggy Sue.

Her grandma had her heart open to her. God! She even told her she intended to leave the farm to her. And Ted had offered her a job without a care of who she was or her intentions.

He needed help and his reputation wasn't helping, of course, but even though... She was a stranger and he had been trustful and kind.

People were too judgmental, perhaps. He was cocky, but a teddy bear inside, full of joy and playfulness.

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Seven.

Okay, she had been wrong. He wasn't a teddy bear, but a huge teaser. She had been working for him for two weeks, and he was driving her nuts with his unintentional sexiness.

Or so she thought it was, unintentional. The man was so attractive and mesmerizing! Was it his fault she waited for his endearments, eager like a puppy?

His words were a pump to her ego: sweetie, darling, doll, you're shining today.

Was it his fault she wasn't used to be in the receiving part of them? Her ex wasn't an affectionate or gentle man. He used to complain about her gaining a few pounds or being too clingy.

He often criticized her wardrobe choices. God, how had she been so blind? Sebastian was an ass, and he wasn't half of the man Ted was.

It was depressing to think she had lost so much time taking care of the needs and tantrums of a man who didn't love her.

He had shown it every day to those who wanted to see it. She closed her eyes to the awful truth.

She had been scared and lonely. She thought she needed his love and his presence. She didn't. Now she saw it.

“Dakota, come here, darling. I have something to show you,” Ted said.

She was in the kitchen preparing a meal for him. It was almost 4pm, and Peggy Sue was waiting for her to come back to have dinner.

“What is it? I’ve almost finished here. I will put your meal in the oven and…”

“I will do it. Come here, woman. I have a surprise for you. You’ll be happy.”

She frowned. A surprise? Uh. What could it be? She plated the food and put it in the fridge. He could heat it later.

Then she walked into the living room. He stood with a wide grin next to the coffee table, and there was a box by his side.

“I asked Marie to select this for you.” He took the box and offered it to her, and she chewed her inner cheek. She wanted to cry.

She couldn’t remember how much time had it been since someone gave her a present. Since her mother had died, she thought.

Her asshole of a fiancé wasn’t generous, and he gave her his credit card on her birthday, but he told her the small amount of money she was allowed to spend.

Most of the times she bought herself socks or panties, and not the expensive ones.

“What is it?” she asked, and he smiled. God, that smile! Bright, honest, although full of himself.

“A gift to show my appreciation. You make my days easier and I enjoy having you around, sweetie.”

She got the box and took the ribbon off. When she opened it she found a beautiful pair of cowboy boots, in white and black, with beautiful designs. She gasped.

“Do you like them? Hand-crafted by Mr. Pierce, the finest leather artisan in the region.”

“They are amazing. I love them,” she whispered while caressing the soft leather. “You didn’t have to...”

“I wanted to. You’re a country girl now, and you work for the best cowboy in town,” he winked. “You deserve the best of the best. Enjoy them, sweetie. And I want you to wear them tomorrow at the festival.”

“Festival?”

“Yes. There will be music, food, and lots of fun. I want to be there. God knows I’m in great need of harmless fun. But I will need you.”

He pouted and rounded his eyes, and she laughed at his ridiculed attempt to convince her. Hell, how could she refuse?

“Okay, okay, I will drive you. But you have to behave.”

“I will. You can trust me.”

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“Mmm. Okay. What time do you want to go?”

“We can have lunch there, and then spend the afternoon fooling around.”

“Perfect. See you tomorrow!”

“Bye, doll.”

She put the boots in the box and rushed to the truck. She was happy and touched by his gift.

These gorgeous boots had to be expensive. But the most valuable thing for her was that he had taken time to think of her.

She was trying hard not to fall for him, but it was difficult because he was thoughtful and gentle. She sighed and drove the truck into Peggy Sue’s land and parked it next to her grandma’s car.

She was waiting for her on the porch, sitting on the rocking chair. She looked tired, and Dakota thought the old lady worked too hard.

She was always doing something, and despite Dakota wasn’t around during the day, they talked a lot.

She got tired just by listening to her grandma talking about working the land, seeding crops, battling gophers, harvesting the fruit and making canned fruit, feeding the animals, scraping the barn, and much more.

“Hello there, Dakota. How was work?” This was a standard question since day one, and she offered the same answer she used to.

“Fine.”

“What have you got there?” Peggy Sue asked, pointing at the box, and Dakota rushed to sit by her side on a stool.

“A gift!” she clapped her hands, the box on her thighs, and her grandma grinned.

“Oh, dear, that’s wonderful! Who...?”

“Ted! Can you believe it? He’s so kind! Look at these beauties,” she said, and unboxed the boots and showed them with pride.

“They are gorgeous! These are Mr. Pierce’s creations, I can tell. The man is a legend around here. They aren’t cheap, Dakota.” She eyed her with a wide grin.

“I thought they weren’t. I love them! He told me I have to wear them tomorrow to go to the festival!”

“Oh, yes, the festival! I had forgotten about it! I used to sell my products there.”

“Really? How exciting! Do you want to go with us? I’m sure Ted would be happy.”

“That sounds like a good idea. We can have lunch and it’s a splendid opportunity to show off my granddaughter,” she said with a big smile. “Gossip must have spread, and people will be curious. You’ll have many eyes on you tomorrow.”

“That sounds kind of embarrassing,” she frowned. She just wanted to have fun and enjoy the company of the two people she liked most these days.

“Don’t worry. Once they see you, they will be fulfilled. I will do the talking. You only need to say hi and smile.”

“Deal. What should I wear?” she asked.

“You will rock the cowgirl style with these boots and a nice dress, or even jeans. It’s an informal event. Every outfit you wear fits you wonderful. You’re beautiful.”

“I don’t see myself that way,” Dakota whispered. “Although...” Ted makes me feel pretty, she wanted to add, but hesitated, and then decided it was better to keep that for herself.

She didn’t want her grandma worrying about her falling for Ted.

“I see a gorgeous lady. You have a delicate face, and your eyes sparkle and show your soul. Men around here appreciate genuine women and strong and curvy bodies. Those starved ladies from magazines and social media...” Peggy Sue shook her head. “I don’t understand it.”

“My ex, Sebastian... He used to point out what he said were my weaknesses.” She made quotation marks with her fingers. “I went to the gym, counted calories, starved myself, but it was pointless. I only lost a few pounds...”

“You don’t need to! That man,” she shook her head in disbelief. “Asshole! He could learn a few things from men around here. Men like Ted.” She stared at Dakota while saying this.

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“I think the problem was me, mainly. I should have cut him, and told him to go to hell. But...”

“You cannot blame yourself for wanting love and respect from your man, Dakota. In the same way, your mother wasn’t the one to blame for believing in my son’s false promises. People who love deserve to be loved, or don’t be encouraged with false promises.”

“I see it now.”

“Okay, enough of this. Have a shower, and then we can have dinner. It’s tacos’ night!”

“Wonderful!” Dakota said and rushed to her room. She had a quick shower and soon they were having dinner. Tacos were superb, and after having more than she should have, they drank coffee sitting on the porch swing.

“Such a beautiful night! I hadn’t ever seen as many stars!”

“One perk of living here. You can see the sky.”

“Yes. And the air is fresher, traffic is light and food tastes amazing.”

“You’re falling for small-town life. I’m glad if it means you’re going to stay here for a long time.”

“Too soon, I’m afraid,” Dakota said. “I love being with you.” She took Peggy Sue’s



hand and squeezed it, and the old lady smiled.

“Me too, darling. You brought light to my life. I was depressed the last year. Your presence here gave me hope. I want you to be happy wherever you live. Don’t stop yourself from rebuilding your life for me. Traveling is easy these days, and technology is amazing. We can be in touch, and see each other, if you decide you have to leave.”

“Oh, grandma, I love you!” Listening to the fragile lady saying those words touched her heart. She felt seen and appreciated. Loved.

“I used to dream about meeting you, and I have to confess I was scared. I thought you would hate me. Perhaps that idea stopped me from looking for you.”

“I don’t know what I would have done if you came to me when my mother was alive. I don’t know how she would have reacted.”

“Hard to say. But I think the fact she didn’t infuse hate in your heart is the response to that.”

“It hurts me she wasn’t happy. She stopped living because of me.”

“I don’t think that’s true. She made choices. She could have had a different life. Most single mums marry again and have boyfriends. She chose to be alone, perhaps due to fear of suffering again.”

“Change is scary. I understand she could feel fear.”

“Fear is like poison. When you’re afraid of living, you stop dreaming, experimenting, changing... Don’t be afraid of living your life as you want, Dakota. Ever.”

She nodded, and Ted's face appeared in her mind. She had dreams, indeed. Crazy, hot fantasies warmed her nights, and she had been making efforts to stop them.

A crush on a sexy cowboy was natural, wasn't it? Sure, it was harmless, and nobody would be hurt. Everybody had a crush.

Hers was with his boss, but he didn't have to know about it. She could behave normally. Sure, she blushed most of the time he teased her or told her lovely things, but he thought of her as shy and innocent, not as horny as hell.

"Dakota, dear? What are you thinking of? You're flustered."

"Nothing important. Just that my life is changing and I like it."

"I'm glad! Now, go to sleep, dear. You will need fresh energies tomorrow."

She kissed her grandma's forehead and went to her room. She lay down on the bed and hugged the boots against her chest, and smiled.

She was in the middle of a major change, but she was happy.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:43 am*

Eight.

It was nine pm, and he was watching a baseball game when he received Dakota's message:

Dakota: Is it okay with you if my grandma goes to town with us? She felt excited about the festival, and she told me she hadn't been around it in the last few years.

Ted smiled and rushed to deliver his response, but it took him a whole effort. God, those thick fingers of his hit all the letters at the same time!

Ted: Yusa

Ted: Sorry. I mane Yes!

Ted: Mean!

Dakota: Not a fan of written messages, uh? Smiley facee-moji.

Ted: Nope.

Then he thought he had to be clearer and recorded audio.

“My fingers are clumsy as fuck. I'm thrilled about the idea of the two prettiest ladies in town by my side tomorrow. I'll be the envy of every male in the place.”

He chuckled when imagining Dakota's beautiful face flushing red. He loved teasing

her. Her soft cheeks were like ripped apples and she lowered her eyes, shy and flustered.

He had the time of his life when imagining those same doe's eyes looking at him when she was on her knees, her pouty lips surrounding his cock and sucking him alive.

He tried to avoid those vivid fantasies the first week. He did, but he liked her too much. By the third week, he surrendered to his lust, and he jerked off thinking of her almost every night.

He had thought he could stay immune to her charm because she was like the epitome of the good girl.

Timid and respectful, kind and hardworking, she hadn't made a move or insinuated a thing. He was the bastard with the dirty mind.

It was difficult for him to understand what on earth she had that allured him so much. She wasn't the usual woman he fell for.

She was attractive, of course, but hell, he liked easy and fast. There were a lot of ladies eager to please him everywhere, and perhaps he should have called one or two to get off.

He hadn't. There was something about her that called to his inner beast. He wanted that mouth on him, kissing and licking every part of his body.

He craved those doe eyes brightening with bliss, her back arching towards him, offering those tempting breasts for him to play with.

He wanted his calloused hands all over that silky skin, caressing her curves and

discovering her most intimate places.

He wanted to corrupt her, to overwhelm her with passion and lust till she was his. The instant his mind thought about these crazy things, he hurried to shut it off.

He was just horny and lonely, that was all. She was the only woman around, and she was so pretty it was natural he was touched. That was it. No more.

He had to be grateful and gentle with her. She had accepted to help her by pure goodness. She said she needed a job, but she could have found one better if she wanted.

Many people needed help around town, and most of them were fond of Peggy Sue and would have loved to help her granddaughter.

That was the other thing that stopped him from attempting something foolish with Dakota. She was going through enormous changes in her life.

She had lost her mother two years ago, and she thought she was alone in life. She told him how she had found she had a grandma she knew nothing about, and that she had resigned from her former job and traveled to New Essex to get to her past.

She had said two or three things about a massive jerk she had been dating, and he guessed the asshole had had something to do with her escape from New York.

A major love deception, perhaps. The idea of a man hurting her made him livid. She deserved the kindest of man, one who loved and took good care of her.

She was precious. If she was his... No, no, he couldn't walk that path. He had to be real and strong-minded. He couldn't act on his instincts.

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He didn't want to scare or hurt her. He wasn't looking for a girlfriend or a wife in the short term. And she wasn't a woman to play with.

So, every day she was in his house doing the house chores, he was like an eager pup, following her around.

She did his laundry, made his bed, shared his time, and talked a lot. Every time, he did his best to behave like a gentle human being. He tried not to show her how much she allured him.

He failed many times, however. He couldn't avoid touching her any time he could, although not disturbingly. He caressed her cheeks with the excuse of helping her to tame the wild hair that escaped from her ponytail or a messy bun.

He stood close any time he could, breathing on her amazing scent, a mix of spicy and sweet he loved. He put his hand on her lower back when she was cooking and asked her to taste her dishes in advance.

Her tiny fingers on his mouth when she fed him a mouthful of whatever she was cooking felt like heaven. He didn't avoid sucking softly or licking the fingertips, and the flustered way she took them off was the obvious sign he disturbed her.

He didn't think it was an adverse reaction, though. She never showed annoyance.

He thought she liked this game between them, and that was both enticing and dangerous. He didn't want to give her false hopes.

Damn! He hadn't felt so frustrated ever. Sexually, but emotional, too. He had acted on his wants if he didn't respect Dakota so much.

She got under his skin. He cared about her. Oh, man, he needed to get laid, urgently.

He had thought of telling Dakota to not come the next two days and take time for calming himself and settling his mind.

He considered asking Dolly to come to the hut and drive him into town to the festival. He knew this would lead to her bed. The lively red-haired was a widow and loved random sex from time to time. A free spirit she was, and he liked her.

Somehow he had ruined this plan when asking Dakota to take him to the festival, and then he had gifted her a pair of expensive boots. It was as if his mind betrayed his body. He didn't know why he acted like that.

He had thought of the gift as a gesture of thanks, and Marie was kind enough to help him. Okay, Rex had to drive her to Mr. Pierce's workshop, but the bastard loved to consent to his wife. Ted had avoided his censorious eyes and dismissed his words.

Ted, be careful. I never saw you giving a woman such an expensive gift. You're a cheap asshole. That lady, she's Peggy Sue's granddaughter, and the lady is in heaven because of her. I don't want you breaking that young woman's heart. I will allow Peggy Sue to eviscerate you if that shit happens, he had told him.

Calm down, big bro. It's a gift to show her my appreciation. She is helping me a lot. She's sweet and caring. I'm not trying to do anything but keep her around. Your sorry ass should be grateful. You and Brad left me alone when I needed you the most. He had smirked, knowing his older brother felt like shit for that, but he liked to tease him.

You're old enough to wipe your ass, and you wouldn't be in this position if you weren't so stubborn. And it's not as if Brad left town eagerly. He felt like crap about you being alone.

I know, I know. I just enjoy driving you mad. Brad is doing what he must, and I love the idea of you taking care of my sweet sister-in-law and my niece, Rex. Don't worry, I won't screw this. I'm not a complete idiot. I like Dakota, and I want the best for her.

I know you're a good man, bro. I love you. You're a good man, and I don't buy your facade. You care about people more than you show. All of your cocky attitudes are a facade.

That kind of dialog happened a few times between them; the Sullivan brothers loved each other and had their backs, but they talked little about feelings.

Marie had changed Rex in the best of ways: he was happier, more talkative, and his sour face had a smile most of the time. Love made that, Ted supposed.

His mind wandered a lot that night, and he sent audio to Dakota.

Ted:Dakota, you don't need to be by my house at 8. Take your time, and be here at 11. I'll be ready.

Dakota:What about breakfast? You'll need me to help you with clean clothes from upstairs. I don't want you climbing the stairs. It's dangerous.

The sweet lady! She worried and fussed about him, but he was doing much better. He had an appointment with the doctor next week and he was sure the professional would take the cast off.

The rehabilitation was going great, and that was something he had to thank Dakota,



too. She helped him with patience and care.

Ted:Don't worry. I have plenty of leftovers, and I will be careful. I just need to avoid weight on my leg, but I'm not disabled.He inserted a winking face emoji.

Dakota:Face-blowing kisse-moji

Nice, really nice, he thought. What about giving one of those in person?, he felt tempted to ask her, but he stopped himself from teasing her. He had to behave around her.

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Nine.

Dakota felt excited. She had slept well, and she and Peggy Sue had breakfast together. They talked a lot, and she felt their bond grew day by day.

They were still cautious around each other, and Dakota thought theirs was more a friendship than anything else, but it was a matter of time.

Neither she nor Peggy Sue wanted to force feelings. They had met three weeks ago for the first time, and although the old lady knew about Dakota and received her with open arms, it wasn't the same for Dakota.

She found herself working to understand and process the whole affair. Her mind tried to put her past into a new light.

She remembered how closed her mother became when she asked her about his lover, Dakota's father, or when Dakota inquired about other relatives.

She had been secretive, and Dakota understood her mum was full of sorrow and resentment. Dakota blamed these dark feelings for her mother's premature death. So sad!

Going to work to Ted's house was like breathing those days she felt down. He was funny and talkative, and he made her smile.

His teasing and small touches made her shiver and drool, but that was understandable. She had red blood in her veins, and the man was sexy as sin.

The perspective of sharing a day of fun in town with him pumped her mood. Ted's invitation wasn't a date. She told it to herself once or twice.

She wished it was, but that wasn't going to happen. Her infatuation had grown to a dangerous level since he gave her the boots. She put too much meaning into his gift, perhaps.

She promised herself she would enjoy and be open to meeting people. Her grandma told her funny stories about the festival and what they would see there. It sounded fun, and she was willing to experience the whole western vibe.

She dressed in tight jeans, a bright blouse, and her new boots. She felt pretty. She was sure Ted would have something nice to praise her, and she smiled.

She certainly expected it. The man knew how to take good care of a lady's ego. Hers needed some praise. She would take advantage of his charm.

At eleven she and her grandma were heading to his hut, and he was waiting for them outside.

Dakota stopped the car and got off to help him enter the vehicle. He was handsome in the dark jeans that hugged his gorgeous ass. The cast didn't diminish his powerful limbs, and the upper part of his body was broad.

The flannel shirt glued to his wide shoulders, bulky forearms, and pecs. He was the sexiest cowboy with his Stetson and his boots.

Holy shit, he is a god, Dakota thought, her eyes on his chest when taking the crutches to put on the bed of the truck.

"Hello, Peggy Sue! So nice to see you! You're even prettier than the last time I saw

you.”

“You’re a charmer, Ted Sullivan,” Peggy Sue giggled, and Dakota sat and started the engine. “But the genuine beauty here is my granddaughter, don’t you think?”

Dakota blushed and shook her head.

“Grandma, please!” It was embarrassing.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said, and although Dakota didn’t look at him, she could feel his gaze on her. “She looks amazing, and I think the cowgirl look is perfect on her.”

He straightened his beefy arm and put a rebel strand of hair behind her ear, and she shivered when his warm fingers stroked her skin.

He was touchy, but not in a creepy way, and she loved it.

“Thank you. Now, tell me more about what we will find at this festival,” she said, trying to focus on another thing than Ted.

Both Ted and Peggy Sue talked and laughed, remembering past festivals’ anecdotes. Dakota smiled and enjoyed the moment, and soon they were in the middle of the event.

There were stalls, balloons, food, music, and people coming and going. Color everywhere.

“Oh, Marge settled herself in a food truck! How nice. I will go and say hi, dear,” Peggy Sue said.

“I’m coming with you,” Dakota said, but her grandma refused.

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“Go, walk around and enjoy the festival. I will sit with Marge. You can go later. Have fun!”

“Don’t you worry, Peggy Sue! I’ll be the best of the guides to show Dakota our traditions. By the end of the day, she will be convinced New Essex is the right place to live and work.” He winked, and the old lady nodded and left, a wide smile on her face.

“You promise too much, considering you can’t walk around freely, Ted,” Dakota said.

“Listen, I only need to show you three or four things, and you will fall in love with our land. There are heritage demonstrations, an arena, and livestock exhibits that I want to see. You can find it interesting. Not the formal parts, but the animals. Then, cowboy cooking and western entertainment.”

“I think we could start with food,” Dakota said, and he nodded.

“Agree. Do you know your grandma won several pie competitions?”

“She told me, yes.”

“Since she retired from competition, Mrs. Glenda Aspen has been the queen of pies around here. She bakes the best apple pie in the USA. Let’s find her.”

“Okay, easy, cowboy. Walk slower, and use your crutches.”

They found the woman, a tall and thin lady, and when Dakota tasted the pie, she almost groaned with pleasure, the apples melting in her mouth.

When she turned to tell Ted he was right, she saw him as uncomfortable, even flustered, his eyes on her.

“Are you tired?” She worried and tried to help him, but he mumbled something and gave her his back.

Okay, that was weird. She thanked the lady and praised her baking, and the lady tried to gossip about her and Peggy Sue.

She said goodbye without telling her too much and then went to Ted, who was sitting on a wooden bench.

“Are you okay?” she eyed him carefully, and he grinned.

“Absolutely. Look, the rumor about you is spreading,” he said and pointed to a group of ladies who were talking lively and stared at them both.

“Are you sure they are talking about me? Some of them are rather young and they seem your type,” she said, and he snorted.

“Please, the youngest is like seventy! We can go to...”

“Ted Sullivan, where have you been hiding, sweet?” a raspy feminine voice said, and both Ted and Dakota turned around at the same time.

The lady was a beautiful red-haired, tall and lean, dressed in a tight dress with a low cleavage that displayed her assets proudly. She talked to Ted and ignored Dakota as if she was a post.

“Oh, hello there, Dolly. Nice to see you! I’ve got a broken leg, so I’ve been recovering.

Dolly, as he said, came nearer and sat between Ted and Dakota. There was little space, so Dakota stood and stayed aside, disturbed and annoyed by her rudeness.

“Why didn’t you call me, darling? You know I could have made you feel better. I have my ways.”

There was so much implied in those words that Dakota felt disgusted. Could the woman be more obvious?

She was sexy, she supposed, with her short slutty dress, but her manners were horrible. She crossed her arms in her chest and doubted.

“Mmm, Ted, do you need me here?” she said.

He stared at her and nodded eagerly.

“Who are you, girl?” Dolly asked and looked at her from head to toes.

“I am Dakota.”

“She’s my date,” he said, and his eyes burnt hers as if compelling to agree.



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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:43 am*

“Your date? This lady?” The awful gesture and the disbelief in Dolly’s words infuriated Dakota. Who the hell she thought she was?

“Yes, I’m with Ted. Come on, baby. You said you will show me the bulls.”

Ted’s grin was big, and he winked at her shamelessly. Then he waved at Dolly and hugged Dakota’s shoulders, and they walked a few meters away.

“You’re the hottest date I have ever had, babe,” he said in a low voice, and Dakota glared at him.

“What was that about?”

“You saved me from a horny widow who wanted to take advantage of me when I was at my lowest.”

“The way she talked and looked at you seemed to tell you enjoyed her ministrations before.”

“A gentleman doesn’t tell his adventures. Now, seriously, I’m sorry, but Dolly was being rude and the only way I found to cut her off was by suggesting...”

“I don’t think she bought the idea, Ted.”

“Why not?” he frowned.

“She looked at me as if I was a bug.”

“You aren’t. You’re the sexiest woman here, Dakota.” He was serious, his voice was lower and his eyes were on her.

There he was again, making her feel appreciated.

“Well, well, well, I finally have the chance to meet our newest visitor,” a deep voice said.

Ted’s face went a bit serious, and he rolled his eyes. Dakota turned around and then she was in front of a tall man with astonishingly blue eyes and a friendly smile.

“This is the most powerful man in town, Sheriff Spencer O’Hara,” Ted said.

“Ha, ha, ha, hilarious,” the man said, and then he focused on Dakota. “My pleasure, madam. I’ve been told a lot about you.”

“You have?” she asked with a frown.

“Oh, yes. Part of being a sheriff in a small town is receiving all the gossip. But nobody told me Peggy Sue’s granddaughter was such a beauty. I hope you don’t mind me being blunt,” he said with a gorgeous smile.

“I strongly agree,” another man arrived, and this was shorter but wider, with blond hair. “Ted didn’t tell us you were such a charming lady. The selfish prick!” The man gave Ted a dirty look, and Ted seemed annoyed. “I’m Billy Jackson, madam. Whatever you need, you tell me. I’m the foreman at Sullivan’s ranch.”

Dakota stared at both gorgeous men and giggled. They were so handsome! What was the deal with men here? Was there something in the water?

“Did you finish? We are in a hurry,” Ted said and wrapped his hand around Dakota’s

waist, pulling her to him.

She felt the warmth of his hard body against her, and when he caressed her side, she hesitated.

What was he doing? Not that she didn't like it. She loved the sensation, of course. But there was something weird here.

He was looking at the other two as if this was a contest and she was the prize. The two men smirked.

"Would you like to dance with me, Dakota?" Billy said. "There's country music in the biggest tent."

"I..." she said, but Ted pushed her to his chest, almost cutting her breath. It was okay. Breathing was overrated, she thought in wonder.

"She's busy. Back off, gentlemen. She's my date," he almost growled, and she liked it. He seemed almost jealous and a little caveman.

"I thought you didn't date," the sheriff answered with a smile and winked at Dakota, who grinned.

"You thought wrong," Ted told them, and then took Dakota's chin and made her look at him. "Let's go back home. I'm feeling a little dizzy."

"Dizzy. Is that a thing? A big bear of a man, a bull rider, dizzy?" Billy laughed, and Spencer chuckled.

Dakota frowned and stared at them coldly. Now they were being mean to Ted.

“I see you are Ted’s friends, but you’re behaving like children. Excuse me, gentlemen, I have to help Ted.”

“Lucky bastard. I will visit you soon. I hope you recover from your dizziness, man,” Spencer said, and Ted ignored him.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:43 am*

Ten.

Spencer and Jimmy were the biggest assholes in town! Ted drummed his fingers on the table while waiting for Dakota to bring him the coffee.

He behaved like an idiot! He groaned. Those fuckers were the ones to blame. They tried to hit on Dakota just in front of him. They had homicidal desires, hadn't they?

He should have known better than bringing her here today. Both Spencer and Jimmy were rather curious about her. They had asked about her repeatedly when they visited him.

He knew it was weird he had hired a stranger to take care of him, and he had quite a reputation. He had been vague when telling them Dakota was an excellent help, shy and efficient.

He knew the horny bastards would be around her when they saw how astonishing she was. Damned birds of prey!

He had enjoyed being the only one who knew her so far. She had been like a secret he could savor and appreciate, like those greedy art owners who bought a masterpiece and enjoyed it alone.

He made little sense; he knew it. When Spencer and Billy saw her and their eyes widened with lust and interest, he felt he had to show them she wasn't available. She was his.

Unbelievable! He wasn't a caveman. Till Dakota appeared in his life, at least. It was a matter of time that those two bastards or someone else made a move to show his interest in her.

She had been in a small bubble the previous weeks. She was new in town, and she was bonding with her grandma. Besides, she was in his house most of the day.

It was logical she wanted to spread her wings and meet more people now. And her beauty would attract every bachelor who lived around.

He almost growled in anger when he thought of all the males without a woman who lived in New Essex. His cousins, for instance, Joe and Matt. Or the ranch's hands, Fred and Marcos. Or...

Stop thinking like that, asshole. Make your move if you don't want her dating anyone else. Sooner than later, he concluded when staring at Dakota being hit by a middle-aged rancher while she walked back to him with two pots of coffee.

"Leave her alone, man. She's with me," he yelled, and the rancher glared at him. He didn't give a shit that the man was one of Rex's acquaintances. He stood and leaned to hand his crutches, but Dakota left the man behind and hurried to get to him.

"Sit, Ted! You're been rude! The man was asking me where was the horses' exhibition."

"Please! That's bullshit! He knew it! That man is a rancher who brings pure breed to the festival. He was hitting on you, Dakota! You're far too innocent." He shook his head in annoyance, although he was being an ass.

"You cannot seriously believe every man who talks to me wants to seduce me!"

“I believe it! Of course, I do.” Was she blind, for God’s sake? Didn’t she see herself in the mirror every day? He sighed. “I’ve told you, and you don’t believe me. You’re the most exquisite woman around, Dakota. You just don’t see yourself as you should. You’re beautiful, babe.” He leaned to her until his mouth was almost above her lips.

“I don’t feel beautiful,” she said, and she chewed her lower lip.

“I could show you how pretty and desirable you are to me, babe.” Was he doing this? Making his move? Yes, you are, idiot. He saw Jimmy in the corner of his eye. The jerk! Was he trying to infuriate him? No, no focus here, on her. “I’m struggling here, though. I don’t know if I should act on my wants or not.”

“You...” Her wonderful eyes stared at him, and then she licked her upper lip with the tip of her tongue. That unconscious gesture sent more urges to Ted’s groin.

As if he needed more stimulus to be a horny mess!

“I would love to punch every bastard’s face who dares to get near you. I want to be the only one surrounding you, Dakota. But I promised myself and every person I know I would respect you, and I wouldn’t behave as usual. Although I promise my man-whore fame is unfair... Well, I’m babbling now. What I mean is that the only thing preventing me from kissing you now is I’m afraid of hurting you.”

It was the most passionate phrase he remembered telling to a woman, but his words were the truth.

“What if I want you to hit on me? What if I dare you to show me how much you desire me?” She said this in the lowest of voices, almost a whisper he had to decipher.

He froze, and his mind almost melt. Fuck! She was so brave! Telling him what she wanted was like putting herself on a tray, knowing she could be exposed to hurting.

She wouldn't. He would never hurt her. Except that when you invite her to your bed and your life, you are giving her hope. What if you change your feelings after a few weeks? Could you truly compromise your heart besides your body, Ted?

He sighed. He knew himself too well. He liked novelty and challenge.

But Dakota was much more than that. He craved her body, but her smile, her talking, her silences, too.

We are good together. It could work. What did he have to lose? Nothing. His only concern was her well-being. Fuck! His mind was a mess.



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“Darling, you’re tempting me beyond reason. You’re in a time of your life when all is changing. You moved thousands of miles to a new place that is so different from New York. You left your job, your friends, your support system...” he told her.

“That’s partly true. I didn’t have friends. The only one I had cheated with my fiancé,” she said.

God! She had gone through so much shit. She was heartbroken and probably saw him as a life jacket in the middle of the stormy sea.

“That info only added to my point. Your mind is clouded with pain, and you could be mistaken your want of stability with...”

“I’m wide aware of what I’m feeling and what I want right now, Ted. Don’t worry. I know I want you, badly. We probably won’t last. I’m not looking for my true love, or my charming prince, Ted. I want to live my life, that’s all. Is that clear enough for you?”

Her words were firm, and she stared at him in defiance. She was breathtaking, and she wanted to be his. Things were sound and clear.

He wasn’t swearing eternal love, but she wasn’t, either. The truth hit him then.

Being with Dakota was a challenge for him, too. All this time, he had been thinking he would be the one who could fail and retreat.

But what if she was the one who changed her mind and left him? She was a city girl.

She never said she would stay.

So, both of them had things to lose and gain. He stared at her, smiled, and then his arm enveloped the back of her neck and pulled her to him.

“Sexy lady, I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Waiting,” she said, waving her brows, and he didn’t think more.

She barely got the words out before his mouth came crashing against hers. He kissed her hungrily, devouring her soft, sweet lips.

She parted them for him and then he ravished her inner mouth with powerful strokes of his tongue. Her mouth tasted like cream and coffee, and he couldn’t get enough.

He bit her bottom lip and growled with it between his teeth. Dakota hummed in return.

The sound of catcalls forced them to separate, and he glared at the two assholes who were staring at them.

“Back of, idiots. Buy yourself a life,” he yelled, and both retreated when they saw he wasn’t bluffing, and Dakota was red and stared at the ground.

“Sorry, Ted. We just…” one said.

“You’re lucky I cannot punch your sorry asses!” he added, and took Dakota’s hand and stood. “Let’s go, sweet. I don’t want any other jerk giving us shit.”

“Ted…” She helped him with the crutches. “I liked it. I loved it. I want more,” she whispered, still blushed.

“I loved it, too, sweetie. We will do it again, promised. Now, let’s find your grandma.”

“Marge told me she will drive Peggy Sue back home when she is tired. My grandma is having the time of her life, chatting with everyone who gets to the food truck.”

He narrowed his eyes and stared at her.

“I feel like going home, Dakota. Now.”

She giggled and nodded.

“That’s okay, boss. I will drive you. I don’t want you to force your leg too much.”

“Oh, I won’t.” He put his hand on her lower back and pushed her to the exit path.

He couldn’t wait to kiss her again and again.

Eleven.

Well, who is the suicide driver now? Dakota thought while turning the last curve with a fierce decision and pulled up in Ted's driveway.

She was floating in a cloud of wanting, and Ted's hand squeezing and caressing her thigh and stroking her hair the whole trip from town didn't help to tame her lust.

She had been bold when daring him to hit on her, but she had been shy long enough. It was time for her to get what she wanted from life.

She felt this thing going on with Ted didn't need a label. She wanted him to kiss, hug, and make love to her with all her heart and mind.

Their relationship had built from zero, but it was more than a simple boss-employee bond. It grew into something Dakota wanted since she saw him for the first time.

He had made a huge impression on her the minute they met. That was the reason she offered her help when she didn't know a thing about him.

She hadn't felt confident enough to ask for more until today. His praises, his eyes on her like lasers... His grumpiness when those two men showed an interest in her. The way he told them to back off.

Everything messed with Dakota's head, and she saw the pattern. He wanted her as badly as she wanted him. So, what were they doing?

Life was short and had to be enjoyed. He was gentle, kind, and honest. Dakota knew he wasn't looking for a girlfriend. She would not lie to herself: she wanted to be his only one, but if she couldn't, she would be his lover for the time she could. She wouldn't feel embarrassed.

"Here we are, babe. If you want to go now..."

"I don't," she answered, and she looked at him.

"Let me say this, please. I'm full of desire now, and I want more than kissing. If you enter now..."

"That's okay with me," she nodded. Hey, she was counting on it.

"I will be gentle, babe. You can stop me anytime you want. I promise."

"I trust you, Ted," she whispered and raised her hand to caress his cheek. "I'm not nervous. I know you'll be kind. And I promise I will tell you if I got scared or think it's too much. But I don't think so. I'm... I've been fantasizing a little, you know."

"Fuck, babe. You're killing me," he groaned.

She got off the truck and walked around to help him. When he was on his feet, he wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her to his chest, and his mouth was on hers again.

She put her hands around his neck and raised her heels to deepen the kiss. It felt as if her skin was buzzing with energy, the adrenaline flooding her veins. Warmth bloomed in her limbs, in her chest, in her face.

Alive! She felt alive. As if he was awakening all her cells just by kissing her.

He separated and put his forehead on hers and then kissed the tip of her nose. His right hand was still caressing her back.

“Let’s go inside, sweetie.” Dakota nodded slowly, panting as if she had run a marathon. He grinned, and she relaxed. “Oh, babe... You should be scared right now. If you knew what I want to do to you...”

“I love surprises,” she said, and then walked to the house, looking at him over her shoulder.

“Teaser!” he said, and she laughed while opening the front door. She entered and was putting her bag on the counter that separated the kitchen from the living when he wrapped his arms around her, one of his hands on her belly and the other circling her shoulders.

He dwarfed her despite her being a curvy woman. She was conscious of his warmth, but his hardness, too. His impressive hard-on rubbed against her back.

“Do you see how much you arouse me, babe?” His mouth was traveling down her neck now, and she arched her head to give him space. He nibbled and licked her skin, and Dakota cried softly.

“That’s it, my sweet baby. Let me hear you.” His hands were on her breasts now, brushing them through the textile, and Dakota felt her nipples pebbling on alert.

She was so wet, so aroused!

He made her turn around, and they were chest to chest. Their gazes locked, and the lips joined again in a scorching kiss.

“So. Fucking. Sexy,” he grumbled, and his mouth traveled to her ear and bit her

earlobe.

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She shivered. Her hands stroked his chest slowly, and she peppered his jawline with kisses.

It was too much and too little at the same time. Dakota felt she could implode just by him kissing and touching her, but she needed more. More of him.

“More,” she whispered, and he seemed to go mad. He cupped one breast with his big hand and lowered his mouth to bite it, wetting the blouse and making her nipples perk even more.

His fingers worked clumsily to unbutton her blouse, and then he grabbed it and tore it apart with one brief jerk.

She shouted in surprise when she saw the buttons flying across the place, but when his mouth closed around her nipple and sucked it hard, she moaned and forgot all about her clothes.

He licked and brushed both peaks with his tongue as if they were the tastiest food. Hot sensations traveled from her breasts to her core in amazing electric waves, and soon she was begging him.

“Oh, my God! Ted, this feels like... heaven! Don't stop!”

“This is just the first dish,” he said. “I will not taste your cunt today because of technical problems,” he chuckled. “This leg of mine is preventing me from showing my best performance.” He massaged the other bud while talking.



“Oh, my, I forgot,” she said, concern on her face. “You could have hurt your leg.” Guilt hit her.

“I’m working with my mouth and my hands, sweetie.” He cupped both breasts and licked his lips, and his thumbs petted the aureoles without taking his eyes from hers.

She sighed and closed her eyes, abandoning herself to the pleasure. Then his hands slouched her lower body. He unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, and his fingers slid below her panties.

When his fingertips found her pussy and stroked it, spreading her wetness from her clit to her puckered hole, she cried in ecstasy.

“You’re soaked! Hell! I want to taste you,” he said, and then took his fingers off her and sucked both of them, closing his eyes and smiling. “Sweet. I knew it. Delicious, darling. I cannot wait for the time I can lick your pussy. Soon,” he promised, and then his hands took the jeans waistband and lowered her pants and panties at the same time.

She was almost naked, and she attempted to cover, but he stopped her.

“Don’t. I want to see you. You’re so gorgeous,” he told her, kissing her. “How are you? Do you still want to...?”

“Yes,” she said. “I want you in me, Ted.”

“Oh, I will be. But not today,” he answered. “Today is about you feeling and enjoying. I want you to come on my fingers, babe. I won’t fuck you today.”

Well, those were both good and bad news.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been so sure,” he stated. “There’s no need to rush. I want to know every part of your delectable body. Don’t mistake my words, sweet. I will fuck you soon. But I need you to think of this, think of me, and what I can give you. Let me show you just a piece,” he rumbled, and his fingers went to her pussy again.

He pushed her thighs to open more, and then one hand opened her folders and two digits of the other brushed her clit. She shivered when feeling the pleasure exploding in her mind.

“Such a tiny spot, and it can bring so much fun, mm?” He rounded and petted it, and she felt the warmth building in her belly.

The sensations almost overwhelmed her when his mouth caught one of her nipples and played with it, biting, licking, and blowing it, and then the other one.

He slid one finger inside her pussy and curved it, and she almost jumped when he found a place that sent more stimulus to her body. She felt like molten lava traveling down her spine and through every nerve she had.

She couldn’t stop herself from shuddering and moaning, and when it was too much, she exploded, rolling her eyes back and screaming his name.

She felt like flying, wave after wave of pleasure hitting on her until her legs were weak. He hugged her and pushed her into his chest.

“That’s my babe, passionate and hot. I knew it. I knew you had a fire on you.”

“Oh, Ted, I had... I had never felt like this.” She didn’t know she could be so sexual. So uninhibited.

“I’m glad. It means I’m your first, in a way.”

“What about you?” she asked.

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“I enjoyed every damn second of this, babe.”

“I could... take care of that,” she blushed and pointed to his groin.

“You mean this huge thing, hard as a monolith?” He touched his cock in the sexiest way, and Dakota held her breath. Holly shit! “This is because of you, but I will take care of it. Don’t worry, dear. Soon, it will be your issue,” he waved his brows and smirked.

“I don’t want you to think I am a teaser, and...”

“Oh, but you are, sweetly and innocently, darling. I love it, by the way. Every part of your mind, body, and heart teased me since I met you. I will take my time to wrap the gift you are. Your expression while climaxing will fuel my imagination tonight, Dakota. Now, babe, it’s time for you to go home and think of us. Think of me.”

She sighed and nodded. He was right. She had a lot to ponder and consider. But she wanted to be sure of something.

“Ted... How do we follow?”

“I want you to think if you want to go on exploring this. Our minds are foggy now. Adrenaline and lust are like a drug, baby. Be sure you’re comfortable with me, with yourself. Think about what you want from me. I will do the same thing. Tomorrow, we will see.”

“Okay. I will.” She cupped his face, kissed him tenderly, and then left.

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Twelve.

What a day! She was light and dizzy. She felt like singing, so she opened her Spotify app and selected country music. She was a country girl now, wasn't she?

She lived on a farm; she had her boots. She had a sexy cowboy all for herself. For now. Wow! She opened her arms and threw herself onto the mattress.

Think, he had told her. Consider, ponder... She understood he was behaving like a gentleman, focusing on her well-being. He was completely aware of his reputation as a womanizer. He wasn't comfortable with that.

He told her he had doubts and wasn't looking for a permanent relationship. He showed her respect by telling the truth. That was huge. He didn't lie to be in her pants.

Hell, he could have fucked her today, but he chose to wait for her to have her mind clear. But she had set her mind the minute he told her he lusted for her.

Yes, the recent events of her life weighed on her. Sebastian had been a shit of a boyfriend, but the cheating was the ice on the cake.

He had always been mean, and diminished her body and mind. Breaking up was the best thing that happened to her, besides traveling to meet her grandma.

She had options; she had family love and a lover. A sexy beast of a cowboy who was a bull rider looked at her as if she was the finest woman.

He told her how pretty and sexy she was, and his praises were like honey. He healed her wounded ego. He made her feel wanted.

A soft knock on the bedroom door startled her.

“Dakota, dear, can I come in?”

“Yes, grandma,” she raised her voice and sat on the bed with her legs crossed.

Peggy Sue poked her head into the room.

“Are you busy, my dear? I don’t want to disturb you.”

“Not at all, grandma. Come, sit down with me,” Dakota patted the mattress beside her, and Peggy Sue entered. She looked tired, and Dakota worried.

“Are you feeling well? You seem exhausted.”

“It’s the good kind of fatigue, Dakota. I gossiped, laughed, and walked around the stalls. I even helped Marge with the food truck. There was a lot of fun.

“I’m glad, grandma. I saw your face there. You were enjoying your time.”

“I did. I had been kind of a hermit last months, and I missed the town and activities. You brought me happiness and extra energies, Dakota,” Peggy Sue said and squeezed her granddaughter’s hand.

“Coming here is the most intelligent decision I made in years. I’m happy too,” Dakota answered and kissed her grandmother’s cheek.

“Mmm. Although I think there are other things bringing you happiness,” the lady said,

staring at her.

Dakota reddened, but there wasn't annoyance or disgust in her grandma's voice. She studied her. Dakota sighed.

"Well... Let's say I'm open to meeting people and giving them a chance," she whispered.

"That man, Ted... You liked him a lot, don't you? I saw you both kissing."

Dakota chewed her lips and nodded.

"It's complicated."

"People become simple things into major issues. You like him, he likes you... It's natural. He's handsome, single, and a charmer. You're gorgeous, smart, sexy... A real catch, if I may say."

"You see me through love glasses," Dakota smiled.

"Oh, I sure love you, honey, but I'm certain. Several men put their eyes and interest in you today. I saw young men with their eyes glued to you. And I saw Ted, honey. That man went all protective and possessive when he realized he had competence."

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“I don’t know. He behaved a little caveman, yes,” she said and smiled, remembering his glares and growls.

“Have you both...?”

“We have talked.” She would not tell her grandma she had climaxed in his arms, not in a million years. “We’re exploring our feelings.”

Peggy Sue snorted, and Dakota frowned.

“Oh, dear, you’re a little prude, aren’t you? I’m an old woman and a farmer. I had lovers before marrying. And I’m a farmer. I know everything about how women and men explore each other,” she quoted in the last sentence. Dakota looked at her with her mouth wide open.

“That... That’s private,” she said.

“It is, indeed. I’m not trying to gossip or make you feel bad or embarrassed. I’m only saying it’s natural and I like you acting on your feelings. You have been through a lot of sadness. You deserve fun and love. Just... be smart. Ted is a good man, but...”

“I know, grandma. He isn’t husband material. He told me he’s not looking for something permanent. I’m aware. But we like each other.”

“I’m not sure about him not being husband material, as you say. Those guys, the Sullivan... They are hard-working, honest, and trustful. Yes, Ted likes having fun and has had lots of lovers, or that’s the gossip around. But he had never kissed a



woman at a festival, or a place full of people. When I saw him..." Peggy Sue stopped and frowned.

"What...?"

"It was as if he was claiming you in front of everybody. As if making everyone know you were his date."

"Grandma, I don't need you giving me hope. I'm being cautious."

"Cautious is good. But remember what we talked about."

"I do. I'm embracing my new life, trying to make the most of it. I'm allowing myself to feel and enjoy being spoiled and praised by a gorgeous man. If I make a mistake and my heart falls for him, and it breaks when we split..." She sighed. "I think it's the cost of risking and acting on my feelings."

"Wise words, honey," her grandma said and took Dakota's hand in hers. "Don't wait too much, but too little, either. Life takes and gives. I think it owes you, my dear."

"That's wishful thinking, grandma. I like that."

"I like that, too. Now, get your beauty rest. I ate a sandwich and left one for you in the fridge. The bed is screaming my name," she stood and left.

Dakota stayed pensive for a few minutes and then went downstairs to eat her dinner. She put on her pajamas and brushed her hair, looking at her reflex in the mirror.

Change is good. Sex is wonderful. Enjoy it. Let him understand you want him, you need him. Be bold, be brave. Time will say if this is meant to be or not. Life owes you. Peggy Sue is right.

It took her a lot to sleep, although she kept yawning and felt tired. But her mind didn't leave her alone, bringing memories of what he did to her in a loop.

He touched her. He fingered her till orgasm. He told her how sexy she was. He wanted her.

She wanted him, and the entire experience. His mouth on her pussy driving her crazy, his cock in her. Sebastian had never gone down on her; he never offered her that.

And she had been such a prude. She had thought there wasn't more in sex than some seconds of joy. But it was just Sebastian who was plain and boring, in everyday life, and in bed.

Ted, however... Wow. He enjoyed everything, even the loud and the dirty. He encouraged her cries. He smelled and tasted her. He touched her everywhere. His eyes showed his arousal. He put all his senses to work.

She loved it. The way he sucked on his fingers. How her mouth sucked her nipples, the softness of his tongue licking her. She shivered.

Sex with Ted was amazing, and he had promised there will be more, much more. Bring it on, handsome, she thought.

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Thirteen.

No woman had made such an impact on him before. Ted felt under a spell, living in a hell of arousal. He had jerked off many times since Dakota left his house.

He had gotten up at dawn. He couldn't sleep more, and Rex came to see him early.

He ignored his issues with Spencer and Jimmy yesterday, or the fact he had kissed Dakota in front of half of the inhabitants of New Essex. He would give him shit when he found out, but Ted would be prepared to tell him to back off.

The only person who could tell him to stop was Dakota. Nobody else. She was the only one who mattered.

It was 7.45 now, and he waited for her with anxiety. Stopping himself from fucking her had been immensely difficult.

His cock had been so hard, leaking, and his blue balls were painful when he told her to return to Peggy Sue's farm. It was the right thing to do.

He wanted her to be sure of her decisions. He would be game the instant she told him she was ready, however. He had fantasized about all the things he wanted to do to her.

He craved the idea of teaching her naughty things. Hot stuff. She was avid to learn, he could tell by the way she melted between his arms and how she had arched her back and head to offer her gorgeous body to his mouth and hands.

Her breasts, for God's sake! Rounded, full, perky. He could feast on her body for hours and days. His damned leg still prevented him from bending and manhandling her as he wanted.

But next week's story would be different. He couldn't wait for a complete recovery.

A month ago, he was eager to be back on his horse and be able to enter a competition. Now his major concern was being able to fuck her properly. Everything else could wait.

He listened to the engine of his truck pulling up into his driveway. She was here. He gulped his coffee, walked to the door, and opened it to look at her. She waved at him with a big smile, and he smiled back.

“Good morning, sweet girl. So nice to see you. I've been thinking of you a lot.”

She got nearer and then stopped just a few inches from him. “I thought of you, too. A lot.”

He leaned forward and kissed her softly, and she kissed back. They smooched like horny teenagers for a minute, biting their lips, tangling their tongues, messily clashing teeth.

Ted slid his fingers across her face and neck, brushing her collarbone softly. Her skin was like silk, especially her lips. He loved her mouth. He needed on him. Soon.

“I would say your thinking didn't change what you want.”

“Mmm, and how are you so sure?”

“This kiss... The way you're looking at me. The way your body reacts to me.”

“Okay, you’re a smart watcher,” she giggled. “I would say some parts of your bodies missed me, too.”

“Of course, babe. That’s easy. It’s difficult to hide a hard-on with these pajamas. Let me correct your idea, however. I missed you, all of you, baby.”

“What are you going to do about it?” she said, and he hugged her waist and brought her to him

“I’m going to take my time to seduce you. Little by little,” he told her. He took her hand and pulled her inside. “First, I will feed you. Rex was here and brought me pie. Marie is baking a lot these days. The poor thing can’t work and that’s driving her mad.”

“Okay, it sounds like a plan. And after that?”

“We will talk, and I will do my exercises. You’ll prepare lunch...”

“Boring. I was expecting some action,” she said, and he laughed at her bluntness.

“Oh, were you? What kind of action?” He slid his fingers through her hair and removed the hair clips. Her beautiful hair spread over her shoulders and back.

“The kind that includes sweating and humping and...” She stopped.

“Fucking hell, Dakota! You’re blowing my mind. I’m trying here, babe.”

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“I don’t need you on your tiptoes for me. I can handle you,” she told him.

Well, this was a dream come true. His woman was daring him, and he had something for her.

“You think you’re ready,” he said, and his fingers went to the pajamas’ waistband, and he lowered them. His dick was fully hard, and the glands shined with pre-cum. “Is this what you want to handle, gorgeous?” He defied her now, smirking.

“Yes,” she answered, and she went on her knees without a doubt. He stared at her in awe, and when the tip of her rose tongue lapped his slit, his mind almost exploded.

“Holly. Shit.”

She circled the head and explored the shaft, her tongue following the vein from the top to his pubes, and then back. He widened his legs a bit more, and she cupped his balls with the other hand, squeezing them softly while opening her mouth and swallowing him.

The warmth! The tightness! The wetness! He breathed hard and thrust in short moves, fucking her mouth. Her gaze was on him, and he wrapped a handful of her hair and pushed a bit more. He could feel her relaxing her throat, and she had half of his fat dick in her mouth.

“My sweet Dakota... I won’t last long if you go on, sweet... So. Fucking. Good!”

Paradise! He could feel his orgasm building at an alarming speed. Fuck! He would

embarrass himself, but she was a goddess. He moaned loudly while she bobbed on his cock, and he warned her,

“Back off, sweet, I’m about to come...”

She sucked him harder, and then he flooded her mouth with his cum. His eyes were unfocused while he unfolded in her throat, and it took him several seconds to stop panting. Then he took her by her armpits and brought her to her feet.

She was a tempting mess, her lips swollen, her eyes sparkling and her face all flustered. He kissed her hard, devouring the lips that blew his mind.

“Was it okay?” she asked.

“No, honey, I’m afraid it wasn’t okay,” he said, and the concern in her eyes made him laugh. “You were amazing. That was the best orgasm I have had. You took me high, and then reduced me to ashes.”

“Really? Promise? I haven’t got much experience, but I’ve read a lot.”

“Is that so? Are you doing research, naughty girl?”

“I want you to enjoy every minute you spend with me.”

He got serious and stared at her.

“Every minute I’ve spent with you since day one has been enjoyable, Dakota. I mean it. You’re an incredible, sexy lady.”

She grinned, and that almost brought him to his knees. His heart beat harder. He hadn’t felt these emotions, ever.

She aroused him, but it was much more. Much more. This warmth, this need, this insanity... It was new.

“Why are you staring at me so serious?” she frowned.

“You took my breath away, babe. I’m just trying to recover.”

“Coffee and pie?”

“Hell yes. I will need all my strength to deal with you.”

She giggled and walked to the kitchen. Ted walked to the bathroom, closed the door and looked at his reflex in the mirror.

He had changed, he thought. The man who stared at him wasn’t the cocky cowboy who rode bulls, fuck women, and enjoy life without a care or remorse.

You’ve fallen, asshole. You’re in love. Fuck! This should frighten him. He had thought he would continue fucking around for years and years. Then a city lady appeared and he was lost.

It helped that she was amazing, gorgeous, sweet, and perfect. I need her in my life 24/7, he thought. I have to convince her she has to stay here. With her grandma. With me.

What if she becomes tired of the quietness and lack of entertainment in New Essex? If she decided he was just a stop in her life? A landmark she could leave behind?



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He frowned and washed his face, staring at the mirror again. No. She liked him, he could tell. He had to do the boyfriend thing. Seduce and charm her until she was in love.

Fuck her so hard and deep she felt he was the only one for her. The owner of her moans, her orgasms, her time.

He had to tell her what was happening. He wasn't subtle or sophisticated. He was a bull rider, used to deal with everything except emotions.

The soft knock on the bathroom door startled her.

“Everything right in there?”

“No, it's not,” he said, and she opened the door immediately, concern in her beautiful eyes.

“What is it? Your leg?”

He turned and stared at her.

“My heart.”

She got pale and put her hands on her mouth.

“We have to go to the hospital! Now! I will help you.” Her face was a mask of worry, and he took her hand and put it on his chest.

“I realized my heart pounds for you, Dakota! And I’m afraid...”

“What? You’re scaring me, Ted. What do you feel exactly?”

“I’m telling you, woman! I’m in love with you, and I’m worried you just see me as a man-whore who can help you to forget your ex-fiancé, and then you will go. You’ll return to the city and will find another man. Because you are amazing, and you don’t need me.”

She looked at him with her mouth wide open, and then she slapped him. He stopped babbling and snorted.

“I’m an ass.”

“No, no. I can’t believe you’re saying all this. Here!” She looked around and shook her head, and then turned and left the room.

He froze and didn’t know what to do. He groaned. He went nuts. That was it. She had broken her without saying a thing.

“Ted! I’m waiting,” she shouted, and he rushed to the living room. He would worry about his leg later.

“Dakota, I...”

“You said you’re in love with me. Is that true? Are you sure?”

“I’m positive I have never felt like this. Dizzy, worried, aroused, wanting you every minute. Craving your body and your presence.”

“It could be lust. Perhaps I’m just such a good cocksucker you...”

“Oh, please, come on! I’ve had many lovers, sweetie. I can distinguish lust from... this.”

“Okay, okay,” she said, nodding and pacing for a couple of minutes. “I love you too,” she said.

He blinked, and a wide grin grew on his face.

“You do? Excellent!” He pumped his fist, and then looked at her with cockiness. “I knew it. I’m irresistible.”

“You were frightened just two minutes ago.” She rolled her eyes, but her beautiful smile was back.

“I panicked, but your words gave me strength and hope.”

“Ted... You’re not messing with me, are you?”

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He brought her to his chest and kissed her.

“I would never joke about something like this. I swear, baby. The truth hit me like thunder, just right now. This is more than lust or sex for me. You’re much more.”

“So... Am I your girlfriend?” she asked. There was doubt and uncertainty in her words. As if she didn’t believe him entirely.

He understood. He told her he wasn’t looking for something formal just yesterday. He had been delusional.

He was more than ready to commit; he saw it now. His words had been mere crap.

He was a goner from the exact moment Dakota entered his life. Period. It was time to change. He wanted her in his life for real.

“Dakota, you’re my girlfriend. My first and only.”

She smiled.

“My grandma told me you hadn’t had a formal relationship.”

“Not until now. Does the idea scare you? I will have to change a few things, but I’m willing to. What do you say? Will you give me the chance to be with you for real?”

She pretended to think about it, tapping the point of her finger on her cheek.

“I think so. I’m feeling more and more interested in rural life.”

“I will make my biggest effort to show you all the perks of living in a small town with a handsome and strong cowboy.”

“I cannot wait.”

Fourteen.

Ted looked at the sleeping beauty resting on his bed and grinned. Three months had passed in the blink of an eye, and his feelings for her were even stronger.

He was living the happiest time of his life. His leg was perfect, and he rode and worked on the ranch. He was planning to come back to the arena in a few months.

But his daily joy was coming back to Dakota every day. Men on the ranch made fun of him, especially Billy. They said Dakota had changed him, and she had him on a leash.

Idiots! He rushed to her because the woman was the sweetest, most passionate, adorable, and he loved spending time with her.

He hadn't asked her to move with him yet because Dakota liked sharing part of her time with her grandmother. It was more than understandable.

He could wait. She stayed some nights. Sometimes, they made love desperately, and it felt torrid. Others, it was lazy and tender, sweet. But it was always the best of his life.

Sleeping with her glued to him, spooning, felt like completion. Time after time, he understood she belonged with him.

He had plans, big ones. He felt the need to tie her to him as soon as possible. It was risible, considering he had made fun of Rex when he started dating Marie.

Sullivan men went down hard when they fell in love, it seemed. Those were Spencer's words. The bastard.

Ted kissed Dakota's cheek and caressed her hair, and she blinked and woke up, yawning. Then she smiled at him, and the sun seemed to rise. Oh, he had it so bad!

"Good morning, sunshine!" he whispered. He leaned forward to kiss her, but she crawled to the side of the bed and then stood.

"Morning breath, sorry!" She ran to the bathroom, and he laughed, although her nude and jiggling buttocks made his groin hard. His woman liked to sleep in the nude. Shy Dakota was naughty Dakota too.

She came back and rushed to the bed, and he hugged her tightly, adjusting every part of her to him. He was hard now, and she humped him without remorse.

"Wanting something, babe?"

"You, silly cowboy." She kissed him, her tongue parting his lips and entering his mouth, and he was lost.

He turned her over, and then he was on her, his shaft against her pussy.

"You make me crazy with want, babe."

"Make love to me, Ted," she whispered, and he grinned.

"Yes, madam," he said and worked to take his boxer off.

He parted her legs with greedy eyes, and her pink core called to his mouth.

He had feasted on her so many times! He knew what to do to make her fly. He nibbled the creamy skin of her inner thighs while his hand cupped her pussy. His thumb brushed her pussy lips, and she sighed contently.

Then it was the time for his tongue to lap the soft petals in a long first taste, and he growled when her sweetness exploded in his mouth.

“I love to have breakfast in here,” he said, and she gasped.

He put his hands on her thighs and used his tongue like a sword to devour her pussy.

He worked her clit back and forth. He circled and touched it restlessly.

Her moans grew more and more, and her soft trembles showed she was on the edge.

“Ted... Oh, Ted, I’m about to... No!” She cried when he stopped, and he smirked.

“You will come all over my dick, babe,” he told her, and he laid backward.

“Mount me, babe. I want you to ride me hard. Imagine I’m the bull you have to tame.”



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She was on him immediately, scrubbing herself all over his shaft. She leaned to kiss him, and her breast rested over his chest. He slid his fingers to brush her pink nipples, and she cried.

He kissed a line across her neck, and then his hands went to her buttocks and pushed her to take his shaft.

She impaled on his dick with a moan, and she rolled her eyes in delight, and he felt he could explode just by seeing how decadent she looked: wrecked and wild. His.

“Ride me, Dakota,” he told her. She raised her chest and moved to take him deeper, purring.

“Ohhh! Move, Ted, please! Pound me hard, babe, I need you,” she cried.

He manhandled her to put her on all fours and sunk between her thighs again.

“I want you to scream, babe. Don’t hold back,” he told her while thrusting into her hotness. He was addicted to her pussy, to her body, to her. He wanted her shouting his name, telling the world she was his.

“Brad...”

His brother had returned a month ago, and Dakota felt shy around him. But his middle brother was the best and tried to give them room.

Ted knew his old-fashioned brother wanted him to make things formal with Dakota.

He had given shit to Rex until the older bro asked Marie to marry him.

It was a matter of time before Brad insisted Ted gave Dakota a ring or left her alone.

Brad was a gentleman through and through, always thinking about the well-being of women around. He cared about their reputation and hated gossip.

“Brad left early, babe. Come on,” he urged her, and pistoned harder. She arched her neck in a trance, and he slid his fingers to touch her clit.

She cried with ecstasy and then orgasmed with violent trembles.

“Ted! I’m...”

“You’re coming all over my dick, babe. Just wait...” he said and went deeper. The tingle of his balls announced his climax.

He shot his release inside her, and he almost roared with pleasure.

“Love you, Da,” he said and kissed the back of her neck while still unloading in her.

“I love you more, Ted.” She looked at him over her shoulder.

He caressed her side with tenderness and removed his softening shaft from her. He hugged her waist to pull her to lie beside him.

“I’ve been giving a little thought to my life...” she mumbled, and he stared at her in awe.

“Our life, you mean,” he said, feeling awkward. What was this about? Had he misunderstood what they had?

“Mmm. I mean my life, my working life,” she added. “I need to get a job.”

“You work for me, babe,” he said, frowning.

“Please, be serious. You’re my boyfriend. Me spoiling you rotten is because I love you. I resigned a month ago.”

“What? Rex didn’t tell me anything.”

“I asked him not to. I knew you would be all flustered, and I want to get a proper job, Ted.”

“Babe... You don’t need to...”

“Yes, I need. I enjoy working. So I applied for a job.”

“What kind of job?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:44 am*

“As a secretary for a new doctor. A woman. She is new in town and is setting her clinic.”

“So, you’ll work all day and then go to Peggy Sue’s home. When will I see you, babe? I need you.” As clingy as it sounded, he gave a shit. “Move with me, Dakota.”

“Brad... I don’t want him to be uncomfortable because of me.”

He frowned, leaned to get his phone, and hit Brad’s number.

“What are you doing, Ted?” Dakota asked.

His brother took the call.

“Brad. Listen to me. You have to get a new house. I asked Dakota to move here.”

“Ted!” Dakota shouted.

Brad listened and answered without hesitation:

“Okay, little bro. I’m moving on when I see a ring on Dakota’s finger.”

“You get it. You have a month.”

He grinned and looked at his horrified girlfriend.

“Ready. This hut will be ours in a month.”

“Brad is going to hate me,” she whispered.

“Not a chance. He’s a resourceful man, and he has plenty of money. He understands I’m a family man now.”

“Is that so?” she said.

“Absolutely, sunshine. I haven’t got a ring yet, but I’ll buy the biggest I can find.”

“If this is the way you’re going to propose...”

“I’m telling you what will happen. When it will happen, how it will happen, that’s a surprise.”

“Okay, I can wait. Now, kiss me silly, my cocky cowboy.”

“Yes, madam,” he said, and devoured her mouth.

Fences and cattle could wait. He had a woman to tend to.

THE END