



Down in Flames

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Description: He's been in love with a rugged, hunky cowboy for years. The problem? Michael is fifteen years older...and straight.

West Owens grew up suffocated by his overprotective family. To prove he's not the frail child he once was, he's shredding through local rodeos on the wildest broncs around. But the man he most wishes would stop seeing him as a sickly child is Michael. Since the moment they met, West had hoped that one day Michael would look at him with desire, seeing him as a true equal and not just a responsibility. Michael Whittaker has devoted his life to protecting others, but he's failed at every turn. He's always been just a little too late to save anyone. When he discovers the boy who's wriggled under his skin is risking his neck riding broncs—and realizes he's no longer a boy at all—the tough-as-nails cowboy is forced to make a decision. He's old enough to know better. Straight enough to know better. Seducing West may ruin their friendship, but maybe it will save his life. Each moment together is delicious torture. Passion hotter than either of them expected. Michael may be old enough to be West's daddy, but there's nothing fatherly in his sinful gaze and rough hands. As they grow closer, Michael realizes that trying to keep West safe might just break the young cowboy's heart. Because West is looking for more than just a roll in the hay; he's looking for love—and the one thing Michael can't give away is his heart. Even though it feels like West has already stolen it.

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CHAPTER ONE

No one cheered for him. Not for him.

In the rodeo world, West Owens was less than a ghost. He didn't even exist. But the crowd went wild for Kade Keller, the mystery bronc-buster who'd been tearing up local rodeos for years without ever winning a buckle.

Everyone loved an underdog, but no news outlet wanted to run stories about the state's most tenacious loser. The rodeo world was crammed with hard luck stories of has-been and never-was.

Kade Keller wasn't anything special, and he liked it that way.

Winning was out of the question. One whisper of his secret life was all it would take to burn West's world to the ground. No one suspected a simple good ol' boy like him to be leading a double life, especially not in a town like Sweetwater where even the Sunday sermon took a backseat to the congregation's gossip. He was a second fiddle, a side note in other people's lives. Nothing more than a helpful shadow.

It took an insane amount of skill to constantly throw his rides without drawing suspicion, but money and fame had never been his end game. He wasn't like his friend, celebrity bull rider Calvin Craig, who lived like his hair was on fire and rode the same way. West wasn't after a buckle. When he sat a bronco, it was for a very different reason.

He rode to prove he could take as much punishment as his old man ever did.

Jasper Owens was old now, whittled down to a brittle echo of the man he'd once been. But West still remembered the whipcord tough rodeo man he used to be, back before he was forced to kill his dreams and get a real job or watch his family starve. He had no idea that his youngest son had followed in his footsteps. It never crossed his mind that West might be able to do blindfolded what he'd once done so long ago, and it never would. Not if West had any say in it.

It would break his heart if he ever found out.

He'd sacrificed everything just to keep West alive, working himself to the bone to pay the medical bills for West's congenital heart condition until all that was left was meanness and brittle edges. West had survived to adulthood on the broken backs of his family, so he couldn't blame them for not wanting to risk their investment. They would always think of him as a fragile, sickly boy. But he wasn't a boy anymore, and there was no stopping a man and his foolish pride.

Even if he'd never prove it to anyone else, he needed to know his own worth.

It wasn't difficult to stay under the radar if he stuck to small rodeos. In rural backcountry, it was impossible to throw a stone without hitting an amateur event, especially during the long, dry eastern Oregon summers.

West had been delivering supplies for the local tack and feed shop since right out of high school, so it was easy to hide his absence from town. Harder to disguise the injuries, but he managed. It wasn't like anyone wanted to see him with his shirt off anyway—and didn't that sting just a little?

There had been a moment when he'd thought maybe...but no. He'd been wrong. Even he knew better than to pine after a straight man.

Michael Whittaker was older, wiser, and tougher than West could ever be. Like the

hero in an old-school Western, all square-jawed and lean-hipped. Women crawled over him everywhere he went, like ants at a picnic, especially when they realized how much money his ranch funneled into Sweetwater's struggling economy. He was everything small-town girls were raised to want, before they realized they'd be forced to settle for small-town boys. Feisty boys with quick smiles whose worlds closed in on them a little more every day. Boys who grew into men with no hope and no future. West was one of them, simple and unambitious, but it had never bothered him much until he stood next to a man like Michael.

Michael.

Everyone else called him Whit, ever since he'd first rolled into town, fresh off active duty with a pretty wife and baby girl on his arm. His eyes had been cold back then. Lonely eyes. That's what West had thought when he first looked up and met his gaze, all the way across the room. The only time those eyes had ever thawed was when his wife said his name. Michael. West had seen that warmth, and he'd wanted it. Not to steal it—not to keep it—but just to bask in it for a while.

So, he'd always been Michael.

Those gorgeous, bright eyes had only gotten colder the day lightning struck a tree in front of Mary Whittaker's horse. Michael was the first to reach his wife, the one to stop anyone from moving her when he saw the angle of her neck, but it was too late.

After the funeral, the Ladies Auxiliary had taken it upon themselves to set up a meal train. For months, Michael could do nothing but work and drink, and it was West who drove out to the ranch to deliver hot meals. He was the one who sat at the kitchen table with Michael's little girl, Abigail, sculpting with Play-Doh while the newly single father grabbed a nap and a quick shower. Their unexpected friendship had bloomed one day at a time, usually with a couple fishing rods and a cooler full of beer. It happened slowly, until their lives had become so tangled up that West

couldn't separate them anymore.

Many of his friends worked the spread out at the Triple M, and he grabbed dinner at the ranch a couple nights a week. Every spring, he rolled up his sleeves for calving season. Come summer, he helped with branding, and he stacked hay in the fall. He never accepted a penny in exchange. In his world, that was just what friends did for each other.

But he hadn't been a very good friend lately.

Three months ago, a local farmer had set fire to the Triple M in a livestock dispute, and the ranch had been razed nearly to the ground. West was there that day, arriving just as they dragged Michael out of a burning stable before it collapsed, and his faulty heart had nearly stopped in his chest.

As Michael recuperated in the hospital, West never left his side. He barely slept or ate, certain that something terrible would happen once he looked away.

All at once, he'd realized how deeply he'd already fallen, and it terrified him.

Looking back, it was love from the start. From that very first day when the little bell over the shop door had jingled and West glanced up, right into the eye of a hurricane that sucked him up and never let him get his feet back on the ground. For years, he'd stuffed those feelings way down deep where he didn't have to examine them too closely, but one look at Michael, wounded and vulnerable in a hospital bed, and they all came gushing up to the surface. Suddenly, West questioned every motivation. He couldn't even trust himself enough to offer a comforting touch. He felt like a vulture, preying on a man at his weakest.

So, he ran. Turned tail like a coward, avoiding church, ignoring friends, and ducking out back doors whenever Michael walked in the front. It had been three months since

he'd set foot on Triple M soil. Every time one of his friends invited him to check on the rebuilding progress, he invented a quick excuse, pretending he couldn't see the hurt and confusion in their eyes. But that was nothing compared to the ice that had slowly returned to Michael's gaze.

West tried to pretend he didn't notice by taking on an even bigger workload than normal. His newest delivery had taken him across the border into northern California, slinging fence for the autumn stampede in Montague.

His eyes were heavy and gritty from the road, and he was dragging ass by the time he finished the supply dump and robotically pinned his entry number to the back of his shirt. It was just a thin cotton T-shirt, nothing fancy like the pearl snap button-downs the other cowboys wore. Chaps and cowboy hats were practically a uniform for bronc riders, but he made do with work jeans and his lucky ballcap. They suited him fine when all he ever did was eat dirt.

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The buckles were big at local rodeos, but the prizes were small. Most riders were happy just to cover gas and time off work. Out here, it was every man for himself. The only people a rider had in his corner were buddies willing to lend a hand.

But Kade Keller was a ghost, and ghosts didn't have friends.

"Got anyone pulling for you today, Keller?" Hank Pruitt asked around a fat lip of Skoal.

"Naw." West bit his glove strap between his teeth and pulled it tight. The tang of leather oil stamped his tongue. "Want to lend a hand? There's a beer in it for you."

Hank squinted at him through the stringy bits of hair that had come untucked from his Stetson. "A'ight. I gotcha," he said, and then added with a hint of mischief, "You need all the help you can get, son."

The sun was gliding low and heavy behind the mountains before the rodeo started. Barrel racers went first, their shadows stretching like mythic, flying beasts across the arena. In most events, rider and horse worked together as a team, and their trust and partnership showed in everything they did.

Not so with broncs. They didn't have the same glamorous reputation as bulls, but they were just as dangerous even without horns. Dislocated shoulders and broken bones were just rites of passage in bronc-busting, and neck braces were standard gear in every toolkit for a reason. Bucking horses were finished as soon as they shook a cowboy free, like dislodging a gnat. After that, all they wanted was to take a victory lap and gloat a little bit. But that didn't mean much to the men they ripped through on

the ground.

A temperamental mare named Death Rose waited for him in the chute. She was a real beauty, combed and curried until her sorrel coat gleamed beneath the arena lights, but there was a fierce look in her eyes.

“Hey, gorgeous,” West murmured, stroking the forelock that curled over her forehead.

“Hurry it up, Keller,” Hank said, spitting in the dirt and kicking some dust on it with the tip of his boot. “We’re not here to make friends with ‘em.”

“You’ve got a real way with the ladies, Hank,” West teased. He’d learned from his buddy Tucker Grace to never take a horse for granted. They were so much more than simple animals. Stupid and sentimental as it was, West liked to think introducing himself made a difference.

“I do fine with the two-legged kind,” Hank said dryly.

West laughed and slung a leg over her bare back. Nothing connected them except the simple rigging that stretched across her withers. She snorted and whinnied, jittering in place and side-stepping to slam his thigh into a post. West murmured to her in a gentle voice, jamming his hand beneath the wooden handle until his knuckles popped.

The crowd droned like a swarm of wasps, peppered now and then by the bright trill of a fiddle down on the green. Pickup men loped silently at the edges of the fence. Autumn crisp was moving in fast from the mountains but nervous sweat still rolled down West’s nose and dripped off the tip.

His heart tripped like a snare drum in his chest, alarmingly fast, and he discreetly slid two fingers beneath his glove to check his pulse. Quick, but steady. Nothing a few

deep, calming breaths wouldn't fix.

Hank clapped him hard on the shoulder, but West barely felt it through the thick pad of his rough stock vest.

"Keep it ninety, Keller!" Hank shouted.

West jerked a thumbs-up without looking at him. His neckroll was so stiff he could barely turn his head, but it kept his head from popping clean off on the hardest bucks, so he figured it was worth it.

There was power in the air tonight. It tingled over his skin like a gathering electrical storm, raising the hair on his forearms. Energy twitched through Death Rose, quivering in her haunches as they settled together.

This was his night. He could win. But that wasn't his reason for riding, so he clenched his jaw and slipped one boot heel just behind the mark out line at the mare's shoulder. When the stars aligned and he was tempted to just cut loose and show the world what he could really do, the simplest way to sabotage himself was to fail the mark out on the first jump. It was an automatic disqualification, and he kept the trick in his back pocket for nights like this. Nights when he was sure he could throw a rope around a hurricane and ride it all the way to ninety points.

The gate flew open at his nod, and Death Rose leaped into the arena. It was like trying to ride a lightning bolt. She went berserk, jack-knifing like a broken seesaw and snapping his body back and forth hard enough to shake his fillings loose. His father never spoke of his riding days, and he sure as hell hadn't passed on any of his knowledge, but bronc-busting wasn't rocket science. It didn't take killer instinct, no matter how much the tough guys nattered about it. Mostly, it took a lot of balance, a little bit of skill, and enough pigheadedness to keep holding on when a sane person would let go.

West was a master at that.

Every worry and doubt he'd ever had was shaken right out of his head in a matter of seconds, disappearing in a tidal wave of adrenalin. His heart hammered, and his breath ran like a freight train through his lungs.

Funny, how eight seconds could feel like an eternity.

Every muscle in his back and shoulders felt like they were tearing loose at the joints, strained by the sheer force of each buck. The crowd roared, but he ignored them. It wasn't his name they chanted. Kade Keller was just an alter ego, a figment of his imagination. A man he could never be. But beneath the spotlights of this outdoor arena, riding lightning through clouds of sand, he could pretend.

Death Rose tore across the dirt, taking him with her whether he liked it or not. He knew his form was damn near perfect, and he was already calculating his dismount when the buzzer sounded. That was when the mare whipped around and slammed him into a fence, dragging him across the weathered posts. A rusty nail caught his jeans and tore open his thigh, but he held on. That was when the pickup riders closed in fast, taking her by surprise and startling her into an uncontrolled rear. West held on grimly as they both went almost vertical, but he sensed the instant she hit the tipping point.

They fell together, West spinning like a frisbee off her back and slapping the hard-pack face-first. A shower of colorful sparkles exploded behind his eyes, like the confetti cannons they'd popped at Abigail's last birthday party, and then the horse landed on top of him. She hit with the power of a mack truck, punching the air from his lungs. Blinding pain ripped through him from shoulder to pelvis.

For a terrifying clutch of seconds, he wasn't sure he was still alive. Then Death Rose climbed to her feet and angrily shook her coat, galloping to the opposite end in a flash

of hooves and dust.

“You okay?” A pickup man dropped low in his saddle, leaning down and thrusting out a helping hand. West clutched him by the wrist and hauled himself painfully to his feet.

Everything ached, but not in the red-hot poker way of broken bones or crushed pelvises. He'd taken most of the damage to his face. His nose was definitely broken. Dust clogged his nostrils, and a bitter, coppery taste flooded his mouth, but he was otherwise miraculously uninjured.

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“Fine,” he said, swiping a sleeve beneath his gushing nose before allowing himself to be dragged into the saddle behind the rider.

Death Rose had already calmed, preening at the edge of the arena while an official looked her over.

“That sucked,” Hank said when he reached the gate.

A crowd had gathered behind him, full of concern, but West would trade them all for a good friend. He grinned through blood-stained teeth.

“I’ve had worse,” he muttered, poking around at the bridge of his nose before cracking the broken bone into place. What should have been an explosion of pain was just a drop in the ocean for his broken body.

“All that, and you didn’t even get a score.” Hank gave a woeful little shake of his head. “How did you manage to miss the mark out?”

“Bad luck, I guess.”

“You ever think bronc-busting just ain’t for you, Keller?”

He shrugged, wiping at his watering eyes with dirty fingers. “Got nothing better to do.”

“Shit. Don’t you have anybody back home who can keep you out of trouble?”

“He does now.” The voice was deep and rough. Angrier than West had ever heard it.

He shouldn’t sound like that. It was the first thought to pop into West’s head, rattling around in his empty brain like loose change in a vending machine. And then: No. Not here.

With trepidation, West slowly raised his head and searched the milling crowd over Hank’s shoulder. Just a moment ago, they’d been a faceless sea, meaningless and impermanent. But not anymore. Now the ocean parted, making room for a cowboy with blazing blue eyes and a dark expression.

“Michael,” West said stupidly.

Michael was here. Somehow, despite how secretive West had always been about his little hobby, despite the strain that had cropped up between them since the fire, and despite the fact that he should be hundreds of miles away...he was here.

And he was furious.

CHAPTER TWO

West was jammed behind the wheel of his delivery truck with a cold compress over his eyes, when the creak of rusted hinges alerted him to the fact that he wasn’t alone.

He didn’t bother opening his eyes. He’d know that particular blend of sage and juniper soap anywhere. The truck dipped as Michael slid into the passenger seat, but West still didn’t look at him.

The door slammed hard enough to make his ears pop.

“Ow.” He winced and pulled the compress off his battered face. “Careful. This old

Ford belongs to Gus, and it's had nearly as many birthdays."

Michael didn't laugh. Why would he? Apart from awkward small talk and lame excuses, West had barely spoken to him in months. But without his usual warm smile, he looked like a stranger. Shadows sank into the strong planes of his face, illuminating every harsh angle and highlighting the anger in his expression.

In the close darkness, his presence was almost suffocating. He filled the truck, taking up room with his wide shoulders and the spread of his massive thighs. Everything about him radiated strength. He was a screaming neon advertisement for a man in his prime, and it had West wanting to claw at the windows to escape.

So, he did. He threw open the door and tumbled out into the cool mountain air. The ominous thud of the passenger door told him Michael had followed him, but he ignored it.

Night had fallen, but the stars were washed out by light pollution from the stadium. West was parked on a hilltop overlooking the arena. Cheers still echoed from the stands as clear as a bell, and elderly couples danced to bluegrass music down on the green. Cars wended their way through the parking lot like a giant snake, trying to beat the traffic rush.

He propped his butt against the fender and stared down at the glow of headlights as if hypnotized. It was so much easier than looking at the man who settled down beside him.

Michael still hadn't said a word. He just sat there. Breathing. Why did he have to breathe so sexily? The rise and fall of his chest, the little catch in his throat...

"How did you find me?" West blurted, just to drown out the sound.

“What makes you think I’m here for you?” Michael asked.

West scoffed and rolled his eyes to show what he thought of that, then tried to hide a wince of pain. Michael wasn't the type to leave his daughter and ranch hands while he jetted off to a rodeo. He didn't enjoy rodeos in the first place, not when he lived them every day.

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He waited for an answer, but Michael just blew out a long, slow breath and said, “I’ll give you one question, and then it’s my turn. Are you sure that’s what you want to ask?”

“Yes—no. My head hurts too much for this,” West muttered, shoving the compress against his swollen nose. But it had been so long since they’d had a real conversation, and he only wanted to know one thing. “How are you? How’s Abigail?”

Michael leaned back against the Ford and shoved his hands deep into his pockets, hanging his head like he was struggling to hang on to his temper. He’d always been a patient man, and West felt a flash of shame that he’d been the one to provoke him into losing it.

“Abby’s fine,” Michael said after a small hesitation. “She’s turned her new bedroom into a wild animal sanctuary.”

It hurt to smile, but West couldn’t help himself. That little girl was the patron saint of anything with a beating heart.

“So, you must have finished construction on the house,” he said with satisfaction, but Michael was out of patience. He reached out and clamped one huge hand around the back of West’s neck, pinning him like a dog with a small animal clamped between its jaws.

“I said one question,” Michael reminded him. “Now it’s your turn to explain just what the hell you thought you were doing out there.”

“I’m good at it,” West said defensively.

“Sure didn’t look like it from where I was standing.”

Embarrassed heat crawled up West’s neck. He clenched his teeth and stared down at his boots, muttering, “I don’t care about winning.”

“So, what are you trying to prove? That you can take a beating?”

“Maybe.”

If anything, the response only made Michael angrier. There was something dark in his eyes when he snarled, “Ask Calvin Craig how well that worked out for him.”

West still remembered the way his father used to nod approvingly every time Cal's PBR stats came up on ESPN. “That kid has guts,” he used to say, oblivious to the son in the room with him. “He did what the rest of us sorry sacks only dream about.”

Cal had made it all the way to the World Finals where a wreck nearly killed him. Before he came limping home, broken in body and spirit, desperately searching for a reason to keep on living.

“Christ, I’ve been compared with that guy my whole damn life,” West muttered. He stalked around the side of the truck and began digging for the sleeping bag he’d tucked under the seat. “If I do break my neck out there, you can put it on my tombstone. He was no Calvin Craig.”

For a big man, Michael could move shockingly fast when he wanted. He was on West in a hot second, spinning him around so quickly that his head whirled.

“You listen to me,” he growled, pinning West’s battered face between two rough

hands. “Don’t ever joke about something like that. Not while I’m around. You and I both know that all it takes is one bad fall.”

The embers of West’s temper had begun to glow, but Michael’s white-hot anger was like a bucket of cold water.. His irritation sizzled and died, leaving him sorry and sick to the stomach.

“Michael,” he said, reaching up and clasping the thick wrists where Michael still pinned his head. “Michael, I’m sorry.”

All of a sudden, it was Michael who couldn’t meet his eyes. He pulled back, leaving West suddenly cold. West leaned forward and ducked his head, hoping to catch his gaze. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, and the weight of it sat on his chest and left him winded. “I didn’t mean to remind you of Mary.”

Michael shook his head, but he still wouldn’t look at him. He stared down at the lazy serpent of cars, and his throat worked as if he were struggling to keep down his last meal.

West hated seeing him like this. Maybe it was the age difference between them, but he’d always seemed so cool, so confident. Sure of himself in a way every man hoped he’d become and so few ever did. A man who could handle anything...except the idea of losing someone else he cared about.

Somehow, West was lucky enough to be counted in that select group, and yet he was destroying it all because he was selfish enough to want more. To want everything.

“You weren’t supposed to find out. I wouldn’t do this to you on purpose,” he said with a sigh.

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me for months?”

“What? No!” And then, like a dumbass, West realized he’d just been handed a perfect excuse. “Yes! I mean...yes.”

Michael’s eyes turned sharp. He studied West for a long, silent moment before shaking his head and stepping back. They both drew a deep, calming breath. West turned and finally retrieved his sleeping bag from under the seat, just to relieve some of the tension.

“You’re sleeping here?” Michael asked.

“I don’t have the cash to waste on a motel,” West said with a shrug. “Don’t matter. The nights aren’t too cold yet.”

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“We could drive home tonight.”

“Naw.” He tossed an easy grin over his shoulder, but he still felt strained and raw inside. “I feel like garbage. My shoulder hurts like hell, and I need to sleep off this headache before I get behind the wheel. You ever going to tell me how you tracked me down?”

“Nope.”

West threw him a disgruntled look, and Michael finally laughed. The sound of it sent a flood of relief through West that took his pain down a notch—but just for a moment.

“I asked Gus,” Michael admitted.

“And he told you?” West asked, climbing up into the empty truck bed with agonizing difficulty. Every fiber of his body ached. He unrolled his sleeping bag with an irate snap.

“Not at first. That old man thinks of you like a son, you know that,” Michael said. He crossed his arms and leaned on the dropped tailgate, watching as West worked.

West grunted noncommittally.

Gus Awbry had given him a job straight out of high school. Back then he was just a pale, scrawny kid, but years of heaving hay bales and farm equipment had taken care of that. Nothing but tumbleweeds blew out any time someone from the Owens family

opened their wallets, so West definitely needed the money, but the job had given him more than that. It had given him a sense of purpose and the perfect excuse to be out of town during the warm months when local rodeos began popping up like wildflowers.

Only Gus and West's childhood friend, Tucker, knew that he'd started riding. Mostly because they were the only two people West trusted to mind their own business. Until now.

"If he thought of me like a son, he'd have kept his mouth shut," West muttered under his breath.

"You've got funny ideas about fatherhood," Michael said with amusement. He looked so good standing there in his autumn flannel, with his Stetson cocked back on his head, that West didn't even mind that he seemed to be laughing at him. "It's because he cares about you that he told me at all. At first, he thought it was just something you needed to get out of your system. Said your old man used to ride, and he figured you felt like you had something to prove. Maybe you had some wild oats you never got a chance to sew when you were a kid. But you're crazy if you think he's missed the new bruises cropping up all over you like daisies lately. Hell, even I noticed, and you haven't come near me in months."

"You notice everything," West said ironically. It was part of the reason he'd been keeping his distance ever since he realized how strong his obsession had become. There was no way he'd be able to keep it a secret forever, not with the way Michael watched him.

Michael's laugh was dry as an old creek bed. "I wish to God that were true."

They fell into silence after that, but for the first time in months, it felt easy and companionable. Slowly, the thing inside West's chest that had been twisted up tight

and painful began to unknot. Just in time, because every other joint and muscle seemed to be locking up all at once. Everything hurt, and he let out a muffled groan as he stripped off his filthy shirt and yanked a clean one out of his bag.

“Jesus, look at you.” The rasp in Michael’s voice caught him by surprise. “Between the bruises and those old scars, you look like you’ve been wrestling bears.”

West glanced down at his exposed torso, but he didn’t see much to get hyper about. Just a few bruises and the old, faded scar running down the center of his chest; the one he lied about and told everyone was from a climbing accident. He’d spent his entire childhood watching his father and older brothers break their bodies to keep food on the table. This was nothing compared to that.

“Eh.” He shrugged.

“Your nose hasn’t stopped swelling.”

West chuckled. “Not like it makes much of a difference.”

He’d never been much of a looker. Everyone in his family was plain as dirt, with dark hair and muddy brown eyes over noses that looked out of joint from birth.

Michael frowned, but West was suddenly too exhausted to hear another objection. He held up a hand to forestall whatever Michael was about to say.

“Look, I know you’ve got more to say to me, but I need to crash. Can we talk about this back home?”

“We can talk about it in the morning,” Michael said grimly, planting a hand on the open tailgate and hitching himself into the back of the truck with far more ease than West had done. It was almost offensive how quickly he’d recovered from his injuries

after the fire. Like West needed another reason to think he was superhuman. “I’m sleeping here with you.”

West was so surprised he nearly ripped the zipper off his sleeping bag. “What? Why?”

“Because someone needs to make sure you wake up,” he snarled, settling down in the corner between the bulkhead and the wheel well. He kicked his long legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankle.

“You’re crazy,” West stuttered. “You’ll freeze without a blanket.”

“I’ve had worse nights.” Michael chuckled and tugged his hat brim low over his eyes, popping the collar on his thick flannel shirt for warmth.

“Don’t be stupid. Your leg is barely healed from the fire. You’re lucky to be walking!”

“So are you,” Michael said, deadly serious.

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The sleeping bag was bunched in West's clenched fists, but he couldn't seem to make himself relax. His teeth ached from grinding, and his entire face throbbed so badly it made his eyes water.

"Fine. Be a stubborn ass," he muttered, sliding between the nylon layers of his sleeping bag. He crammed his duffle under his head as a pillow, cursing under his breath, but Michael didn't even look up. He seemed to have already settled in for the night, as loose and relaxed as if he were napping in a hammock on his own back porch.

Still, Michael's low voice drifted over to him just before he dropped into an unconscious slumber.

"Sweet dreams, kid."

CHAPTER THREE

When he awoke in the middle of the night, it felt as if he'd dipped his face in a giant snow cone. His nose dripped and he'd never been so aware of the tips of his ears before. Somehow, the chill had reached all the way into the thick sleeping bag he clutched around his chin.

The night had settled into that peculiar silence that only happened in the mountains. Except for a few cowboys bedded down in their rigs, the arena was deserted. Even the faint twinkle of lights from the nearby town did little to cut through the tarry blackness. Up on that hilltop, he might as well be the only person in the world.

Except he remembered suddenly that he wasn't alone. He cranked his head around to glance at the man sleeping beside him.

Michael had barely moved. He still leaned against the corner of the truck bed, hat turned down and chin on his chest, but he'd tucked his bare hands under his armpits for warmth.

He must be freezing, West thought, though it was impossible to tell. He looked dead to the world, and his skin was so tanned from outdoor work that West had always thought he must radiate his own warmth like a mini sun.

He's a grown man, West told himself sternly. He can take care of himself.

But he didn't; that was half the problem. He was always too busy looking after everyone around him. The boss, the father, the man the whole world counted on in a pinch. The friend who had barely begun picking up the pieces of his torched life and would still drop everything to track West across state lines because he was worried. Despite West treating him like a second thought the past few months—or maybe because of it.

With a groan, West pried himself into a shambles of a sitting position. It felt as if a two-ton gorilla had used him as a hacky sack. His body was one giant, throbbing bruise. Everything hurt, but his right shoulder was the worst. Pain spread through the joint with every breath, shooting directly into the base of his skull.

Holding his breath, he cautiously inched across the truck bed until he was lying snug against the outside of Michael's leg. His numb fingers fumbled with the zipper until he could spread the bag out like a blanket that covered them both. Through it all, Michael didn't even twitch, but as West lay his cheek tentatively on the pillow of Michael's denim-clad thigh, he thought he felt something feather gently through his hair.

Then he was out like a light.

The next time he woke, it was from a dead sleep. One minute, he was stacking zzz's, and the next, he was being chewed up between the jaws of searing, unadulterated agony. It felt as if someone had jammed a red-hot poker through his shoulder socket. The pain was intense, radiating outward in concentric waves that began sharp and faded to a dull ache by the time they reached his elbows. He was moaning before he even opened his eyes.

His head was pillowed on something soft, and one rough hand brushed his sweat-soaked hair off his forehead.

Michael's low voice barely pierced his fog of pain. "What hurts?"

"What doesn't?" West gasped, laughing breathlessly. It took tremendous effort to pry his eyes open and blink away the wetness that had gathered beneath his lashes without his permission.

Michael loomed above him, a shadowy figure so big he nearly blotted out the moon. The sky was still dusted with stars, but a thin white line had just begun to crack the edge of the horizon. Judging by the gloom, it wasn't much before dawn.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," Michael announced.

"No!" That had him bolting up out of Michael's lap, no matter how much a part of him wanted to stay there. It hurt like a sonofabitch, but he'd force himself to dance a two-step if that's what it took to keep him out of a hospital. His breath hung in icy clouds between them as he ground out between clenched teeth, "It's just my shoulder."

"Can you feel your fingers?"

“Sure,” he lied.

“Prove it.”

Michael’s face was hard as stone. He waited silently, giving West all the time in the world to make a fool of himself staring down at his hand and trying to make his fingers twitch. He wasn’t certain if he’d truly lost motor function or if his subconscious was just pants-wetting terrified of the pain that he knew would result.

Grimly, Michael climbed down from the truck bed. Earlier that day, he probably would have hopped, but his own injuries still hadn’t fully healed, and the cold hadn’t done either of them any favors.

“Your leg—” West began anxiously, but Michael cut him off.

“My leg is fine. I’ve been out of the cast for weeks; not that you were around to notice. Now, I’m taking you to the hospital.” There was no room for argument in his tone this time.

The world slid sideways as he slung West over one shoulder like a feed sack and carried him to the passenger side of his own truck.

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West's vision went red.

"Put me down!" he barked, catching Michael in the ribs with a furious elbow. That granted his wish right quick. Michael dropped him, and the impact felt like a grenade going off. He groaned and doubled over in agony.

Michael's mouth twisted like he'd tasted something bitter, but he watched without comment as West scrabbled at the door handle. By the time his ass sank into the bucket seat, he was a shaking, soggy ball of noodly muscle.

He had a spare minute to collect himself as Michael cleaned up the bed and stowed his gear in the back seat, but he'd barely caught his breath before Michael climbed behind the wheel and slammed the door so hard the frame rattled.

"Buckle up," Michael growled, flipping down the visor and snatching the spare key as it fell into his lap.

"This is stupid. I'm not a kid," West muttered, but he felt like one as he fumbled to stretch his seatbelt over his bad shoulder without setting off the meat grinder in the joint.

"Could've fooled me." Michael gunned the engine, jackhammering the Ford over a never-ending sea of potholes as it lurched onto the dirt road that took them down the mountain. "Shit, this road's rough. Hang on," he said, reaching one arm protectively across West's chest.

West clenched his teeth and braced himself against the dash. "I didn't ask you to be

here.”

Michael’s laughter rattled him nearly as much as the potholes. “Kid, you practically sent me a written invitation. You’ve been living in my back pocket for years, and you figured I wouldn’t notice when you ghosted?”

“You were so busy rebuilding the Triple M. I didn’t want to get in the way.” It was a lie, but it sounded like something he’d do. Quiet, selfless West Owens. Permanent wallpaper. No one had ever looked too closely at his secrets because he didn’t seem like the type who would have any.

He’d grown up listening to Pastor Jackson’s blistering tirades about honesty and righteousness, the same as every other boy growing up in Sweetwater, but that particular lesson had never stuck. By the time he’d been healthy enough to start school—six open-heart surgeries late—lying had already become a way of life. I feel fine. I’m better now. And most importantly: my mom said it was okay. Lying was the only thing that had given him some semblance of normalcy as a child, and he was wickedly good at it because no one ever saw it coming. Until now.

The look Michael shot him was full of mockery, but he didn’t bother arguing once he noticed the ashen hue of West’s complexion.

“Here,” he said, lifting his hips and pulling his phone from the ass pocket of his jeans. He dropped it in West’s lap. “Check the map and tell me where I’m going.”

West didn’t bother. “Nearest hospital is Fairchild,” he said, “Twenty minutes, at least. Take Bruce Street once you get into town.”

Michael didn’t ask how he knew. Maybe he figured it was a rodeo thing; that all riders familiarized themselves with the nearest place to set their bones. But the truth was that West had been taught to memorize the nearest hospital ever since he was a

kid, and it was a habit he couldn't shake even if he wanted.

He'd been lucky enough to be born on the cutting edge of a technological revolution. A few years earlier, and he'd have died before reaching his first birthday. He'd had four surgeries before age three, and two more after that before doctors were able to divert enough blood through his malformed heart to keep it pumping for good. He was the first generation of HLHS babies to reach adulthood, charting unknown territory, and the only thing that helped his mother sleep at night was the knowledge that he was always firmly aware of his limitations. As if he could ever forget.

And here he was, all his weakness on display, in front of the man he wanted to impress more than anyone.

"What a goat fuck," he mumbled, pressing his battered face against the chilly windowpane as farmland began to flash past.

The Ford's headlights seemed like the only lights on earth, slicing through a dark ribbon of nearly abandoned highway. Only locals traveled these rural backroads, and none at this time of night. The sun had barely begun to rise, and the land was sunk in a thick, foggy gloom. Patchworks of green pasture were stitched up against dry brushland, whipping by at ghostly speed and dotted by lonely stands of cottonwood and black walnut. In daylight, the area was nearly as beautiful as Sweetwater, but it seemed lonely in the eerie blue shadows of predawn.

Despite the pain, he must have dozed, because the next thing he knew, they were rolling up on the brightly lit emergency department. After that, the morning devolved into a monotony of paperwork and stiff furniture. The creepy stench of plastic and industrial cleaner always spiked his anxiety, but he hated the way Michael seemed to go on alert once he noticed.

Right after the fire, West hadn't left Michael's side. He'd been like a rabid dog,

guarding the hospital room against well-wishers and nosy neighbors while doctors pieced Michael's body back together with ointment and fiberglass. After a few days, he'd nearly been climbing the walls, and not because of the bad food and torturous furniture.

Back then, Michael had been too high on painkillers to notice his agitation. But he was noticing now. Big time. So, West booted him back to the waiting room. He had to pretend he didn't see his wounded look as he left, but it was for the best.

Michael didn't know a dang thing about his heart, and if West had his way, he never would. All he knew of West's childhood was that he'd never had much of one. Even in a town as small and bored as Sweetwater, the locals had better things to gossip about. West doubted most of his childhood friends even understood the details. No one in his family had ever amounted to much, but they all knew how to keep their mouths shut. His oldest brother, Derek, had broken more than one nose when some kid had gotten mouthy about West's health, and eventually, people had lost interest.

Unfortunately, doctors asked too many questions.

"Any complications since the Fontan operation?" the doctor asked, ignoring his swollen shoulder and pressing a stethoscope to West's chest.

"Nope," West said tightly. He rolled his eyes up and stared at the ceiling over the man's balding head, imagining himself anywhere else. A tropical beach. That would be nice. A cold drink in one hand and Michael's hand in the other, while Abby built sandcastles beside a crystal clear ocean—

"Any A-fib?"

Just like that, the dream popped like a soap bubble.

West sighed. “Look, Dr. Stevenson, I respect your professional curiosity and all, but I’m here about my shoulder.”

The doctor straightened up, stethoscope dangling flaccidly down his stomach, looking for all the world like West had just canceled his birthday. In a stream of ear infections and viral illness, an HLHS survivor was like a bright, shiny new toy, and he’d just ripped it out of the man’s hands. But he wasn’t interested in being a science experiment.

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Dr. Stevenson cleared his throat. “Yes, well, the X-ray was clear enough. The humerus is almost completely separated from the glenoid cavity. What did you say your pain scale was?”

“He didn’t,” the nurse interjected. She was already pulling little plastic-wrapped packages from a cabinet.

“On a scale of one to ten,” the doctor supplied helpfully. He gripped West by the shoulder and elbow and began to slowly rotate his arm in the socket.

Sweat broke out across his forehead, and he swallowed hard. “I’m here, aren’t I?” he gritted out between clenched teeth.

“Huh.” The doctor sounded as if he’d heard that more times than he could count. It was a farming community, after all. He applied sudden downward pressure, and with a sickening pop, West’s shoulder slid back into place. The relief was overwhelming, leaving him weak and clinging to the edge of the exam table.

Dr. Stevenson turned to his computer and made a note. “It says here that your friend brought you in. I can give you something for the pain if he’s driving. It shouldn’t interfere with your condition.”

“Naw. It already feels better.” It wasn’t technically a lie. Compared to what it had been, the pain he still felt was a light summer breeze. A dull background throb rather than bone-crunching agony.

“He’s also been pestering my staff to let him back here. For some reason, my nurses

seem hesitant to put him in his place.” The doctor eyed his nurse with reproach, and she blushed.

West chuckled. “He has that effect on people.” On every woman he’d ever come across, but he didn’t add that. And on me, he thought with helpless amusement. “You can let him in—uh, but I don’t want to discuss my medical history around him.”

“Of course,” the doctor said smoothly, and when Michael had finally wheedled his way back into the room, he added, “You’re fortunate. This subluxation was a hairsbreadth from becoming a complete dislocation. As it is, you’ll only need the sling for a couple of weeks.”

“Going to be hard to work one-handed,” West said, hissing as the nurse strapped his arm to his chest with something stretchy and neon.

She was the only soft thing in the entire room, and she kept glancing furtively at Michael from under her lashes. She smelled pleasantly of floral soap, a nice change from the reek of disinfectant and failure that surrounded them, but the scent turned bitter on the back of his tongue when he noticed the way Michael returned her interest. Michael leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching the curvy sway of her hips as she moved. He’d left his hat in the truck, and his thick, dark hair curled at his temples, just exactly where silver touched it. He’d always been movie star handsome, but that hint of age somehow humanized him and made him even more outrageously appealing.

The doctor didn’t bother glancing up from his computer screen as he continued his litany of instructions. “No raising your shoulder above a ninety-degree angle, and no lifting anything more than twenty pounds.”

“But—”

“The interscapular pain is referred from the whiplash. I’ll prescribe some anti-inflammatories, but you’ll need to alternate heat and cold therapy at least three times a day. No driving for at least forty-eight hours.”

“That ain’t happening,” West said, laughing tightly. “I’ve got seven hours behind the wheel as soon as I walk out of this building.”

“Well, what do I know? I’m just the doctor.” A twitching mustache was the only sign of the man’s annoyance.

West went to rub the back of his neck, only to realize his dominant hand was now bound to his chest in a powder blue sling. He cursed softly, shooting the nurse an apologetic look, and she smiled back. “Look, I’m not trying to be argumentative. It’s just that I can’t afford to hang around here twiddling my fingers.”

“Yes, yes, I know. You have a busy life to get back to, one that doesn’t involve strapping yourself to heavy animals that can crush your bones in an instant.” Dr. Stevenson held out a paper script between two fingers, eyes gleaming behind the smudged lenses of his bifocals. “You think you’re the first rodeo yahoo I’ve seen? Son, you’re not even the first tonight. Drive, don’t drive. Lift, don’t lift. Makes no difference to me. But it darn sure will make a difference to you if you ever want to ride again.”

Michael reached between them, plucking the prescription from the doctor’s hand. “I’ll take care of it, Doc.”

“Like hell you will. What about Abby?” West grouched, but his big show of leaping nimbly off the exam table was ruined when every aching muscle in his body loudly protested. His jeans stuck to the vinyl tabletop, and in the end, he was forced to awkwardly shamble to his feet. He threw out his one good hand and braced himself on the wall, glaring at the way Michael’s lips twitched as if he knew exactly how he

felt.

The doctor sighed heavily.

“Abby will be thrilled to spend a couple extra nights with Celia and Zoe,” Michael said smoothly. Celia was the Triple M’s foreman, and she had her own little girl a few years older than Michael’s daughter. She was Michael’s right hand, and they all loved her.

When West still didn’t agree, Michael reached for his shoulder. He glanced at the sling and hesitated before settling a gentle hand on the center of his back instead. West stiffened, and the touch immediately dropped away. You didn’t hurt me, he wanted to say. Anything to get that reassuring warmth back. But that was the problem, so he kept his lips sealed.

Michael cleared his throat and glanced away, saying roughly, “I’ll take care of it with Gus, if you’re worried about work.”

“Gus isn’t the problem,” West muttered.

You are.

Michael’s eyes darkened, and even though West hadn’t said it out loud, he felt certain Michael heard him anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What do you mean you’re stuck there?” Derek’s voice was like his personality: sharp and abrasive. Sometimes West wondered how their mother had delivered him without getting sliced to ribbons.

“I said what I said,” West muttered into his cell phone.

He was lying flat on his back on one of the motel's double beds, staring at a faded water spot on the popcorn ceiling. It looked like an inkblot made from spilled tea, and as he tilted his head, it morphed into the shape of a polar bear devouring a kitten. He wondered what that said about his psyche.

The Shasta Heights Motor Lodge wasn't the only place in town, but it was the only one that didn't look as if its most loyal residents were the bed bugs. A fresh coat of paint and some Windex did wonders for attracting out-of-towners. There had only been a single vacancy left; a suite with garish teal walls, gold duvets, and flamingo pink upholstery. But it had two double beds and a kitchenette, so it would get them through the night.

West was determined that one night was all they would need.

“What exactly is wrong with the truck?” Derek asked. West could practically hear the way his eyes narrowed in suspicion, even through the phone. He didn't take it personally. His brother was untrusting by nature.

“I already told you. The fuel pump crapped out on me. The garage needs to order the part from Redding, but it'll be here in a day or two. Max.”

“Which garage?”

Now that he thought about it, mechanical troubles might not have been a safe excuse with a man who'd been working on engines since he could crawl. His brother had

been fixing up cars for spare cash since he was a teenager, and these days he had a constantly rotating supply of scrap parts coming through his salvage yard.

“It doesn’t matter which garage,” West said, exasperated. “I just need you to check on Mom and Dad while I’m out of town.”

“I would’ve done that anyway.”

That was true. Derek visited like clockwork, keeping tabs on his parents and each of his four siblings, even though he seemed to loathe every second of it.

West set him off worse than most, but it wasn’t always that way. Back when West was a little kid, they got along great. His oldest brother had been mythic to his childish eyes: huge and cranky, with a nose that had been broken too many times to count. His rough features were permanently marred by a small, painful-looking knot on the bridge of his nose. But what he didn’t claim in looks, Derek made up for with one huge brain. Not that he’d ever gotten a chance to do much with it.

West was only a toddler when Derek dropped out his freshman year and joined their father in the workforce. But even that hadn’t been enough once West’s medical bills began piling up. Their father had been forced to head to the west Texas oil fields to make ends meet, while Derek took on the role of de facto provider at home. He’d done it, and he’d done it well, but he’d become nothing but a roiling mass of abused muscle and seething frustration in the process.

Sometimes West thought his brother hated him, and most of the time, he didn’t blame him.

“Dad has been skipping his pain meds again,” West hurried to say, anxious to end the call before the shower turned off in the adjoining bathroom. He’d always done his best to keep his family separate from the rest of his life, and he doubted that Michael

had ever done much more than pass an Owens sibling in the grocery store.

It wasn't that he was ashamed of them. Far from it. More that they made him ashamed of himself.

"Why aren't you making sure he takes them?" Derek growled.

"You know how stubborn he is."

"He's an old man. Sack up and make him listen to you."

"When has that ever worked?" he asked, rolling his eyes so hard he felt the strain somewhere in the back of his skull.

"Yeah. Forgot who I was talking to." Derek's tone was dismissive. "I'll take care of it. You just get your ass back here as soon as the pump comes in. Mom will lose her shit if you're out of touch for more than a couple days, and I don't have time to pick up your slack."

The line went dead without a goodbye.

"Love you too, bro," West announced to the empty room. He flopped his arm out and set the phone on the end table, too sore and weary to move, at least until the bathroom door opened.

Michael stepped out in a cloud of steam, barefoot and dressed in the same jeans he'd worn the day before. He'd shucked his flannel button-down and wore only a white T-shirt that looked so crisp and soft that West just knew it would still smell like fabric softener if he pressed his nose to it.

"That water pressure is intense. Nearly shot me through the opposite wall," he said,

running a towel through his dark hair. It was ruffled and wild looking, perfect for grabbing, and West hated himself for noticing.

Take it away. Anything. I'll do anything. Just please take it away.

The litany had been running through his head for months, ever since he'd realized how far gone he was, but if God answered prayers, he sure as hell did it in his own time.

"This place isn't so bad," Michael was saying, oblivious to the agony of lust he'd inspired just by being wet-haired and barefoot. He yanked open the ancient floral curtains, sending spirals of dust through shafts of sunlight.

"Tell that to the broken spring playing slap and tickle with my ass," West groaned, shifting the ice pack he'd had wrapped around his shoulder for the past ten minutes.

He'd relented on some pain medication, partly because he wasn't going anywhere, and partly because he thought it might make the coming argument more bearable. But all it did was dump a bunch of cotton balls in his head, and they'd been tumbling around ever since, making everything feel fuzzy and unimportant.

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An argument was coming though. He had no doubt about that. Michael had clearly been bottling up everything he wanted to say since he realized how much pain West was in, and West could tell he was just dying to rip a slice off him. Carve him up like a Sunday ham. Consideration for his injuries was the only thing that had kept him from going nuclear until now.

“You know there’s a carnival in town?” Michael asked, bracing one arm over his head and staring at the crowded parking lot on the other side of the window. The colorful peaks of a Ferris wheel could barely be made out over the treetops.

“Because of the stampede. It’s the most tourism this place ever gets,” West grunted, shifting so that he sat reclined against some pillows. Lying down while Michael stood, strong and whole and fully dressed, made him feel intensely vulnerable.

Michael gave a noncommittal grunt and checked his watch. “Okay,” he announced. “That’s enough ice. Time to switch on the heat.”

“I can do it,” West grouched, but Michael was already gently slipping the ice pack from beneath him and replacing it with a heating pad.

West turned his face away and squeezed his eyes shut.

Even with nothing but cheap motel soap, the man smelled better than that nurse’s sugary perfume ever could. It was something baked right into his skin. Somehow, he could spend hours fixing fence in the blazing heat, and still smell good at the end of the day. Warm and spicy, like he’d just settled down for a nap in a patch of sage and showy tarweed. A good, familiar smell, like home...except a far cozier home than

West had ever known.

“You’re good at taking care of people,” he mumbled as he settled back into the blissful heat.

“I’ve had a lot of practice.” Michael flashed the straight, pearl-white grin that stopped hearts wherever he went. West didn’t know how his own heart had ever survived the repeated shocks.

“Abby is lucky to have you,” he said.

Michael chuckled. “I’m luckier to have her, but that wasn’t what I meant. I handle half a dozen troublemaking cowboys on a regular basis, and not a single one knows how to take care of himself like an adult.” He hooked a ridiculous hot pink chair by its back and dragged it over to the bedside to straddle, and that’s when West knew it was coming. The Talk.

“It’s how we were raised,” West said, adjusting the heating pad like a cape over one shoulder.

“Maybe,” Michael agreed, folding his arms across the back of the chair and resting his chin on them. “I learned the meaning of hard work early, growing up on my grandpa’s farm with my cousins. But he was old, and he’d lost enough people in his life that he made sure we knew how important it was to look after ourselves.”

“Says the man who removed his cast three weeks early,” West pointed a finger at him and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s different,” Michael said dryly. “I had a ranch to rebuild and people counting on me for their livelihood. Besides, I probably took it easier than you think.”

West scoffed, and Michael's lips curved upward in a rueful smile. "Why do you think I healed up so well?" he asked, lightly rapping his knuckles on the leg he'd broken. "You've got to at least do the bare minimum, and you and I both know you aren't going to wear that sling around your family. So, take a couple days here. The world won't stop spinning."

But it might if West had to spend more than a few hours alone with him.

The last time they'd been alone was those first few days in the hospital, right after the fire, back when West didn't have to explain himself for holding Michael's hand or smoothing back his hair while he slept. He'd gotten used to it so fast it frightened him. Michael was in so much pain that he might not have noticed how territorial he'd gotten, but the nurses noticed, and that's when he knew that he'd crossed a line. He couldn't trust himself. Not around this man.

As he glanced helplessly around the eyesore of a room, he became aware of the tension in his own body. Anxious knots rippled across his shoulders and down his back.

"I'll pay you back for this," he said, gesturing at the room.

Michael glanced carelessly around them and shrugged as if the wasted money didn't matter. But West knew that couldn't be true. The Triple M had always turned a decent profit, but the insurance money had barely scratched the surface of necessary repairs. The whole town knew that he'd drained his savings bone dry putting the damage to rights.

"Consider it a return on all the unpaid hard labor you've given the ranch over the years," Michael said.

"That's what friends do."

“Yeah.” Michael’s eyes sharpened. “It is.”

Something unspoken thrummed between them. West didn’t know what it was, but he knew it pulsed down his spine and made his hair stand on end. Michael's eyes were shockingly blue. In the slant of orange sunlight filtering through the open window, they practically glowed, like the hottest flame on a gas burner.

He dropped his gaze, hoping it was enough to calm his racing heart.

“What did Gus say when you told him you were stuck here?” Michael asked, abruptly breaking the tension.

“He didn’t believe my line about a fuel pump, for starters,” West said with a chuckle. “Then he complained that the owner shouldn’t have to actually do any work around the shop. I swear, he’s fixing to retire any day now.”

“What will you do when that happens?”

“Work for whoever buys the shop off him, I guess.” West shrugged, then he remembered why that was a bad idea. He hissed and cupped his injured shoulder.

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“You ever wanted to do something more?”

West’s laugh was bitter. He’d wanted to climb Everest when he was a kid, and after that, he’d dreamed of going to college. But that was before he’d realized some things were impossible for guys like him. Even if he’d had the money, the grades, or the guts—he didn’t have the heart.

But he couldn’t say any of that, so he asked, “What do you think I’m doing here?”

Michael went still. His eyes narrowed. “You aren’t honestly thinking of making this a career?” he asked. Actually, he didn’t ask at all. It was more an order than a question, and that rubbed West the wrong way.

“What if I am?” he asked, pointlessly, because of course he wasn’t looking for a career. He was almost thirty, for cripes sake. That wasn’t what this was about. It never had been.

“Jesus Christ, West! What's gotten into you?” Michael exploded from the chair, his expression contorting through a series of reactions West couldn’t pin down. He looked like he wanted to strangle him with the cord to his heating pad. Giving it some serious thought, in fact.

West picked nervously at the pilling bedspread, unable to look directly at him but helpless to resist tracking his progress as he paced the room. Back and forth, back and forth, like a caged lion. There was no way West had caused such a violent reaction. Just...no way.

“Sewing my wild oats, I guess,” he said lamely.

Michael cursed, bracing himself against the window frame and hanging his head. “I don’t need this right now,” he said furiously. “I’ve barely got the roof finished on the main house, the grass seed isn’t re-planted yet, and I’ve had my hands full with Cal and Aiden.”

“What’s wrong with Cal and Aiden?” West asked, frowning. Of all the cowboys at the Triple M, they were the two who ran the hottest, but they’d always gotten along like brothers. Mouthy, sarcastic, pigheaded brothers.

“They’ve been gunning hard for Ronald Sutter ever since Eli couldn’t turn up any evidence against him. I had to keep Aiden from crawling all over him at The Hungry Pig a couple days ago. Now I’ve got to worry about you on top of everything else.”

West wouldn’t condemn anyone for going after the man who’d nearly burned Michael alive in his own home. Hell, he’d pay to be there to watch it. To do it himself. But Michael wouldn’t want to hear that, so he said, “I can take care of myself.”

Michael cracked out a hard laugh. His gaze flickered over West, head to toe, and his expression twisted like he didn’t like what he saw. “You’re joking, right? Having you around is like being responsible for another kid, except Abby has more sense than you half the time.”

Well, look at that, West thought in surprise. He had a hard limit after all, and all it took to break was being emasculated by the man he’d admired almost his entire adult life. He shrugged off the heating pad and stood, heedless of the twinge in his bad shoulder. His hands shook as he scooped up his wallet and keys from the end table.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Michael barked, turning on him. “You can’t

drive.”

Calmly, West adjusted his ballcap. “Go to hell, Michael,” he said softly.

He headed for the door, and he didn’t look back.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Your aim’s getting a little sloppy there, buddy,” the carnival barker warned as another of West’s ping-pong balls bounced off the rim of a goldfish bowl and landed in a pile of stuffed animals. “Might want to lay off the hard cider.”

West laughed and drained his plastic cup. “It’s the only good thing in my life right now, my guy.”

He wasn’t lying. It was good, produced by a local pub that had set up a food truck that was also hawking craft beer and giant turkey legs as big as West’s head. In retrospect, the turkey had been a mistake. It sat in his stomach like a rock, and the heavy scent of burnt caramel corn and rancid grease was making his stomach churn.

A look of sympathy crossed the barker’s leathery face, like he’d been there one too many times. Digging deep in the front pocket of his stained jeans, he produced a tattered business card and handed it to him. The ink was so faded that the name of a local AA chapter was barely legible.

“Changed my life,” the barker volunteered helpfully.

West considered explaining, but the man seemed so anxious to help that he felt like he’d be ruining the moment. In the end, he just thanked him and pocketed the card. Besides, the barker wasn’t wrong. West’s aim had gone from a bull’s eye every time to less than fifty-fifty, and his ass was going numb from how long he’d been sitting

on this rickety metal stool.

Driving was out of the question, of course—but then, he'd never had any intention of driving off in a huff. That was the worst part of it. Even if he weren't on painkillers, he wasn't the kind of man who could just race off with his hair on fire out of spite. He'd always wished he was, but being careless wasn't an option for a man who'd been taught since birth what a miracle it was that he was even alive—not outside the arena, anyway. Taking his own life in his hands was one thing; dying and leaving someone guilt-riddled on the back of a fiery exit was just selfish.

The carnival was within walking distance of the motel, and it wasn't a bad place to kill a few hours people watching. He was a big kid at heart, and there was nothing he loved more than rides that felt as if they were seconds away from turning him into a stain on the pavement. But right now, his shoulder couldn't handle anything more thrilling than the merry-go-round. So instead, he cranked back a couple ciders and parked himself at the games booth, winning prizes for kids who couldn't manage on their own.

"Which one are you aiming for?" he asked, leaning toward a group of teenagers who were blowing through their combined tickets at an alarming rate. They took one look at his swollen nose and the bruises filling in beneath both eyes and shifted away from him, all except for one girl with bright pink hair.

"That one," she said, pointing to a giant purple teddy bear hanging from a hook near the top of the booth.

West glanced at the barker, who discreetly pointed under his elbow toward the highest value bowl in the center of the display.

"Try it like this next time," he suggested, leaning forward and flicking his wrist, putting a little spin on the ball. It landed with a plop in the bowl.

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“Winner, winner, chiiickeeenn dinner!” The barker announced. He raised his bushy eyebrows at West, who just sat back on his stool and gestured carelessly toward the kids.

A boy with a mop of over-styled hair offered him a fist pound. “Thanks, bro,” he said, grinning around a mouthful of braces with rainbow-colored spacers.

Only fifteen years ago, West had been the same age. But he would have been ridiculed mercilessly if he’d ever dared wear something like that. In the city, sure, but this was a small farming town exactly like Sweetwater.

“Man, times have really changed,” West mused as the kids moved to another booth.

“Huh?” the barker asked, frowning in confusion.

“Nothing.”

The crowds lulled, drawn by a band that began pumping out bro country from center stage, and West finally hopped off his stool and stretched. His back had begun to cramp, and his neck and shoulders felt as if he’d been trampled by wild horses. Well, whaddayaknow—he had.

Laughing at his own joke, he turned his face up to the sky. Clouds had been rolling steadily since early afternoon, and their dark slate shadows spoke of a coming storm. That was autumn weather in the Pacific Northwest: hot enough to sweat one day and pouring buckets the next. The Scrambler and Ferris wheel were lit up like Christmas trees in the stormy blue light, and he decided to take one more stroll through the

grounds before he was forced to head back to the motel and face the music.

He'd probably just swallow his pride and laugh it off like it was nothing, like he always did. But he was so sick of being the one to make peace. In thirty years, he'd never rocked the boat—not once—and lately, all he wanted was to blow the damn thing up.

Christ, he was so sick of being a responsibility.

Michael had been different, or so he thought. At the Triple M, West was just another one of the guys. He'd proven himself. Time and time again, he'd sacrificed work and sleep just to be there when they needed an extra pair of hands. He'd sat on the porch and helped Abby with homework, and he'd taken her crawdad hunting down by the creek, and even though he always had a cold beer and a pair of fishing rods in the back of his truck for her daddy, he'd somehow been relegated to the role of a child's playmate. Someone to look after and worry over for all the wrong reasons.

Somehow, Michael had adopted the exact same attitude as West's family despite never having even sat down to a meal with them.

Maybe West needed to get laid. He was thirty years old, and he'd been pining like a blushing virgin for so long that sometimes he wondered if he'd forgotten how his dick worked. But then all it took to remind him was a gleam of sweat off the small of Michael's shirtless back, and his dick was trying to do a Hulk Smash against the back of his zipper. West might be built to impress, but that was the only thing about him that did. He'd probably freak out and spill in his pants like a teenager if Michael ever even looked at him funny.

That was the problem with growing up in a small town. All the straight kids were banging like bunnies parked out on dead-end logging roads, but it was beyond slim pickings for a guy like him. At the time, Eli Jackson and Calvin Craig were the only

two gay kids in town, and even they weren't out. Besides, they'd only had eyes for each other.

West might have remained a virgin forever if a pseudo-straight boy hadn't taken pity on him behind the bleachers their senior year of high school. Anything after that was sporadic at best, and for more than a year now the only pleasure he'd gotten was from his own hand.

That should have been his first clue that he was in way too deep, emotionally. But by then, it was already too late. He needed to get over this obsession because avoiding someone in a town the size of Sweetwater was next to impossible. Even keeping his distance, all it had taken for Michael to find him was one old man running his mouth.

As he stood watching The Zipper tumble screaming riders like socks in a dryer, he felt...alone. Desolately, permanently, undeniably alone, and for the first time, he began to suspect it was always going to be this way.

"You forgot this." Michael's voice was so sudden and so close, he felt like he'd conjured it out of sheer misery. But as he turned, a powder blue sling hit him in the face, and he certainly wouldn't have wished up that.

Part of him wanted to throw it right back, but that would be childish, and he'd already had enough of that accusation for a lifetime. Besides, his shoulder was killing him. Spending an hour chucking ping-pong balls at the game booth hadn't done him any favors.

"Thanks," he grumbled as ungratefully as possible, slipping the straps over his head and tucking his elbow into the folds. Then he went back to staring at The Zipper and ignoring the man who came to stand with him, shoulder-to-shoulder, so close that his elbow brushed West's sleeve.

Michael tucked his hands in his pockets, watching the ride in silence. His posture was easy and comfortable, like he could stand there all night without saying a word, and West gritted his teeth. He decided then and there that he was done playing peacemaker. Done letting everyone around him coast on easy mode just to keep from upsetting them. Done. He was just done. If Michael had something to say, he could damn well man up and say it without West breaking the ice for him. He didn't care if it took all night.

When Michael eventually sighed, it was deep and loud and so sudden that West nearly jumped out of his skin.

"I'm sorry," he said gruffly.

"Don't be," West replied. "Not if you meant what you said."

"I didn't. Not exactly, anyway."

"Which part did you get wrong? The part where you think of me like a kid? Or the part where I have less common sense than an eight-year-old?" West asked, turning to him and looking him directly in the eye. It would have had more effect if they were the same height, but nobody matched Michael Whittaker for tall. The man was a goliath. Even now, the crowd seemed to part around him.

Michael had the grace to look ashamed. His neck and cheeks were dark with color.

"I shouldn't have said that," he said, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. "I was angry. Been angry for days, ever since Gus confessed what you two boneheads have been up to. That's what I thought, anyway. But I guess maybe it's been longer than that."

West tightened his jaw, but he didn't reply. He wasn't going to apologize. His

decision to ride was about proving to himself that he could do it. Nothing and no one else played a part in that. He'd done nothing wrong.

Except, perhaps, keeping such a big secret from the man who'd become his best friend in all the world. A man whose wife had been killed after she was thrown from a much tamer horse than the broncos he rode.

He swallowed hard.

Michael cleared his throat and said, “It’s just that I never realized how you’d become such an important part of my life until you stopped showing up. You were always there, dropping off supplies or bucking hay or chasing frogs with Abby, and then suddenly...you weren’t. I nearly lost my ranch in that fire, but the day I stepped out of the hospital, I realized I’d lost more than that.”

“Shit. Michael—”

He held one hand, palm up, to forestall whatever West was about to say, and West shut his mouth with a snap. Probably for the best, because he had no clue what he could have said that wouldn’t make him sound like a selfish asshole.

“I’m not saying that to make you feel guilty,” Michael said. “You’re a grown man with a life of your own, and I respect that. I’m just trying to explain where my head was at when I said those things. I’m older than you by more than a decade. Sometimes it seems like I’m older by a lifetime. You were just a scrawny kid when I first moved to Sweetwater, and I guess it was easy to keep on seeing you that way forever. But the fact is, I’ve grown to trust you more than just about anyone. That’s why it hurt so bad to realize how much you’ve been keeping from me.”

West groaned and buried his face in his hands. What was that sound? Oh, right. His inner voice, sneering. Where’s all that righteous anger now, tough guy?

Seconds trickled by, one agony at a time, punctuated only by lively trills of calliope music and the shrieks of people joyfully living their lives. The clouds finally opened

up, and a cool, fat raindrop struck the back of his neck. It was mild autumn rain, refreshing in the warm smog of the carnival.

“West.” Something in his voice pricked goosebumps down West’s spine, but he still couldn’t meet the other man’s eyes. How could he expect to be treated like an equal when he’d been running and hiding like a kid with a dirty secret?

But he did have secrets, and bronc-busting wasn’t the worst of them.

“Look at me, West.”

Christ, but that voice could turn a preacher to sin. Deep and compelling, expecting to be obeyed. Maybe some men had the strength to resist a voice like that, but he wasn’t one of them.

Michael caught and held his gaze easily, and the speculation in his eyes made West’s stomach roil. “Are you sure you don’t have anything else you want to tell me?” he asked.

I love you.

It was so loud in West’s head that he was shocked no one else could hear it.

I’m so in love with you that just looking at you hurts.

He didn’t want to lose this friendship. It was the truest thing he’d ever known, special in a way that even the lies and fear he’d pumped into it couldn’t destroy.

He swallowed thickly, and as the rain began to fall in earnest, he managed to squeeze one word out of his tight throat. “Nothing.”

Michael's jaw tensed, and he gave a jerky nod.

"So be it," he said grimly.

CHAPTER SIX

The crowd thinned once the rain turned into a steady drizzle, and they had a fight on their hands to hopscotch their way through the clumps of bedraggled families heading for the parking lot.

By the time they got back to the motel, they were soaked to the bone. It wasn't particularly cold, but the rapid change in air pressure had done a number on West's pain, and even Michael was limping.

"Your leg is still bothering you, isn't it?" he asked as they took a shortcut through a wilted pansy border.

"Now and then," Michael admitted, choosing his footing with more care than West, "but part of that is just getting old. I've gotten knocked around so much over the years that pretty soon I'm going to know when a storm's brewing just by how much my bones hurt."

"Forty-five is hardly ancient," West argued.

"Talk to me in another decade." Michael laughed, but there was something brittle in the sound. He scanned West, observing the stiffness in his posture, and said, "At the rate you're going, you might even end up worse than me. Do you need another painkiller?"

"Naw."

All he really wanted was to get off his feet. A domino effect had taken hold of his body, beginning at his shoulder, where all his pain coalesced into diamond razors and then cascaded down his back in concentric rings of agony that ended at his pelvis. He was lucky the mare had fallen in a way that dispersed her weight across so much area. If she'd struck him just right, she might have crushed his pelvis—or worse.

He thought of Mary Whittaker, and the way one wrong fall was all it had taken to rip her away from her husband and baby girl. He hadn't known her well. Back then, Michael was a married man with a young family, and West was just some pimply kid down at the feed store. But even though he'd known he was gay since before puberty, he understood the thrall Mary held over the town. She just had a glow about her; one that had nothing to do with her sunny tan and flaming red hair, and everything to do with her zest for life. Standing next to her, everyone else seemed hollow and flat by comparison, like paper cut-outs instead of real people.

Not that Mary was perfect. Far from it. She'd had a mouth that wouldn't quit, and she seemed to enjoy kicking the hornet's nest of the Sweetwater gossip network. For months, the town couldn't stop whispering about her deliveries from an online sex shop. Not when the name of the company was right on the label and the postwoman, Dolores, happened to also be the leader of the Ladies in Prayer group that met every Thursday evening.

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“I looked at the website just for curiosity,” she'd announce to anyone who held still long enough to listen. Then she'd drop her tone, sotto voce, and add, “It isn't the place a married woman should be shopping, if you catch my drift. Lots of unnatural contraptions.”

West had always figured her gleeful interest in someone else's bedroom was far more unnatural.

If Michael had ever heard the rumors, he never let on. But he had bigger concerns back then.

He'd arrived in town, freshly discharged and still recovering from back-to-back tours of active duty, and he'd purchased three hundred acres of failing land. Instead of turning it into a hobby farm or summer retreat like most out-of-towners, he'd rolled up his sleeves and developed one of the most successful working ranches in the county. He'd breathed life back into a struggling economy, keeping dozens of cowboys off the unemployment line and winning the hearts of the locals in the process. He had modernized the Triple M without stripping away the traditions that gave it heart, and within months, old-timers were asking him for advice.

No matter what anyone had to say about his wife, Michael Whittaker could do no wrong.

“You eaten?” Michael asked, glancing at his watch and then turning his face up to the darkening sky. Evening came fast this time of year. It would be full dark in another forty minutes.

West thought of the greasy turkey leg and three hard ciders.

“You could call it that,” he said philosophically. He regretted it now, not only because his stomach was still roiling, but because it left them both with nothing to do but sit around the motel room watching nimbledyfuck cable TV for the rest of the night. A bath might have felt nice, but the tub was barely big enough for a toddler. He wasn’t a huge man, but he doubted he’d even be able to stretch out his legs sitting up.

The hot tub across the motel's parking lot beckoned him. It was set behind a privacy fence in a recessed corner of the building, a few yards away from a tarp-covered swimming pool. A janky sign hung off the locked gate, proclaiming the area closed for the season. Steam wafted from the tub, curling like smoke in the damp air, and an intense longing filled him.

“I think I’ll try the hot tub,” he said impulsively.

Michael followed his gaze, swiping the rain out of his face with his palm. His T-shirt was beginning to cling damply to his muscled chest and biceps. “You don’t have a suit,” he pointed out.

West lifted his eyebrows to acknowledge the point, then glanced around the lot. Every parking spot was filled but the property was dead quiet, all the guests already tucked in for the night.

“I’ve got a clean pair of boxers in my bag,” he decided, “and ain’t no one crazy enough to come out in this weather. That tub will do a hell of a lot more for me than a heating pad and a spring poking me in the ass. It’d probably even help that limp you’re trying to keep under wraps.”

Michael’s expression was thoughtful, eyes flicking over West as if trying to decide how crazy he wanted to be. He wasn’t exactly the skinny-dipping type, not even on

hot days when the rest of his cowboys were stripping down to hurl themselves off Lookout Bridge and into the river below.

It was a reckless suggestion. West already had trouble concentrating just looking at him, standing there in the rain with his wet hair and his t-shirt plastered against his firm chest. The scruff on his jaw looked soft, much softer and fuller than the patchy beard growth that always made West look like he was sleeping off a bender. His fingers itched to reach up and test its thickness, and it was the twitching of his hand that finally broke the spell.

Michael's expression was full of regret, and West knew he was going to say no, so he blurted, "You can borrow my spare gym shorts."

"What else you got in that bag, son?" Michael asked, brows raised in surprise. "Weren't you planning on staying only a night?"

"I'm busting broncos," West drawled, dripping with irony. "You think I didn't bring more than a couple changes of shorts?"

Michael's laughter was a rich, rolling sound. He hadn't laughed like that in months, and it shivered down West's spine in deep waves that tugged on his balls. West probably would have ended up head-over-heels for him regardless, but the first time he ever heard that honey-warm laugh clinched it.

It wasn't easy to convince the desk clerk to give them the code that unlocked the fence. West was ready to just jump it, shoulder be damned, but he was worried Michael would strain his barely healed leg keeping up with him. They went round and round for five minutes before Michael settled the matter by tipping him an extra fifty bucks. That earned them not only the code, but two water bottles and a stack of clean, fluffy towels.

"That was smooth," West muttered to the wall as he changed. "I didn't think bribes actually worked."

"Cash works everywhere, kid," Michael shot back. He sounded like he was smiling, but West didn't turn around to check.

He was careful about keeping his back to him, not out of shyness, but fear that he might stare. They'd changed in front of each other dozens of times over the years, a matter of necessity with no end of filthy jobs on the ranch, but that might as well have been another lifetime ago. Sex changed everything, and sex was what West wanted. Sometimes he felt like he'd go crazy, laying wide awake at night and dreaming up all the ways it could maybe—maybe—happen. Fantasy. Pure fantasy, like a bodybuilding pizza delivery man stumbling across a lonely housewife with perfectly-augmented breasts in a porno. But he couldn't help himself when fantasy was all he'd ever have.

His gym shorts were meant to be loose, but Michael filled them like a prize. The waistband sat tight on his washboard abs, right at the spot just below his navel where a trail of hair began to taper toward the V of his groin. His thighs were so thick that the shorts clung, revealing the faint outline of his dick beneath the thin fabric. West squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head, praying for patience and purity.

A towel hit him in the face.

"Let's get this done," Michael said, slinging his own towel around his neck and hanging onto both ends in a way that made his biceps pop. "We should ice your shoulder once more after the soak and get some anti-inflammatories in you. Hell, you might even feel good enough to head back home tomorrow."

Night had fallen by the time they got back to the parking lot. Light seemed to bounce off the thick black clouds, stirring up swirls of gray and sparkling in the raindrops. It

was still raining, but the deluge had tapered into a light drizzle. The temperature had dropped enough to prick goosebumps across West's bare flesh, but it felt refreshing rather than uncomfortable. He breathed deep as they hit the pool deck, but all he got was a huge whiff of chlorine that burned his lungs and made him cough and splutter.

Michael laughed, tossing his towel over a plastic lounge and slipping into the hot tub without hesitation.

"How's the temperature?" West asked, setting his towel and card key on a table with more care.

"Just this side of boiling lobster," Michael replied. But he didn't seem to mind, floating on his back like a muscular jellyfish and unwittingly giving West an eyeful of gleaming flesh.

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He bit down on the inside of his cheek so hard he drew blood. It took more willpower than he thought he had to look away, focusing intensely on the frothing water instead of the miles of wet muscle gliding within arm's reach. He didn't even realize he'd been holding his breath, but it leaked out of him in a long hiss as he stepped down into the tub.

The contrast between the chill night air and the bubbling water was enough to sting, but the spreading warmth in his sore legs had him wishing he could plunge headfirst to dunk the rest of his aching body. Blissful heat surrounded him, cradling his sore neck and shoulders, and he closed his eyes in sweet relief.

"Christ, this feels good," he groaned.

Michael rumbled a noise that might have been an agreement.

They relaxed together, the only sound between them the gentle patter of raindrops on the water and the ghostly sounds of the carnival in the distance. One by one, the tortured muscles of West's back loosened, and he took what felt like his first deep breath all day, letting it out on a quiet moan of pleasure.

He wasn't sure how long they drowsed in the warmth, but it was long enough for him to eventually pick up on the strange, tense quality of Michael's complete silence.

Reluctantly, he cracked one eyelid.

Michael sat against the opposite side of the tub with his arms propped over the rim, watching him with a strange intensity that made West's stomach flip. His damp skin

gleamed in the reflected lights. Dark, springy hair curled over his chest, tapering down the packed ridges of muscle on his naked belly. His body was incredible. Technically old enough to be West's father if he got an early start, and yet Michael could still run circles around him. The creases at the corners of his eyes and the hint of silver at his temples were deeply sexy and only added to the overall aura of power and confidence.

He sucked the breath from West's lungs every time their eyes met. But if he looked into those blue eyes long enough, he couldn't even feel himself suffocating.

"You okay?" West asked cautiously, gauging Michael's troubled expression.

They'd never been more at odds than they were right now, and he hated not knowing what to expect. But he only had himself to blame. In a panicked effort to save their friendship, he'd distanced himself when Michael was at his most vulnerable. In the end, he was the one who'd done the damage. Their easy camaraderie had been lost, replaced with secrets and suspicion.

Judging by the speculative side-eye Michael had been throwing his way whenever West couldn't hide fast enough, he knew something was wrong. Usually, all West needed was to turn on his slow, good ol' boy smile, and attention drifted away from him like dandelion clocks on the wind. But that had never worked on Michael, and lately, he'd been turning that knowing look on him more and more often. Like he could peel back all his layers and read the truth on the faulty heart beneath. But that was impossible. He couldn't suspect the truth, or he never would have followed him here.

"Michael?" he prompted breathlessly.

Michael frowned, as if trying to solve a perplexing question. "Hm?"

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He paused, a deep midnight gleam in his eyes, and added, “You’re the only one who calls me Michael. Did you know that?”

“Does it bother you?” Heat crawled up West’s chest and face, but it had nothing to do with the temperature of the water.

He gave it some consideration before slowly shaking his head. “No. I like it. No one else ever called me that besides Mary.”

“What about your grandfather?” West asked.

Michael didn’t talk about his childhood much. He’d lost his parents at a young age and been raised on his grandfather’s struggling farm, but it didn’t sound too bad. He’d had plenty of cousins for company, and that was where he’d met the girl next door who would one day become his wife.

“He mostly just called me kid,” Michael said with enough irony in his voice that West knew he realized how obnoxious it was.

His smile was reflexive. “I’m not anywhere close to a kid, you know.”

“Not on paper,” Michael grunted in agreement, settling his head against the lip of the tub and gazing up at the sky. “You’re like reverse dog years.”

“I’m what?” West asked.

“One year for you is like five years for the rest of us.”

West’s lips twitched. “So, I’m almost six?”

“Something like that.” Lazily, he lifted one dripping arm and reached out, brushing away a raindrop that was rolling down West’s cheek. His touch was so light, instantly covered by a playful tap, but it made West’s stomach twist. “By the time I hit thirty, I must have lived three lifetimes compared to you. I guess that’s why I shouldn’t have been so surprised when Gus told me you were riding broncs. God knows, you’re past due to pull some crazy, fool-headed stunt. I know your folks were awfully strict on you growing up. Hell, they’ve still got you out there working the farm on your days off, and try as I might, I can’t think of a single reason why you’ve stuck around.”

“I owe them a lot,” West said, shifting uncomfortably to angle one of the jets against a knot between his shoulder blades. He wasn’t happy with the turn in conversation. Nothing good ever came of too much attention, even—especially—from the man he wanted to notice him the most.

“No more than any other child owes their parents,” Michael said. Wrongly, but he couldn’t know that, now could he? “If Abby’s still hanging around looking after me when she’s your age, I’ll know I failed her in some way. Didn’t you ever want to get out of Sweetwater for good?”

“Naw.” The lie came dripping off his tongue like honey, but he’d repeated it so many times it might as well be the truth. “Where would I go? No money, no education—”

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“You could’ve gotten a scholarship.”

“I wasn’t smart enough for something like that. I missed so much school that I barely graduated. Besides, I love my hometown.”

“So do I,” Michael replied sternly, “but I’ve seen what else is out there. When I settled down in Sweetwater, I knew exactly what I was getting...and exactly what I was giving up. You never had that chance.”

He was still looking at West like Abby looked at a fascinating new insect specimen. Like he’d just discovered his existence, and he wasn’t about to stop poking until he got to the bottom of what made him tick. West’s ears began to ring, softly at first, but growing louder. Alarm bells. His pulse kicked into high speed.

“What’s your point?” he asked tersely.

That must have been the wrong response. Michael’s face shut down, and he stood so abruptly that a wave of chlorinated froth caught West in the mouth. Water sluiced off his tense back as he climbed out of the tub, and the borrowed shorts clung wetly to every hard curve of his ass.

West had to force himself to look away. He stared down at the water, fingers digging convulsively into the meat of his thighs. His reflection rippled back at him, bruised and hollow-eyed, with his hair standing up on end like a thatch of hay. In the darkness, his skin looked pale and sickly, but he ignored it except to note that it made his face look even more like it had been shaped out of a lump of clay.

“I guess I don’t really have a point,” Michael said harshly, toweling himself off in an angry burst. “I just wanted to see if you’d finally admit what’s been going on with you lately.”

“You already know—”

“Yeah.” Michael interrupted, and something dark flashed in his eyes. “I know...and now I’m wondering how long you’re going to keep fucking me around before you tell me the truth.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“What...I don’t—it’s not—” West stammered, eyes darting everywhere except where they most wanted to be.

Michael stood there, all languid confidence despite only being covered by a scrap of wet fabric. But if there was ever a clear-cut sign that he didn’t mean it the way it sounded, that was it. He wouldn’t be standing there, looking like that—looking at West like that—if he understood even a fraction of West’s fixation. He’d be running so fast in the other direction, he’d leave behind nothing but a puff of smoke.

“What I want to know,” Michael continued, ignoring West’s verbal fumbling, “is why you felt like you had to hide it from me?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” West insisted—and really, the possibilities were endless.

He’d kept so many secrets for so long that taking a guess was like playing Russian roulette. He licked his lips, but terror had turned his tongue to a shriveled husk inside his mouth. His mind bounced like a panicked pinball in a broken machine, unable to form a coherent thought except: deny, deny, deny.

“So that’s how you want to keep playing it, huh?” Michael sounded calm, but West finally understood the harsh undercurrent that had been playing peek-a-boo in his voice since the night before. “You’re the kind of man who’d lend a stranger his last five bucks in gas money and then walk home, but you seriously want me to believe you took one look at the ashes of the Triple M and decided: Nah, he’s got this?”

“Hey now,” West protested, “I was there for you at the hospital.”

“My bad,” he said sarcastically. “You waited until I got some crutches before suddenly developing a raging social life.”

“You’re out of line.” West figured he might have had more impact if his voice didn’t crack, but he was lucky he got anything out at all.

Guilt pressed on him like a physical weight, leaving him to wonder how easy it would be to just drown himself in this boiling chemical bath. But that would undo the work of dozens of people better and smarter than he was, and he couldn’t allow that, so he climbed stiffly from the tub instead.

Michael’s eyes burned as he tracked him. All at once, he didn’t seem like the relaxed, friendly cowboy West had known for years. He looked huge and cold and fierce. Dangerous. West wondered if this was what he’d looked like back during his army days.

“You didn’t leave my side when I was stuck in that hospital bed,” Michael said in a low voice. “I wasn’t so out of it that I could forget something like that.”

“That wasn’t anything. You would have done the same for me,” West said, snatching up his towel and giving himself a hard buffing to disguise the way his hands were shaking. If his shoulder still hurt, he couldn’t feel it under the shot of adrenalin.

“Maybe. Maybe I would have, at that. But you know what I wouldn’t have done?” Michael asked, shifting forward and stepping up so close that his heat penetrated the rainy chill. He ducked close to West’s ear and enunciated the next two syllables with dangerous precision. “Run. Away.”

Hysterical laughter bubbled up in West’s chest, and all he could do was pray it sounded scornful instead of panicked. Stumbling back on trembling legs, he said, “My family’s been keeping me busy. You said it yourself.”

Something like pain tightened Michael’s expression, and he followed for each step West retreated, backing him toward the fence.

“What did I ever do that could make you so afraid of me?” he rasped.

Red-alert, West’s mind rattled, red-alert!

Even if Michael had somehow clued into the fact that he was gay, even if he'd picked up on the lust and longing that took hold of him every time they were in the same room together, there was no way he understood how deep it ran. And he never would. West was taking that shit to the grave. But he needed to put a stop to his digging, and he needed to do it now.

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said flatly, turning his back on him and starting toward the motel, “but I’m going to—”

“I’m talking about this.” Catching West by the good arm, he yanked him forward and crushed their mouths together in a hard kiss.

It was like being hit by a cruise missile. West let out a shocked gasp, air rushing out of his lungs only to be caught and inhaled a second later by Michael’s sharp breath. Even in his inexperience, West recognized that it was only a kiss in the strictest definition of the word. There was no softness, no affection, just the press of firm lips and the warm, satin glide of a closed mouth against his own. But it was enough. Too much. It rocked him to his core, shooting a bolt of pure lust through his belly that tingled all the way to his balls.

It ended just as abruptly as it began. Michael pulled back, his breath a puff of cool mist between their panting mouths. It was like suddenly breaking free of an undertow. West filled his lungs with ragged gulps, battling the creeping sensation that he’d narrowly escaped drowning.

Michael still held him by his good arm, imprisoning him with an iron grip around his wrist. West tried to retreat a step, but he followed, backing him up against the chain-link fence and hooking the fingers of his free hand in the links, caging West in the brutal frame of his arms.

“You must think I’m blind,” Michael gritted out between his teeth.

“No,” West gasped. His heart felt like it was seconds away from jackhammering right

out of his chest. He couldn't catch his breath. "But I hoped you were."

The blue in Michael's irises had been nearly swallowed by his blown-out pupils, making him look positively evil as he growled, "When did I ever treat anyone differently because of who they love?"

Oh, God. Love. This was bad. Every ounce of tension the heat therapy had cured came rushing back, amped up, and dialed all the way to eleven. A better man might have sucked it up, chin high, chest out, and faced the truth. But not him.

"I don't think of you like that," he blurted out like a coward.

"Now that's a damn lie," Michael drawled, leaning so close that the scruff on his cheek dragged against West's temple. "You and I both know that I'm the only one you've been thinking of for a long, long time."

"But you're not..." West didn't know what he was trying to say. He wasn't what? Gay? Interested? Desperate enough?

"No," Michael agreed calmly. "I'm not gay."

"I knew that." West nodded like a bobblehead. Of course, he'd known. Michael Whittaker was a ripped-shirt-and-blue-jeans roughneck, a man who could peel women out of their panties with just one look, and everyone knew it. He didn't date around after Mary died, not even a whisper of a long weekend or a tavern hookup, but that didn't mean anything. Not from a man as loyal as him. Still, hearing the words out loud was like taking a boot to his gut.

Michael sighed and released him, running a hand through his damp hair and slicking it back from his face. He kept it longer than was fashionable in a small town, and West had never decided if it was a throwback to his youth listening to Nirvana or just

a side effect of a lifetime of putting other people before himself.

“I should have said something a long time ago, but I didn’t want to complicate things. I didn’t want to make life harder on you than it is already. Not until this little crush of yours had burned itself out.”

“Jesus Christ,” West groaned, mortified. He buried his face in his good hand. “It’s not a crush.”

Michael shook his head dismissively. “Whatever you want to call it. I figured it wasn’t any of my business...but then you went and made it my business. I remember the way you touched me in the hospital. Like you could put me back together with just your desperation alone. Even when I was loaded up with morphine, I knew you were there. It was your voice pulling me back.”

West hung his head, squeezing his eyes shut and wishing the concrete would split right there and swallow him. Compared to this man, he felt so small. Not worthless. Michael had always gone out of his way to appreciate him. Just...less. Even daring to dream about him in the hidden corners of his own mind seemed offensive.

"I thought I had a handle on it," he said, barely recognizing the strain in his own voice.

“I know.”

“But then I watched them pull you out of that burning stable and it just got...it got hard. I was going to come back. I just needed some time. I just...” His throat closed up on him and he hung his head, swamped by the memory of his despair and shame.

All he could think about was how close he’d been to losing him completely, and how he still might. His secret was out. Things were about to get complicated, and the only

kiss he'd ever get from him was just to prove a point.

Barely a kiss at all.

Helplessly, he reached out with his good arm and clasped Michael by the back of the neck. It felt daring in a way that touching him never had before. Michael watched him, nonreactive and curious, going along with it when West tugged his head down and kissed him again. Kissed him the way it should have been all along. Slow, sweet—and Michael let him. He let him. He stood docile as a newborn calf, unhesitating, letting West take charge and kiss him the way he'd always dreamed about. Heat sparked low in West's belly, glowing like an ember and spreading delicious warmth through his arms and legs. Time seemed to slow, dragging him along in a molasses-thick moment that he wished would never end.

But it did. The peculiar tension in Michael's body, the strange passivity, finally penetrated his foggy brain. It jerked West back to reality. Hard.

They broke apart, and only then did he realize that Michael's arm around his waist was all that was keeping him on his feet. His other hand was still clenched in the chain links.

In the sudden silence, the ragged sound of their mingled breath was strangely erotic.

Dropping his forehead to rest on the soft cotton of Michael's shoulder, he croaked, "Why did you really track me down this weekend?"

Michael's brows drew low, as if the question irritated him, and he said flatly, "You've been avoiding me for months. Catching you in the act was the only way to finally get some honesty."

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They hadn't even scraped the surface of honest, West thought bitterly, and suddenly, an incredible weariness overtook him.

Michael's rough palm cupped his chin, forcing him to meet his eyes. "You're the best friend I've got," he said solemnly. "What was I supposed to do? Just let you go?"

Like it was as simple as that. But then again, maybe in his world it was that simple.

"You've lost your mind," West muttered. "You don't turn gay just to help out a friend."

Michael's lips twitched in sudden amusement. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"You're straight." He was starting to wonder if maybe he'd taken a knock to the head back in that arena. Everything since then felt like the kind of dream he'd only come up with if he had brain damage. He longed to lie down, and maybe—just maybe—he'd find the strength to get back up in a week or two.

"I didn't exactly say that." Michael slung his towel over one shoulder and snatched the key card from the table.

West pinched the bridge of his nose. "But—"

"Come on," he said, pressing one gentle hand low on West's back and guiding him toward the gate. "We can talk about this later. You're weaving on your feet, and I'm freezing my balls off out here."

CHAPTER EIGHT

They didn't talk about it later. West made sure of that by crashing as soon as he got back to the room. He'd been trying to keep himself busy with distractions for so long that he was running on fumes. Exhaustion didn't merely catch up to him; it snuck up behind him and locked him in a sleeper hold for twelve hours.

He woke with a headache and a mouth that tasted like the inside of an old shoe. Smacking his lips, he scanned the fuzzy room. The curtains had been drawn tight, but judging by the bright yellow sunlight leaking around the edges, it was mid-afternoon.

Potent silence buzzed in his ears. No hiss of the shower behind a closed door, no television hum, not even the inaudible live-wire awareness of another beating heart in the room. He was alone.

He rolled onto his good shoulder to bury his face in a pillow, but instead of cool fabric against his cheek, all he got was the slick crackle of notebook paper. Groaning, he scrubbed a hand over his sleep-numb face and held the note up to squint at the cramped penmanship.

Call me.

And then, in an underlined scrawl at the bottom of the page: I mean it.

His dry lips cracked into a helpless smile. God, he'd missed that man. Keeping away from him and his surrogate family out at the Triple M was the hardest thing he'd ever done. It had taken something out of him, like he'd jumped off a train before it reached the station and been left jogging beside it, hoping for a glimpse through the windows at the people he'd left behind. He'd never expected Michael to hop the tracks and come after him like a runaway engine, but maybe he should have.

At his very core, Michael was a leader, with one eye constantly on the well-being of the people around him. His own wants and needs were a distant consideration that seemed to barely cross his mind. In a twisted way, it made sense for him to try to make things right once he noticed how much West was suffering, even if it meant forcing himself into a situation that made him uncomfortable.

West's body still felt like a giant bruise, and his mind was a riot of unanswered questions, but he fumbled for his cell phone, yanking it unceremoniously from the wall plug.

The little icon beside Michael's name was a picture West had snapped years ago. In the photo, Michael was lifting Abby into the saddle of her first horse. Her gap-toothed grin was brighter than the sun, a little girl in pink boots who knew without a doubt that she was safe in the strong arms of her daddy. The picture had always struck a deep chord in West, and sometimes when he couldn't sleep, he pulled it up just to stare at it.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that Michael wasn't going to be strolling through the door any second. He was gone. That kiss must have freaked him out. He'd probably only meant to be kind, or maybe to shock West into talking, but then West had gone and turned it into something more. It only made sense for him to put some distance between them before West got the wrong idea.

But even as he spun the story out inside his head, the memory of that last kiss wouldn't leave him alone. It flickered beneath his surface thoughts, a potent mix of sense and memory so strong that he could almost feel the smooth glide of Michael's lips.

He'd be the first to admit he was a novice when it came to kissing. Hookups had never held much appeal, but they were the only thing on the menu when a date meant driving two hours just to share a plate of cold chicken wings with a man who kept

looking at his watch. Still, he had enough experience to instinctively understand one thing: that was the first time Michael had ever kissed a man.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Rubbing at the ache in his chest, he reluctantly pulled himself out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom. A splash and swish later, and he felt even worse. Sticking his toothbrush in his mouth, he gripped the sink and stared at his reflection in the mirror, wondering how a man like Michael could ever look at him and see someone worth kissing. Even when he didn't look like someone had used his face as a pinata, he was scruffy and plain. His eyes were the color of creek silt, and he only kept his pencil-shaped body from being scrawny by constant physical labor. Not the kind of man who suddenly inspired burning passion.

On the other side of the room, his phone began to buzz and jitter across the table. He sprang on it, fumbling with clumsy fingers to punch the little green button. “‘Lo? Hello?”

Smooth was his middle name.

“I told you to call me.” Michael's deep voice crackled through the speaker with a strange tinny quality. He'd already packed the miles between them.

“I just woke up.”

Michael grunted. “How are you feeling?”

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“Like something one of your bulls chewed up and spit out,” he admitted, wandering over to the window and pulling back the curtain. In the thin autumn daylight, the town looked tired and dirty. Nothing like Sweetwater. The frame of the motionless Ferris wheel jutted up over the rooftops like the broken spine of a sea creature, rusted and tawdry. Taking a deep breath, he reluctantly asked, “Where are you?”

“Passing Diamond Lake now. Reception is getting spotty.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Yeah? What am I thinking?” West asked faintly. He wasn’t being a smartass. His mind had gone blank. With just a few words, Michael had yanked his plug right out of the wall, just like he’d done to his cell phone.

“You think I freaked and ran off in the middle of the night.” Amusement flickered through Michael’s voice, thicker than the static. “You don’t think a little thing like a kiss is enough to scare me, do you?”

“Two kisses.”

“Yeah, but only one of ‘em counted.” Michael’s voice dropped, the deep burr of it rasping across West’s nerve endings. He cranked his head to the side, fighting the shiver that ran up his spine. “I can’t get it out of my head. The way you tasted. The little sound you made in the back of your throat, the one that made it sound like you wanted to crawl inside me if you could. Have you been thinking about it?”

“I just woke up,” West said weakly, leaning one hand against the wall to support himself when his knees threatened to fold.

“You’re a real romantic, Owens,” Michael drawled.

“I’ve never had a reason to be.”

“Never, huh?” Michael didn’t sound surprised, but the hint of sympathy in his voice made West want to crawl under the carpet and die. “That’s a long time.”

He took a deep breath. “Why did you leave?”

A burst of static made the wait interminable, and he braced himself for the worst.

“Celia called early this morning. Our entire irrigation system is down. The pump station sprang a leak, but the pipes are buried, so I’ve got to rent an excavator just to dig it up before the entire south pasture floods.”

“Oh, shit. Is there any water running?”

“Nope, and we’ve been replanting the fields all week. Those seeds need water, or we won’t have anything for forage next spring. I’ve got to take care of it, but I wanted you to get as much rest as you could before you head home. The room is paid for another day if you need it.”

A pang of anxiety shot through him, and even though Michael was already a hundred miles away, he shuffled over to his open duffle bag and began pulling out a fresh change of clothes.

“Gus knows a few people,” he said, tucking the phone between his ear and shoulder and shaking out a dusty pair of jeans with his good arm. “I’ll see if anyone has some

heavy equipment they can loan you. Did you use my discount for the seed?"

"I've got it covered, West." Michael sounded amused. "It's not your job to solve everyone else's problems."

He scoffed, trying to pull his jeans on without moving his bad shoulder and getting caught in the cuffs. "I can't even solve my own damn problems," he grunted, falling on the creaky mattress in a tangle of denim.

"That's what this bronc-busting thing is all about, isn't it? Climbing out of that bubble your folks have kept you in all these years. Taking charge of your own life, and to hell with what anybody else has to say about it?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah. I figured. That's why I'm not going to tell you to quit...even though what you're doing scares me to fucking death."

"What happened to Mary was a fluke, Michael. A one-in-a-million lightning strike. You know that. It didn't stop you from letting Abby get on a horse, did it?"

"I'm not going to hold my little girl back just because I'm afraid," Michael acknowledged. "But she isn't out there taking stupid risks."

"It's not really that dangerous," West protested, and maybe that would have been true if he were a different man. A man without a cardiologist on speed dial.

"It's not really that safe either," Michael said pointedly. "It's like throwing yourself under a speeding train just to prove how tough you are, but there ain't nobody you need to prove that to except yourself. Trust me on that, kid."

“I get that. I do. That’s why nobody ever needs to know.”

Michael’s voice was grim, and the crack in it had nothing to do with static. “I don’t want to lose anybody else I care about, West.”

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“You won’t.” Not if he could help it. But the one thing he’d been taught, early and often, was that any scrap of control people thought they had was a lie. He’d almost punched his ticket a dozen different ways as a child, and that was playing it so safe he might as well have been swaddled in bubble wrap. So far, caution had brought him nothing but misery.

“You’re a grown man. You want to run around the state, tearing yourself up and letting horses drag you through the dirt, that’s your business. But when you’re home, you’re back at the ranch with me. No more hiding.”

“I can’t live my life in your back pocket,” he protested.

“Why not? It’s where you belong.”

West’s pulse kicked up, fluttering under his bruised ribs. He sat there on the bed and buried his face in one shaking hand. He’d been dreaming of those words for years, but the shock of it had his stomach churning with nerves. Reality was going to kick in sooner or later, and when it did, he thought he might puke.

“You don’t mean that.”

Michael’s sigh was heavy. Static hissed down the line, and West felt a bolt of terror that the call would drop before he could hear what Michael wanted to say. He held his breath, his entire body straining toward the faintest wisp of sound coming through his cell phone’s speaker.

Michael spoke slowly, as if feeling the truth of the words out in his mouth for the first

time. “All I know is that I was miserable without you. Somehow, without me even noticing, you filled up all the empty spaces where Mary used to be. I want to resent you for it, but I can’t, because I’m just so damned relieved to not be walking around all hollowed out every second of every day. In return for all that, how could I not do everything in my power to make you happy?”

“It’s too much. You can’t force yourself—”

“Listen to me, West.” Michael’s voice dropped to a low growl that made his balls tighten. “I’d rip my fucking heart out and hand it to you if I could. If it’s what you need. If it would keep you where I need you to be.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. Even if he knew what he wanted to say, his dry throat couldn’t form any sounds beyond a guttural grunt. But he was listening. Oh, he was listening, and the absolute truth in Michael’s sandpaper promise had him hissing through his teeth and pressing down on his twitching cock with the heel of one hand.

“Trust me, kid,” Michael rasped. “There’s no end to what I’m willing to do to keep you with me. All you’ve got to do is come home and find out.”

CHAPTER NINE

Less than a day later, West sat shucking corn on the steps of the farmhouse where he grew up. He ached to head right to the Triple M, but Michael had his hands full digging up irrigation pipes.

West felt like hell, but he launched himself back into his daily routine like the whole weekend hadn’t happened. He’d have gone crazy sitting around with Michael’s words rattling around in his skull. Nothing made him more miserable than being forced to sit uselessly on his hands when there was work to be done, and in a town like Sweetwater, there was always someone who needed help.

As soon as he crossed the county line, West hit the ground running. Gus had a backlog of local deliveries at the shop, and after that, West had promised Pastor John that he'd crawl into the ductwork and figure out what was making a rattling sound during Sunday service. His oldest friend, Tucker, needed someone to feed his horses while he was out of town, and then there was the usual never-ending work at his family's farm.

The house was so old that it was practically a landmark, but not the fancy kind. Four generations of the Owens family had been raised between the little farmhouse's crumbling plaster walls. The white paint was peeling and the shingles needed to be replaced, but the flower border his mother had planted when he was young was still vibrant most of the year. The dilapidated little three-bedroom sat like a malignant growth on fifty acres of lush farmland. The fields had all turned to seed years ago, but the overgrown garden still kept his parents fed through the winter.

His father had lost the will to care for the property a long time ago. The kids all pitched in where they could, but Susan and James had families of their own, and Bethany had managed to nab herself a scholarship to the state university. West made barely above minimum wage at the shop, hardly enough to support himself, and Derek had been the wallet of the family for so long that it was only natural most of the bills fell on his shoulders. So, West picked up the rest of the slack with his own sweat and blood. He probably spent more time on the farm than at his own crummy apartment.

It was one of the last few warm evenings of autumn. Even now, the air held a crispness that warned of the coming winter. In the garden, tomato plants drooped in their cages, and the corn stalks had long since turned brown and crispy. Sweat trickled down the base of West's spine, but every time he twitched to scratch the itch, the agony in his shoulder reminded him why it was a bad idea.

His swollen, bruised face was impossible to hide. He'd played it off by claiming he'd

taken a crane arm to the face at work, but it was impossible to avoid using only one arm to carry a fresh supply of firewood into the house. His parents had noticed. As he sat on the steps, focused on stripping every last hair of cornsilk from each cob, their raised voices carried through the open screen door.

“He’s taking on too much!” his mother exclaimed, and her distress tore at his heart. “And you’ve seen the bruises. He should give up that apartment in town and move back home. I’m sure Gus would let him switch to part-time hours if we explained—”

“Explained what?” Jasper Owens cut in harshly. “That you coddled him so much as a child he can barely function as a grown man?”

“He’s fragile!”

“If he is, you made him that way.”

West clenched his teeth and ripped viciously at the stalk in his hands.

He didn’t blame his mother. She’d once been a strong woman; strong enough to juggle four children and a sick baby while her husband worked himself to the bone. She was the one who’d refused comfort care for him and demanded a risky experimental surgery, and then she’d done it again and again. Five surgeries before kindergarten. She’d watched him turn blue right before her eyes, and she’d been the one who performed CPR on him in the backseat of their station wagon while her eleven-year-old drove them to the hospital.

Dorothy Owens was the salt of the fucking earth, but years of hardship had worn her into something thin and frail. West and his siblings hardly dared breathe around her, afraid she’d blow away like a tissue-paper doll.

“You need to do something about your face,” Susan said.

His oldest sister sat in a folding lawn chair, sipping on canned wine and watching as her youngest children ran through the sprinkler for the last time before the weather shifted.

“I’ll do something about mine when you do something about yours,” West said mildly.

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She muffled a laugh and discreetly hid her raised middle finger so the kids couldn't see it, but West stopped her cold when he flicked a piece of cornsilk into her hair.

“Ugh! You're so annoying.”

“I know you are, but what—”

“No.” She held up a hand, palm-out, and gave him her sternest look. “Just no. I get enough of that from the littles.”

He grinned, leaning back on the steps and watching as she fished the vegetation from her long brown hair. If Derek had been their de facto father growing up, Susan had played the role of second mother. Even now that they were all grown, she couldn't stop clucking over her siblings. It came as no surprise when she couldn't let the matter drop.

“I'm serious,” she said. “You've got no business walking in here looking like that and scaring Mom half to death. You should've stayed away until you healed up.”

“And miss Sunday dinner?” His eyebrows shot toward his hairline. “Last time I did that she sicced Derek on me. It was like being dragged home by a feral dog.”

Susan laughed and stood, scooping up discarded clothing and plastic toys on her way across the porch. But before she disappeared inside the house, she pointed toward a huge cloud of dust racing down the dirt road.

“Here comes Cujo now,” she said.

A classic F250 rocked through potholes and rolled to a stop beside the old, gnarled apple tree West's great-grandpa had planted after getting home from the war. With a different owner, the truck might have been a showpiece, but Derek claimed he never had time to restore it properly. The thick red and white stripes had peeled almost completely away, revealing the rusted skeleton beneath. The windshield was covered in dust, and the oversized tires were caked with red clay. It was a truck made to work, not one that sat around under a tarp in a climate-controlled garage. Ratchet as it was, it was still the best thing in Derek's life.

His oldest brother ignored the children playing in the yard, cutting through the sprinkler like he didn't even feel it. The kids watched him curiously, but they didn't jump all over him the way they did when West or their middle brother James showed up. Nothing in Derek's body language invited familiarity. He was more like a statue carved from raw, jagged sandstone than a man of flesh and blood. In a family with only middling looks at best, he'd drawn the short end of the stick. His face looked like it had been hammered into all raw edges, and his permanent scowl didn't help. His tight black T-shirt was sweat-soaked and splattered with mud, and the deep color in his cheeks was a sign of a long, hard day working in the sun.

"You're back," he said, sounding like he'd tasted something sour, as if he hadn't been all over West's ass about rushing home.

"What's that?" West asked, pointing with a half-shucked cob toward the mottled fluff of fur tucked under his arm. "Is that a puppy?"

"Found her in a crate of busted car parts someone left outside the scrap yard," Derek said gruffly, shifting his squirming bundle. "What happened to your face?"

West tugged on his ballcap, pulling the brim low to shade his bruises. "Forgot to duck when we were unloading," he muttered.

“Clumsy.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” He viciously ripped the covering off another ear of corn and set it in the paper bag at his feet.

Derek watched him silently, eyes narrowed in that particular way he had when that giant brain of his was processing information on a level ten times higher than any normal person. If life had been kinder, he could have turned that formidable intellect to curing cancer or sending rockets to the moon instead of wasting himself fixing up cars and machinery for cheap out at the scrap yard. He was the poster boy for small-town wasted dreams.

Sometimes it hurt just to look at him.

“Word’s been getting around that Gus is looking to retire soon,” Derek said. “You’re the one he’s going to want to take over, but you’ve been stacking injuries ever since he put you on a full delivery schedule. If you can’t do the job, you need to tell him now.”

“I can do it fine.”

“That broken nose says different.”

West shrugged. He’d given up trying to prove himself a long time ago. Derek had always resented him for his weakness, but he was also the one to most aggressively insist that West stay in his lane.

West had always told himself that he kept the rodeos a secret so he didn’t terrorize his mother, and that was true enough, but if he were honest with himself, he had another reason. Somewhere deep down, he still held onto a little scrap of hope that it proved he was just as tough as the rest of the men in his family, and he could keep hanging

onto that delusion so long as he never saw the looks on their faces if they discovered his secret.

Derek brushed past him without another word, climbing the porch in two quick steps, but he paused with one hand on the screen when he heard the agitated voices inside.

“I wouldn’t go in there if I were you,” West warned.

His brother cocked his head, listening, then he closed his eyes and banged his forehead against the warped frame. “You did that to them, didn’t you?”

“I ain’t the only one here, brother,” West reminded him through clenched teeth.

“You’re the only one who matters.” It wasn’t a compliment. Derek considered him for a moment before jibing, “What happened? They catch you watching gay porn again?”

“I never told them how I found out about that website, did I?” West shot back.

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Derek opened his mouth, but the door swung open before more poison could come spilling out. The screen bounced off Derek's shoulder, and he caught it on the backswing before it could strike their father.

"You need your cane—" West began, scrambling to his feet and wiping his hands on the seat of his jeans.

"Don't start," Jasper warned, resting one hand on the door frame for balance. "I already get enough of that from your mother. Buncha nagging hens."

"Don't be an ass," Derek said. "Get your cane or go sit down."

Jasper scowled at his eldest son. "You're not too old for me to whoop," he muttered, but as he spoke, he was reaching behind him and snagging one of his canes from the umbrella stand by the front door. "There," he snarled. "Happy?"

"Ecstatic," Derek drawled.

These days, Jasper barely left his easy chair. He claimed it hurt too much, but West had always suspected it was his pride that hurt when he was forced to hobble like an old man. His time in the oil fields had ended abruptly the day he'd fallen from a drilling platform and fractured his spine in two places. It was just the last in a long line of injuries that had slowly eaten away at him over the years. Hard work had ground him down, snapping pieces off him one by one until almost nothing was left but frown lines and frailty.

West couldn't even remember the last time he'd left the house. His cheeks were

sunken and his skin had a pale, waxy hue. He just sat in his recliner, scrolling listlessly through sports channels and yelling whenever his wife suggested he get some fresh air.

Looking at him now, it was almost impossible to believe he was the same quick-grinned bronc-buster from the old photo albums. Any stranger could be forgiven for assuming he was decades older than the number on his birthday cards.

His father sighed. “Your mother thinks ol’ Gus has been laying too much responsibility on you.”

“It’s not a problem,” West said, casually moving to his father’s side in case he began to topple. Derek was already flanking him from the other side, one hand hovering at his elbow.

“That’s what I’ve been telling her.” Jasper’s lips twisted into something that looked like a smile that died before it arrived. “Look, we all know your mother would keep you in her pocket for the rest of your life if she could. But she’s got a right to be worried when you walk through the door looking like you just tangled with a mountain lion. You’ve been getting banged up an awful lot lately.”

“So what?” West said, shrugging awkwardly. “I’m not made of china.”

“According to your mother, that heart of yours might as well be.”

“You know there’s an HLHS survivor who just hiked the PCT, right?”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy. I’ve read the studies, same as you. It’s the uncertainty that drives your mother crazy.” There was something strangely keen in his gaze when he flicked it across West’s battered face. “But I didn’t raise my children to be helpless or lazy. Not even you.”

Derek barked out a short laugh, and West's back stiffened.

"What's your problem?" he demanded.

Derek shrugged, catching his glare and throwing it back to him like a javelin. "It's just funny. You've been working the same minimum wage job since high school, and we're still arguing about whether you can hack it."

"Derek..." their father began warningly, but Derek plowed right over him.

"You're over there playing around at a job any kid could do, and I'm the one busting my ass to cover everyone's bills. Who do you think is paying for that handicap rail in Dad's shower?"

"I don't need no bars in the shower!" Jasper barked, slamming his hand into the screen so hard that it popped off its rusty hinges. "You think I can't even wash my own ass without help? What do I look like to you?"

"There's no shame in not being able to do everything you want, Dad," West said, resting a cautious hand on his shoulder.

His father shook him off, snarling, "Maybe not for you."

A muscle in West's cheek flinched before he could stop it, but he covered it by squinting out at a distant nothing in the front yard.

Jasper ran a hand through his unkempt hair, looking aggravated. "Look," he said, "You're a grown man. Do what you want. But if you show up here again looking like you were trampled by a herd of buffalo, your mama is going to keep blaming that job of yours. Then she's going to march herself downtown and give ol' Gus a piece of her mind."

Then his secret would be out. That kind-hearted old man was no match for his mother's tears. Nobody was.

His father looked at him funny, and there was something tense and knowing in his tone when he warned, “Watch yourself, son.”

“Yes, sir,” West promised.

Satisfied, Jasper’s attention transferred to his eldest son. “You planning on sitting at your mama’s table like that?” he asked, gesturing to his filthy clothes and the bedraggled puppy still tucked under one arm.

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“I lost my appetite,” Derek muttered.

“Then get it back. This is Bethie’s homecoming dinner, and your mother wants all her children sitting around her table and behaving themselves for once. Go splash some water on your face. Put that dog in one of the bedrooms so he doesn't get underfoot.”

Derek sighed. “Let me get a beer first.”

“You coming, West?” Jasper asked, already hobbling inside.

“Naw,” West said, settling himself down on the steps and picking up his last ear of corn. “I’ll just watch the kids for a spell.”

The door snapped shut behind him, hanging awkwardly by its newly broken hinge. West draped his forearms over his thighs and hung his head. Between the worn toes of his boots, a vine beetle dragged itself on three broken legs. West watched as it pulled itself in defective circles, unable to hold a straight line. Then he lifted one heel and crushed it, putting it out of its misery.

CHAPTER TEN

“Lord have mercy! Who did that to you, child?”

Florence Bonnard caught the shop door and held it open before it could swing back on West's bad shoulder. His hands were already full, juggling a stack of UPS boxes under one arm and a wriggling fluff of puppy in the other.

Derek had spent the entire dinner mad enough to chew nails, and by the time the cobbler was dished up, he'd already booked it, leaving the puppy behind. James and Susan had vanished like puffs of smoke after that. Crazy how quick parents could move once their kids lit up on a new pet. Bethany was only home long enough to give her ex-boyfriend time to clean his things out of the duplex they shared near the university, and his parents had lost interest in caring for anything—even themselves. So somehow, West had gotten stuck babysitting.

“Thanks, Miz Bonnard,” he said, shooting her a grin that usually put some color in her papery cheeks. But not today. She clung to the door and clapped one hand over her mouth.

“Just look at your poor nose!” she exclaimed, wide-eyed and appalled. “Whoever did that deserves to be horse-whipped!”

“Probably Sutter.” August French sat on a stool by the register, squinting at the playing cards clutched in his arthritis-twisted fingers. “He’s been madder than a wet hen ever since the boys at the Triple M started spreading it around that he set that fire.”

“West doesn’t work at the Triple M,” Flo objected.

August shrugged and threw down a ten of spades. “Everybody knows he’s one of ‘em, anyway.”

“Well, bless him for it!” Flo twittered like a bird, shooing West across the threshold and shoving a rubber stopper in the door to keep it open. “Michael Whittaker has done a lot of good for this town—including giving your grandson work every spring, Auggie.”

“It just don’t sit right with me, ruining a man’s reputation with no evidence.”

“Full house, Auggie,” Gus interrupted, laying out his cards. He gave West a sharp look from over the frame of his eyeglasses. “Is that the new dewormer you ordered?”

“Naw. That came in last week.” West crouched and set both the boxes and the puppy on the floor. The cardboard stayed where he’d put it, but the puppy went nose-to-the-floor almost instantly and wandered off exploring scents.

“Some hound in that pup,” August speculated, lifting an empty soda can to his lips and spitting.

West stripped the shipping tape off one of the boxes and dug around in packing peanuts until he came up with a garden gnome carved out of a single piece of wood.

“What the hell is that?” Gus demanded, wandering up to peer over his shoulder. He’d once been nearly as tall and broad as Michael, but age had sunk his chest and his cheeks. He’d been old for as long as West could remember, but he was still as intimidating now as he’d been when West only came up to his knee. “Did you get my shop confused with Anna’s Geegaws next door?”

“Nope.” West strolled over to the display window filled with show bridles and set the gnome front and center. “We get so many confused tourists in here thinking we’re another hokey gift shop, I figured it couldn’t do any harm to give them something to buy while we’ve got them.”

Gus screwed up his face. “You know what my friends will say when they see me selling that junk?”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. I’m the only friend left this side of the pearly gates,” August cackled.

“I think they’re precious,” Flo piped up. “Gus, add one to my order.”

Gus looked between Flo and the gnome, taking in its round tummy and pointed hat and rolling his eyes in disgust. “Do what you want, son. You’ll be the one stuck looking at it when I retire.”

“You been retiring for twenty years. Ain’t nobody who believes it anymore,” August said, licking his thumb and dealing out a new hand of cards. The puppy sat beneath him, toying with the tattered hem of his jeans and pulling threads loose with her sharp little teeth.

“Yeah, well, this time I mean it.”

“I’m bringing the car around,” Flo interrupted. “Can you load the trunk for me, West, dear?”

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“Sure thing, Miz Bonnard.” He plucked another gnome from the box and handed it to her before focusing on the sacks of rabbit feed behind the counter. Something popped and twanged in his shoulder as soon as he hefted the first bag. He grunted, and the sack slipped from his suddenly numb fingers, hitting the floor with a thud.

The men looked up from their card game.

“Butterfingers,” August said with a chuckle, but Gus didn’t laugh. He watched West closely, eyes shrewd behind the split lenses of his bifocals.

“Something wrong with your arm, son?” he asked.

West clenched his teeth, wiping at the sweat on his upper lip with the back of his wrist. His expression was stone when he finally heaved that first bag onto his shoulder, but it cost him. His injury was on fire. It felt like someone had funneled gasoline right into the joint and struck a match.

“Just pulled something unloading that shipment down in California,” he said tensely.

“Those deliveries have been getting rough,” Gus said dryly, tossing a pair of sevens onto the counter and ignoring the warning side-eye West directed his way.

“You’ve got no business running the boy all over creation like that,” Flo scolded, digging a set of keys from her purse and skittering toward the door on West’s heels. “What would his mother say?”

“Can’t say it hasn’t crossed my mind,” Gus admitted, stroking the silver whiskers on

his chin.

“I won’t tell her if you don’t,” West said, forcing out a chuckle despite his strained breathing. “You got the schedule for today?”

Gus grunted and removed a sheet of paper from the clipboard beside the register, saying gruffly, “Only a few local deliveries today. Nothing I can’t handle.”

The effort it took to turn back with the pellet sack on his shoulder was nothing compared to his irritation when Gus tried to crumple the list into his pocket before he could grab it.

“Give me that, old man,” he said tightly, holding out his hand and wiggling his fingers in a ‘cough it up’ gesture. “I handle deliveries.”

“Usually,” Gus agreed, “but you’re a wreck.”

“I’m fine.”

Gus scoffed and said pointedly, “Son, you look like you’ve been stomped by a wild horse.”

“Yeah, but you’re eighty.”

“He’s got a point,” chortled August.

“Seventy-nine last birthday,” Gus shot back irritably.

“Give me the damn list,” West said, pain sharpening his voice into something harsher than he’d intended.

Gus gave him a wary look. West stood there, hand out, refusing to budge. Whatever the old man saw in his expression had him sighing, and he reluctantly forked over the list.

But as his fingers closed around the paper, West didn't feel victorious. He felt tired. Weary down to the bone of fighting for every step he took out of the living grave he'd been stuck in since birth.

Men like Calvin Craig and Tucker Grace had shown up mangled, banged, and bruised their whole damn lives, and no one said a word, not even when they should have. But it was an argument any time West broke a sweat.

Most of the town had forgotten the circumstances of his birth, or maybe they had never known in the first place. But old folks had long memories. Maybe they were fuzzy on details, but they remembered the sudden trips to out-of-state hospitals. They remembered the bill collectors, and the way Derek and James used to beg for under-the-table work after school. Gus had never treated West differently than the other boys, and he'd covered for him too many times to count once he clued in to how West was spending his free time most summers.

But he was getting softer with each passing year, more cautious and more worried, until he'd finally broken down and tattled to Michael over a few bumps and bruises.

One look at his anxious face, and West knew he'd lost his only ally.

He glanced at the list in his hand. Way down at the bottom, Gus had added Michael's name in a spidery scrawl, and beside it, an order for nearly one ton of forage seed.

"Jesus," he growled, exasperated. "You're going to give yourself a heart attack, old man."

“Same goes for you, son,” Gus muttered under his breath. “Kade Keller might be invincible, but you and I aren’t.”

“Who’s Kade Keller?” August asked, staring at them blankly.

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“Nobody,” West said, cutting Gus a dangerous look. The old man lifted both hands in surrender, nodding wearily. “Nobody at all.”

He saved the Triple M for last, partly because it was the biggest delivery, and partly because the thought of facing Michael again terrified him. Apart from a few quick texts when he got back to town, they hadn’t spoken, and West was beginning to worry that Michael regretted what he’d said in California.

Michael didn’t speak about his past much, but West knew he’d lost plenty of loved ones over the years. His grandfather was long gone, and there were no relatives flying in for the holidays, no cousins for Abby to visit, not even an opinionated in-law questioning his parenting. It was just him and his little girl and the family of lost cowboys he’d built up around him. Nearly losing the ranch had probably brought back a lot of old fears and grief, and then West had to go and ghost him on top of everything else. What a mind fuck. No wonder he was willing to do anything to keep from losing someone else he cared about.

It made sense.

They would both play it off, and things would go back to normal. West would never let it show when the might-have-beens got so bad they nearly killed him. He could do that. For Michael.

That decision should have settled him, but as the long day drew to a close, he found himself babbling anxiously to the puppy in his passenger seat. His palms were damp and sliding on the wheel, and even an open window and George Strait crooning about Amarillo on the old FM radio couldn’t calm his nerves.

So, he talked to the dog.

“Want some?” he asked, thrusting out an open bag of corn nuts. The puppy stuck out her nose and sniffed curiously. If Derek had given her a name, he hadn’t shared it, so West had taken to calling her Patches. If the wagging of her fat little rump was any indication, she didn’t mind. She shook her head, sneezed, and then curled up disinterestedly on the bed he’d fashioned from an old towel.

“Suit yourself,” he said, tossing back a few nuts and turning one-handed onto Elkhorn Road.

He knew this road like the back of his hand, but he hadn’t dared get anywhere close since those first few days after the fire. It was a shock to turn onto the familiar gravel road and not be greeted by massive wooden arches capped by an M forged from giant horseshoes.

Even now, destruction was everywhere. The fire had originally sparked with the horses in the stable, but it hadn’t stopped there. The pristine white fencing that used to run along the culvert was now nothing but charred logs, and a quick and dirty barbed wire fence had replaced it. Beyond the wire sat black and fallow fields. Acre upon acre of ruined pasture; an unending sea of ash stretching all the way to the foothills of the Strawberry Mountains.

West knew that Michael had already spent a small fortune on hay just to get the cattle through the winter, but the success or failure of next year’s herd depended on sowing enough seed to germinate in the spring. The twenty industrial sized bags of grass seed in the bed of West’s truck wouldn’t do any good unless Michael fixed his irrigation before the ground froze.

At the end of the road, the house and the outbuildings sat in various stages of construction. Some of them were gutted down to the wiring and others were already

coated in fresh paint. They looked like haunted houses, strangely eerie with their bare frames and empty windows. Trucks, scrap piles, and heavy machinery littered the work yard, and a giant rental dumpster was filled to overflowing with detritus.

A huge CAT excavator sat in a nearby field, surrounded by a handful of cowboys, and just as West glanced in their direction, something struck his windshield with a hard splat.

“Cripes!” he yelled, slamming on the brakes.

Patches tumbled off the seat with a yelp.

“Sorry,” West said absently, throwing the truck into park and hopping down. Dark, sticky liquid dripped down the glass, and he tested it with one cautious finger. It was mud, thick and gooey, and it must have been a ball the size of a cantaloupe to strike with such force.

“Whoops!” a man shouted from the field.

“What the hell, Aiden!” West shouted back.

The cowboy grinned, hanging from the back of the excavator by one arm and waving. There was a sharp bite in the air today, but he was shirtless and his blond curls were plastered to his forehead with sweat. He was covered in so much mud that it looked like a strange new form of body art.

“Come on in; the water’s great!” Aiden called. The excavator jerked beneath him, dumping a full bucket of mud, and Aiden went tumbling off the back. He landed hard in the slop.

“Oops,” Calvin Craig said mildly from behind the controls. Aiden rolled onto his

back and thrust two middle fingers in the air, but Cal only chuckled.

God, West had missed them. Sure, he'd seen them around town, but it wasn't the same. In a strange way, the ranch was a second home for all of them, a place where they could be themselves. The only path to acceptance at the Triple M was hard work, but once they'd proven themselves, it would take the force of God to make any of them leave. That was part of the reason the fire had shaken them up so badly—and the reason Michael had been forced to threaten their jobs if they went after Sutter on their own. They all wanted revenge.

West was laughing as he picked his way across the ruined field. Patches followed behind him, running double-time on her tiny paws, little ears flapping in the breeze. She yipped and scampered up to Aiden, nipping at his hair and slinging mud everywhere.

Two days ago, Michael had been kissing him outside a rundown motor lodge on the wrong side of the California border. But in that time, it looked like he'd managed to dig to the center of the earth. The pit was half-filled with murky water, and Michael and Celia stood thigh-deep in sludge, hauling on an industrial-sized pipe wrench.

Like Aiden, Michael was shirtless and filthy, and West's heart tripped when he laid eyes on him.

It was like this every time. Whenever he got a little distance and managed to convince himself he could control this obsession, all it took was one look to make a liar out of him. Michael was beautiful in a way West had never known men could be, and West knew he lit up like a beacon whenever he was around. His feelings were so bright and so loud that Michael always seemed to sense his presence even before he'd announced himself.

Right then, Michael glanced over his shoulder, attention landing unerringly on West

and sucking the breath right out of his lungs. He knew he was suffocating, but he didn't care. He wanted this man more than he wanted his next breath. There was a time he thought he'd go crazy with it. Maybe he already had.

Play it cool, West reminded himself as he finally broke free from the gravity of Michael's gaze. Just play it cool.

He flipped his attention to Aiden and reached down to offer a hand, saying, "I don't know why, but I'm dead certain you deserved to get dumped on your ass."

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“Oh yeah?” In a flash, Aiden hooked the back of West’s knee with his ankle and gave a hard yank.

Before he could even let out a shout, West was tumbling down the embankment and into the pit. He skidded through the mud quicker than a sled on second-day snowpack, slamming into Michael and Celia from behind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He landed up to his neck in muck. White-hot agony shot through him, and he fell back with a groan, taking in a terrible mouthful of dark grit. He cursed and spat, cradling his injured shoulder and looking around for his lucky ballcap.

High above him on the bank, Aiden was doubled over in laughter, hooting until his face turned purple.

“You’re a jackass,” Cal announced, killing the engine on the excavator.

“It’s just West,” Aiden protested, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. “He doesn’t mind.”

“But I do.” Michael’s tone was grim. “You just made me drop a four-hundred-dollar wrench, Aiden. Get your ass down here and find it.”

He stood above West, fists on his hips and legs braced. From this angle, he was a giant, and West was forced to crank his neck back just to get a good look at him.

“Are you hurt?” Michael asked in a low voice.

“Naw.” West forced himself to grin, but it twisted into a grimace as he struggled onto his knees in the tarry sludge. “But that's no way to treat a man with a half-ton of grass seed in his truck.”

“Well, hallelujah,” Michael drawled, cupping West’s elbow and trying to gently tug him to his feet by his good arm. It didn’t work. The mud acted like quicksand, sucking him back onto his ass with a squelch.

“I got it,” West grumbled, but every time he pried one leg out of the swamp, the other half of his body just sank deeper. He flailed, splattering mud in a wide arc until Celia let out an impatient huff and grabbed him from behind. She heaved, and something clicked in West’s shoulder.

“Damn,” he groaned, squeezing his eyes shut and sucking in a few deep breaths before he puked. “Thanks, Cel.”

“You okay?” she asked worriedly, and West managed to spare her a ghost of a smile.

“Fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “Must’ve tweaked something on the way down.”

Celia returned his smile, and it was like taking a laser beam of sunshine right in the face. She was a pretty woman with sun-leathered skin and a white-blonde ponytail, and she’d won the hearts of every cowboy on the ranch when she’d insisted they stop trying to call her a forewoman.

“Just stick with foreman,” Celia had said, rolling her eyes. “I do the job of four men anyhow.”

She was close to Michael's age, divorced, with a daughter of her own. They'd probably make a great couple.

He looked away.

Michael was watching him narrowly, and he didn't look pleased. Beneath the sweat and grime, those blue eyes of his burned like twin stars. West turned up the wattage on his good ol' boy smile, but Michael wasn't buying it. He looked at West like he could peel back his layers one by one and read the truth on the faulty heart underneath.

"I'm fine," West repeated, quieter this time, looking him straight in the eye.

A muscle flexed in Michael's jaw.

"Come on," he said, resting a gentle hand on the back of West's neck and steering him out of the pit. "Better hose off before this mud dries."

"What about the leak?" Celia asked, pulling out a floral handkerchief and wiping her face. "The pump station is fucked if we can't get the flange fixed."

Michael hesitated, but he didn't let go of West. He glanced at the water and then squinted up at the low sun. "Ain't going nowhere," he said after a pause. "Besides, we can't do anything until I get my wrench back. We'll pick back up in the morning."

"I need to find my hat," West protested.

"You've got dozens of 'em," Michael said carelessly.

"Yeah, but that was my Smarty the Steer hat. It's my favorite." It was the one Michael had given him for Christmas.

“Aiden!” Michael barked. “Find West’s hat.”

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“Do you know how hard it will be to find a ballcap in this mess?” Aiden grouched, picking his way down the embankment with a flashlight in hand. His expression was twisted up like he was rethinking some of his life choices.

“Easier than finding your ass once I’m done handing it to you,” Michael said.

West gave a strained chuckle.

They scrambled out of the pit together with Michael half-dragging both him and Celia. Their boots slipped in the muck, and West was forced to hook an arm around Michael’s waist to keep from sliding backward. Ridges of slick muscle shifted beneath his grip, making his palm tingle, and he was acutely aware of the sheer physical presence of the other man.

Kissing him had been a mistake. He’d spent so many years clinging to every scrap of self-control he could manage to wring out of himself, keeping his desire a low-key buzz in the background of his life. But now it was out of control. All it took was one look, one touch, one curl of his masculine scent, and heat incinerated him from the inside out.

“I think I’ll stick around and help Cal dig out another section,” Celia announced, dropping her hands on her knees to catch her breath once they were back on solid ground. “Unless you need help unloading that seed?”

“I can handle it,” West said.

She looked doubtful, but before she could open her mouth again, Cal dropped a soggy

mud goblin in his arms.

“Looks like you lost this,” he said.

“Oh Christ, a puppy. Don’t let Abby see her,” Michael groaned.

“She belongs to Derek,” West said, cranking his head around to avoid her ecstatic puppy tongue. “I’m just watching her for the day if she’ll stop trying to eat me alive.”

“I wouldn’t hold that against her,” Michael said dryly. “Can’t say the same thought hasn’t crossed my mind a time or two.”

West’s eyes shot wide. Michael grinned, and that grin only widened when West tossed an anxious look over his shoulder. If anybody had overheard, they weren’t letting on. Cal and Celia were deep in discussion about the next digging spot, and all that was left of Aiden was muffled curses drifting over the lip of the pit.

“You can’t just say shit like that,” he hissed under his breath.

“Why not?” Michael’s tone was mild, as if he really didn’t understand the dangerous game he was playing. “It’s nobody’s business.”

“They’ll make it their business! It’s not like choosing a damn breakfast cereal, Michael. Word spreads like wildfire in a town like this. Abby will be hearing about it at school. No matter what you said the other day, you can’t be ready for that.”

His breath had started to pick up pace, and he had to force his fingers to unclench on the puppy’s fur. His shoulder ached, and so did his chest, but not in any quantifiable way that warranted hopping on the phone with his cardiologist. His chest felt tight and squirmy, like an itch he couldn’t scratch, and the feeling intensified every time he thought about what Michael might be sacrificing on a whim.

Michael examined him with unnerving scrutiny. “Come on,” he said, gently palming the back of West’s head. “We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Maybe they did, but it didn’t happen in the truck. Somehow, they both seemed to sense it wouldn’t be an easy conversation, and they veered toward safer topics like the irrigation leak and the chance of coming snow. They had been friends too long for silences, and there was so much to catch up on.

A lump formed in West’s throat as he pulled into the work yard for the first time in too long. The house looked mostly the same except for a wrap-around porch made of raw lumber. The roof was new, and the fresh siding still needed a coat of paint, but the bones had survived mostly unscathed. He wondered what it looked like on the inside. Michael’s house had always been cheerfully dilapidated, warm and broken in, just like him. The few pieces of fine décor were Mary’s brief touch on the place, and her beaming portrait had sat prominently on the fireplace mantle. Had it survived, he wondered? What kind of lousy friend was he that he’d never even bothered to ask? The guilt of it nearly drove him to his knees.

He caught Michael by the arm before he could hop out. “I’m sorry.”

Michael cocked his head, puppy tucked under one arm like a football, and waited. He was good at that. His unending patience was part of what had drawn West to him in the first place.

West took a deep breath and swallowed his pride. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you needed me.”

“You had your reasons.”

“None worth a damn. I’m your friend. No matter what, I’m your friend, and I...I shouldn’t have let you face all this alone. It’s just that seeing you in that hospital bed

nearly broke me, you know? I felt so useless, and I couldn't face it."

Michael's lips curved in a ghost of a smile. "I'm a big boy, West. I can take care of myself."

"You shouldn't have to," he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose where a sting was brewing.

The rough, warm stroke of Michael's palm against his cheek made him jump. His touch was fleeting, sliding around to the back of his neck and giving a gentle squeeze. It was so familiar, and West realized he'd been touching him like that for a long time now, but it had been so casual and easy that he'd never noticed.

"You can help now by giving me a hand with all this grass seed," Michael said with a chuckle. "Between the two of us, we almost make a whole person. But put your sling on first."

"I'm fine without it."

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“Yeah, you are.” Michael’s chuckle was teasing. “But you’re going to wear it anyway.”

While Patches explored the barn nose-first, they divided the job between them. After a full day of grueling work, Michael couldn’t climb without his bad leg locking up on him, and West didn’t want his shoulder to slide out of its socket again after that tumble. So, he backed the truck through the open barn doors and then hopped into the bed and dragged each bag to the lip of the gate one-handed, where Michael shouldered them and stacked them neatly against the wall. Ordinarily, a fifty-pound bag would be nothing, but forty of them added up to a real burden at the end of a long, hard day.

Together, they managed, but West was itchy and sweaty and exhausted by the time they wrapped up. Dusk had fallen, and automatic lights flickered on, one by one. Horses whickered to each other from inside the stable. Dogs left their herds and began nosing at empty food dishes, ignoring the giddy puppy nipping at their heels. As the sun sank below the mountains, the very air seemed to settle. Peace rolled over the land, smelling of earth and frost, and one by one, cowboys straggled in from the field.

The temporary help were the first to call it quits, starting up their engines and arcing headlights across the driveway as they headed for home. Then the main crew. Cal first, stopping to fill troughs on his way toward the kitchen and the always brewing coffee pot. Then Celia, dragging a soggy Aiden behind her.

Aiden dropped a mud-caked tool on the workbench and grumbled, “Couldn’t find the hat.”

“I’ll look tomorrow,” West said, hiding his disappointment.

“I’ll help,” Aiden said, wiping a glob of mud from his hair and grimacing apologetically. “Sorry, buddy. I was just playing.”

“Grab a shower at the house,” Michael suggested. “We’ll throw something together for dinner. You staying, Celia?”

“Might as well,” she replied, wrinkling her nose and trailing after Aiden as he made his way toward the house. “Zoe’s with her father this week.”

Michael watched them go with a fond expression before transferring his attention to West. The warmth in his eyes only deepened. “You too,” he commanded. “Stay.”

“I need a shower,” West protested.

“We’ve got two.”

“I don’t have a change of clothes.”

West wasn’t sure what twisted impulse had him throwing up roadblocks to every suggestion. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t run directly into Michael’s arms as soon as he hit town. He’d spent years basking in any scrap of attention he could get, leaping at any chance to earn Michael’s approval, replaying his smiles for days. But that was back before the fire, when he hadn’t yet suspected how completely one man owned him. Before he’d known what it was like to be so wrapped up in another person that the fear of losing him almost stopped his heart. He wondered if Michael had felt like this after Mary’s death, and how he’d kept from losing his mind.

“You can wear something of mine for dinner,” Michael suggested, all easy warmth, as if he hadn’t spent the weekend blowing West’s world apart. As if they weren’t

standing on the precipice of a cliff, one thin line away from a fall they'd never recover from.

Even on a knife's edge of panic, the ridiculous image of himself wading around in pants a foot too long had him choking on a laugh. It was nearly enough to have him volunteering to shimmy back into his own crunchy denim.

Like he could read his mind, Michael gave a soft chuff of amusement. Lazily hooking one hand behind West's neck, he turned him toward the house and said wryly, "Not exactly how I figured you'd be getting into my jeans. But we'll take it one step at a time."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A meal and some hot water went a long way to making a man feel human again.

Or maybe it was the crispness of a cold beer and the scent of a charcoal grill, combined with the chaos and laughter of a half-dozen people all talking at once. He'd missed this place, these people. His people. Missed them like hell.

Now he stood with one foot propped on the corral fence, watching as Cal's taillights flashed in the darkness. The air was chilly and sharp in his lungs but not yet cold enough to see his breath. Cattle lowed from the hills, and a dog barked. The quiet, familiar sounds of a ranch bedding down for the night.

Behind him, the house was lit up from within by a dozen welcoming lights. Somewhere in all that warmth, Michael was tucking his little girl into her bed with Derek's puppy on her pillow. A bare bulb swung on a wire above the porch like a lure on a hook. Calling West home.

The snap of a screen door caught him by surprise. Wiping his hands on his borrowed

jeans, he turned hesitantly toward the house. One of the long shadows on the porch moved, detaching itself from the darkness.

Michael languidly grabbed hold of the overhead beam and stood there, triceps popping, as he watched West with an intensity that twisted his heart in his chest. He'd only showered after everyone else was finished, and his hair was still damp and curling over his forehead. His long legs were encased in denim that looked thin and soft from thousands of tumbles on the heavy-duty cycle, and his plain T-shirt was rumpled as if he'd just scooped it off the floor. Raw masculinity pumped from him in waves that called up a visceral response, like a drum beat deep in the pit of West's stomach.

Nothing but the salt of the earth ran in Michael's veins, and West knew it would never cross his mind how sexy he looked right then. His expression was unreadable, but the look in his eyes made West want to squirm like a worm on a hook.

West came to a dead stop there in the driveway, dry-mouthed and terrified.

They stared at each other silently, tension bleeding off them and hanging thick in the air until West swore he was choking on it. And like the clueless, inexperienced shmuck he was, West ruined the moment by blurting out the first thought in his head.

"You said you aren't gay. Back at the motel, I mean."

Michael gave a short nod.

"But you're not straight either?"

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Michael tipped his head, looking thoughtful. “Who knows what I would’ve called myself if I’d been single? Mary and I practically grew up together. Being with her was just always how it was going to be, you know?”

He didn’t know, but he nodded, anyway.

“We experimented some,” Michael added, and West nearly choked on his tongue.

Suddenly, he was thinking about the postwoman, Dolores, and her innuendo and gossip. She’d never liked Mary Whittaker, and she’d never trusted the packages addressed in her name. West was instantly imagining whipped cream and feathers, or maybe chains and ball gags. Michael naked, stretched out, and tied to the headboard.

He broke out in a cold sweat.

Michael took one look at his face and laughed. “Look at you. Do I even want to know what’s got you making that face?”

“What...” West licked his dry lips. They were still too far away from each other. He felt small and foolish, standing there while Michael loomed over him from the porch. “What does that mean...exactly?”

“Probably not whatever you’re imagining.” Michael’s lips twisted wryly, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Back before we had Abby and settled down, Mary used to be pretty wild. Her favorite thing was to find a third to join us every once in a while.”

“Women?”

Michael inclined his head. “And men.”

West’s brain felt like it was about to explode, overheated by a whole new series of images flickering through his imagination. Mary wasn’t in them. West’s subconscious shied away from imposing on her like that. He didn’t imagine a woman at all, just an amorphous body pinned between two men. Or even better...watching. Just watching as a faceless man laid hands on the sculpted perfection of Michael’s body, worshipping him the way West had always wanted.

A peculiar sense of jealousy filled him, and he was forced to clear his throat twice before he croaked, “I didn’t think...uh, I mean...I thought maybe you’d never kissed a man before.”

“I hadn’t.”

“But—”

With a sigh, Michael stopped holding up the overhead beam and stepped off the porch. Something about the seriousness in his expression had West backing up a step before he realized what he was doing. He locked his knees, both relieved and disappointed when Michael paused just out of reach. The light from the porch was behind him now, and his face was mostly in shadow.

In a low voice, he said, “Kissing is for romance, West. Those men...they were just extra bodies between me and Mary. You understand?”

“But...” West scrambled to put his spinning thoughts in order. “You kissed me.”

“Yeah. I did.” Slowly, Michael reached out and cupped the side of his face. His

thumb stroked along the edge of West's jaw, testing the roughness there, and West desperately wished he'd had a chance to shave. He could have borrowed Michael's razor, but he'd been worried it would look like he was trying too hard. Or worse, that he expected something to happen. But now all he could think about was how scruffy he must look.

Gliding his thumb over the cushion of West's lower lip, Michael added, "Neither of us is the type to fool around. Are we?"

Mutely, West shook his head. He wanted to reach out so badly that his hands shook in bloodless fists inside his pockets. The heat from Michael's body was like a physical wall between them. Part of him longed to throw himself into that warmth, but the rest of him was screaming to run. So instead, he just stood there and quivered.

He was in over his head. In all his naïve, hopeless longing, he'd never imagined this. Michael was so much older, so much stronger, so much better—and so much more experienced than West had ever realized. Even in his wildest dreams, West would never be a match for him.

Michael was searching his face, somehow reading the paralyzing terror there. Gently, he asked, "This is what you wanted, right?"

"I never get what I want," he whispered hoarsely.

"I don't know much about how you grew up, but it seems to me you just learned to stop asking a long time ago. How 'bout you start up again?"

"You could say no."

"I could say yes." Michael splayed his hand across the side of West's face, sliding his fingers through his hair and gripping so tight he couldn't look away. "Ask me."

West's heart was going to explode. It was pounding like a snare drum in his chest, and he couldn't catch his breath. Somehow, it felt as if this was the first real thing in his life, and everything that had come before was just practice.

His pulse pounded, and every sense had sharpened to a crystalline point: the chill sweeping down from the mountains, the quiver in his legs, and the sweet, woody scent of Michael's soap.

Before this, he'd only been playing at living. But if he could only sack up and find the courage, he could grab hold of this moment and live in it for as long as it lasted.

If only.

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Silence ticked away in seconds, and then minutes, and he still couldn't unhinge his jaw enough to speak. Michael watched him with slowly eroding patience.

This is it, West thought, panicked. This is when he realizes you're only brave when no one is looking.

But Michael hadn't stopped touching him. His fingers tightened in West's hair, and he growled, "Listen to me, kid. I bullied an old man and tracked you all the way across state lines just to get you to stop running and face me. This last step needs to be all you."

Taking a deep breath, West opened his mouth, and...nothing. Not a darn thing. He felt every bit as weak as his family had always thought him to be. Beating himself up on the back of a bucking horse was never going to prove anything.

In that moment, he hated himself more than Derek ever could.

Concern clouded Michael's expression. He framed West's face in both hands and leaned down, pressing their foreheads together and staring into his eyes. It felt like getting swallowed by the ocean. All that blue.

"Ask me, West," he whispered.

His voice trembled. It was the first time West had ever heard him sound anything but certain. Guiltily, West realized that he was still only thinking of himself. His desire. His fear. He'd never once stopped to consider all the loneliness Michael had faced over the years. Maybe he wasn't forcing himself out of some misguided sense of

friendship or responsibility. Maybe he needed to be touched just as badly as West did, and he'd never trusted anyone else to do it. Until he'd noticed West right there in front of him.

It was that realization that finally gave West the strength he needed.

His voice shook as he said, "It won't be easy. Not in a town like this. Maybe not anywhere."

"Life ain't ever easy."

"But...can we give it a shot?" West gave a hard swallow. "You and me? Something real?"

A soft breath left Michael's lungs, like he'd been holding it and had finally gotten permission to breathe again.

"Yeah," he rasped. "Yeah, kid. We can try."

He curled a hand around the back of West's neck, tugging him into his chest for a fierce hug. Cautiously, West slid his arms around his waist. He'd never been held like this, by arms stronger than his own. It felt so good. If the men in his family had ever been affectionate, life had pounded it right out of them. He'd thought being held might make him feel weak, but it didn't. He felt strong.

And that's when Michael kissed him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For a man who'd spent his whole life only kissing one woman, Michael knew how to turn kissing into an art form. Gone was the gentle curiosity of their first kiss, replaced

by slow, easy confidence. Like everything he did, there was no rush and no need to impress as he tightened his arms and skillfully coaxed West's lips apart.

The first satin touch of his tongue was all it took to send West up in flames. The longing he'd ruthlessly repressed for years suddenly flared, like pouring gasoline on a wildfire. Lust had taken over, and it was riding him hard all the way to ninety.

Their height difference forced his head back, giving Michael the perfect leverage to freely plunder his mouth. It was a strangely vulnerable sensation, being forced to submit to a man whose strength and size dwarfed his own. Michael was so big, so hard all over, it felt like he had his own gravity. Like a magnetic force rose from the very core of him. Whatever that power was, it wrapped around West's heart and tugged him closer, until they were plastered together from chest to thigh. Until their breath filled each other's lungs, and a shockingly hard ridge pressed against his groin.

In the end, it was Michael who broke the kiss. At least, West thought that was how it happened. He was too busy locking his knees and hoping they didn't buckle. Right now, the only thing keeping him upright were his bloodless fists in Michael's shirt. He rested his forehead against his shoulder, sucking in huge gulps of air while he waited for the world to stop spinning.

"Dear God," Michael whispered, threading his fingers through West's hair and cradling the back of his head. "When I think of all the time we could have been doing this, if only I'd been paying attention. You kiss like you're starving for it."

West pulled back just enough to look him in the eye. "I guess you're not the only man who feels funny about kissing a stranger. When your nearest date is some internet rando who lives two hours away, it feels like a business transaction. Not a lot of room for...romance."

"There must have been someone," Michael said—kindly, West thought.

Most of the town expected him to live out his days as a sheltered, inexperienced bachelor, until he was as shriveled as the crotchety old men who played cards down at the shop. He was sure that the only reason his family hadn't kicked up more of a fuss about his sexuality was because they hadn't expected it to ever come up. West had been braced to be single his whole life. No one could ever compare to Michael, so he hadn't bothered looking.

"There's not exactly a line of guys waiting to crawl into haystacks with each other around here," he said with a soft laugh. "If Aiden hadn't been such a horndog when we were younger, I'd have probably been a virgin forever."

"Aiden?" Michael asked, jerking his head back sharply. "Aiden Doyle? The guy who just spent his day rollin' around in mud like a little kid?"

West's cheeks heated, and he grimaced. "None of us were exactly spoiled for choice back then," he said defensively. "I was desperate not to die a virgin, and he was horny enough to fuck a mailbox if the post looked particularly fetching."

"Is he even gay?"

"Not so's you'd notice," West drawled, chewing the inside of his cheek.

“Ugh.”

His obvious disgust had West laughing, draining away the last of his nerves. He curled one hand around the back of Michael’s neck, and a little thrill of power zipped through him when Michael allowed it. He tugged until their mouths were a scant breath apart. Michael’s eyes gleamed, and his hot breath gusted across West’s lips like a preview of his kiss.

“It’s funny,” West mused, “I spent so much time imagining what the two of us would be like in bed. Crazy, impossible stuff. But I never once dreamed that you would be the one who’d been with more men. You seem so...”

“Straight?”

“Straight-edged, maybe,” West corrected, shrugging lamely.

“Whatever I am now, it was a lifetime of mistakes that made me this way. Can’t say I’m sorry, though. Not when it led me here.” Michael took him by the hand and tugged. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” West asked, lacing their fingers and following obediently.

Michael’s grin flashed in the moonlight. “I’ve got a haystack with your name on it.”

“What about Abby?” He stopped dead and glanced back toward the quiet house.

The porch lamp glowed peacefully, a soothing sentinel guarding the animals as they

bedded down for the night.

Michael chuckled and pulled a portable two-way radio from his back pocket. “Ain’t nothing more independent than a cowgirl. She’s used to waking up and finding me all over the property. All she’s got to do is click the button and she’s got me.”

“Helps you keep track of her, too,” West murmured, warmed by the pride in Michael’s tone every time he spoke of his little girl.

Michael gave a nod and began tugging him once more toward the newly rebuilt hay barn. “They’re satellite, so she’s got reception almost anywhere on our property. I bought ‘em after that day when you two got lost up on the mountain. She’s feisty and adventurous, like her mother, and I don’t want to crush that. But I can’t lose anyone else I care about. This way she gets her freedom, but I’m not going out of my mind with worry.”

West squeezed his hand. “You’re a good man, Michael Whittaker.”

“So are you, West Owens.” Michael pulled him into the barn, and he didn’t stop reeling until West was in his arms. Dragging one knuckle along the edge of West’s cheek, he added, “It kills me that you think no one notices.”

“Aw, shucks,” West muttered awkwardly, but Michael saved him from further discomfort by sealing his mouth with a kiss.

West was tempted to shut his eyes, but he didn’t. He was afraid it would feel too much like his fantasies, an impossible daydream that was meant for better men than himself. A slip of moonlight leaked through a gap in the door, illuminating the stacks of baled hay. The sweet scent of alfalfa and fresh sawdust mingled in his nose, and beneath that, the salty, masculine scent of Michael’s skin. Michael’s lashes were boyishly long, casting little shadows over the tops of his cheeks, but just as West

noticed, those lashes swept open.

It was intense, kissing a man while looking into his eyes. There was nowhere to hide, no way to lose himself in the plush warmth of his mouth without being aware of precisely who he was kissing. Michael. He was kissing Michael. He had Michael's tongue in his mouth, and when he gave an explorative suck, it was Michael's breath that hitched.

West knew the heat in his gaze was because of him, but he couldn't bring himself to fully believe it. Men like Michael Whittaker didn't fall for nobodies like him.

"This is a dream." His whisper was lost in Michael's mouth. "Things like this don't happen to me."

A deep chuckle rumbled through Michael's chest. "They do now."

Slowly, without West noticing, he'd been backed into the nearest haystack. With firm pressure, Michael coaxed him down onto one of the bales. He sat with a graceless thud, pulling on Michael's shoulders to avoid breaking their kiss. Michael loomed over him, one knee braced on the bale beside West's hip, clutching the back of his skull as he plundered his mouth.

West scrabbled at the hem of Michael's shirt, slipping his hands beneath the warm cotton to the even hotter skin beneath. His body was hard and packed with muscle. West couldn't stop touching him, exploring the ridges of his abs and the pebbled peaks of his nipples.

Michael hissed through his teeth.

"Sensitive?" West asked, pulling away only far enough to admire the way Michael's shoulders flexed as he peeled his shirt over his head.

“Put your mouth on me and find out,” Michael growled, kissing him hard.

It was like West had been waiting his whole life for permission. He was on him in a heartbeat, moaning as he tasted his skin for the first time. He toyed with one hard nipple, teasing with the edge of his teeth then soothing the sting away with the tip of his tongue.

“God, it’s been a long time,” Michael groaned. His head fell back, and West crawled up his body to taste the exposed column of his throat.

He kissed the soft, vulnerable pulse beneath his jaw and asked, “How long?”

“Not since Mary.”

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West's heart gave a painful tug, and he hesitated, mouth hovering over the flickering beat beneath his skin. "Michael—" he began, but Michael interrupted him by cupping the back of his neck and hauling him up to meet his eyes.

"I guess I was just waiting for something special," he murmured, reading the question in West's eyes.

Suddenly, the world flipped on its axis, and when it righted itself, West realized he'd been dropped onto his back. Huge, rough hands were rucking his shirt up to his neck and stroking his body like they owned it. They were the sexiest hands he'd ever seen, sun-dark and callused, with heavy veins that twined up the thick muscle of his forearms. He could spend his whole life appreciating them, but looking down his own body to watch as one of those hands massaged his straining dick through his jeans was going to kill him on the spot.

"Jesus," West gasped, curling into the delicious pressure. "Feels so good. I could come just from that—oh."

His stomach twitched as Michael's fingers delved beneath his waistband. It emboldened him to reach out and grab Michael by the belt loops, yanking his hips forward. Gripping him by the back of the thigh, West worked his buckle open and popped the button on his jeans one-handed. A sliver of taut skin appeared in the open V of his jeans, dusted with a shapely line of hair that disappeared into the trim thatch at his groin.

Lust made him clumsy. His fingers trembled, and he needed Michael's help to shove the denim halfway down his thighs so he could get at the thick, flushed cock beneath.

It bobbed against his cheek, and he nuzzled the length, tracing the veins and sculpted head with reverent lips before slipping it into his mouth.

Far above him, Michael bit out a rough curse.

He wasn't exactly a blow job artist, and he doubted he ever would be. He'd given and received less than a handful in his life, most of them awkward and rushed, where climax felt more like an obligation than a pleasure. But this—he could devote the rest of his life to this.

Michael tasted of salt, and beneath that, the subtle, cool-water sweetness of clean skin. He filled West's mouth perfectly, a luscious weight on the back of his tongue. West didn't have any fancy techniques, but judging by the fine sweat that broke out over Michael's stomach, sheer enthusiasm counted for something. He wanted as much of this man as he could get, any way he could get him, and right now that meant inhaling his cock like it was his last meal. He was gagging for it. It wasn't long before he was a wet, sloppy mess. The slick, hot length of Michael's girth slid inside his mouth, barely fitting, so that their mingled fluids dripped down his chin.

“Beautiful,” Michael groaned. His voice was completely shredded by lust, but he traced the curve of West's jaw and said with easy confidence, “Look up at me. I want to see your eyes. No, keep those pretty lips stretched around my cock. Good boy.”

West let out a muffled whimper and squeezed his own dick so hard it hurt, using the ache to stave off the orgasm threatening to ruin his borrowed jeans. No matter what happened after this, that voice, saying those words, was going to have him waking in a cold sweat for the rest of his life.

Michael took over then, cradling West's head between his hands and using his mouth in a lazy, rocking rhythm that took him to the edge but never pushed him too far. He watched West's face like a hawk, perfectly tuned to what he needed and what he

could take.

West grounded himself by clutching the denim bunched around Michael's thighs. His own erection begged for attention, weeping in its prison, but he was so lost in the song of Michael's harsh breathing that it didn't occur to him to free it until Michael ordered him.

"Unzip," he commanded roughly. "I'm not going to last. I need to watch you come before I do."

The strain was getting to him, tightening his voice like a rubber band ready to snap. His hips stuttered as West scrabbled at the snap of his jeans. West curled his fingers around the familiar weight of his own cock, closing his eyes in sweet relief.

Michael's groan tangled in his throat, and he said appreciatively, "Damn, son. Taking that cock is going to qualify me for the Olympics. Oh...West. Pull back. Now. Now."

But West had been waiting for this his whole life, and he'd be damned if he missed the prize. Michael's thrusts had devolved into short, aborted jerks. Suddenly, he froze, body locking down hard. For an eternity, it felt like they hung there on the precipice of heaven, and then his quivering muscles spasmed and he spilled deep inside West's mouth.

Swallowing him felt like a vow, and West closed his eyes to savor it.

His eyes were still closed when Michael pulled gently from between his swollen lips. The world slid sideways as Michael pressed him back into the hay. Fabric rustled, and a brief chill swept over him as their bodies separated, but he kept his eyes shut tight as Michael got down on his knees.

It took an extra minute with his bad leg, but just when West was about to sit up and

protest, those rough hands clutched at his thighs and pulled them wide open. Hot, gentle breath gusted over the damp head of his cock, and then came the velvet brush of lips far too soft to belong to such a hard man.

West threw one arm over his face and whimpered.

"You're not going to fit at this rate," Michael warned him. "I'm going to need some practice."

"You don't," West gasped, arching helplessly into the hum of his voice. "Just—just touch me. Talk to me. Anything. It hurts. God, Michael, it's hurt for so long. Make it stop, make it—"

"Shhhh," Michael murmured. "I've got you."

He smoothed his hands all the way up West's thighs, gripped him by the cage of his pelvis to stop his anxious thrashing, and slipped the tip of his cock into his mouth.

West's eyes flew open.

The man of his dreams was there between his thighs, dark head bent, lips stretched uncomfortably around his girth. As if he sensed West's gaze, those blue eyes flicked up, and the shimmering heat in them set West off like a rocket.

It happened so fast, he couldn't even stutter out a warning. He tried to pull back, but his body fought him, thighs clamping down on Michael's head, back arching, as every cell in his body simultaneously combusted. It was the most intense orgasm of his life, flashing white across his vision and freezing time. He swore for a second that his heart stopped beating as he hung there, helpless, before crashing back to earth with a thud.

"Good boy," Michael murmured approvingly, licking up the traces of his spend that had leaked down the base of his cock.

Whatever noises West was making, he wasn't sure they were human. Just reverent, guttural whimpers.

His heart flipped and stuttered, racing despite his deep, slow breaths.

Michael sat beside him on the hay bale, jeans pulled up but still gaping open at the zipper. He raked one hand through West's sweaty hair, combing it back from his forehead to get a good look at his face.

"You okay?" he asked, concerned.

West gulped and nodded, trying to keep the strain off his face as his pulse finally began to settle back to normal. "Fine. Just let me catch my breath."

Michael's palm settled flat on West's chest, and he frowned. "Your heart's racing."

"Well," West gave a winded laugh and propped himself up on his elbows. "That was an epic workout."

"You think it was hard on you? I'm practically old enough to be your father."

He wasn't, not really, but West grinned devilishly. "I'll call you daddy if it would make you feel better."

Michael threw back his head and laughed, throat gleaming with sweat in the moonlight. "Kid, you ain't seen nothing yet."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They spent the night together in that barn, protected from the itchy hay by an old

wool blanket Michael dug out of the equipment room. A bed in the house would have been more comfortable, but West figured that was a huge step for a man with a little girl to think about. Or maybe, like West, he just wanted to preserve this intimacy as long as possible.

The temperature dipped past freezing, but the insulation of the hay and blanket kept away the worst of it. Michael's arms did the rest. Using his pocket knife, Michael had cut the twine on one bale and fluffed it before settling back and spreading his legs for West to nestle into the open V.

It should have felt strange. He'd never cuddled with another man—hell, with anyone—in his life. Not that he could remember, anyway. The Owens family had a lot of good qualities, but outward demonstrations of affection weren't on that list. His own father hadn't hugged him since he learned to tie his shoes. But affection came second nature to Michael. He'd had long years of marriage to learn, and he'd somehow come through his own hardships without any hang-ups that West had ever noticed. He was overprotective, but that seemed like a reasonable response for a man who'd lost so many loved ones in his life. His parents, grandparents, fellow soldiers, and wife had all been taken from him too soon. West couldn't blame him for riding herd over whoever was left.

West had never lost anything—because he'd never had anything to begin with. His family had sacrificed everything to keep him sheltered from the brutal world. He'd never worked until his hands bled, and he'd never flunked out of school. He'd never lost a job or hidden from a debt collector. His truck was an old hand-me-down, and so was the furniture in his studio apartment. He'd never known his grandparents, so he didn't remember the agony of putting a relative in the ground. He'd never had a relationship, and he'd never been in love. Not until Michael. But as inexperienced as he was, even West knew he couldn't just blurt something like that out after one blowjob. No matter how earth-shattering it had been.

So, they talked about other things. Anything and everything. In quiet voices, they murmured secrets in the darkness. Michael admitted how lonely he'd been since Mary's death, how in the early days, he'd distracted himself by working to the bone on the ranch. It might have gone on for years if not for a dream he'd had one night.

"Mary was there," he murmured, resting his chin on top of West's head. "Not how she was when she died, but a girl again, like the day we met. She was holding a little girl by the hand, and I didn't recognize her. It was Abigail, and I didn't recognize her. Not until Mary said her name. When I woke up, I felt sick to my stomach. I don't know if I believe that it was a message from Mary...but I want to believe it. I want to think she's still watching out for us, and that means I need to be sure to make her proud."

"There's no way she'd be anything else," West murmured, squeezing one of the thick forearms Michael had wrapped around his chest. "Is that why you've never dated? You're worried about what she'd think?"

"Nah." Michael's voice had a smile in it. "I guess I just wasn't ready, and I didn't want to lead anyone on. I've managed to avoid small-town drama ever since I got here, and I wasn't about to start courting it just because I got bored of my own hand. But Mary wasn't the jealous type, or we'd never have survived our sex life."

"I can't imagine..." West swallowed thickly. "I mean...I can, and believe me, it's hot, but it doesn't seem like something you'd enjoy."

"No?"

"You're so traditional."

Michael chuckled. "It was fun...or at least it was at first. We were young. It gave me a chance to explore part of myself I'd never have known existed otherwise. But it wasn't always easy. Mary was a lot more invested in it than I was, and she didn't want

to stop when I started to feel like it was coming between us. I was still commissioned then, and word was getting around the base that she'd been playing on her own while I was deployed."

West sucked in a shocked breath. "Was she?" he asked fearfully.

"She said no. But part of the reason we moved here was to get away from that scene."

West didn't need it spelled out for him. Michael's voice was thin with old pain, and maybe even a little guilt for not believing better of the woman he'd loved. It hurt to hear, and West shuddered to think how much more it must hurt to carry.

I'd never do that. I'd never betray you. I could never hurt you like that.

He wanted to blurt it out, and it took a strength he didn't know he had to bite his tongue. The last thing he wanted was to come across like he was judging a dead woman, especially when it was his deepest desire to take up the space she'd left empty. But he couldn't just stay silent. He couldn't risk Michael wondering if he'd ever wake up one day and discover West sowing his wild oats with some other man.

"I..." He licked his dry lips. "I don't think I could ever share you with anyone. I don't think I could handle it if you wanted to share me with anyone."

Michael was silent, chest rising and falling with the pace of his slow, steady breathing. West began to worry that he'd tripped over a deal breaker, and he tensed up, opening his mouth without any idea of what might come spilling out. But just then, Michael's hand came up and cupped him by the chin. He tilted West's face and kissed him, gentle as summer rain.

"I don't want that," he assured him, lingering over his lips. "Don't need it."

“What do you need?”

Michael stroked his thumb across his cheek. “Just you,” he said thickly, “by my side like you’ve always been. I already know you’d never lie to me.”

West didn’t flinch. That was the worst of it. He’d been lying by omission his entire life. It didn’t even feel like lying anymore.

“Never,” he promised.

They dozed a little, but they were too focused on talking and touching to get much sleep. West wasn’t tired. He was flying.

They crept across the yard just as the blue light of dawn began to break through the clouds. Frost cracked beneath their boots, and Michael warmed his hands by slipping them teasingly into West’s back pockets.

“Winter came on fast,” he remarked, nuzzling his cold nose into the back of West’s neck.

“Susan’s kids were playing in the hose just the other day,” West said.

Michael grunted and turned away to start up the coffee pot. He wasn’t looking at him when he asked, “You going to take it easy on the broncs now?”

“What?” West froze in his search of the cabinets. He’d known his way around the old house like it was his own, but everything was just slightly off in the new place. “Why

would I do that?"

Michael shrugged, elaborately casual. "It's heading into the off-season. Not many local rodeos until spring."

"Yeah." But West knew there was more to it than that, and he wondered if Michael thought a few orgasms were enough to get him to settle down. Something inside him squirmed anxiously at the thought of losing the best outlet he'd ever found.

"Might do you some good to take a break. Heal up. You ever consider getting some pointers from Cal or Tucker?"

West laughed. "Tuck's job is to keep horses so calm they don't buck in the first place. What's he going to teach me?"

"How to stay on?" Michael asked dryly. His eyes flickered pointedly over the fading bruises on West's face.

It stung, allowing the man he admired so much to believe he was inept, but there was no way he could explain. Not without sounding like a lunatic.

"What about your dad?" Michael asked. "Does he ever talk about his old career?"

He froze with his hand on a jar of powdered creamer, staring blankly. "Can't say we talk about much of anything," he said softly. "Besides, I'll always be the baby of the family. They already fuss too much."

He heard a rustle and sensed Michael's presence behind him, but he didn't look up. Strong arms wrapped around him from behind, and he let out a startled breath. Hesitantly, he curled one hand around Michael's wrist and squeezed.

“Never too late to start talking,” Michael suggested, his voice warm in the shell of West’s ear. “Not while you’re both breathing.”

Before he could reply, a startled squeak had both their heads cranking around. Abigail stood in the kitchen doorway, clad in pink pajamas, with her hair piled like a cinnamon bun on top of her head. Derek’s puppy cavorted at her ankles, chewing on the hem of her pajamas and shaking its head back and forth.

West nearly hit the stratosphere. He would have jumped right out of his skin if it weren’t for the way Michael held him. Michael was practically vibrating with tension; he could feel it humming where they pressed together. But he didn’t pull away, and he didn’t allow West to act guilty either. When West scrambled to jerk free of his embrace, Michael only gave him a subtle warning squeeze.

“Morning, pumpkin,” Michael said easily, waiting until his daughter returned his smile before finally releasing West. He strolled over to her and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Let me grab a shower, and then I’ll make us pancakes.”

“West is still here!” she cried delightedly, smiling bright as the sun and doing a squirmy little dance in place. She didn’t seem to find it unusual, but then, work on a ranch never quit. Cowboys came and went at all hours of the day and night.

She dodged past her father, barely acknowledging him, and threw her arms around West’s waist, shouting, “Oh, good! Can you take me to school today?”

With a wink, Michael vanished down the hall, and West was left excruciatingly aware that he smelled of sex. He lifted the collar of his shirt and gave a discreet sniff, but all he smelled was Michael.

“Don’t you catch the bus?” he asked, giving the little girl a squeeze. She didn’t take the hint, clinging to him tighter than ever, as if afraid he might disappear. “Let a man

breathe, sweetheart,” he said, laughing as he shimmied out of her stick-thin arms.

“I don’t like the bus,” Abby pouted. “Noah Collins always sits behind me, and he calls me cow girl.”

“You are a cowgirl,” West pointed out.

“Not like that,” she insisted, sniffing disdainfully.

“Like what?”

“Like it’s an insult.”

“Ain’t no one who can make you feel bad about where you come from,” he said, sticking his head in the fridge and pulling out cartons of milk and eggs. “Not without your consent.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means you ignore the little shit,” West said with a grin.

She laughed, and it was like the trill of a little bird. She worked at his elbow while he mixed up batter, chattering at high speed as if she were trying to make up for his long absence all in one shot. She didn’t ask why her father had been hugging him. He wondered if she’d even noticed, or if she’d still been half-asleep, until she blurted, “We missed you. Daddy said you must have had something real important keeping you away, but I told him there wasn’t anything more important to you than us.”

“You did, huh?” West ruffled her hair. “When did you get so smart?”

“I was born that way,” she said with the artless confidence of childhood. “But if you love us, how come you stayed away for so long?”

“I guess I wasn’t born as smart as you,” he said around the sudden lump in his throat.

“Well, don’t do it again.” Her tone was severe. “It makes Daddy sad.”

“What makes me sad?” Michael asked, strolling into the kitchen looking fresh and handsome with a towel hanging off one shoulder.

“My pancakes,” West said in a rush, shifting to the side as Michael reached past him for the coffee pot. Michael’s hand settled briefly on West’s back, calming him like he was a spooked horse. The rich scent of sage in his soap made West’s mouth water.

“Hmm,” Michael grunted, peering at the first blackened discs in the frying pan. He dropped a quick peck on the edge of West’s jaw. “Better let Abby handle that. She’s been flipping cakes since she was five.”

West didn’t know if she’d caught the discreet kiss, but he figured probably not. All he knew was that she had a big old grin on her face that morning. They all did. West could feel his smile burning in his cheeks, but he couldn’t help himself. Nowhere on earth felt more like home than sitting between his two favorite people.

After breakfast, Michael tackled the dishes while Abby got dressed for school and West slipped off for a quick shower. As he lathered up with a black bar of spicy-sweet soap, he wished he could do something to earn the affection that Michael and his daughter offered so readily. If only he could deserve it. If only he could protect them. They’d already lost so much, and taking on a bad bet like him was only a guarantee that someday they’d lose again. Maybe not because of his condition. After all, Mary Whittaker had been in perfect health, and she was still lying six feet under a hawthorn tree at the edge of the town cemetery.

But West had never been responsible for anyone else’s happiness, and it terrified him. His decisions had been his own for such a short time, and now it felt like they didn’t belong to him again.

As he wiped away the steam from the bathroom mirror and stared at his ugly mug, he tried to see what a stranger might. There wasn’t much to work with. Jaw too sharp,

cheeks too hollow, and a nose that was misshapen even underneath its current swelling. He'd always thought his thin lips made him look weak.

Michael was out of his damn mind for choosing him when he had every woman in the county throwing herself in his arms. But West wasn't strong enough to turn him down, not even for his own good. All he could do was everything in his power to make sure he was there when they needed him.

That was how he managed to already be halfway across the kitchen wearing nothing but a towel before the first screams from outside had even faded.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The change that overcame Michael was stark. Gone was the steady calm that always grounded everyone around him, and in its place was something raw and awful. It flashed across his face in a split second, there and gone, but West was certain he'd never forget it. Even with everything he'd been through as a kid, he didn't think he'd ever felt fear like that. Fear that hurt just to look at.

He dropped the cast iron pan he'd been scrubbing and tore across the kitchen.

"Whoa, hey," West caught him by the elbow, but it felt like trying to stop a freight train. "It's okay. It's just Aiden."

Michael's chest heaved. "How can you tell?"

"We grew up together," West said with a shrug. "You get to know what it sounds like. Besides, I can hear Cal laughing."

Michael cocked his head, listening, just as Aiden let out another yell.

“If you don’t get that thing away from me, I’m pitching it! I swear to God!” he yelped.

“He won’t hurt you!” Abigail’s sweet, trilling voice shot back.

“Jaysus! It tried to bite me!” Yup. That was definitely Aiden. When he got spun up, only he could come close to hitting that octave.

“You’re scaring him!” The distress in Abby’s voice stiffened Michael’s spine like a whipcrack, and he was out the door in an instant. He’d been favoring his bad leg since yesterday, but he could still move quick as lightning.

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“Dumbass,” West said affectionately, trailing Michael across the porch and around the corner of the house. “She’s fine. It’s Aiden you should be worried about.”

“Aaaah!” Aiden screamed, as if on cue, and a clamor of voices suddenly chimed in.

“How in the darned hell—”

“Grab the head!”

“—unwrap it first.”

“Sure it ain’t poisonous?”

As they came around to the side porch, they were greeted by pure pandemonium. Aiden was backed up against the rail, flailing, while a five-foot snake tightened around his neck. His eyes showed white all around, and Cal had his arms pinned behind his back to stop him from scrabbling at the coils. Abigail was tugging on his shirt, yelling at the top of her little lungs that he was just trying to be friends.

“That’s our Abby.” West grinned, elbowing Michael in the ribs, and the exasperation on his face had him laughing.

“Christ,” Michael muttered, dragging a hand over his face.

“Cal, if you don’t let me go right now, I’m going to break your face!” Aiden roared, planting an elbow in his gut.

Cal grunted. “Just calm down, buddy. It ain’t big enough to hurt you.”

“Try saying that when it’s choking you!”

“If you’re talking, you’re not choking,” Celia interjected in her no-nonsense manner. She had her hands jammed down into the shearling-lined pockets of her denim jacket, hunched against the chill and looking half-asleep. “Abby, what is that thing?”

Michael’s little girl was standing on her tippy toes and reaching to unravel the snake, but Celia dragged her away. Aggravated, she planted her hands on her hips and thrust out her chin. “I don’t know,” she admitted reluctantly.

Aiden sputtered.

“But it’s not a rattlesnake!” she yelled, face red with frustration. “That’s the only venomous kind we’ve got around here. He was just smelling around. It would have been fine if Aiden hadn’t freaked out and scared him!”

The snake was thick-bodied, mottled yellow and black, with an angry slash above its eyes that made it look cartoonishly grumpy. It didn’t look scared to West, but it was starting to look mighty pissed. If it weren’t so cold that morning, it probably would have already bitten.

“Aw, it’s just a little ol’ gopher snake,” he drawled, squeezing past Celia to guide the snake’s head over his forearm. Goosebumps prickled over his bare skin as the cool scales slithered up his bicep.

“West! I was getting food for Patches and look what I found!” She hurled herself at him, wrapping her skinny arms around his waist, and he hurriedly caught his towel before it slipped.

“Oh shit, don’t make it mad,” Aiden moaned when the snake whipped its head around to stare at him with unblinking eyes.

West ignored him, and before anyone else had sussed up enough to help, he had that snake dangling off his shoulders like he was a tree. Everyone stared at him like he’d just pulled a rabbit out of a hat.

“I used to catch these fellas all the time when I was a kid,” West explained with a grin.

Aiden squawked indignantly. “It’s almost as tall as me!”

“Darn near petite,” West agreed. “There’s a seven-footer down near Powder Creek.”

Aiden’s throat flexed and he turned a sickly shade of green.

“If you’re going to puke, aim it over the railing,” Celia barked. “We just got this porch finished, and you’re not going to undo all my hard work.”

“Abigail, where did you find that thing?” Michael asked. He was trying to sound stern, but he wasn’t fooling anyone. The struggle to keep his lips from twitching was written all over his face.

“Under the house!” she replied brightly, squealing with laughter when Michael scooped her up and blew a raspberry into her neck.

Growling like a bear, he pulled back and asked, “What did I tell you about respecting personal space, young lady?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

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“What’s wrong with this one?” Michael asked, examining the snake coiling lazily around West’s bicep.

“He’s missing his tail.” With those big green eyes of hers, it was no wonder she had her daddy wrapped around her little finger. “I think one of the builders accidentally caught him with a shovel. So, I’m going to take care of him until he’s all better. Celia said I could!”

Michael cocked an eyebrow at his foreman. “Did she now?”

“I said she could ask you,” Celia protested.

“I was trying to help!” Abby explained earnestly. “Aiden wouldn’t be so scared of snakes if he petted one. But then it slithered up his arm and...”

"He freaked out," West finished for her.

“I’m not scared of them,” Aiden interrupted indignantly. He gave West a disgusted look. “I’m just not going to act like Tarzan, strolling around half-naked with a slimy reptile on my arm. What are you even doing here this early?”

“I crashed on the sofa after dinner,” West muttered, rubbing the back of his neck where goosebumps prickled.

“Bullshit. I was here at dark o’clock because I forgot to tell Whit about the freezin’ troughs, and there wasn’t no one on the couch when I poked my head in.”

“Maybe I was in the john,” West said, annoyed.

“With your blanket and pillow?” Aiden glanced between him and a silent Michael, a knowing smirk pulling at one corner of his mouth.

West glanced wildly at Michael, silently begging him to jump in and dig them out of this hole, but Michael just shrugged as if to say: they’ll find out anyway.

Aiden began to laugh. “Hell, yeah! You’ve been following him around like a puppy for years. About time you got yourself some, ol’ son!”

He slapped West hard on the back, chortling, and West hissed as a shockwave of pain rolled through his shoulder.

Cal was silent, regarding them speculatively from over the rim of the coffee mug he’d rescued off the porch rail. His eyes were razor sharp as they took in the pattern of fading bruises from his shoulder to hip. He’d been looking at West like that a lot lately. So had Derek.

“What did West get?” Abby asked, her face screwed up in confusion. “What’s he got?”

“He grew a pair,” Aiden snickered, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “Finally.”

“Now you just need to grow a brain,” Cal drawled, smacking him upside the head so hard his hat went spinning to the dusty porch. He jerked his head pointedly toward the little girl and said, “Stop running your mouth about things that are none of your business.”

Aiden took one look at Abby, and then at the fire in Michael’s eyes, and choked on

his last spate of giggles. He coughed into his fist. “Sorry, Boss.”

Michael cocked his head, unamused, and said, “I’m driving Abby to school this morning. We’ve got some things to talk about. So, you can take my place down in the pit.”

“I still ain’t got the dirt out of my ears from yesterday!” he sputtered.

At the same time, Abby said, “But I wanted West to bring me!”

“I’ll pick you up,” West suggested, shifting uncomfortably. The weight of their stares made him itch, and he was eager to get off the porch and back into some clothes. He’d never been much to look at, and the bruises made it worse. He looked like something the cat dragged in, and even though everyone at the Triple M was like family to him, he knew what they were thinking. What they couldn’t help but think when they looked between him and Michael with uncertainty in their eyes. The same thing he’d been telling himself all these years any time he caught a glimmer of warmth in Michael’s eyes.

He could do so much better than West Owens.

Ranch life got such an early start that he was able to swing by his folks’ place and load a dump run before his mother had even started breakfast. He was sweating despite the cool morning by the time he washed up at the kitchen sink.

“You’ll stay for breakfast.” His mother said it in a way that didn’t make it a question.

“Sorry, Ma.” He kissed her sallow cheek and snatched a biscuit from the cooling rack. “I’ve got too much on my plate today already. I still need to stop by Derek’s on my way into work.”

“Nonsense. You’re not doing your body any favors running around without a good, hearty meal. You’re not a normal boy, West. You never will be.”

“Not with that attitude,” he said with a wink.

She huffed worriedly. “Jasper, talk some sense into him!”

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“Leave the boy alone, Dorothy!” his father shouted from the living room. He’d already been settled in his recliner, staring listlessly at the sports report, when West came in. His cheeks were covered in silver bristles and his clothes were so wrinkled that West was sure he hadn’t been to bed the night before.

“But he needs—”

“Mind your own business, woman!” Jasper interrupted. “No one needs your damn coddling!”

She slammed her wooden cutting board down so hard that it sounded like a gunshot. West nearly jumped out of his skin, shocked when his mother planted her elbows on the counter and buried her face in her hands.

“Mom...” He reached out to pull her into a hug, but something about the fragile angle of her shoulders made him rethink. He watched, guilty and paralyzed, as the rooster clock on the wall ticked out the seconds. Part of him wanted to give in and stay for breakfast, just to make her feel better. The only thing stopping him was that he really didn’t have time.

Eventually, his mother straightened and scrubbed at her face. He’d thought she might be crying, her face was so pinched and red, but her eyes were bone dry.

“I’ll wrap you up something to go,” she said, brusquely cracking an egg into a cast iron skillet.

“How is he?” West asked, glancing toward the drone of television in the other room.

She sniffed and wiped the tip of her nose with the corner of her apron. “He’s been in a lot of pain this week. It makes him cranky.”

“He stopped taking his meds again, didn’t he?”

“He’s stubborn. It runs in the family.” Her smile was tremulous as she slapped together a bacon and egg sandwich and wrapped it in foil.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to him, and he knows it,” West assured her, kissing the top of her head.

“Your father loves us. It's just that he's got nothing left.”

“He’s got us,” West said stiffly.

“Yes,” she said, and her smile was more genuine this time, “and I need you to keep reminding him of that. Now take these sandwiches out to your brother, will you? And make sure to get some rest today. You’ve been looking tired lately.”

As West took the twisting mountain road up to the junkyard, he wondered if his mother had really been about to cry or if she'd only been trying to manipulate him. He didn't blame her. It was just her way of coping.

They all loved each other, West had never doubted that. But the rough years had left a bitterness that was hard to shake. Sometimes it felt as if they were all screaming inside to speak thousands of tiny resentments, but they never did. It was like they sensed how dangerous it would be, how fragile the delicate balance they'd maintained truly was.

Maybe that was part of the reason West had been so afraid to open up to Michael. In his family, feelings weren’t something easily shared. His whole life, he’d only had

one goal: keep his head down and his mouth closed and never, ever rock the boat.

Back when even a grade school sniffle had resulted in a battery of medical tests, his only option to lead a normal life had been to lie, lie, lie. Keeping secrets had become his default, and nearly all his energy went to making sure they never caught up to him.

“What are you doing here?” Derek asked, coming out to meet him in the heart of the junkyard. It was so early that city folk had just begun their morning commute, but Derek was already streaked with grime.

“You forgot something the other night,” West said, killing the engine and scooping up Patches with one hand.

Derek automatically cradled the puppy when West thrust her into his arms. “I don’t want her,” he protested, even as his grease-stained fingers stroked her fur.

“Then you shouldn’t have saved her,” West said, tongue in cheek.

“I wasn’t going to leave her in a box,” he snarled, and West chewed on the inside of his cheek when Derek cuddled the puppy under his unshaven chin.

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t have time to take on a puppy.”

“The responsibility would do you some good,” Derek muttered.

West set his jaw and considered snapping back, but something about the tender way his brother fluffed the silky little ears tugged at his heart. Derek wasn’t unfeeling; far from it. He’d spent his whole life trying to protect everyone and everything around him, and it had nearly killed him when he failed. He’d hardened his heart a long time

ago, just to survive. West had been just a kid, and he hadn't understood at the time. He did now.

"Oh, I almost forgot." He reached into the truck and grabbed a plastic bag filled with breakfast sandwiches. "From Mom."

Derek grunted and slung the bag over his shoulder, heading toward the rickety shack he called an office. He didn't invite West to join him, but he left the door open, so West followed him inside.

It wasn't much to look at, just a couple of chairs and a thrifted desk nearly too small for such a big man. The calendar on the wall was from last year, right next to a smudged business license held in place with a thumb tack. Pale morning light leaked through a single window in whatever meager dose it could squeeze through the dirty panes. Beyond the glass was a jungle of broken vehicles and twisted scrap, rusted and dirty and mean. Derek's home away from home.

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A tiny pot-bellied stove sat in one corner of the room, and beside it was a brand-new dog bed and two dishes filled with water and puppy chow. They were the only things in the office that weren't worn out and broken.

West chuckled.

"What?" Derek asked defensively as he crouched and settled the puppy on her cushion.

"Nothing." He coughed into his fist. "It's just surprising sometimes how good you are with little creatures. James' and Susan's kids would hang all over you if you let them. But you never do."

"They're a nuisance," Derek muttered, avoiding his eyes.

"Yeah, well, you're going to have to put up with them next Sunday because the rails for Dad's shower have come in and James wants to help."

"I can do it by myself."

"And let you hold it over our heads for the rest of our lives? I don't think so."

"Then he can damn well get a babysitter. I already did my part raising you all. I don't need his brats running around with a hacksaw."

"It's okay to love them," West said through his teeth, barely hanging onto his patience. "It doesn't make you any less of a tough guy. Who knows? You might even

make a great father someday.”

An ugly expression crossed Derek’s face, and he shot to his feet so fast the puppy startled in her bed. Cutting West a vicious look, he stormed out of the office. The door slammed so hard that dust sifted down from between the wooden ceiling planks. The puppy sneezed, and somewhere out in the yard the low whine of a machine started up.

“Shit,” West said, scrubbing at his face. He crouched down beside Patches and tousled her floppy ears. “I almost regret leaving you here. But I think he might need you even more than you need him.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“—so then Noah told me they had two hearts, but I didn’t believe him. So, we looked it up in the library, and they don’t. But did you know that humans can be born with snake hearts?”

“Eh?” West draped one wrist over the top of the steering wheel and stretched out an arm across the passenger seat, waiting for the most pointless light in Sweetwater to turn green. Most locals ran it, but traffic always picked up a little once school was out, and West wasn’t taking any chances with Michael’s little girl riding shotgun.

He didn’t think he’d ever forget the joy on Abby’s face when she’d spotted him idling in front of the school after the bell rang. Right then and there, he vowed that he’d always be there when she needed him, no matter what happened between him and her father. He knew she considered him one of her best friends, and she didn’t have many of those. She was too different. The other children didn’t know what to make of her, and they kept their distance. He knew how that felt. Kids had been the same way when he was in and out of school with every sniffle.

Abby dangled one hand out the open window, catching the crisp breeze between her fingers as she chattered. She was all sweetness and sass, with those freckles and a messy braid that always stuck out around her face like a straw halo. Just looking at her tightened his throat up a little, and he thought of his brother. He wondered how hard a man had to let himself become to look at such joyful, tiny little people and only see a nuisance.

“It’s called atavism!”

“What is?”

She rolled her eyes. “Are you even listening? The man who was born with the snake heart. He was almost sixty years old before they discovered it! A reptilian circulation system, and it worked just fine nearly his whole life!”

West laughed and rubbed at his sternum. “Lucky him.”

“I figure if something like that can happen, then Sir Hiss can regrow a tail.” She patted the plastic tote on her lap where the gopher snake coiled.

“That’s a good name.”

“Daddy picked it out.” She beamed at him. “He was in such a good mood this morning that he didn’t even mind keeping Sir Hiss next to him on the seat when we stopped for hot chocolate!”

“Oh, was he?” West asked, biting back a grin and turning into the parking lot behind the veterinary clinic.

He didn’t think it was ego to assume he’d been the one to put Michael in such a good mood, but it was still hard to wrap his head around. It made him feel powerful.

Maybe gods could make the sun rise and set and call up storms at sea, but he could make Michael Whittaker happy, and what could be better than that?

He remembered the flash of Michael's smile in the dark, and how rough his hands had been on his bare skin. Sense memory had been tugging at him all day, leaving him aching and restless. He'd pulled his cell phone out of his pocket a dozen times, anxious just to hear his voice, but he'd always tucked it away before making a complete fool of himself.

Michael was full of surprises, but he was still a fiercely independent man who'd been living on his own for a long time. He didn't need West holding on too tightly.

"He said you're dating him now. Like how Cal and Eli do, or Tucker and Nate. Kissing and stuff." She said it casually, but West noticed the way she began to fidget with her seatbelt.

Oh, shit. West cut the engine and braced both hands on the steering wheel, breathing deep through his nose and letting it out through his mouth. Michael could have at least called to give him some warning. He could take no chances with a conversation like this.

“How does that make you feel?” he asked carefully.

She shrugged, staring down at her lap so West couldn't see her expression, but he thought he caught a twitch of her lips. It looked like a smile.

“I guess it's okay.” She said it like a queen bestowing a favor. “It sounded weird at first. I've never seen Daddy kiss anyone. Not even Mom. I mean, I guess he did. But I was too little to remember. I just remember stupid things, like riding in front of her on a horse or watching her make cookies.”

“But you remember how much she loved you?”

She nodded.

“Then I think you remember the important things,” West said gently.

Her smile was easier now, and she grinned, revealing a gap between her two front teeth. “Daddy said that's the important part. She loved me, and he loves me, and you love me. So, I'm an extra lucky girl.”

“I guess you are,” he said, so relieved that he felt lightheaded.

“Now we can be like a real family.” But there was doubt in her voice.

“You'll always be my family,” West assured her, tugging at her scraggly braid. “Even if I didn't love your daddy so much, you'd still be my family. I ain't going anywhere. Never again, kid.”

There must have been a weight on her little shoulders, though he hadn't noticed it when she'd climbed into the cab of his pickup. But now he watched it drop away. As he led the way into the clinic, she was walking on air at his side. Dancing, more like. Performing little pirouettes on the sidewalk, shuffling her booted feet and wriggling like a puppy. She chattered away at high speed now, discussing her plans for her new snake friend and asking when Patches would be visiting again.

"Are you going to live with us?" she asked suddenly as he filled out a clipboard at the front desk.

West's pen skittered over the paper.

"I, uh—" he stammered around a thick tongue.

"Because you should," she continued, ignorant of the cold sweat across his forehead. "You already spend all your time with us anyway. Or...you did. Before you went away. You can have the bedroom next to mine! It's so much better than that stinky apartment where you live now."

The receptionist snorted in gentle amusement. West gave her a hard look, but she only adjusted her tortoiseshell glasses and smiled. It was impossible to intimidate a girl who'd looked up his shorts on the ropes course in gym class, but he gave it his best effort.

"Is the doc ready for us, Theresa?" he asked pointedly.

"Not as such," she said, taking the clipboard from him and marking it with her initials. She got busy on the computer, tapping away and squinting like she had to check a crowded schedule to be sure where to put them. "Nate is on vacation."

"He went to the horse show with Tucker?" he guessed, grinning crookedly when he

thought of how tickled Tucker must have been to bring him along. His friend had been holding out a long time for the love of his life, and he'd been making up for lost time by devoting himself wholeheartedly every step of the way.

"Yes, and he left his assistant in charge."

"The doofus," a light tenor announced from behind them.

West glanced over his shoulder and crooked a brow.

A petite man leaned against the door of an exam room, looking glittery and out of place in the sterile environment. His fluff of blond hair was artistically styled, and he wore black jeans and a silver button-up made of some silvery material beneath his lab coat.

"Hey, Briar," he greeted, smiling to put the other man at ease. "You excited to help us out with Sir Hiss?"

West didn't have a lot of physical presence, not like Michael or Tucker or his brothers, but he felt like a bruiser next to Nate's assistant. Briar Phillips always looked tense, like he was ready to skedaddle with one foot out the door, and even though he'd been settled in Sweetwater for months now, he still seemed surprised when people greeted him in a friendly manner.

Briar glanced at the tote clasped in Abby's arms, and his nose wrinkled. "Delighted," he said wryly. "Let me just finish up with my current patient. Theresa, can you please take Cujo to the kennel?"

"Sure, just let me get these two settled in an exam room."

"I managed to get a muzzle on him, but I'd like to move him before he comes out of

sedation."

"I understand, but I really, really think I should move West to a room first," Theresa spoke with slow emphasis, making big eyes at Briar from behind her specs.

"Now, please, Theresa." Briar spoke calmly, but for the first time, West noticed how he kept one hand tucked in the pocket of his coat. The sleeve was shredded and speckled with blood.

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"Hey, are you—" West began, but he'd barely completed a single step forward before he was interrupted by a voice that sent chills down his spine.

"I'm not paying for an overnight stay!" Ronald Sutter bellowed, storming out of the exam room Briar had just exited.

Ronald Sutter was one of those townsfolk who dwelled on the periphery of other people's lives. As far as West knew, he had no close friends or family. The best he could claim was some drinking buddies, a son who worked a pump at the truck stop, and an ex-wife who'd settled down in Joseph with a restraining order. But it was those drinking buddies who'd given him the alibi he needed to slither out of suspicion on sparking the fire at the Triple M. He was grizzled and meaty and low, and just looking at him made West's stomach churn.

Briar sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and saying with exquisite patience, "Mr. Sutter, I already explained to you—"

"It was just a little barbed wire! I should have just sewed it up myself."

"But you didn't, did you? The lacerations would have been impossible to close without a heavy dose of acepromazine. That dog would have ripped you to shreds." He looked like a child facing off against a giant, barely coming up to the huge barrel chest of the man who'd nearly destroyed Michael's life.

"Nothin' a bullet couldn't handle." Sutter stuffed his fists in his coverall pockets. They bulged beneath the denim like he couldn't stop clenching them.

"If that's how you feel, I'd be happy to take him off your hands. He'll need extensive rehabilitation. You'll need to keep him indoors for several weeks, at the very least."

"I need him to guard my property!" Sutter looked flabbergasted, chewing on his tongue until his jowls flopped.

"You worried someone's going to take a match to it, you son of a bitch?" West demanded. Even he could hear the current of rage running under the surface of his words, but he couldn't hold it back. Not when he thought of Michael lying flat on his back in that hospital, brought low by some cowardly worm who couldn't handle being called out on the shitty way he treated his animals. Just seeing little Briar standing so close to him set West's teeth on edge.

Briar's head snapped around, attention flicking between the two men while calculations ran behind his wide eyes. West didn't blame him for not immediately connecting the dots. He was still new in town, little more than a friend of a friend, and he probably didn't even remember that West was close to every man and woman who worked on the Triple M. But Theresa knew, and she'd been doing her best to get him in a room before Sutter came out. She was on the phone now, nervously tapping her pen against a clipboard and speaking in a low voice. When she caught him looking, she gestured for Abby to come around the desk so she could put her arm around her.

Abby was silent, clutching her plastic tote and watching him with big eyes.

West knew he should take her outside, but it turned out even he had a temper when pushed too far. There was no way in hell he could turn his back when Sutter was sneering at him in that ugly, disparaging way.

West tipped his head at Theresa, pleading with his eyes. She nodded and ushered Abby toward the door marked employees only, phone still tucked under her chin. As

the door swung shut behind her, he heard her saying, "Tell Eli to move his butt."

"Oh, it's you," Sutter said dismissively. "You ain't worth my time, kid."

West's palms were sweating, and his hands flexed at his sides. "Yeah?" he snarled, thrusting out his chin. "Well, you better get used to seeing me because none of us are ever going to forget what you did to the Triple M."

"I didn't do nothing to that shithole," Sutter retorted, shoving past Briar with a hard shoulder check and coming straight at West. He got right up in his face, so close that West couldn't help but focus on his dilated pupils. His breath stank of tobacco and stale coffee when he spat, "Whittaker and his new generation of sanctimonious, self-righteous wannabe cowboys make me sick. He had no call to get my horses taken away from me. What happened to his place was justice, and I wish to God I could shake the hand of whoever did it. But it wasn't me."

"Get out of my face, Sutter," West warned, struggling to hold onto his fraying edges.

"Or what? You gonna go cry to Whittaker? He your sugar daddy too? He gets off on taking care of a bunch of rejects."

West didn't give an inch, not even when the older man purposely stuck out his chest and knocked him back. He'd never been much of a fighter. Never been given the chance. The one time some kids had dared knock him around in high school, Derek had come down on them like a hurricane. Then he'd spent the next year making damn sure West knew how to defend himself. But West was happiest in his role as peacemaker. He even took pride in it. But that didn't mean he was afraid to get his hands dirty, and they were itching now.

"Both of you can quit the dick swinging right here," Briar interjected, shouldering his way between them. His tone had lost its lighthearted lilt, quivering like he was

frightened. "Mr. Sutter, I'm asking you to leave this clinic."

"I was here first. He can take a hike!"

"I'm asking you to leave," Briar said, and to his credit, he didn't flinch. Not even when Sutter grabbed him by his injured arm and tossed him aside like he weighed nothing more than a child.

West was on him in a split second—or at least he would have been, if someone hadn't grabbed him by the jacket and hauled him backward so quickly he tripped over his own feet and ended up landing hard on his ass in a waiting room chair. A man the size of a mountain was between them now, shoving Sutter into a wall with an arm bar across his throat. West would have recognized the proud set of those shoulders anywhere.

"I warned you once," Michael snarled, baring his teeth like an animal. He yanked Sutter away from the wall only to slam him back so hard that the other man gasped. "You touch any of my people—any of my people—and I will fucking bury you. You see any of them, you walk the other way."

"It's just the Owens kid—" Sutter protested, voice hoarse from the forearm collapsing his trachea like a straw.

"He's mine," Michael interrupted, pressing harder. "West is mine. You so much as whistle good morning to him and I will take you apart piece by piece. You hear me? You hear me?"

Sutter wheezed.

"He can't answer if you don't let him breathe," Eli Jackson drawled, strolling through the front entrance in his sheriff's uniform. "Don't make me regret letting you tag

along, Whit. I'll throw cuffs on you in a heartbeat.”

For a split second, Michael didn't look like he was going to let go. His pulse throbbed wildly beneath his jaw and his nostrils flared, memorizing Sutter's stench the way a predator would. West had never seen him like this. Not out of control, exactly. He didn't think Michael had ever been out of control a day in his life. But he'd never seen him look so dangerous. West had no doubt that he meant every word he said.

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Sutter realized it at the same time. His complexion turned chalky, and his throat worked but no sound came out of his mouth. Michael eyeballed him hard before releasing him with a sound of disgust.

“You’re insane,” Sutter croaked, rubbing at his throat. He glared at Eli. “Aren’t you going to do something about him assaulting me?”

“Looked like defense of others to me.” Eli gestured toward Briar who clutched his bandaged arm between bloodless fingers. “You want to press charges, Mr. Phillips?”

“No.” Briar stood off to one side, a beautiful, wilted butterfly. “Not unless West wants to.”

“I didn’t even touch Owens. The only one tossing him around was the big hero over there.” Sutter jerked his head toward Michael with a scoff. “Good thing he showed up to fight the kid’s battles. Wouldn’t want him to break a nail.”

“You don’t talk to him.” Michael lunged, but this time Eli was ready. He thrust out a restraining arm and caught him around the chest. They were nearly the same size, and he had no difficulty driving Michael back across the room.

“Cool it, Whittaker. This is your last warning.” Eli’s tone brooked no argument. He held Michael’s gaze until he was sure he’d regained control, and then he turned his attention to Sutter, braced his legs, and said mildly, “You’re one stupid SOB. You think you got away with it, don’t you?”

“Stick to the facts, Sheriff,” Sutter warned, smoothing a hand down his wrinkled

coveralls.

“Count on it.” Eli smiled faintly, the same smile that had chilled West’s blood back when they were kids. “We all know who started that fire, and you can bet that the truth is going to come out eventually. And when it does? I’ll be there. So, watch yourself, Sutter. Because I am.”

It didn’t take long for Eli to take a few perfunctory statements. No one felt like talking. Briar was busy rebandaging the puncture wounds in his wrist, and Sutter just kept repeating ‘I know my rights’ over and over again. Michael and Eli conversed in low tones, and though West could have joined them, he didn’t.

He sat in the chair where he’d been shoved, head hanging and elbows braced on his thighs. He stared down at the speckled linoleum between his boots, feeling useless, like a child sitting in the corner while the adults spoke over his head.

After Sutter finally left, sans dog, Theresa and Abby returned from the kennels. West pulled his head out enough to allow the little girl to climb onto his lap.

“We were holding rabbits!” she declared, resting her head on his shoulder. “We need to make sure to wash our hands before holding Sir Hiss or he’ll think we’re food.”

“Yeah?” West asked dully, watching Michael over her head.

“Don’t feel bad, West,” she said, squeezing his ribs in a quick hug. “Daddy’s here now. He’ll take care of us, so you don’t have to be scared of that man.”

He made a thoughtful sound in the back of his throat, but he was distracted because just then Michael turned to look at him. Those blue eyes of his were burning, and the way he looked at him...well, it left him breathless. He looked at West, sitting there with his daughter, like they were the center of his entire universe. Like he’d do

anything for them. And it felt good. Really good. It warmed something deep inside him that had been cold for a hell of a long time.

But West was sick to fucking death of being saved.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The buzz of another voicemail caught West's attention, but he was too busy adjusting his neck roll to do more than glance at the display. Then he chucked his phone into his pile of gear.

Gus had been lighting him up all afternoon, ever since Johnny had tattled that they'd traded deliveries so he could make the run over to Prairie City. The old man was no fool, and he'd spent the afternoon chewing West's ear off in increasingly irate voice messages.

If I hear tell about you sniffing around that rodeo this weekend, I'm taking you off deliveries. You can't keep doing this, boy.

Don't think I haven't noticed that gimp arm of yours.

What would your mama say?

And then, finally, the real kick in the gut.

You ain't beating your daddy out in anything but stupidity, son.

West ignored this last call just like he'd ignored all the others. Gus talked a good game, but he was as soft-hearted as they came. He'd keep covering for West. He knew what it meant to him.

Michael was another story. West couldn't ignore him, and he couldn't fool him, so he'd shot off a text first thing that morning. He hadn't exactly been lying when he'd said that Gus had him running errands all day. He was a master at telling the technical truth. But he didn't have the strength to answer when Michael immediately called. Michael hadn't left a message, and he never replied to the text, and West had felt heavy with guilt ever since.

But that was nothing new. He'd been unsettled all week, ever since that dust-up at the clinic. Days were filled like always, making himself useful around town, and evenings were spent at the ranch.

It felt like they were making up for lost time, as if they both felt a strange, clawing need to connect on a deeper level. Touching him would never lose its thrill, even if West still did his best to keep it behind closed doors. He wasn't ashamed. Far from it. But he wanted to leave Michael the option to change his mind without the whole town knowing about it.

For his part, Michael seemed to feel no hesitation at all. The first time he'd come off the range, filthy and sweating, and hauled West into a deep kiss right in front of his men was maybe the hottest moment of West's life. More than any fantasy. Even more than their night together in the barn. For the first time in his life, West had felt desired and powerful. It was almost enough to soothe his stinging pride. Almost enough to forget that Michael would never stop treating him like a clueless kid.

Almost.

“You’re up, Keller,” a cowboy announced, ripping him out of his thoughts.

He glanced around the arena. The weather was lousy for a rodeo. Rain pounded so fast and loud on the aluminum roof that it sounded like the roar of the ocean. The humidity mixed with sawdust and manure into an acrid stew that burned West's nostrils with every breath, and each exhale hung in front of his face like a mist.

The crowd was quiet, mostly bored rural families looking for some Friday night excitement beneath the stadium lights. Gone were the summer rodeos laced with sunscreen and caramel corn. Old folks were tucked together with lap blankets, and children were stuffed into woolen hats and jackets. Even the buckle bunnies had shed their crop tops and daisy dukes for plaid and tight-fitting denim.

West's heart was pumping so fast he didn't feel the cold, not even in his threadbare T-shirt and jeans. His lucky hat was still at the bottom of a swampy pit on the Triple M, so he twisted his trucker cap around backward and swung a leg over the chute.

A roan stallion with a buzzcut mane pranced below, calm and ready, an old hand who'd been raised for shows since he was just a colt.

"Starting off in chute number three today, the one-hand-hold wild man's contest of a lifetime! Give it up for Kade Keller and our first-class bucking bronco Fuuuury Roooaad!" The announcer's voice was like a roll of thunder, washing over the arena.

West ignored the words as he braced himself on a gate and eased down into the chute.

The heat of the stallion was familiar and reassuring, seeping through his jeans like they were somehow sharing strength.

He wouldn't need to sabotage himself today, not when he was already riding at a handicap with his injured shoulder. He snugged his hand in the rigging, wedging his knuckles into the handle until the leather of his glove creaked.

"Remember, folks, the louder you cheer, the better they ride!"

Not West. The arena could have been empty, and he'd still ride. No hit he took could compare to everything his father and brothers had been through their whole lives. He'd watched from the outside as they came home with bruises and broken bones, filthy and wrung out like limp rags from endless, back breaking work, and all they'd ever asked of him was that he stay alive. He'd gotten real good at that, and all it had cost him was every scrap of pride.

He'd hoped with time that the tide was turning, but he knew now that would never be anything but a pipe dream. Even Michael, a man who was clueless about his past, couldn't quite bring himself to treat him like an equal. The way he'd stormed to the rescue the other day proved that he didn't think West could handle himself. Worse, he didn't trust West to keep Abby safe. Maybe he was right. Sutter outweighed him by nearly seventy pounds, he figured. He probably would have mopped the floor with him. But it stung something fierce that Michael and Eli had felt like they needed to save him.

He'd lived his whole damn life like one of his mother's geegaws, set up on a shelf somewhere collecting dust. He didn't want to hurt anybody, but he couldn't go on living like that forever. If Michael ever found out that he'd been born with HLHS, that would be the end of any hint of equality between them.

He loved how fiercely Michael wanted to protect the people around him, but it was

that need of his that would turn him into West's strictest warden once he knew the truth. West hated lying to him, but he'd settle for it if that was the only way to keep him.

"Remember, half the score goes to the horse and half to the cowboy! How hard they kick, how high they jump, and how much control our boys show during the ride!"

If this was the only place in West's life where he had any control at all, so be it.

He took a deep breath and settled back, lifting his creaky arm and tucking the heels of his boots over the stallion's shoulders to stay within the mark out rules. It gave the advantage to the horse on his first jump out of the gate, but that was the only advantage this bronc was going to get. West was stone-cold ready to take this ride apart, one buck at a time, until he killed that nagging doubt in the back of his mind.

He gave a nod, and they pulled the gate.

The stallion came out of the chute like a rocket launch, and for once, West didn't even have to sabotage himself. He was off-center from the start, and hanging on with his bad arm was hell. All the athletic tape in the world couldn't withstand that amount of torque. In less than a second, he knew that he was going to eat dirt. But he didn't. Instead, Fury Road stumbled, jack-knifing sideways and flinging him off his back. He sailed like a frisbee into a metal post. He struck with a hollow thunk and dropped to the ground with a groan.

An audible gasp went through the crowd.

West lay there, winded, but he didn't know for how long. Time had stopped. His ears were ringing. He thought he might be in pain, but he couldn't be sure. All he felt was adrenalin, surging like a heartbeat in each of his joints.

“You okay, kid?” Hank Pruitt was working as a pickup rider today. He reined in beside West, knocking his hat back to get a good look at him.

“He’s a killer,” West groaned, clutching his arm as he crawled to his feet. Sweat rolled down his face, but he couldn’t even lift a sleeve to wipe it away. His heart was tripping in his chest, too fast, like the frantic flapping of a bird’s wings. But he was already flying.

It didn’t matter that he hadn’t even stayed on long enough to earn a score.

“Listen, Keller.” The cowboy slung one arm over the swell of his saddle, leaning down and dropping his voice to a confidential low. “You’re one tough kid. Ain’t nobody can say otherwise. But I’ve been watching you for a while now, and you’ve got the worst luck I ever saw.”

West’s ribs creaked when he laughed. “I’m not arguing.”

“No shame in it. Better ‘n you have tried and failed. Your daddy ought to have taught you that much.”

West froze. Alarm raced through him, pumping his gradually slowing pulse back into the stratosphere. His mouth went dry, and his breath picked up. Hank's steady gaze was unnerving.

West's eyes skittered around the arena. “I—er...”

He hadn't even finished tripping over his own tongue before the cowboy was laughing. The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened, canyons carved from decades of weather. "You might be foolin' most everyone with that fake name of yours, but those of us who rode with your daddy know better. You've got his look."

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"Don't I know it," West said, rubbing at his nose self-consciously.

Fury Road had left the arena, and the next rider was already queuing up in his chute. West began to hobble toward the open gate, pulling himself along the fence with his good arm. Everything hurt.

Hank gave a soft cluck of his tongue, turning his gelding to keep pace.

"Jasper was a good man," he said conversationally. "Everything he ever did, he did it for his family. Riding was the only thing that was his alone. Damn near killed him to give it up, but he says it was worth it."

"You still keep in touch?" West asked through clenched teeth. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and each step felt like it was taking him apart at the joints.

"Hadn't talked in years 'til his boy started kicking up hornets' nests all over the state. Shocked the shit out of him, let me tell you."

"Hell," West grunted, sagging against the gate as it clanged shut behind him. Time stopped. Or maybe it hadn't stopped, maybe it had been bombed out by the ugly fear surging in his veins.

"Aw, kid. Don't look like that. He's real proud of you."

"Yeah?" West asked dryly. "He tell you that?"

"Well...that's not his way."

West's chuckle wasn't much more than a dry rasp. His knees gave out, but he had just enough pride left to catch himself on the top rung of the gate. Slowly, he lowered himself down until he'd planted his ass in the dirt. He crooked his legs up and rested there with his head hanging between his knees, breathing deeply.

Far above him, he heard the old cowboy say, "He's fine. Just give him a minute."

But West wasn't sure he'd ever be fine again.

His secret was out. It was only a matter of time before the others found out, and it would destroy whatever was left of his family. His mother would never forgive his father for not shutting him down. His siblings would be furious, and Derek...he would be deadly. But that wasn't the worst of it. His father didn't know he'd been purposely throwing his matches, and he'd never believe it even if West had the guts to confess. He thought this was the best his youngest son could do. That must be why he'd chosen to remain silent. He knew West couldn't hack it and wasn't willing to rub dirt in the wound, not when anyone with West's low scores would have already quit by now.

He must be so ashamed.

West had wanted to prove to himself that he could eat pain, bite by bite, just like the rest of his family, but all he'd done was make it clear to the man he admired more than anything that he'd always be the runt of the litter.

He was a small-town nobody, and he always would be.

If Michael had any sense, he'd be running for his life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was nearly midnight by the time West's pickup crawled into his parking spot at the Cedar Street Apartments. He'd grabbed a bite to eat, swallowed some ibuprofen, and warmed up in a campground shower before hopping behind the wheel, but it made no difference to his aching muscles.

Normally, he rode a thrill after every ride, no matter how much pain he was in. But not tonight. He just felt cold and stiff and hollow.

There was a man waiting on his front stoop when he pulled up. His hat brim was tugged low, shading his eyes from the glare of the headlights, and his long legs were crossed at the ankles. His posture was casual as he whittled at a block of wood with his pocket knife.

West couldn't see his face, but it wasn't necessary. He'd recognize Michael in the pitch dark. The air around him felt different. Stronger. Calmer. All West needed to do was breathe deep, and the ache in his chest finally eased for the first time since he'd been chucked into the post.

"Hey," he greeted, marveling at the pleasure and relief in his own voice. He hobbled up the steps, wishing he could bend down and kiss him, but something made him hesitate. "Told you I'd be working late tonight."

Michael didn't answer right away. He turned his whittling block this way and that, rubbed his thumb over a rough edge, and flicked the blade shut. Judging by the heavy breath that lifted his chest, he seemed to be thinking very deeply about something. Slowly, he raised his head. His face was tight, his jaw and cheekbones cut by deep shadows. His eyes flickered over West's face and then down his body, as if he could see beneath his dusty flannel to the wreck beneath. He didn't move, and he didn't speak, and something about his predatory stillness set the hair on the back of West's neck on end.

Neither of them were fools. They both knew where West had been and what he'd been doing. It had been a coin toss from the start whether Michael would call him on it. Or maybe Gus had just ratted on him again.

West broke eye contact first by fiddling with his keys.

"Where's Abby?" he asked, voice cracking with false cheer.

"At a slumber party for the Murphy girl."

"I told her this was the year she'd start making friends," West said, fumbling blindly for the lock. "Want to come in? I'm wiped out, but you're always welcome. The place is still a shithole. You remember..."

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There was a whisper of movement behind him. Michael braced himself against the door, hands on either side of West's head, stopping him cold. He didn't touch him, but he stood so close that his heat seeped through West's shirt and began to work on his aches. It felt so good. All he wanted was to lean back against that broad chest and let Michael's strength hold him up. He dared to believe Michael might even allow it, angry as he was.

He'd always been gentle with West, but it was his anger that kept West's knees locked and his head down. It crawled over his skin like a living thing, pricking at instincts buried so deep in his hindbrain they felt like they belonged to someone else. He trusted Michael with his life. He knew he'd never hurt him. But something about the hot breath on the back of his neck reminded him that Michael could put a bullet through a dying animal without flinching. He'd been a soldier once, after all, and he never talked about it. He must have hurt a lot of people.

"How bad is it?" Michael asked in a low voice, and then, before West could do more than open his mouth, he warned, "Don't lie to me, West."

"I don't lie to you." Not exactly. Not often, anyway. Not about anything that could hurt him.

Damn, now he was lying to himself.

Cynical laughter brushed the shell of his ear. "Maybe. Maybe not. But you sure don't tell the truth."

"That doesn't make a lick of sense," West protested, but he felt like a jerk as soon as

the words were out of his mouth. He knew exactly what he meant. He was an expert at half-truths, and so far, Michael was the only person in his life who'd ever clued in on it. Playing dumb was an insult to them both.

"How bad is it?" Michael repeated patiently, still not touching him. His arms were so taut that West could see a tremor running through them. "If you can't handle me tonight, you need to tell me now."

West dropped his forehead against the door and squeezed his eyes shut.

"I'm wrecked," he admitted reluctantly. Michael stiffened and began to draw back. West panicked and clutched him hard by the wrists, trapping him and blurting out, "But I'd have to be dead before I sent you away."

Michael was quiet for so long that he worried nothing good was coming, but then he pressed in close behind West and murmured, "Unlock the door."

Somehow, West managed to not break the key off in the lock. His damp palms slipped twice on the knob before he got it open. He stumbled over the threshold and slammed the door into the opposite wall, sending a plastic picture frame crashing to the floor. He didn't care. It was just a stock photo from some website. He'd ordered it when he got the place because he figured that was the grown-up thing to do, but he'd never cared much about decorating. This apartment wasn't home; it was just some place he slept. Home was out at the Triple M, and it had been for a very long time.

Michael took his time closing and locking the door behind them. He hadn't taken off his hat or boots, and something about it made him feel unapproachable, like he was wearing a suit of armor. His eyes were cool, cold blue. Not even a hint of the warmth that West had come to depend on.

"Strip."

West's eyebrows shot toward the roof. "What?" he asked.

"Take off your clothes, West."

There was steel in Michael's voice, a lot like the way he'd sounded when he'd had Sutter by the throat. It felt wrong. Everything was off balance. But he didn't have a choice. He'd meant what he said: he'd have to be dead before he turned Michael Whittaker away.

His hands shook on the snap of his jeans.

"No. Start with your shirt first."

West licked his dry lips and said teasingly, "You could come over here and do it yourself."

Michael didn't bother replying. He just stood there, perfectly at ease, waiting to be obeyed. And damn him, West did. His dick was already stiffening inside his jeans as he popped the row of buttons on his flannel one by one. He didn't try to get cute and draw it out. He just peeled the fabric off his shoulders as quickly as he could and tossed the shirt aside.

Michael's eyes flickered over his chest and stomach, lingering on his shoulders and ribs, before he commanded, "Turn around."

"I don't think—"

"No, you damn well don't." The leash slipped just a fraction, and his fury nearly got loose. "Turn around."

West shivered and obeyed. Behind him, Michael sucked in a quick breath. West

stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and hung his head, feeling chilled to the bone. He hadn't looked at his back yet, but he figured he knew what to expect: red patches and a swamp of muddy-looking bruises already blossoming from shoulders to waistband. He waited for a question, a touch, something to break the tension building in the pit of his stomach, but instead, Michael only said, "Now your pants."

It was easier with his back turned. He didn't have to choose between the humiliation of looking into Michael's cold expression or dropping his gaze like a coward. He didn't like this. It felt like he'd become something less in Michael's eyes, like an object or a pet who needed a dose of discipline. But his cock had never been harder. Tears of frustration sprang to his eyes, and he bit his lip as he swiftly unbuckled and dropped his denim to the floor. His erection sprang free, slapping against his lower belly, and he held his breath.

The thermostat was always cranked low when he was away, and it was freezing. Goosebumps cropped up across his entire body in waves, and the queasy feeling in his belly twisted tighter and tighter.

"Bend over."

That was too much. He had his pride. He wasn't some twink hookup for Michael and his kinky wife.

"Michael—" He started to turn around, but the pain in Michael's voice stopped him dead.

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“When have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?”

“I do.”

“Then trust me now, baby.”

It was the endearment that did it. Reminded him that, even though he wasn't anything special, he was special to him.

Steeling himself, West braced his hands on his thighs and put himself on display. It wasn't easy. His ribs hurt so bad that they left a deep, stabbing feeling in his chest with each breath. But he'd rather die than admit that to a man who'd cut off his own cast weeks early just so he could get back to work. He stood there, quivering, with his bare cock dripping and his face flushed hot.

Michael's gentle fingertips nearly sent him out of his skin. He'd moved so silently that West hadn't even tracked him, but suddenly warm hands were cupping his clenched ass, joined by an even hotter mouth at the base of his spine. Still bent over, he glanced down between his legs and caught a glimpse of Michael's spread thighs. He was on his knees behind him. Touching him.

“You're bruised even here,” Michael whispered. His fingers were light as they teased the cleft of his ass, parting him, exposing him to his gaze. “How am I going to give you the spanking you fucking deserve now?”

“You know, I was joking about that whole daddy thing.” West laughed weakly.

“No, you weren’t.” Michael’s reply was dead certain. “I wanted to go slow at first. Give you time to get over your doubts and ease you into what it means to be in a relationship. But you need to learn that it ain’t just you that you’re living for anymore. What happens to you hits me just as hard.”

His grip changed and grew firmer, imprisoning him. Holding him open. Then came the slow, lavish lick of his tongue.

“Fuck,” West gasped, shocked to his core. His knees melted, and he would have fallen if Michael hadn’t wrapped one arm around his pelvis to hold him up.

West hadn’t ever imagined he’d be so exquisitely sensitive there. It didn’t seem possible. Nothing had ever felt quite like this before. His mouth was like wet velvet. He swore his vision had gone black around the edges, narrowing down to a single focal point. Nothing existed but this warm, melting glide. It made him feel...worshipped. But strangely vulnerable.

“Michael,” he gasped, “I don’t think I can take this.”

“Put your hands on the wall,” Michael murmured, his breath a warm flutter against West’s damp entrance. “Hold yourself up that way.”

Awkwardly, West leaned forward, but he didn’t so much brace himself on the wall as collapse against it. Once he’d found his balance, Michael skimmed one hand down the back of West’s thigh and lifted it, laving his tender skin with the tip of his tongue. The slick sounds he made were obscene.

West bit down hard on his forearm, but he couldn’t muffle his high-pitched whine. Like that was the sign he’d been waiting for, Michael reared back and gently turned him. West blinked hard, trying to clear his vision, but Michael’s face was turned down and hidden by the brim of his hat. The bristles of his unshaven jaw slid down

the length of West's aching cock, nuzzling into the most vulnerable parts of him.

"I want you to take me inside tonight," Michael murmured, teasing him open from behind with two fingers.

West couldn't hold onto a thought, distracted by the satiny rub of Michael's lips against the head of his cock, but he managed to string a few words together in an order that probably made sense. "Thought you'd never ask. But I need a shower."

"You smell good."

West's laughter strangled in his throat. "I probably smell like that nasty powder soap from the campground."

"You smell like a man," Michael said roughly. "My man."

"I'm yours for as long as you'll have me," West admitted. He reached out and knocked the brim of Michael's hat back, desperate to lift the shadow from his eyes, but those shadows were still there even when Michael removed the Stetson and tossed it like a frisbee onto the nearby sofa. They lurked on the edges of his irises, bleeding into the blue like a stain that West didn't know how to lift.

"I don't think you know what those words mean," Michael said, breathing heavily. "But, by God, you're going to learn."

Roughly, he pinned West's hips with a forearm, pressing him back against the wall and aggressively diving onto his cock. West's head hit the plaster with a crack, and his spine arched until it felt like he'd snap in two. His body hadn't stopped hurting, but it was like riding the adrenalin high on a bronc. Pleasure sliced through his aches and pains, shoving them away until they were just a nagging distraction in the back of his mind. Michael slurped down his dripping length, loud and messy and utterly

unashamed. This rough, older man who could take on the world wanted him, and he wanted him so badly that he was willing to choke on his cock to get him. It was the hottest thing West had ever seen in his life.

He didn't even stand a chance.

"Oh, oh—too soon. Not yet," he gasped, fingers fluttering at the sides of Michael's face. "Coming—"

Michael pulled off just long enough to growl, "Come in my mouth."

Two fingers worked deep inside him, stretching him hard.

"Fuck."

"Yes."

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"Ah, Michael!" He let out a strangled cry, arching deep into Michael's mouth. The sounds that tore from his throat weren't human.

He'd thought it was good before, but West realized suddenly how naive he'd been. There was a reason Michael had laughingly told him he hadn't seen anything yet. What he'd thought were the best orgasms of his life now seemed weak and pleasant. This orgasm was practically forced on him, it came on so fast and strong. It tore through him, locking up his already abused body until he couldn't breathe.

He choked, eyes clamped shut and fingers buried deep in Michael's hair, helpless to do anything but ride it out and hope it didn't kill him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He was gone. Drifting. When he came back to himself, Michael had him propped up against the bathroom sink while he tested the shower spray one-handed.

"This hidey-hole ain't big enough for a mouse," Michael muttered, peeling back the vinyl shower curtain and stepping inside. "Why do you live here?"

"Better than staying at my folks' place for the rest of my life," West managed to slur. He stared down at his naked body, bewildered by the way his legs quaked.

"You should just stay at the ranch. You've practically lived there for years, anyway." Michael's lips curved, the first smile he'd worn all night, but it was still just a pale ghost of his usual expression. West couldn't even guess at what he was feeling right now. He seemed so confident, so sure of what he was doing, but the guarded look in

his eyes told a different story.

"Not sure I'm ready to ask permission to stay out past curfew," West said caustically.

"You think that's what's going on here?" Michael took him by the wrist and helped guide him over the lip of the tub. His hands were gentle but firm, holding him up and giving him most of the spray until he got his bearings. "You think I'm mad because you didn't ask my permission to go tearing off to another rodeo?"

With the full warmth of the showerhead pouring down on him, it was difficult to concentrate. All he wanted was to close his eyes and sag against Michael's body, letting his pain and shame swirl down the drain until he felt clean. Maybe Michael sensed it. Maybe he was watching the way he swayed on his feet, because his arms came around and drew him into an embrace. West's forehead dropped to Michael's water-slick shoulder. Rivulets dripped down his neck and into his eyes, so he kept them closed.

Words were easier to find in the darkness, anyway.

"I think you're used to being the boss," he said softly. "Sometimes you forget that I'm not one of your cowboys. I make my own decisions. I'm a grown man, Michael."

"I noticed." One slippery hand stroked over his hip, caressing his limp cock and lazily working it awake. "You've got the same damn foolish pride as the rest of us."

"You knew I wasn't going to stop riding," he pointed out.

"It's not that, West." Michael's jaw brushed his temple as he spoke. "Or...not only that. It's the way you keep hiding it from me. How do you think it feels to spend all day wondering where you are or how bad you're hurt? I can't put anyone else I love in the ground West. I can't."

“Whoa, hey.” It was the closest West had ever heard him to breaking. He pulled back and cupped his face between both hands. Michael’s eyes were turbulent, and droplets of water spiked on his lashes. “Bronc-busting ain’t that dangerous. I’m not going anywhere.”

Michael’s jaw clenched, and he stopped stroking him to rest his hand on West’s hip. “You can’t promise that.”

"No one knows what's going to happen tomorrow, but I've made it this far without second-guessing myself. I'm good at what I do."

"Gus told me you've never won a single buckle."

West took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and gave up one of his secrets. Only the first one. The small one at the top of the pile. He should probably have listened to the voice in the back of his mind telling him he could be starting a landslide, but Michael sounded so desperate.

"I don't try to win," he admitted. "Never have. If I start winning buckles, word gets around, and then my family is on my ass about how I've got no business on the back of a bronc. I'm never going to live up to my dad in their eyes. I quit trying a long time ago. But I can prove to myself that I'm a tougher bastard than he ever was."

Michael's nostrils flared, and he searched West's eyes. The dawning realization in his expression forced West to look away.

"You're throwing the matches." Michael said it slowly, as if testing out how ridiculous it sounded.

West inclined his head.

"Why?" Michael gripped him by the sides of the neck and forced him to look him in the eyes. "What happened when you were a kid to twist your family up so bad? They act like you can't do a damn thing on your own."

West shrugged, uncomfortable beneath his penetrating stare, so he distracted himself by grabbing a bottle of body wash and squeezing some into his palm. As if this was a normal shower. As if he was used to just standing there, buck-ass naked, soaping his pits and lying to the man he loved more than life itself. Because he was lying. He couldn't pretend he wasn't anymore.

"They're protective," he said awkwardly as he sudsed up.

"I've seen Derek and James around town. Nobody looks twice at anything they do."

He shrugged. "I'm the baby of the family."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"It's complicated." West cracked his neck. He couldn't wade too much further into prevarications and half-truths without tripping himself up. He had to cut the conversation short now.

He braced his hands against the wall and ducked under the spray to rinse suds out of his hair, jumping a little when Michael's hands found their way to the globes of his ass. Michael palmed him gently, crowding up behind him and soothing him with an open-mouthed kiss to the base of his neck.

"You don't have to prove anything to me," he murmured, gliding his mouth up to West's earlobe. "But you can't keep hiding things from me. My heart can't take it."

West's lips twisted bitterly. "Your heart can take anything."

"Not losing you." Michael cupped his jaw from behind and cranked his head around for a deep, searing kiss. Despite his guilt, West's flagging erection began to swell back to life. "I know you think I've been through all this before, but it's not like that. This is new ground for me, too."

West closed his eyes and tipped his head back, granting access to the side of his neck. His voice shook when he asked, "What do you mean?"

Michael drank slowly from his skin, sipping droplets from the cords of his throat. When he spoke, his words were a gentle rumble that tickled West's neck. "I loved Mary. I would've grown old with her if we'd been allowed. But we were just kids

when we fell in love. It was a sure thing before we even knew who we were or what we wanted out of life, and we just coasted on that. But what I feel with you..." His swallow was audible. "It's like for the first time in my life, I got to choose. You were right by my side for so long, and I never noticed. But then one day I looked at you, and it was like I saw you for the first time. It felt like I was breathing different air when you were around. You always acted like I could take on the world, and it made me feel good. Made me feel strong even when I was weak inside. You're so full of life. You've got so much love to give...and...and I wanted it. I wanted you. I chose you. But I'm scared to death that I'm going to lose you just like I lost her."

West wanted to turn around and fold him in his arms. He wanted to kiss away the agony in his voice. But he couldn't. Michael had him pinned against the shower wall. He pressed close, slowly rocking his pelvis, clutching West's hips in both hands and guiding them in the rhythm he set. His cock was a thick, hard length that slipped along the crevice of West's ass. Not looking for entrance. Not yet. But getting him used to the idea. Knocking at the door.

Helpless to reach him any other way, West clutched his hand and brought it to his mouth to kiss his palm. But he didn't stop there. He placed a trail of small, affectionate kisses down the inside of his wrist, tasting water and sweet skin on the tip of his tongue as he went. Michael's fingers curled, but he stood placidly and took each kiss.

"You're not going to lose me," West promised.

"It would kill me this time," Michael groaned, cupping the back of West's thigh and lifting his leg to tease at his entrance.

West's legs weren't shaking anymore. His body didn't pain him. Not nearly as much as the ache in his heart, anyway. It wasn't built to hold this much love at once, and it hurt. He needed a release valve, or he was going to explode. But just when he thought

he couldn't take it anymore, Michael began to ease inside. It was like being taken over. His body didn't belong to him anymore. It was Michael's...and he deserved to know...

“Michael, I...”

“I love you.” The confession sounded as if it had been ripped out of Michael's chest. He groaned and bit down on West's shoulder, sliding so deep that West's balls began to ache from the pressure. “I've loved you for a long time now, even if it took me a while to realize it. And I know you love me.”

“I do,” West gasped. “I love you, Michael.”

“Then promise me something.” Michael's arm snaked around his chest to hold him close, and West threaded their fingers together. “Promise you'll stop hiding things from me. If we're going to have a chance, we need to start with the truth.”

West closed his eyes, leaning his head back on Michael's shoulder as he began moving steadily inside him. His strength cradled West, supporting him and warming him from behind while the water soaked him from the front. Exactly the way he'd been longing for earlier that night. Whether he realized it or not, Michael had always given him exactly what he needed.

It crushed him that he couldn't do the same. He could try, but there would always be one guarantee he could never give.

“I promise,” he whispered, ignoring the tears leaking out from beneath his closed lashes. Pretending they were just water.

Michael cupped his balls, rolling them between his fingers as he thrust once, twice, and began to come. West groaned. He'd never been filled before, and it was so hot

that he only had to pump his dick once before he was squeezing out a second climax.

His knees buckled then. Michael caught him and palmed off the water one-handed before half-carrying him across the tiny studio toward the bed. West sank between the sheets wet, so exhausted that he could barely raise his head, but when Michael turned to go, he caught him by the wrist.

“Stay.”

“Baby, wild horses couldn’t drag me away.” Michael unpeeled his fingers, flipped off the light, and then slid into bed next to him. West winced and rolled until he was in his arms, burying his nose in the hollow of his throat and breathing deep.

“I want to stay like this forever,” he murmured sleepily.

“You could have this every night,” Michael said, kissing the top of his head. “No need to stay in town when there’s three hundred acres with your name on it.”

“My name doesn’t start with an M.”

“Turn the W upside down.” Michael’s jaw cracked wide on a yawn. “Forget the issues you’ve got with your family. You’ve got a place with us now. All you’ve got to do is grab it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

West slept like the dead, and when he woke, his body didn't hurt nearly as much as he'd expected.

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"The curative power of orgasms," he'd teased as they lay in bed the next day, mapping the scars and texture on each other's skin.

"Or hot water and liniment," Michael said wryly. He'd brought a tin of salve with him the night before, touching West with his consideration. Despite how angry he'd been, the only thing he'd cared about was taking care of him. "What you need is a good soak in another hot tub."

"The closest thing to that around here is a trough in the middle of August," West said, tracing Michael's frown lines with the tip of one finger.

"You could get one."

West laughed at the ridiculous suggestion. "And keep it where? My sock drawer?"

Michael might have had more to say, but West's trailing fingers had wandered down the path of his abs and into dangerous territory. In less than a second, he was on his back with Michael's huge body covering him. He'd never felt so powerful before. So cherished.

They spent the rest of the day like a couple of teenagers, napping, making love, and eating cold cereal naked in bed. When evening rolled around, they dressed and retrieved Abby from her slumber party to take her for pizza and a movie. He spent that night at the ranch, in Michael's bed, and woke to the reassuring sounds of Celia and Cal arguing over heavy machinery.

All it took was one look at Michael's sleepy, lazy smile for West to finally believe

this was something real. Something true. No man would bring another man home to his bed with his child in the house for just a fling. Crazy as it seemed, Michael loved him. Him. West Owens, town nobody.

He'd never brought anyone home to meet his family before, and part of him would rather go the rest of his life without ever crossing that bridge. It was too risky. But his innate sense of fair play had him inviting Michael along when he headed over to the farm that evening.

Sunday dinner was a tradition, with siblings coming and going depending on their schedules, but tonight the ramshackle farmhouse was bursting at the seams. Susan's mini-van was parked awkwardly in the driveway, boxed in by her brothers' trucks on both sides. The front porch was strewn with the detritus of a heavy construction project.

"I thought you were just installing some rails?" Michael asked as he helped Abby down from the truck.

West couldn't help but smile, watching her splash through a hopscotch of puddles in her pink boots and daffodil-yellow denim jacket. Across the yard, a pack of children was spinning West's oldest nephew on a tire swing until he looked ready to puke.

"Derek called it rails just so Dad wouldn't get all het up," West explained, hefting his toolbox from the floorboards. "But that bathroom hasn't been updated since the sixties. We're tearing out all the fixtures and adding some no-slip tile, too."

"That's going to take more than a few days."

"Not in this family," West said, biting down on his grin.

It was predictable chaos the instant they crossed the threshold. The living room was

dark and full of grease smoke from the kitchen. Children huddled together on the carpet, building a Hot Wheels track, and the sound of a nail gun pounded at random intervals from down the hall. The sports channel was cranked up louder than ever to drown out the noise.

"So, the last traitor has decided to show his face," his father announced, watching him with slitted eyes from his easy chair.

"It's a gift, Dad," West said cheerfully, crouching down to ruffle his tiniest niece's hair.

"I've never taken charity from any man a day in my life," his father said with an acid scoff, "and I sure as hell don't need it from my own boys. Don't forget that I diapered your ass, son."

"Really? When?" Dorothy Owens peeked her head into the room, cheeks flushed from the heat of the stove, or maybe from the bottle of five-dollar wine she always saved for Sundays. She never came alive like she did when her house was full of children, and her pleasure only grew when she spotted Michael holding up the door frame behind West. "Oh! We have company!"

"Whittaker," Jasper greeted acerbically.

"Sir," Michael said, nodding. "Thanks for having me and my little girl for dinner. It's been hell trying to cook while we finish remodeling our kitchen. We need all the help we can get."

West glanced over his shoulder and caught Michael's wink. He hadn't traded more than a handful of conversations with Jasper Owens over the years, but he instinctively understood how defensive he'd be at having a stranger catch him at a disadvantage. By making it sound as if he was the one in need of a favor, he'd disarmed West's

father and charmed his mother in one fell swoop.

"Heard about what happened out there," Jasper grunted, and to West's astonishment, he reached out and muted the television. "Damn shame. That was one of the best properties on this side of the county."

"It'll be good as new pretty soon," Michael said easily, nodding in West's direction. "I've got a lot of help. Your son has always pitched in everywhere he can."

Jasper's expression was inscrutable. West's bruised shoulders tightened, tense enough to snap, as he held his gaze. There was a beat of silence, and then his father sucked air through his teeth and glanced away.

West wondered if his father knew where he'd been that weekend. Had Hank only called once, or was he ratting him out on the regular? It nagged at him, eating him alive with doubt. Why hadn't his father ever said anything? Not that West would ever expect a word of praise. But he'd never scolded him either. Jasper knew it would break his wife's heart if she ever discovered what he was doing, but he didn't order West to quit. Was it wrong for that to give him hope?

Maybe his father understood in a way no one else could that it was about a hell of a lot more than horses. Maybe he couldn't bear to force another man to quit like he had. He'd been larger than life back when West was a little boy, and West wondered what secrets lurked in his own heart. What dreams he'd given up. Did he look back and wonder where his own youth had gone?

Jasper straightened in his chair and set his hands on top of his thighs, watching them both closely. His tone was shrewd when he asked, "You fooling around with my boy, Whittaker?"

"Jasper!" Dorothy admonished, but her eyes were alight with curiosity. She stared at

West with raised eyebrows, making him feel like a little kid caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

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"No, sir," Michael replied, holding up a hand when West made a startled sound in the back of his throat. His expression was solemn. "I love him. I want to spend my life with him. No foolin' involved."

"Oh, bless you both," Dorothy said, tearing up and spreading her arms wide to pull West into an embrace. "I've prayed for you, my darling. I knew God had a plan. A reason for you being gay. He found someone to take care of you."

West cringed.

"He does more taking care of me, ma'am," Michael said gently.

"Yes, of course." West's mother opened one arm and reeled Michael in on her other side. She kissed his cheek, laughing damply. "He's always done his best."

Michael's brows drew together, and he shot her a strange look.

"I'm the baby," West said, running interference with a forced grin.

"You'll always be my baby," his mother declared, squeezing him tight. "But your father might start taking over that role if you boys don't get the bathroom finished. Lord, it's been nothing but complaining all day! I had to send Susan out for more wine."

"I can lend a hand," Michael offered.

"You're a guest in our home. You'll sit down right here and tell me and Jasper about

yourself,” Dorothy commanded, and even though her voice was all sweetness and light, there was something fierce in the undertow that made her impossible to resist. “We know all about you, of course. The ladies down at the Auxiliary have been trying to get you hitched to their daughters for years. But that’s not really friendly, now is it? I want to hear your story in your own words. And you brought your little girl too? Oh my, yes, I see her out there rolling around on a scooter. Full of energy, isn’t she? Just like our Bethie.”

Just then, something crashed down the hall, followed by Derek’s vicious curse.

“West!” James hollered, sounding caught between laughter and fear. “I hear you out there! Get in here before he decides where to hide my body!”

If they were a different sort of family, West might have been nervous about leaving his new boyfriend in the clutches of his parents. But they weren’t the type to air their secrets in front of strangers. Hell, they couldn’t even bring themselves to discuss it privately. His mother did a good impression of being open and friendly, but she always kept it directed outward. As Michael folded his long frame onto the couch with the broken spring, hat settled casually on one knee, she began listing off the menu for the family dinner and asking if he had any special dietary restrictions. West’s father had already unmuted the television, giving every impression of tuning them out, but occasionally, he’d glance at Michael from the corner of his eye.

“You can thank me later,” James announced when West finally peeked his head inside the bathroom. His middle brother sat on the edge of the tub with a can of Blue Ribbon dangling from his fingers, looking tired but cheerful.

“Thank you for what?” West eyeballed Derek. His oldest brother was lying on his stomach, measuring trim and ignoring them. He grabbed a stubby pencil from behind his ear and scrawled a quick calculation on the plaster above the ruler.

“For getting you out of there before Mom whipped out the baby book. We all went through it. Remember when she gave Jennie a list of my favorite foods the first time I brought her home?” James snorted. “As if Jennie cooks.”

“What was that crash I heard?” West asked.

“Genius over there knocked my toolbox into the tub,” Derek muttered without looking up from his work. “Take those two lengths of trim out to the chop saw and cut ‘em at fourteen and a quarter. Cut the line.”

“You sure about that?” James asked, squinting at the wall where Derek was scribing a new line along the edge of the door jamb.

Derek gave him a disgusted look.

James laughed and held up his hands. “Forget I said anything.”

They worked together in good-natured silence, for the most part, with southern country playing low on a Bluetooth speaker from James' pocket. Between the three of them, it didn't take long to get the new vanity and sink installed. Susan had shopped fixtures online and chosen the slimmest fit to give their father more maneuvering room on his stiff days. His brothers held the safety rails stable while West drilled them into the wall, and he held the trim while they tapped finishing nails into the jamb. The happy sound of kids eating dinner came and went, but the brothers only took a break to crack open a round of beers from the garage fridge. Laughter occasionally drifted down from the living room where the adults sat with plates around the television.

West checked on Michael once or twice, but he shouldn't have worried. If there was a situation he couldn't handle, it wasn't meeting the folks. He had West's parents eating out of the palm of his hand.

The little window above the shower was pitch black before Derek finally asked, "So you're making this gay thing official?"

West was in the middle of knocking back a box of skittles, and he nearly choked. "I thought that was pretty obvious."

"You've never tried women."

"Nope," he agreed easily, leaning back against the wall and crossing his boots at the ankle. "Because I'm gay."

His brother just grunted and went back to applying an even layer of fresh caulk around the tub. His jeans were streaked with sawdust and plaster, and sweat dripped down the back of his neck. He didn't follow up with more questions, but he reminded West of a coiled snake. Just waiting to strike. His back was so tense that muscled ridges bulged beneath his thin T-shirt.

His body language didn't invite more conversation, but for some insane reason, West decided to poke at him.

"You ever tried men?" he asked impulsively.

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James froze with a paintbrush in his hand, staring at him like a deer in headlights.

West ignored him and continued, "It's a lot more fun than watching DPs on the internet, I guarantee it."

James muffled his laugh in his sleeve, but he still sounded like he was choking. West had taken all the blame for the internet porn incident back when he was a teenager, but none of his siblings had been fooled.

"Shut up," Derek said mildly.

Usually, he would. But he was too happy to take the hint. He was taking charge of his own life for once, and if he spent the rest of his life busting broncs and delivering chicken wire only to come home to Michael at the end of the day, he'd consider it a life well-lived. For the first time he could remember, West felt like the lucky one, and he wanted to share it.

"You know, it wouldn't hurt to give relationships another try," he coaxed. "Man or woman, it don't matter, so long as they put a smile on your face."

"I'm not short on company."

"I don't mean just screwing around. Hell, if you found yourself someone to look after, maybe you'd stop trying to micro-manage the rest of our lives."

Derek's laughter was full of scorn, and something in his expression turned ugly. "You're doing a bang-up job of managing it on your own, little brother. I'm the one

who's going to be paying for your funeral when you're finished pretending to be some big rodeo star."

West's blood ran cold. He crossed his arms defensively, then hated himself for it and stuffed his hands into his pockets instead.

"Did Dad tell you that?" he asked.

Derek scoffed. "I'm the one who told him. I travel more than anyone else in this family, and I've got more than two brain cells to rub together. You've been doing a crap job hiding it."

"Say what?" James stared at him, open-mouthed. He glanced between his two brothers, and for once, there was no trace of his easy-going grin. "You better be fucking joking."

"It's a joke, all right," Derek sneered.

"God, you're an asshole," West said, thrusting out his chin and glaring down at him. It didn't matter that his brother was still on his knees on the bathroom tile. He'd always be ten times bigger. "What I do is nobody's business but mine."

"It's everyone's business!" Derek shot back angrily. His nostrils flared, and his pupils were blown so wide that the green was almost obliterated. "We're the ones who gave up everything to get you this far."

"I'm sorry, okay? Jesus Christ, you've got no idea how sorry." West dragged his hands through his hair, helpless with frustration. "It's my fault you had to quit school. It's my fault you weren't there for Claire when she went into labor—"

Derek cut him off with a vengeful snarl. "Don't you fucking mention her."

“Listen to me, Derek! It was awful what happened to her and the baby, but you can’t keep blaming—”

Before he could finish, Derek was on his feet. Fast. Too fast for a man his size, and way too fast for West to react. He caught West by the shirtfront and gave him a hard shove, flinging him through the open doorway. West's back hit the opposite wall, staggering him and driving the breath from his lungs.

It was like getting tossed by Fury Road all over again.

“Hey! Knock that shit off!” James cried, leaping forward and slapping a hand against their oldest brother’s chest. He didn’t have to do much to restrain him, though. Derek’s expression was already full of regret.

“West—” he said tightly.

But West didn't let him finish.

He didn’t know where it came from, the fury that exploded out of him. Maybe it started in his chest where an awful pressure was building. His pulse skyrocketed, and his fists were clenched so hard that his knuckles popped.

He was sick and tired of being treated like his family’s pet, caged and coddled and then blamed for all their failures. His life hadn’t been worth spit before he sacked up enough to defy them, and he’d be damned if he let Derek vent on him for the rest of his life.

The roar that tore out of his throat sounded like it belonged to someone else. He lunged for his brother in a diving tackle, grabbing him around the waist and shoving him so hard that the backs of his knees collided with the tub. They toppled, Derek’s head cracking against the shower head and snapping it off. James yelled, throwing an

arm out and trying to separate them, but Derek ripped through his hold like he was made of mist. Cursing, Derek brought up a knee and caught West in the stomach, using it as leverage to create some space between them. West retaliated with a hard right cross to his jaw, shouting at the pain in his pulverized knuckles.

“I said break it up!” Jasper Owens yelled. He was wobbling without his cane and trying to get into the crowded bathroom, but Michael held him back. He knew the old man wouldn’t stand a chance if he got caught in the crossfire. Susan was yelling, but whatever James said in reply was drowned out by the frantic thump of West’s heartbeat. His mother was crying.

Derek glared at him, chest heaving, pulse flickering wildly in his throat. His biceps bulged and his knuckles were a bloodless white, but he didn’t move. He didn’t so much as twitch.

West realized he wasn’t going to hit him back, and inexplicably, it only made him angrier. Or maybe it just broke his fucking heart.

“Hit me!” he yelled.

“You hit him, and you’ll deal with me next,” Michael warned from behind him.

Derek ignored him. “No.”

“Hit me back, damn you. You’ll feel better.” West gnashed his teeth, sucking in any little scrap of rage-filled breath he could drag into his lungs.

“I said no,” Derek snarled.

“I fucking deserve this!” West’s voice cracked. “Treat me like an equal for once in my goddamn life.”

His brother’s expression was ice cold, and through the fog in West’s vision, his lips formed a single syllable. “No.”

“You son of a bitch,” West spat furiously.

His voice echoed in the sudden silence. Everyone had frozen. James still had an arm across Derek’s chest, as if he was the most dangerous person in the room even though he hadn’t made a move to defend himself from West’s onslaught.

He didn’t know when it happened, but suddenly, Michael was at his side. His expression was tight and grim. There were undercurrents here that he didn’t understand, and he didn’t like being caught off guard. But he curled one arm around West’s shoulders and said in that low, reassuring voice of his, “I’m here.”

That was all that mattered. Michael's love was the gift that had changed his life, and he'd repaid it with nothing but deceit. The truth was going to come out now. There was no way to avoid it. But maybe he could do some damage control.

He just needed to slow his heartbeat first. Rage was still coursing through him, so strong that it must have been brewing all his life, growing in strength until it blew his lid right off. He couldn't find the stopper to get it under control. His heart wasn't just thundering anymore; it was racing like a hijacked rollercoaster. Faster than he'd ever felt it. Faster than he could ignore. His limbs were beginning to loosen, and he couldn't catch his breath.

Surreptitiously, he slid two fingers to his inner wrist, but he couldn't even track his pulse, the beats were coming so quick.

"West?" Michael asked. His voice sounded like it was coming from a distance, but the alarm in it was crystal clear. "West, honey?"

He caught West by the elbow as he sagged.

"I'm okay," West said breathlessly. "I just need to sit down for a minute."

Everyone was looking at him strangely now, and there was an old, familiar fear slowly creeping across their faces. The dingy bulb over the sink was flickering. But maybe that was his vision, because he suddenly couldn't focus on his brothers' faces.

He shoved himself out of Michael's arms, desperate to stand on his own, but he overcorrected. The room whirled, and then, astonishingly, everything stopped. He became aware of nothing else. He felt the exact second it happened, the moment when everything in his body went terrifyingly silent. His beleaguered, overworked ventricle had finally given up.

Michael caught him before he hit the floor.

“West!” he shouted.

West had never seen such terror. Raw agony screamed across his face, enough to drive a man insane. He was on his knees, cradling West’s head in his lap, pleading in a broken voice. West couldn’t make out the words, but they didn’t seem important. The only thing that mattered was telling him, just once more, how much he loved him. But he had no breath. He was suffocating.

Derek’s face was a blur above him. His fingers were on West’s throat, and then he was shoving him flat and ripping open his shirt.

“Get the AED!” he shouted to someone in the hall.

His eyes were full of horror, and West was sorry for it, but it wasn’t what he wanted to take to the grave with him. Fog was closing in, and all he wanted was Michael. But he couldn’t find him anymore. Couldn’t feel him.

There was only darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“You did this to yourself, you know.”

Dr. Harvey peered at West over the glare of his wire-rim spectacles. He'd been practicing medicine for longer than West had been alive, but he'd been practicing that accusatory expression even longer. He looked like he'd be more at home in a robe and slippers than a lab coat. His shock of white hair stood up on end like he'd been licking electrical sockets. He took no shit from anyone, but especially not from a man he'd been treating since birth.

"Can we spare the lecture, doc?" West asked irritably. "I've already gotten it from everyone else."

"But were you listening?" Harvey raised one eyebrow, looking skeptical. "Complications aren't unusual for patients with HLHS. You know that, West. You should have contacted me the first time you noticed how fast your pulse was getting."

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"If I came to you every time my heart did something funny, I'd be living in your guest bedroom."

"But you'd be living," Harvey replied mildly. "If I'd known how hard your heart has been working lately, I could have gotten you on meds to prevent the arrhythmia that caused your collapse. Your heart works three times as hard as it should for a man your age. You can't afford to take these kinds of chances."

West picked cotton pills off his blanket, flattening his expression into something he hoped didn't look as petulant as he felt.

Lying there in Michael's arms, West had been certain he was dying, and he'd been full of regrets. But whether the meds Dr. Harvey had pumped into his IV were already working, or it was just a placebo effect, he felt better already. Now all he could think was how much he didn't want to go back to being treated like an invalid. Better to die on his feet than live as half a man.

"I hear you," he muttered.

"Do you?"

West raised his head. "Yes," he said forcefully. "Trust me. I know exactly what I'm doing."

Harvey sighed and removed his glasses, tucking them into the front pocket of his coat. He nudged West's foot and sat beside him, informal enough to give his leg a comforting squeeze. "Your folks told me about the rodeos, as if those bruises didn't

Speak for themselves. It's all the nurses can talk about."

West cringed, and Harvey's expression turned sympathetic.

"No one ever said you couldn't compete, West. But every HLHS patient is unique and needs to be monitored for changes. Plenty of them already have pacemakers at this stage, but I don't think you're there yet. I still believe you can lead a normal life. But you need to communicate with me so we can come up with a plan together. I'm not the enemy. You hear me, son?"

West swallowed, feeling almost as ashamed as he had when his mother burst into tears as soon as she walked into his hospital room.

"Yes, sir."

"If you want to ride broncos, you can do it. Lord knows why you'd want to, but it won't damage your heart. Have at it. But working too much, ignoring your health, and skipping medications is another story. You've got to stop pretending you're someone you're not."

Knuckles rapped hard on the door, and West's head jerked around. Michael leaned against the door jamb, arms crossed, and something in his body language told West he'd been listening for a while.

The family had come and gone in shifts through the night, but the one constant at his side was Michael. He'd only left once around dawn to pick up Abby from Susan's house where she'd spent the night.

Despite his unwavering presence, they hadn't spoken much. West mostly slept, groggy from stress and whatever medications the nurses had slipped into his IV. But when he was clear-headed, Michael had been gentle-voiced and solicitous. He hadn't

seemed angry. Not exactly. Just...distant, as if something invisible separated them. West was afraid to test just how solid the wall between them was.

Now Michael was freshly showered, wearing his good button-down and the church jeans that hugged his ass. Those jeans had tormented West every Sunday for years. He'd never looked so handsome, glowing with health and strength.

West's mouth watered just looking at him, and even though his body was wiped out, he felt a responsive tightening in his groin. He lifted a thigh and shifted, discreetly bunching the blanket in his lap. His skin itched for Michael's hands on him, but one thing surprised him. His heart hadn't skipped a beat when he entered the room.

It had been doing that so often: skipping, quivering, racing, and thumping. All signs that he was head over heels in love. Or so he'd thought. Turned out they were just signs that he needed to visit his cardiologist. He felt like an idiot.

"Hey," he croaked, reaching out a hand.

Michael didn't take it. The only thing that moved was his gaze as it slid to Harvey. His expression flickered, and he seemed angry at the doctor for some reason.

"You about finished up here?" he asked coolly.

"For all the good it's done," Harvey declared, shaking out his coat flaps as he stood. "We've already given him his walking papers, so he just needs some pants. But I want to see him for a recheck in three days."

Michael didn't move, forcing the doctor to maneuver around him. His attention was completely focused on West, but there was no pleasure in his expression. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

West was so unnerved that he took his time swinging his legs over the side of the bed and cracking his neck. His battered muscles had locked up after a night on the rock-hard mattress, and he was anxious to get his boots back on and get out of there.

Hospitals put him on edge, even one he'd known since he was a child. He used to have nightmares about the sterile hallways stretching on forever, like something out of *The Shining*. To his mind, hospitals had meant nothing but lonely rooms with plastic smells and strange, cold hands. When he was very little, he used to bolt upright in bed after a nightmare, screaming bloody murder until every light in the house was on.

That was back before his father had left for the oil rigs, and he'd always been the first to reach him, settling his giant frame down on the mattress and scooping West into his arms, blanket and all. Somehow, he always knew just what to say back then.

West could use a little of that skill now.

"You're not wearing your hat," he observed stupidly.

Michael glanced down and ran a hand through his hair, as if he'd forgotten. "Left it in the truck."

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“Oh.” Brilliant conversation, but West was full of foreboding, like he was standing on the edge of a cliff and staring down at the drop.

Reaching awkwardly for the clothes someone had draped over a chair, he asked, “You get Abby off to school?”

“Celia’s watching her while she naps at home,” Michael replied. “She didn’t sleep a wink at your sister’s house.”

“The kids were probably up all night playing,” West said, but Michael shook his head.

“She was worried,” he said harshly.

West scrubbed at his face, full of guilt. “Shit. I’ll call her once I get out of here.”

“She’s sleeping.”

“Oh. Right.” West fumbled with the strings on the back of his gown, peeling it off his shoulders and tossing it in a ball toward an empty linen hamper. He missed.

Michael stared at the long, silvery scar on his chest, the one West had blamed on climbing a rusted metal shed when he was a kid. Then his gaze drifted over West’s shoulders and down his back, all the way to the bruises spreading beneath the elastic of his boxers. His mouth tightened.

“You’ve been lying to me,” he said harshly.

“I haven’t—” West began, but Michael’s expression stopped him cold. He hung his head and took a deep breath. The truth was, he’d been lying to Michael since the day they’d met, pretending to be something he wasn’t, and it had finally caught up to him. “I was trying to protect you,” he said.

Michael’s chuckle sounded different. Low and cynical. Dangerous.

“Try again,” he said, settling back against the jamb and crossing his boots at the ankle. All elaborate ease. Like he was ready for anything.

West’s stomach clenched. He didn’t think he’d ever seen him look so grim, except perhaps in those months following Mary’s death. But they hadn’t been close back then, and he hadn’t understood the massive amount of control it took for a caring man like Michael to keep his emotions in check. He did now, and it hurt to watch.

"Why don't you start with those scars on your chest?" Michael prompted. "The ones you said were from a climbing accident."

West glanced down at himself. He traced the center scar with one finger, following the thick line down his sternum. There were others, thin and old now, barely noticeable. It had been easy to convince everyone they were from getting caught on some rusted sheet metal. No one had questioned it. Why would they?

"Six surgeries," he admitted. It wasn't easy.

Michael blew out a long, slow breath and said in a hoarse voice, "I did some reading last night while you were asleep. They said it only takes three."

"I was one of the first successful patients on this side of the country," West said. He couldn't meet Michael's eyes, so he focused on a tacky ocean landscape on the wall just over his shoulder. "They were still perfecting the procedure, and I had some

complications that meant they had to go back in a couple times."

"So that's why Aiden and Cal always said you were like a ghost back when you were in school. Cal barely even remembered you when he came back to town."

West's smile was slight. "Cal was always more wrapped up in Eli and his own problems, and I mostly hung out with Tucker. But yeah. It was hard to be part of the crowd when I was home 'sick' for weeks at a time."

Michael licked his lips, and it looked like he was bracing himself when he asked, "How long are you going to live?"

"I don't know," West admitted. "How long are you?"

Michael's eyes flared. "Don't sass me, kid."

Despite the gravity of the situation, West couldn't help but laugh just a little. "I swear I'm not. It's just that none of us have any guarantees, Michael. You thought you had decades with Mary, didn't you?"

"Don't." Michael's voice was frigid.

West held up both hands, anxious that he might have just made a severe misstep. Michael always got on edge when the people he loved were in danger, but this was worse than usual, and West had no idea how to talk him back down.

"I'm not making light of it, I swear to you, Michael," he promised. "It's just that I don't have a good answer for you. Before my generation, HLHS patients never made it past childhood. But the consensus seems to be that there's no reason I can't live a normal lifespan if I take care of myself."

"You've been doing a bang-up job of that," Michael said sarcastically. "Running yourself ragged all over town like some self-appointed Mr. Fix-It? Spending days on the road handling deliveries for Gus? Eating at greasy spoons and sleeping in the back of your truck?"

"I—"

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Michael plowed right over him. "How about riding fence with me in the dead of summer when even the strongest men get heat stroke? Or maybe—just fucking maybe—your idea of taking care of yourself is getting stomped into the dirt by a bucking horse. Those bruises on your back tell a story that's mighty different than the one coming out of your mouth."

"That's not fair," West protested. His fingers were shaking as he slid into his jeans and did up his shirt, rushing the job and missing buttons just to get on more even footing. He already felt defensive and vulnerable, he didn't need to be having this argument naked on top of it. "Dr. Harvey has always said I can live a mostly normal life, so long as I take some precautions."

Michael's eyes were hard. "Like what?" he challenged.

West shrugged. "I can't smoke anything. Can't take certain medications. I need to watch my caffeine intake. Ideally, I shouldn't drink any at all. I need a yearly check-up with my cardiologist, and I need to be aware of my heart rate during aerobic activity."

"You drink coffee," Michael pointed out.

"Yeah."

"Seen your cardiologist this year?"

He winced. "I'm a few months overdue."

A muscle flexed in Michael's jaw, and his eyes narrowed. There was something vicious in his tone when he whispered, "Do you want to die, West?"

"Fuck, no." West shoved his feet into his boots and cautiously went to him. He laid one hand on Michael's stomach, searching his eyes, pleading for understanding. "I don't want to die, Michael. I want to live. You don't know what it was like to grow up and watch everyone make sacrifices to keep me safe. I couldn't step a toe out of line without feeling guilty for wasting all their effort. There were no sports for me. No friends. No summertime jobs. I was just a non-entity, someone who just existed, and I might have gone on that way all my life if it weren't for you."

"Me?" Michael's hand covered his where it rested on his stomach, but the tension in his fingers told West he hadn't decided whether to remove it or clasp it harder.

West smiled faintly. "You were new in town, so you hadn't already decided how you were supposed to treat me. I was just a regular guy to you. I never realized how hungry I was for that validation until you gave it to me, and all I wanted to do was live up to how you saw me. You're the reason I moved out of my folks' place and into that crappy little apartment. You're the reason I started taking on deliveries and volunteering around town. You're the reason for everything I do, Michael Whittaker. You always have been."

In some ways, it was a relief to finally be able to express everything he'd always truly meant to him. It went so much deeper than love.

"God, baby." Michael's voice was hoarse. "Don't put that on me."

"I'm sorry I lied to you," West pressed. He felt like if he didn't make his point now, he'd never get another chance. "It tore me up inside, but I was so afraid. You're so keyed up any time you think someone is in danger. I get it, I do. But you'd have locked me up and thrown away the key if you knew."

“I want to make sure you’re safe,” Michael hissed, dropping his hand.

“You can’t,” West said, wincing and flexing his empty fingers, already missing his warmth.

“Yeah, you’ve made that crystal clear,” Michael drawled venomously. “You never planned to cut back on the rodeos, did you?”

West hesitated. His first instinct was to lie, and it shamed him. “I was going to try,” he said eventually, choosing his words with care.

Michael’s laughter was bitter, and he glanced away like he couldn’t stand to look at him. “So, everything I said to you the other night meant nothing to you.”

“No,” West protested, grabbing him by the sleeve. Michael roughly shook him off, stepping away. In all the years they’d known each other, he’d never brushed him off like that. Never denied him touch. It hurt so much he wanted to double over with it. “It meant the world to me that you’d open up to me like that. I’ve never felt so loved. More than that, I felt seen. I was just terrified that you’d break things off if you...if you knew...”

“So, you lied to get what you wanted.” Michael’s voice was flat.

West swallowed. “I want to make this work between us. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Michael stared at him, expression perfectly blank, and asked, “Will you give up riding?”

He’d known it was coming, but hearing it laid out so bluntly caused a twang somewhere low in his chest that had nothing to do with his heart. He stuffed his hands in his back pockets and hung his head, scuffing the toe of his boot on the floor.

"The doc said it's fine," he said, choosing his words carefully.

"No. He said he wasn't going to stop you. But I am."

"Don't," West begged, pinching at the bridge of his nose to stop the sting in his eyes.
"Michael, please. You've got to trust me to make my own decisions. I'm still the same man you've always known."

Michael's mouth turned up at one corner, but West had never seen a smile so bleak.
"That man didn't exist, West. I don't know who you are."

He winced. "That's not fair."

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“Maybe not.” Michael sighed, and for the first time since he’d moved to Sweetwater, he finally looked a full decade older than West. He looked tired, like he’d been the one stuck in a hospital bed. “But I don’t know what else to do. You might not care what happens to your heart, but I care about mine. I can’t break it on someone who’s already got one foot in the grave next to Mary. You can’t keep on riding.”

West sucked in a breath, but he forgot to let it loose again. He hunched his shoulders, curling one arm around his cramping stomach to staunch the pain. It felt like he was bleeding out somewhere, but he couldn’t find the wound.

“Michael...” he pleaded, but he had no more words. Only begging. But Michael had already made up his mind, and the longer West took to agree, the more something in the air hardened between them.

“I thought so,” Michael said softly. He reached out to brush a knuckle down West’s cheek, and his expression twisted. “So be it. But you can’t ask me to watch.”

Then he turned around...and he walked away.

Derek was the one who found West, what felt like an eternity later. He was slumped on the floor with his back against the wall, knees drawn up and head cradled on his folded arms. His shoulders shook, but the only sounds coming out of him were choking, muffled grunts. Like he was in pain. Like he was wounded somewhere, but he couldn’t let the full sound out or he might die.

His brother didn’t ask what happened, but then, that huge brain of his was good at figuring things out on its own. He let out a long-suffering sigh, and then,

astonishingly, he settled himself down beside West and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“I won’t say that it’s going to be okay,” he said shortly. “It won’t be. But I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, little brother.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Derek had been right. Three weeks later, West still wasn’t okay. He was beginning to think he would never be okay again. His heart was beating steady as a metronome now, but it felt like his soul was slowly leaking out of a gaping hole in his chest. Trying to fly back to the Triple M, where it belonged.

He went through the daily motions on autopilot, haunted by a vague sense of misery and humiliation. Cycling through his brain on repeat was a never-ending list of things he could have said and done differently. He should have told the truth, but maybe he would have only lost Michael quicker. He could have been a better liar, or at least less reckless. Maybe he was selfish. Maybe he should have quit bronc-busting as soon as he saw how much it upset him. But what would West be without it? A husk of a man with no pride of his own? Who would want to spend his life with someone like that?

Michael was already a far better man than West would ever be, and he proved it by not ghosting him the way West had done to him. He texted that night to make sure West had made it home safely, and a few days later to remind him about his follow-up appointment with the cardiologist. His texts were brusque, like a message from a stranger and not a man who had tasted every inch of his skin. But they were better than nothing.

Even though he knew it was foolish, those texts kept a weak spark of hope alive, dragging him through the days in a tangle of nerves. He obsessively ran through

every imaginary conversation, but they usually came down to only one option: I'm sorry. I'll quit.

He'd typed that message out a dozen times or more, thumb hovering over the send key...but he could never go through with it.

Rodeo had given him life. It had given him the pride to throw his shoulders back and walk tall even when he was standing beside men like Michael or Derek or Eli. On the back of a bucking horse, for eight glorious seconds, he was free. He couldn't give that up, or all he'd be bringing to their relationship was a broken spirit and a list of health concerns as long as his arm. He refused to saddle a man like Michael with someone like that.

So, West just had to learn to live without him. He only had half a heart to begin with, so it shouldn't matter so much if the rest of it was utterly shattered. He knew how to live with pain.

"Look out, here comes Mopey," August French announced when West emerged from the stock room, red-eyed after checking his phone for the hundredth time that day. The old man was seated on his usual perch, sipping from a stained coffee cup and playing solitaire while Gus repaired a saddle. "C'mon, son. It ain't the end of the world."

"What?" West croaked, digging the heel of his hand into one of his eyeballs and trying to make it look like he just had a headache.

"I'm talking about your celebrity status as our newest rodeo man. We needed a new one now that Calvin Craig retired. Lord knows who snitched on you, but the staff up at the hospital gossip more than one of them tabloid papers down at the Stop N' Shop."

“Oh. Right.” West’s shoulders slumped.

He wasn’t used to being the center of attention, and it made him itch. People were flagging him down all over town, stopping by his table at the diner and interrupting him during fill-ups at the gas station. They encouraged him to ride in the county rodeo next summer so they could watch, and the older folks wondered how his mother was taking the news.

West didn’t know how to answer that question. The truth was, she’d handled it better than he ever expected, but it was obvious how much it cost her. He figured the scare she’d gotten had her afraid of upsetting him, and the protestations would eventually come. But right now she just held onto him whenever he walked into a room, refusing to let go until someone pulled them apart. He hadn’t seen her cry, but her mouth always trembled whenever she looked at him for too long.

“You’re just like your father,” she’d said, her tone a strange mix of pride and something that sounded awfully close to heartbreak. “I should have known.”

Gus was watching him with shrewd eyes. “Don’t let it get to you,” he said, as if reading his mind. “You know how small towns work. People will be jawing about the next thing before long.”

“It doesn’t matter,” West said with a lethargic shrug. His bad shoulder was nearly healed, so it only tugged a little. “I’m finished busting broncs, anyway.”

“Huh.” Gus cracked open a bottle of neatsfoot oil, took a whiff, and then dabbed it onto an old rag. As he began rubbing down the saddle, he said philosophically, “Seems to me that maybe there’s some middle ground between reckless foolishness and quitting altogether. Shame to see you give it up. You’ve always been a fighter.”

“Me?” West laughed bitterly.

“Sure. Folks have mostly forgotten how hard it was for you when you were just a mite, but I never did. The way I figure, most men would let hardships like that break ‘em. I’ve seen it happen. They become soft and lazy, or they let it turn them angry and bitter. Like your brother and your daddy. But not you. You just rolled up your sleeves and got to work, helping out where you could. You’ve worked here for years, and I ain’t never heard even a single complaint out of you. What would you call that?”

“Just trying to keep my head down,” West said uncomfortably, picking at a scratch on the counter to avoid looking at him.

“Hogwash,” Gus scoffed, giving the saddle some extra elbow grease. “You know, I see a lot of myself in you. I decided to hand the shop over to you because you’re a man who loves his hometown just as much as I do. But I was always afraid to take a chance, and I watched life pass me by. I missed my opportunity to marry my sweet Mable when we were kids, and I might’ve missed it again last year if she hadn’t had the balls to ask me.”

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“It was a beautiful wedding,” August interjected with a misty-eyed sniff. “Only time I willingly set foot in a courthouse.”

“And we appreciated it, Auggie,” Gus said wryly, but he refused to be sidetracked. He squinted and jabbed an oil-stained finger in West’s direction. “My point is that you’re better than me. You went after what you wanted with those broncos, and no one could talk you out of it. I sure as shit couldn’t. So don’t give up now just because folks have opinions about it. When I retire, I ain’t leaving my store to no quitter.”

“I’m not quitting,” West said, frustration leaking from every syllable. He scrubbed his hands over his face, hard, but it didn’t make his thoughts any clearer. “Not because it got too hard, anyway. It’s just...hurting the people I love.”

“Like your mama?”

West waffled his head back and forth. “Sure,” he said lamely.

“Or maybe someone else?” August’s rheumy eyes were suddenly bright, and he sat up a little straighter on his stool. “Michael Whittaker’s taken an awful keen interest in you lately. I hear he nearly took Sutter’s head off when he started shit with you.”

“He cares about people,” West said, looking away and rubbing the back of his neck. Michael hadn’t been shy about their relationship, and with Aiden’s big mouth, he figured the whole town knew by now. But he still felt like he ought to protect Michael’s reputation, especially now that it was over.

Was it over? Would Michael still be sporadically texting him if the relationship were

completely dead? Or was it just in the process of dying, slow and agonizing, until one of them finally sacked up enough to put them both out of their misery?

“Sure, he cares,” August agreed, stretching and swiveling on his stool. He propped his elbows on the counter behind him, warming to the subject, “Good man, Whit. Takes care of folks. Keeps cowboys off the unemployment line. Pumps money into this dying town with that ranch of his. Lots of reasons for a man of your persuasion to take a fancy to him.”

“A man of my...” West sputtered, amused despite himself.

“Sweet Jesus,” Gus said, rolling his eyes.

But August was just warming to his subject, and his eyes were beginning to twinkle. “Now, now,” he said enthusiastically. “Let’s not beat around the bush. Everyone’s known which side of the bread you butter since you were just a kid. It was Whittaker I was never sure of, but Mable and I have been talking it over, and—”

“You been keepin’ time with my wife?” Gus demanded, spine snapping ramrod straight. He thrust out his chin and glared, waving his oil rag for emphasis. “I should’ve known better than to trust an old hound dog like you! Ever since you invited Nellie May to the winter formal back in ’58.”

“Now, don’t start that up again—” August protested, holding up both hands.

“You knew I liked her!” There was great excitement but not much real venom behind the accusation. It sounded more like a familiar, worn-out script. The same argument they’d been having for six decades.

“Yeah, I knew. That’s why I did it. I tried to save you from making a terrible mistake. ‘Course, you made it anyway, and look where that left you. Mable got snatched up by

Ike Stockton and you sat on your ass moping for the next half a century. Is that what you want for the boy?"

"Course not, but—"

"Then shut up and let me finish." August huffed, giving his oldest and dearest friend the stink eye. He turned back to West, catching him as he edged toward the stock room. "You ain't goin' nowhere, boy. Not 'til I've had my say."

"Yessir," West muttered, wide-eyed and slightly terrified. Part of him wanted to tell the old codgers to keep their noses out of his business, but he'd been raised to respect his elders. Besides, he was too conditioned to everyone having an opinion about how he should live his life.

"Like I was saying..." August cleared his throat and slid a warning look toward Gus. "Mable spotted it first, but it was pretty clear to me every time Whit came into this shop. He always gave you more attention than you were due. No offense intended, son, but you aren't exactly a looker. Now, you'd know better than me whether something's going on between you, but where there's smoke, there's fire. That incident with Sutter clinched it for me. No man loses his head like that unless he's in love. It makes us all do crazy things. A man like Whit is always going to try to protect the people he loves, even if he's so fear-blind that he can't see how much it hurts them in the process. It's up to you to make him see that you wouldn't be the same man if you quit bronc-busting just to make him feel better. I don't pretend to understand how things work between two fellas, but I figure he must be with you because he wants you. Not some wilting flower. If you let his stubbornness get in the way, you're going to end up like Gus and Mable, and I can't wait around for your wedding. By then I'll be too old and fat to fit into my suit."

It was the most West had ever heard him talk about any topic that wasn't politics or the weather, and once he'd said his piece, he simply licked his thumb and went back

to dealing from the bottom of the deck in his own game. Gus was rubbing the crap out of his saddle.

West stared down at the floor, lost in thought, as sunshine streamed through the display window and painted the dusty floor orange.

August was right, but West didn't have much of a choice. He was caught between a rock and a hard place, tearing himself apart with indecision. What good was self-respect if he lost the only man he'd ever loved in the process? But how could they ever hope to last if he came to Michael as only a shadow of the man he could have been? It was like asking him which arm to chop off. Either way, something would always be missing.

So, he did nothing. He buried his head in the sand, hoping a solution would eventually present itself. He leaped at every buzz of his cell phone, and then swallowed his disappointment when it was someone else.

His phone finally chimed again late that night, as he lay on his stomach counting all the ways he'd fucked up the best thing to ever happen to him. Empty beer bottles littered the floor in a sloppy pile, but the buzz barely took the edge off his misery.

Michael: How are you feeling?

He scrabbled at the keys with clumsy thumbs, tapping out the first honest response that came to his mind: like shit.

The call came in only seconds later. Breathless with nerves, he lifted the phone to his ear, but he didn't even get a chance to say hello before Michael's familiar voice was husking in his ear.

"Are you okay? Do you need to call your doctor?"

West chuckled softly, overwhelmed with affection and regret. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. My heart’s fine...or...no, I guess it isn’t.”

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There was a pause, and then Michael asked, “Are you taking your new meds?”

West swallowed around the lump in his throat, and said, “Like clockwork. But they don’t fix a broken heart.”

“Christ, West.” Michael sounded like he was in pain. A long, ragged sigh dragged over the line, heavy enough to crush him. West knew exactly what expression he’d be wearing, the way the creases at his eyes would deepen and his jaw would tense. He imagined him sitting out on the front porch in the dark, barefoot and fresh from a shower.

Abruptly, he asked, “What are you doing?”

“I was checking on the horses. But somehow, I ended up in the barn, and I just...I needed to check on you.”

“I’m not your responsibility, you know.”

“Tell that to my heart,” Michael said roughly.

West didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t reply. He just lay there, listening to him breathe. Everything Michael did was magic, and even that simple sound was a huge turn-on. If he closed his eyes, maybe he could squeeze himself through the phone and ride those breaths back to the source, invade his lungs, and bury himself in Michael’s body forever.

“What are you doing?” Michael asked, turning his question back on him.

“I was thinking about what it must feel like inside you,” he admitted, pressing down on his thickening cock with the heel of one hand. Even now, he could get hard in seconds if Michael’s voice was in his ear. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to will it away, but all he could think of was the memory of Michael’s sweat-slicked chest. The taste of salt on his skin. The flex of his abs as he moved. How would he survive never touching him again?

“West...” Michael sounded like he was in pain. “Don’t do that to us. It’s not going to fix anything.”

“Can’t hurt more than it already does.” West knew he was playing dirty, but he was too buzzed to care. Now that he had him on the line, he was desperate to keep him there. Even if it meant rolling over and baring his throat to someone already showing their teeth. “I’ve always wondered if you could take my cock. I got off to it so many times, it’s like I already know how you’ll feel. Did you ever think about it?”

“You know I did.”

“We could still try. It wouldn’t have to mean anything, and I’d make it so good for you...” He bit his lip, but there was a tremor in his voice he couldn’t control. “You’d never think about leaving me again.”

“Stop. I mean it.” It was like a shout down the line, so rough and angry that West barely understood the words.

He obeyed instantly, as the last shred of hope inside him sputtered and killed his flagging erection.

“Who am I kidding?” West laughed, choking on humiliation. It burned like bile in his throat. “It’s a nice fantasy, but you’d never have let it happen. You’ve got to be in control no matter what.”

“That’s not true.” Michael’s tone was condescendingly patient, and it enraged him.

“Isn’t it?” he shot back. “You’re so used to being the boss that you don’t even remember what it’s like to give someone else a voice.”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“It’s your way or the highway.”

“You’re way out of line, We—”

“Good! I’ve spent my whole goddamn life staying inside the lines someone else drew for me!” He bolted upright in bed, sheets pooled at his waist, fingers clenching on the phone so hard he thought it might shatter.

He’d never shouted at Michael before. They’d never argued at all, not about anything more important than the best way to tie a lure. The silence on the other end of the line was ice cold.

Michael’s breath was fast and ragged, but he managed to ground out a polite, “Get some rest.”

The line went dead before West could reply. He stared down at his phone incredulously.

Then he smashed it against the wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The same song had been cycling on the old-fashioned jukebox for nearly an hour, and it was drilling into West’s whiskey-soaked brain like a rusty nail. Something about

old trucks and barefoot country roads. Romantic trash from Nashville execs with soft hands and boots that had never seen dirt. But the drunken crowd at The Trophy Club ate it up with a spoon, belting out the chorus in off-key whoops.

The noise was almost enough to drown out the punishing voice in his own head.

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Two weeks, and not a word between them. He had nobody to blame but himself, not just for pushing Michael too far, but for breaking his phone. Sweetwater didn't have a local carrier, and it had taken nearly a week to replace it. By that point, even if he'd wanted to reach out, he didn't know what to say. So, they said nothing.

"You're cut off after this one," Pete announced, sliding a fresh glass of whiskey and coke across the bar.

West stopped it with his elbow, watching numbly as liquid sloshed over the rim.

"I'm not driving," he protested blearily. "The whole town is walking distance from my shit apartment."

Pete shrugged. "Not my call. Sheriff's orders."

West belted back a hard swallow, barely wincing at the burn, and summoned up whatever scraps of dignity he had left to announce with feeling, "The sheriff...can stick it up his ass."

"That comes later," drawled an amused voice at his back.

West tried to swivel on his stool, but it was the room that spun. His head bobbed on his shoulders, so he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the bar. Someone got a fistful of his hair and cranked his head at such an awkward angle that it partially woke him up. Blinking, he struggled to focus on Calvin Craig's blurry face. An off-duty Eli relaxed at a table behind him.

“Aw, shit,” West muttered.

“Is that any way to greet me?” The creases at the corners of Cal’s eyes deepened when he grinned. “You’re supposed to be the nice guy around here.”

“Go away,” West muttered, yanking free and leaving a few strands of hair behind.

“How about a coffee, Pete?” Cal suggested, sliding onto the empty stool next to him and hooking one boot heel on the rung. His body language was relaxed and perfectly at ease, but then, Cal had always been comfortable in his own skin. Settling down had been good for him, breaking that chip off his shoulder one piece at a time and revealing the big-hearted man underneath. West considered him a friend. Maybe even a good friend. But right then, all he wanted was to be left alone to wallow.

“Calvin Craig,” he muttered, propping his head in one hand and giving him the hairy eyeball. “You know how many times I’ve wished I was you?”

“That’s fucking grim,” Cal said with a low laugh.

West finished off his drink and grimaced. “You never cared what anyone thought. Just told this town to get fucked, and they loved you for it. You made it all the way to the world championships with nothing tying you down. No one telling you what to do.”

Cal’s expression was remote. “That’s what you think, huh?”

“Yup.”

He scoffed and shook his head. “You’re so full of shit. You know what I would’ve given to have a family like yours growing up? You’re seriously going to sit here and complain because people care about you too fucking much? No one cared whether I

lived or died. Everything I did was despite that, not because of it.”

The worst of it was that West knew he was right. His flushed face heated up until it felt like he was roasting, and shame sweat trickled down his collar.

“So, I should just shut up and be grateful, huh?”

“I didn’t say that.” Cal’s eyes grew shrewd. “Look, I don’t know all the details—”

“Then maybe you should mind your own damn business.”

“—but I consider you a friend, and I don’t say that lightly.” His tone had an edge of warning, and he nudged over the coffee Pete handed him. “So, I’m telling you, as a friend, to drink that coffee and go home.”

West looked down at the steaming mug and began to laugh. It was hilarious. He couldn’t drink it even if he wanted. He’d promised his mother to take it easy on caffeine for a while.

Cal whistled through his teeth, long and low, like a dropping bomb. “Shoot, son. I thought Whit was handling this bad, but he ain’t got a thing on you.”

West’s head came up like a shot. “He is?” he asked hopefully.

Cal raised one eyebrow. “What do you think? I ain’t ever seen that man do a single thing that wasn’t for someone else’s benefit. ‘Til you. That was the first time I ever saw him do something just because he wanted it, and to hell with everyone else. It was kind of nice seeing those smiles.”

“Yeah, he’s great at taking care of people whether they like it or not,” West muttered, still smarting from the humiliating end to their phone call. “He flipped his shit when

he found out I was busting broncs. Followed me all the way to California and decided to let me suck his dick so long as I go along with everything he says.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because I’m too stupid to know what’s good for me.”

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“I don’t know about that.” Cal rubbed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. He shot a helpless look across the room, but Eli only raised his eyebrows and refused to budge. “I think he loves you.”

“Yeah? That how you treat someone you love? My way or the highway?”

Cal burst out in a startled laugh and glanced over his shoulder at his boyfriend. A smile ghosted across his expression. “Can’t say it’s unfamiliar,” he admitted ruefully. “Some men are terrified of losing control. Whit has already lost his wife on the back of a horse. Maybe he’s just scared shitless he’s going to lose someone else he loves.”

West’s nostrils flared. “So, you think I should quit?”

“Didn’t say that.” Cal said, taking back the untouched coffee and downing it in a couple of swallows. He hopped off the stool and clapped West on his newly healed shoulder. “If there’s one thing I know, it’s the way rodeo burns itself down deep in your bones. You’ll never be happy until it burns itself out again. But don’t give up on Whit. He’s wrecked. He’ll come around...in about ten minutes, if you wait. Eli called him as soon as you started knocking them back.”

“He what?” West was off his stool in an instant, wobbling when gravity asserted itself with a vengeance. Glowering in the sheriff’s direction, he yelled, “That’s bullshit!”

Cal didn’t look like he disagreed, but his lips twitched in a helpless smile when he said, “He can’t help himself. Y’all never should have made him sheriff.”

“We didn’t make him town busybody!” West yelled loud enough for his voice to carry.

“I could have locked you in the drunk tank ‘til you sober up,” Eli replied, not even needing to raise his voice to be heard over the music.

“Screw you, Eli,” West shot back, thrusting out a middle finger, annoyed when both men only looked helplessly amused. An aggravated sound strangled in his throat, and he growled, “Fine. I’m leaving.”

But even after Cal returned to his table, West wasted a few precious moments staring down at the bar, tracing wet patterns in the spilled whiskey and trying to think. His brain felt like a soggy sponge, too full of liquor to soak up any clarity.

Did he want another run-in with Michael? Yeah. He would never stop wanting to see him, hear him, breathe the same air as him. No matter what. But he’d already embarrassed himself in every imaginable way. He couldn’t bear being hauled home or poured into a cab like a child. Worse. Like a responsibility.

He left the bar with his stomach churning and his mind spinning, but he didn’t even make it across the parking lot before he was forced to take a break. He’d never been a big drinker, and the whiskey had burned a sour hole in his belly. Bracing himself against a nearby Honda, he hung his head and sucked in a few gulps of the crisp night air.

His stomach had just begun to settle when the hair on the back of his neck prickled. Gravel crackled behind him, but before he could turn, a fist dropped on the back of his skull. His face bounced off the roof of the Honda and his vision went white. He didn’t remember falling, but he came to on the ground with a dark shadow looming above.

“Nothing personal.” Ronald Sutter’s voice came out of the darkness, thick and sloppy with drink. “It’s just he took something from me. So, I’m going to take everything from him.”

The words had barely registered before he drew back one steel-toed boot. Instinct had West rolling the second he moved, and the blow glanced off his ribs. It hurt. The pain was sharp and hot, driving the breath from his lungs, but it was nothing he hadn’t felt dozens of times in an arena.

Out there, if a cowboy stayed on the ground, he was going to get hurt. So, he scrambled to his feet, gravel spitting out beneath him as he dodged another brutal kick.

“Jesus Christ! Are you insane?” he yelled, swiping a sleeve over the hot blood gushing from his nose. “The sheriff is right inside!”

Sutter grinned, drunk and evil, and said, “Then he ain’t out here.”

He lashed out with a meaty left cross that drove West to his knees. All the power of his huge barrel chest was behind it, and the shot rocked West’s head around so hard it felt like it had snapped right off his spine. He caught Sutter’s knee seconds before it collided with his chin, unbalancing him, but Sutter threw himself forward and they fell together in a tangle of grunts and curses. He was like a concrete block on West’s chest, clumsily straddling him for a good, old-fashioned ground-and-pound.

In a flash, it was ninth grade all over again. Behind the snack stand at a rival football game, running his mouth and taking a beating for it. Derek had come home the next day with a broken nose and knuckles like hamburger. Then he’d taken West out into the yard, and he hadn’t let up on him until he knew how to do more than throw a punch. He’d taught him to fight—and fight dirty.

Headlights flashed, blinding them both, and West used the distraction to rock his hips and throw the huge man off balance. In the same motion, he hooked an elbow around Sutter's neck and threw all his body weight into twisting. Sutter's back hit the ground just as a car door slammed.

“West!”

Michael. West's head cranked around, toward the voice, and that was when Sutter punched him in the throat. He went down hard, clutching his throat and wheezing.

Michael's roar was so loud, he swore it shook the earth. He was sprinting across the parking lot, swifter than a man his size ought to be, and the look on his face chilled West to the bone. If he got his hands on Sutter, he'd be going to jail. All his instincts and fear and training would kick in, and he wouldn't stop until the threat was neutralized and Sutter was in a body bag. He'd lose his little girl, lose everything he'd worked so hard to build...and Sutter would win.

West had no doubt.

“Stop!” he yelled, scrambling to his feet and throwing out a bloody hand in Michael's direction. “Stop right now, Michael, or I swear to God I will never fucking forgive you!”

The absolute fury in his tone was enough to break through Michael's fear. He pulled up short, skidding on the gravel, just as Sutter took West's legs out from under him.

“West—let me—”

“No, goddammit! You're not taking this from me!” West cried, punching Sutter hard in the junk before catching him in the nose with a vicious elbow. There was a sickening crunch and sudden warmth on his sleeve, but he barely noticed.

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The look on Michael's face was horrible. His complexion was ashen, nostrils flared and eyes wide with rage and terror. His hands flexed at his sides, like he was seconds away from ripping out Sutter's spine and beating him to death with it. He was trembling; West could see it in the way his legs were braced.

But he'd stopped. He stood there, quivering, dying in his need to rush in and save the day. A cord in his neck bulged as if he were physically fighting to hold himself back. For a split second, West met and held his gaze, wishing he could spare him from his pain.

Sutter took advantage of his distraction and clocked him hard in the temple.

Michael didn't move.

West's ears were ringing, but he was on top of Sutter now. He didn't have the body weight to keep him pinned, but he used his leverage, jamming his knees beneath Sutter's armpits and locking him in to hit him again—and again.

His breath whistled in and out of his lungs like he was breathing through a broken straw, and all he tasted was blood.

But his heart was steady as a fucking rock.

The back door of the bar slammed open, and a sudden rush of people poured into the parking lot. Too many of them, all shouting at once in a wordless drone. All except for Eli, whose voice rose above the crowd.

“Break it up!”

“West—West!” Arms came around his waist, hauling him backward, and for a second he thought it was Michael. But it was wrong: the smell, the feel, the way his skin didn’t sizzle like he’d touched lightning.

Cal lifted him with all the strength in his wiry body. Sutter came after them, sloppy with blood and spit, only to slam into the sheriff. His beer gut and flab were no match for more than six feet of solid muscle, and Eli had him on the ground in an instant.

“He was the one hitting me!” Sutter raged, thrashing beneath Eli’s knee as it pinned him down. “You queers all stick together!”

“Pete installed cameras in the parking lot last year, dumbass!” Cal shouted. “The screen is right over the fucking bar!”

“I’ve got this, baby,” Eli said with a touch of fondness. “Backup is already on the way.”

For the first time, West became aware of sirens whining in the distance.

“Do you need medical attention?” Eli asked, barely audible over Sutter’s snarls.

“I don’t need a fucking doctor! I want a lawyer! I’m not answering another goddamn thing until I get one!” Sutter was nearly frothing at the mouth, and his bloodshot eyes looked past West, through the audience, until they locked onto Michael. His expression was full of loathing, and he spat, “There’s no room in this town for your touchy-feely new cowboy bullshit. Now you know! If you keep playing with fire, you’ll watch your whole life burn.”

“That a threat?” West asked, shaking off the tight grip Cal had on his shoulders.

“Sounded like a confession,” Cal said grimly.

Michael didn’t reply. He didn’t move. Not even to glance in Sutter’s direction. He’d frozen in place, eyes glued on West, like he was afraid to set himself loose again.

“West?” Eli asked over his shoulder. “You need an ambulance?”

“No.” West deliberately spit blood into the dirt and locked eyes with Sutter. His voice quivered, but it wasn’t fear. It was rage. He wasn’t scared of this piece of garbage, and he didn’t need anyone coming to his rescue. This time, Michael was the one who needed him. “I’m pressing charges.”

“For a bar fight?” Sutter scoffed.

“Try assault, genius.” He took a step, but Eli’s warning look made him think twice. Crouching down on his haunches, he waited until he had Sutter’s full attention and said, “Maybe you got away with arson, but I’ll make damn sure you go down for being a hateful bigot.”

“West...” The agonized rasp in Michael’s voice tugged at him. It sounded like he was one frayed thread away from losing control. His head was bent, hands fisted at his sides so hard that the veins in his forearms bulged.

West went to him. Without hesitation, he walked right into his arms. Michael needed him. Nothing else seemed to matter.

Michael’s arms came around him hard, yanking him close and folding his larger frame around him like he could shelter him from the world. West’s nose was still bleeding, but he didn’t care. He wrapped his arms around Michael’s waist and squeezed, hugging him as hard as he could, damn near holding him up as Michael buried his face in his neck.

“It’s okay,” West whispered, threading his fingers through his hair and cradling his head. “I’m okay. I didn’t need to be saved.”

“Dear God, don’t make me do that again,” Michael gasped, crushing him in his arms and kissing his neck, his hair, his battered face. “I can’t lose you.”

West’s eyes stung, but he managed a wobbly smile when he promised, “You won’t.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

West slept through the ride home, stirring only at the sudden silence when Michael cut the engine. The moon was the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes, hanging fat and silver in a cloudless night sky. He blinked, and the light was blotted out by the dark silhouette of a cowboy bending over him.

Michael lifted him from the truck with barely more strain than a low, steady exhale. The scent of sage and cedar wrapped around West like a warm blanket, and he breathed deep. He'd missed that scent. Missed everything about him.

"I can walk," West protested groggily, torn between stinging pride and the desire to close his eyes and rest his head against Michael's shoulder.

"I know you can. But you're sore, and I want to do this for you. So let me." Michael's reply was gruff and a little winded as he climbed the porch steps.

West didn't want to argue. He was stiff and aching, and the night was so cold he could see Michael's breath hanging in the air like a puff of smoke. It was the darkest part of night, not long before dawn began to carve up the horizon, and the Triple M was dead quiet. Not even insects stirred; they were already buried deep to overwinter and dream of spring.

The Trophy Club was locked and West was weaving on his feet by the time Eli's deputies had finished taking statements. Since he was in custody, they'd transported Sutter to the hospital against his wishes, but West had refused. Pain was like an old, unwanted friend by this point: familiar and not going away any time soon.

Michael managed the knob with his elbow and kicked the door shut behind him, loud enough to wake the dead. The kitchen was empty, but the scent of fresh paint and old coffee still lingered.

West tracked the changes to the house. Art was back on the walls, and throw pillows were piled on top of a soft-looking rug by the fireplace. Mary Whittaker's portrait still sat on the mantle, but he did a double-take at the frame sitting next to it. It wasn't fancy, just a polished wood frame carved with thick, twisting vines. But the photo inside was something special.

“That’s us,” he blurted.

Michael tracked his gaze and grunted. “The day you helped Abby catch her first bass.”

“Where is she?” West asked, finally rousing himself enough to notice she hadn’t accompanied her father into town.

“I dropped her at Cel’s when Eli called,” Michael said, navigating the furniture by moonlight.

West cringed with guilt. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. That’s what we do for family.”

West didn’t know how to reply. All his choices sounded too serious or too flippant, and both options were equally embarrassing. So, he didn’t say anything. His head hurt, and it was easier to close his eyes and sink into the cradle of Michael’s arms.

He’d assumed their destination was the bedroom, but Michael bypassed the door and headed toward the back of the house. The chemical tang of chlorine stung his nose,

and he sniffed.

“Where are we going?”

“I have something to show you,” Michael replied, cutting through the laundry room and out the door that opened onto the back patio. He flipped a switch and flooded the area with light. There had never been much to look at out here, just a barren lot of scrub grass that Michael planned to turn into a swimming pool one day.

Now an enormous hot tub sat atop the concrete, surrounded by hand-carved benches and a cushion of non-slip mats. It was large enough to fit half the ranch staff without getting fresh, and there were so many dials and therapeutic jets that it looked like it had fallen off the back of a spaceship.

West’s jaw fell open.

“What is all this?” he asked, so shocked that he barely noticed when Michael set him on his feet and went to fiddle with the dials on the control panel.

“I know you had plans for your sock drawer,” Michael said wryly, “but this seemed like a better choice. You’ll need it when you start riding again.”

“I don’t understand.”

Michael didn’t reply, but he drew West over to the side of the tub and began working methodically at his buttons.

He’d never looked so handsome. His threadbare shirt and worn jeans clung to his body, and his jaw was dark with a few days’ worth of scruff. His hair was ruffled like he hadn’t stopped to run a comb through it once Eli called, and the hollows beneath his eyes were smudged gray. He looked exhausted. Beyond exhausted. Weary to the

damn bone. It hurt to look at him, but somehow, West couldn't force himself to look away.

"You look tired," he blurted, and then he felt foolish. Of course, he was tired. He'd been yanked out of his bed in the middle of the night to come and take care of him.

Michael's smile was barely a ghost, there and gone, as he cupped West's cheek in a gentle palm. He searched his face, taking in the bruised mess without flinching, and said, "You look beautiful."

West's expression went wobbly, and he jokingly glanced over his shoulder as he said, "You must mean some other guy."

"He broke your nose again." Michael's gaze was solemn, his fingers deft as they stripped West's bloodied shirt from his body. The night was frigid enough to sting.

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West shivered, touching the swollen bridge of his nose self-consciously, and said, "Don't matter. Not like this nose was winning any prizes."

"He could have killed you."

The barely leashed rage in Michael's voice shook him, and he realized that he was still barely hanging onto his fragile control. Whatever he said now, he had to choose his words with care.

"He might have tried," West acknowledged, wrapping his arms around his bare torso. He felt like a plucked turkey, standing there without his shirt on, all pale and goose pimply. "But I don't think he could have taken me in a fair fight."

"You think a man like Ronald Sutter would keep it fair?" A pulse was beating wildly beneath Michael's jaw, and his fingers bit deep into West's shoulders.

"No. But Derek fights dirty as hell, and he taught me how to defend myself back when I was nothing but a toothpick. I know I don't look like much, Michael. But even I can handle a boozed-up oaf."

"You shouldn't have had to," Michael rasped. His expression was twisted like he was reliving some horror that only he could see. "Do you know what it did to me to watch that? To just stand there and let him hurt you?"

He'd begun to tremble again; West could feel it where he gripped his shoulders. Fine tremors ran between them wherever they touched. West had never seen him so undone. Slowly, as if he were approaching a lost calf, West rested one hand flat on

his chest. His heart was thundering beneath his palm.

“It’s freezing, and I’m hurting so bad even my toenails feel bruised,” West said, as calmly as he could manage. He tipped his head toward the frothing water and asked, “Will you get in with me?”

Michael didn’t refuse, but he didn’t make a move toward the water either. He just looked at West, struck silent, with an expression so full of pain that West could hardly bear it. His hands shook as they grabbed the hem of Michael’s shirt and lifted it, and that seemed to pull Michael from his waking nightmare. He looked at West—really looked at him—with those intense, burning eyes of his.

Bending his head, he peeled off his own shirt in one fluid motion, and then he fisted a hand in West’s waistband and hauled him close. He popped the button on his jeans one-handed, stripping them both so efficiently that West thought their clothes might have just fallen off.

“Alley-oop,” he said, lifting West over the lip of the tub. The water was so hot it stung his chilled flesh, and he hissed.

Michael stepped into the tub behind him and settled on a corner bench. West hesitated, considering the open seats. He desperately wanted to sit beside him, but he wasn’t sure what was happening and didn’t want to misread the situation. He’d already embarrassed himself in front of this man in every conceivable way.

Michael solved his dilemma by wrapping one arm around his waist and easing him down into the V of his legs. West closed his eyes and settled back against his rock-hard chest with a sigh.

It was easier to talk now that they weren’t facing each other, and after soaking in the silence for a few minutes, West said, “You weren’t letting him hurt me, you know

that, right?"

"Sure looked like it from where I was standing," Michael said roughly.

"You trusted me to take care of myself. You'll never know what that meant to me," West said, reaching up and clasping the hand resting on his chest.

Michael laced their fingers together and squeezed hard. "I do trust you. But I need to take care of you, too. That's what you do for someone you love—you protect them."

"Even when they don't need it?" West asked.

"Even then," Michael said. "It wasn't your fight. Sutter's problem was with me. He should have come after me directly."

"Naw." West felt like he was trying to smile, but his mouth didn't want to move properly. "It works both ways. I wasn't going to let him anywhere near you. Besides, he's a coward. He only went after me because he thought I was an easy target."

"You're not."

"No," West agreed, almost apologetically, "I'm really not."

"That's what he said," Michael said, clearing his throat. "Your dad, I mean. When you were in the hospital. I don't know what I was looking to hear. Maybe something that would help me understand everything you've been through. But maybe what I was really hoping for was justification for wanting you to quit the rodeos."

West hesitated, then craned his head around to look up at him and asked, "Did you get it?"

“Not really. He told me how hard they’d worked to keep you safe your whole life, and how all it did was make you and everyone around you miserable. I was so angry with you for keeping such an important thing from me. I didn’t want to see your point of view.” Steam was gleaming on Michael’s unshaven jaw, flashing in the moonlight when he swallowed. He looked out toward the black stamp of mountains in the distance.

“Michael...I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

“I hated keeping it from you. I was just so afraid of what it would do to us. And...and I was right. Wasn’t I? You couldn’t handle it.”

Michael sighed and tipped his head back to look up at the stars. “Your dad said something else that day, and it stuck with me. He asked if it was going to hurt any less if I broke it off. For a while, I thought it would. I thought I was preserving what’s left of my heart. But if you got hurt someday and I wasn’t there for you...it would gut me. I don’t think there’d be anything left of me after that. I’d spend the rest of my life thinking just one thing. What if I could have had one more day with you? One hour? I’d fit a lifetime in those minutes if I had the chance.”

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West gently pulled away, just enough for Michael's hold to loosen, and then he swiveled in his arms. He needed to look him in the eye to make sure his words landed when he said, "I want to protect you, too. It doesn't matter that you're the strongest person I know. I don't want you to go through the pain of losing someone you love ever again. I want to be the one you can lean on. The one where you know your heart is safe."

"God, West..." Michael brushed his fingertips over West's injured cheek, gently combing his hair back from his temple. He cupped the back of his head and pulled him forward, resting their foreheads together, and whispered, "I wasn't able to save Mary. You can't ask me not to protect you. My heart can't take it."

West let out a wounded grunt and cradled his face in his hands. His voice cracked when he said, "If there's one thing this heart of mine has taught me, it's that there's no guarantees. I've already made it farther than the doctors ever thought I would, and it looks like I'm here for the long haul. I've got a lifetime of hours and minutes to fill. We do. I want to spend some of it busting broncs and seeing what I'm made of because I never got that chance. But I want to spend all of it with you. Living. Not just surviving. Can you handle that?"

"Loving you is the riskiest thing I ever did," Michael rasped, burying his face in West's neck. "It scares me to fucking death."

West held him close, wishing he could squeeze the hurt right out of him. "I won't take any crazy risks. Never again. I promise. You've just got to keep trusting me like you did tonight."

Michael pulled back and clasped his head between his hands, a bedraggled mess with desperate eyes. “I don’t want to lose you,” he rasped, kissing him hard.

“I’m here. I’m right here. I’ll stand by your side forever if you let me.” West pulled back, grabbed Michael’s wrist, and pressed his hand flat against his own chest. Right over the steady beat of his heart. “Feel that? I may have been born with only half a heart, but it’s all yours.”

The smile that broke across Michael’s face was like a sunrise. He’d seen it countless times before, but it was so beautiful he couldn’t look away, not even for a second, because he was sure he’d never see something so utterly perfect ever again.

“I love you,” Michael whispered, kissing him. “I love you so much that it fucking breaks me.”

“Then I’ll be right here to hold you together,” West murmured, kissing him again, tracing his unshaven cheek with his fingertips. “You’re my family, Michael. You and Abby. You always have been. Being with you is all my dreams come true, for however long you’ll have me.”

“Forever?” Michael asked, searching his eyes.

Fat, hot tears welled, and for once, West couldn’t act fast enough to pinch them away. They spilled on the first blink.

“Hey, now,” Michael whispered, tracing the wet tracks with both thumbs. “Don’t cry, baby. I thought you’d figured it out by now. You’ve been a part of me for so long that I can’t tell where I end and you begin.”

He cupped West’s face in both hands, careful of his injuries, and drew him in for a kiss that started out gentle. Before either of them had drawn a breath, it turned sweet

and deep, sinking right into West's soul and warming him from the inside out.

"You don't want to keep living in sin?" he teased brokenly once they came up for breath.

There was an answering twinkle in Michael's blue eyes.

"Nah," he joked, taking West with him as he relaxed back against the therapeutic jets. "I already bought this tub as your wedding present. It's no gold ring, but I wanted it ready whenever you need. It'll be great for working on those sore muscles after a rodeo...and I'll be right there to ease everything else."

Speechless and overwhelmed, West pulled his head forward, kissing him with force. He thrilled at the warm breath of laughter that fluttered into his mouth, losing himself to it, and only resurfacing a long, long time later when Michael tucked his head against his wet chest.

They drifted together, warm and peaceful, until Michael nudged the top of his head with his chin and whispered, "I'm sorry it took us so long to get here, but I wouldn't trade the journey for the world. You're my best friend, West Owens, and I promise to love you with everything I've got for the rest of our lives."

"That's going to be a long time," West teased. "Sixty years, at least."

"Will you love me just as long?"

"Longer," West promised, meaning it with every beat of his whole heart.

EPILOGUE

They were cheering for him this time.

Kade Keller was dead, and all it had taken was an old, broken rodeo man named Jasper Owens to help bury him. Once the secret was out, West's father had taken a keen interest in his riding. It was the first thing they'd ever shared. He'd never been so lively during Sunday dinners, leaning over a plate of spaghetti and jabbing at West with his fork to get a point across. Even so, it had taken months before West got up the nerve to ask the question that had been plaguing him.

"How come you never said anything?"

His father had been sitting on a stool out in the garden, bracing himself on his cane and hacking at clumps of errant pigweed. It was the most activity he'd done in months.

"About you riding?" he'd asked, squinting off into the distance. "I wanted to let you find your own way. You're a grown man, and taking on those broncs was the first thing you ever did without our permission. I blame myself and your mother for that. She coddled you, and I was too wrapped up in my own hardships to care. The least I could do was give you space. But I never could figure out why you'd put yourself through hell just to purposely lose."

West stared at him agape for so long that his father threw back his head and laughed for what felt like the first time in years. It was a deep belly laugh; the kind that triggered nearly forgotten childhood memories.

"How did you know?" West asked.

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His father's eyes twinkled. "You were born with a faulty heart, but there's nothing wrong with your brain. You expect me to believe you can't find a mark out line?"

A slow flush of shame had crept up West's neck as he admitted, "I didn't want word getting back home. Besides, it was never about winning."

"What was it about?"

"Proving that I was stronger than you."

West had never heard such a loud silence. It had echoed in his ears until he thought he might go deaf with it. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he steeled his jaw and risked a glance in his father's direction. He'd expected anger, or maybe pity. Anything other than what he got.

His father had looked stunned. His face was slack, and his mouth moved, but it took a couple of tries before he finally spoke. Even then, it was just to blow out a hard breath and mutter, "For fuck's sake, son."

West couldn't help but laugh. He'd run through the nightmare of that conversation hundreds of times, and not once had he ever imagined such a response.

His father had stared down at his hands, flexing his knobby fingers, still thick with calluses that would never fade, and said the words West had been longing to hear his whole life.

"They cut you open so many times when you were a kid, and you never let it break

you. All that pain and sickness didn't turn you into something less. But me? I fell to pieces as soon as my body couldn't do everything I expected, and I let that bitterness infect the whole damn family. Strong. Ha!" He began to laugh. "You're stronger than all of us."

Those words had killed Kade Keller for good.

Now there was only West Owens, prodigy son, and he was ready to show the world what he could do.

"Are you sure about this?" Hank asked skeptically, eyebrows twisting like caterpillars as he watched West climb inside the chute. "I don't want you to be shamed on your home turf, son."

West just grinned and bit off a piece of athletic tape before wrapping it around his glove. He still didn't look like a bronc buster. No Stetsons and chaps for a country boy like him, just a pair of dusty jeans and his old Smarty the Steer hat, faded from washes and turned backward over hair that needed a trim. Michael had finally dug his lucky cap out of the irrigation pit before closing it up, and West had barely taken it off since.

He'd never been so fresh before a rodeo, but then, he'd never been to one so close to home. The county fair came like clockwork every spring, drawing cowboys from all over eastern Oregon for low-stakes fun, and the stands were packed full of locals. It was the first time he'd ridden since his secret got out, but not for lack of interest. He'd just been busy living life, settling into his new roles as a business owner and family man.

Gus retired shortly before Christmas, claiming that he wanted to take Mable on a whirlwind European tour while they still had the knees to do more than shuffleboard. Michael had fronted West the money to purchase the shop, and the first thing West

did was order a dozen more garden gnomes. Jimmy handled all the deliveries these days, saving West's back for the more important labor that came with living full-time at the Triple M.

He and Michael had married in a small, private ceremony just before the new year, giving August French the opportunity to gather all his courage and wear his best suit down at the courthouse. Neither of them had wanted to make a big show of it. That wasn't them. Abby carried a small spray of pink roses and wore her prettiest dress, one with pockets for the rings that she gleefully placed in her father's big hand when he reached down for them.

West had never been an ambitious man. He was a small-town boy with small-town dreams, but when he slid that thick gold band past Michael's knuckle, he knew deep in his heart it was the most important thing he'd ever accomplish, in this life or the next.

That night, they had the ranch completely to themselves. The chores had all been finished early, and the crew had vanished only after setting a glowing array of lanterns and candles all over the front porch. A bucket of ice and champagne sat on a tray beside a carafe of hot coffee, and pillows and blankets were piled into a velvet nest.

They cuddled together as the sun went down over the snow-covered mountains. They made love as the clouds shook out fat, lazy snowflakes, and West finally learned what it felt like inside Michael's body. He memorized the precise moment Michael's breath turned ragged, the way the muscles in his back twitched, how vulnerable his nape looked as he writhed and groaned into a pillow.

Afterward, it was West who cried. He lay there, cradled in Michael's arms, with tears scalding his icy face.

“Why are you crying?” Michael asked, brushing his knuckles over West's damp cheeks.

West caught his hand and laced their fingers together, examining the gleam of their rings in the lamplight.

“Just thankful,” he whispered. “By my count, we still have another fifty-nine years and eight months of nights just like this. At least.”

“Well, not exactly like this,” Michael teased, shifting until his thickening erection slid between West's thighs.

“It will be the same in the only way that matters,” West insisted. “No matter how hard things might get, if you're here with me, I'll always be exactly this happy.”

Michael brought his hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the warm metal of his ring. Then his hand. His wrist. The inside curve of his elbow. When Michael reared up over him and pressed him down into the blankets, West closed his eyes and gave himself over to the cowboy who had always owned him, body and soul, from the very first time their eyes met.

That cowboy now stood apart from the crowd on the bleachers, hat tipped low and hands tucked deep inside the pockets of his shearling-lined jacket. Abby sat on the bleachers nearby, tearing chunks off a bright blue puff of cotton candy and occasionally offering a piece to West's father, who accepted with a grimace. Both James and Susan had brought their families, and Bethie and her new boyfriend had traveled all the way from Salem, so the Owens clan filled out two rows on their own. Only Derek and their mother hadn't shown.

“I'll be there in spirit,” West's mother had said, scrubbing at her teary eyes with the backs of her hands, “but I just can't watch my baby put himself in harm's way. Not

when I worked so hard to keep him safe.”

West didn't begrudge it. That woman's big, strong heart had kept his own pumping for years. It deserved to be sheltered now.

“You couldn't have drawn a bigger SOB,” Hank remarked as he stared down the agitated stallion inside the chute. “Ain't a single man who's been able to ride him since his debut.”

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“Guess he was just waiting for me,” West joked, straddling the chute and grinning breathlessly down at the animal.

Whiskey Foxtrot was bright red from tip to tail except for two white streaks on his front fetlocks. He’d already rammed a handler into a fence post just getting into the chute, and now the only thing keeping him calm was the low, soothing flow of nonsense coming from the cowboy tightening his rigging.

West leaned in and rested one hand against the stallion’s glossy neck, attuned to the way his skin and muscle twitched like a live wire.

“Easy, now,” West murmured, giving him a slow, easy stroke. “Save that fire for the arena. We both have something to prove, you and me.”

Except he didn’t feel like he had much to prove anymore. Something had changed that winter, and he didn’t know if it was him or his family. They all seemed to breathe a little easier around each other after the blow-up between him and Derek. Like steam let off a pressure cooker just before it was ready to explode.

West wasn’t riding to show up his father, and he didn’t care about proving to Derek how much pain he could take. Riding wasn’t about any of them. Not anymore.

It was just about West and eight seconds of pure freedom.

“Whooooeeeee! Give ‘em hell, ol’ son!” Aiden shouted from the stands, one arm slung over Celia’s shoulders. Cal sat beside him, snuggled up beneath Eli’s arm, looking more at peace than West might have expected for a man whose own career had been

cut painfully short. When he caught West glancing in his direction, he just grinned and winked.

West didn't mind the attention for once.

He poured himself onto Foxtrot's back like he was made of water, snugging his knuckles into the handle and flexing so far back that his shoulders damn near touched the stallion's rump. Even from all the way across the arena, West caught his father's hairy eyeball. He laughed and pointedly slipped his heels clear of the mark out line. Jasper nodded, just once.

It was a cool day, but West was already sweating, and his breath was starting to come in quick little pants. Just nerves. His pulse was quick but steady as a drum, just like always these days.

Right before he gave the nod, he slid Michael a quick glance beneath his lashes. Just to make sure he was watching. If Michael believed in him, no one else mattered.

Like he'd been waiting for it, his husband instantly caught his gaze. Even beneath the shade of his hat, his eyes were so shockingly blue that West felt his bones burning. Slowly, Michael raised one hand and pressed it flat against his own chest. Right over his heart.

West copied the motion, feeling the powerful beat of his own heart beneath his palm, and mouthed one word across the arena.

Yours.

A slow, secret smile touched Michael's mouth.

West nodded, and the gate sprang open.

He was going to win a buckle, but win or lose, it didn't matter. He'd done the impossible and found the courage to live his dreams. He'd roped the catch of the county, and he'd ridden him all the way to their own happily ever after.

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