



His Cowboy

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Category: Romance, Western, M-m Romance

Description: When Perry, a hopeful vet student, sets foot on the Triple R ranch, he's seeking info on a horse sold years ago. Little did he dream he'd reunite with her—and discover a place to call home.

For Reese Kingsley, Triple R's owner, the mystery of why he held onto that mustang mare for five years becomes crystal clear with Perry's arrival. Perry belongs to him, and Reese is determined to stake his claim.

His Cowboy is a sweet, with heat romance between two cowboys. This opposites attract romance includes a grumpy cowboy, an optimistic sunshine young student, and a found family.

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Prologue

Reese

Five years ago

I had not a clue what I was thinking. I was supposed to be making smart business decisions, not impulsive ones. The thought circled in my mind as I backed up the trailer. I had driven over five hundred miles to pick up a grade horse that had no pedigree, no formal training, and no business being on my ranch. My goal was to build a world class training facility for high class performance horses. I was well on my way to making that a reality. So what was it about the online ad that had me driving across the state to pick up a horse?

Fuck if I knew.

But here I was. Sure, it was nice to take the trip in silence. I had driven straight through the day before, then stayed the night at a hotel. Today I'd be taking my trailer to the home that I would be picking up the horse from. Then straight home after that. Normally when I purchased horses, they were from superior bloodlines and they were young animals. Or they were born right at my farm, from a dame and stud I'd handpicked. More often than not, I simply just kept the horses that were bred on my ranch and raised them up the way that I liked. But this horse was a ten year old Kiger Mustang—which was great, but I didn't raise Mustangs.

I hadn't even told my family or staff the whole truth about where I was going. I didn't need them talking me out of this. Or maybe I did, but I wasn't ready for it. Something

about the ad had called to me so here I was.

I pulled into the drive to find a massive house, more like a mansion really, and an impeccable barn with a riding arena. Someone had once enjoyed horses here. There was a for sale sign in the yard with a sold placard on it. The realtor was the kind that catered to the rich and fancy types.

Had the owners got tired of their horses and shipped them off? Well, I couldn't complain too much if I was simply rescuing a horse that would normally be tossed aside, even if it was an expensive trip for me to make for a horse that wouldn't make me any money.

The white stone of the drive crunched under my dirty boots. A man wearing a three piece suit exited the house and made his way over to me. He shook my hand and sent me a fake smile.

"Thanks for coming out this way. We've got the horse in her stall. We can get her loaded up for you and be on your way."

Good. I didn't have use for small talk, and I doubted I would have anything in common with the owners of this place. I suspected this man wasn't the owner, probably just a lawyer or assistant or something, meant to stay behind and clean up loose ends.

"Sure thing," I said. I appreciated that I wouldn't have to linger around with any small talk. This place definitely didn't give off the welcoming vibe, and I wasn't looking to make new friends today anyway.

The horse was exactly as advertised. Though she seemed a bit skittish. She was a deep sorrel, with a patch of white on her back right leg. A bright white star was on her forehead, barely visibly under her thick forelock. I brushed her mane aside so I

could see the freezebrand on her neck. Those were on every Mustang captured by the Bureau of Land Management. Hers matched the paperwork provided to me.

She danced around and pawed at the dirt while I looked her over.

“She’s probably just nervous with all the moving vehicles we’ve had in and out of here the last few days,” the man said with a chuckle.

I could tell by the way he handled her lead that he was not a typical horse person. Was he even the owner of this house? Did I care? No.

She would calm down soon enough once I got her home. The tension around here was thick in the air, and she likely sensed it. I gave her a gentle pat on her neck and pulled her into the trailer. Though it took some doing to finally get her in there. A lot of coaxing and a ton of patience.

I spent nearly twenty minutes just standing with her outside the open doors of the trailer. She wouldn’t move an inch and she kept looking toward the house.

“You want me to grab the whip? I thought I saw one out there in the tack room,” the man asked.

I cringed at the thought. “Nope. Just give me a minute.”

“Is this going to take much longer? Mrs. Kensey isn’t going to like the driveway blocked up like this.”

“It’ll take how long it takes.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Apparently the niceties were a front, and now I was irritating the man.

I didn't care.

I shot him a glare. Something in my look must have told him to back down. It didn't take much.

I got the horse into the trailer and closed it up. The faster I was on the road, the better.

"Much obliged," I said to the man, but only out of politeness. This horse needed out of this environment.

Just as I rounded the corner to double check the locks on the trailer, the door to the house burst open and a young man, who couldn't be much older than eighteen, ran out. "No! Stop!" he screamed.

A woman followed behind him and gripped his arm. "Perry, you get back in this house right now, or so help me God I will call the vet and have that horse put down faster than you can blink."

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The woman holding him back had her hair done up with fancy curls pinned on her head, her face caked with makeup to cover the wrinkles brought on by old age.

“Mom, please. She’s mine. That was Dad’s gift to me, please!” The kid turned his gaze on me. “Sir, don’t take her. Please.”

“Perry, that horse is sold already. The paperwork is done. Forget about it. You’re going off to school. You can’t take care of her.”

“I can! I just—Please!” He looked to me again.

“Best be on your way,” the lawyer said to me. “Perry will get over it. Divorce is never good on the children, but he’s old enough now that he’ll bounce back.”

I didn’t quite get his logic, but it wasn’t my place to argue.

The woman pulled Perry’s arm, her manicured nails digging into the skin. The young man’s eyes bore into mine.

The woman was right, the sale was done. The paperwork I had received proving that the horse did belong to her was legit. I always checked that sort of thing. If this kid was under age when the horse was gifted to him, it was possible that he just didn’t have the right paperwork.

“You aren’t going to be able to afford to care for a horse once I kick your ass out of this house anyway, Perry. You have no business with it.”

His shoulders slumped, and the fight left him.

His gaze turned toward her and the icy glare he sent her could freeze the dessert. He didn't say a word as he pulled his arm from her grip and walked back inside.

Chapter 1

Reese

I was pulled from my dream, reluctantly. Not that I enjoyed reliving the day that I picked up Blossom, but the memory was never too far away in my mind. It was the day that shifted my world in ways that I hadn't ever analyzed. Even though it had been five years since that day, I still thought about it nearly daily.

My phone rang incessantly, pulling me out of my dream and into the waking world. I didn't need to answer it in order to know what I was being woken up by. My brother wouldn't call me on this day because he knew how late I had stayed up dealing with a difficult birth of one of our brood mares, unless...

That damn horse.

I guarantee she had gotten out again. I swear no matter how high the fence or how hot the wire or where we put her on the property, she found a way to navigate out at least once a month. She never wandered far, but she made a menace of herself.

If I thought a rider could actually take her through a course, I'd turn her into an event jumper. Blossom would excel there. If she was willing to accept a rider. So far I hadn't found one, though she had been sold to me as broke to ride.

I threw my blankets off me and realized that I had crashed in my bed still wearing my barn clothes. Great. Momma would be just finishing breakfast right now, and I'd have

to ask nicely that she clean my bedding today. Though she had long ago retired from her work as a professional rider, and since my father passed away she had no need to work, she still came to the ranch and provided the hands and myself with breakfast, lunch, and sometimes dinner each and every day. We paid her for her work, of course, not that she enjoyed taking the money. And since she was here throughout the day, she took it upon herself to continue to take care of the house and me.

I was blessed, I knew it.

I pulled off my shirt, realizing that it stank just a bit from the night before. The only reason I was still asleep was because I had been awake until the early hours of the morning helping a mare deliver twins. Both survived, but just barely. They weren't out of the woods yet, and I would be making a call to the vet as soon as I had time.

Out the window gave me a beautiful view of the ranch. My room faced the drive, and I could see the barn and several of the paddocks as well as the outdoor riding arena. I couldn't quite see the back paddocks or inside the barns, but that was what I had cameras for.

My brother, Rory, was walking across the drive, and he looked up at the window just then, as if he could sense me there. "Get your ass down here and catch that horse before I kill it, Reese. I swear to all things fucking holy, I will ship this horse out of here today." Dust kicked up around him, almost looking like there was smoke coming from his ears.

I chuckled to myself. Rory didn't like Blossom. Not many did. Most days I wasn't sure if I did. This was her home though, and no matter the trouble she caused, I wasn't going to send her away.

A car pulled into the drive. An old beater I didn't recognize. Dammit. Had that horse been in the road and caused an accident? She never had so far, but that was the last

thing I needed. If she was going to get in the road, then we would have to get rid of her. Though my heart hurt at the thought of it. Not that it really mattered. I was holding on to that horse for Perry. Perry didn't even know who I was. Hell, I didn't know where he was, and why his face stuck out in my memory so much. The boy had been barely eighteen when I first met him. I'd never even exchanged words with him. Yet I kept his horse as if he was just going to arrive one day.

Of course now when I pictured him, the image was that of a grown man, aged five years, but still with quite the young baby face I had seen that day.

I took the stairs two at a time, pulled on my boots, and walked outside. I didn't pay any mind to the car that was there. I wasn't fit for dealing with people right then.

"Where is she?" I shouted at Rory.

"Fuck if I know. She's just not in her paddock. She's probably running amok, terrorizing the stalls and getting into the fucking grain like she did last time."

She was a mischief maker. The name Blossom didn't quite fit her. She was anything but a delicate flower. She was more fitting to She-Demon or something along those lines Maybe Medusa. Her snort could stop a person in their tracks.

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Last time she escaped, she had somehow gotten into the barn and unlocked every single stall before we finally caught her. The rest of the horses had kicked their way free, wreaking havoc throughout the entire barn. It had been a mess of a day. In hindsight it was funny, but only because we were lucky and no one had gotten hurt. If that sort of thing happened more often, though, our reputation for horse boarding would go down the drain.

That damn horse really was a menace, and she sure as shit didn't make me any money. I didn't have a single rider that could actually saddle her and ride, let alone compete with her. But still I kept her and probably would until her dying day.

“Who the hell is this?” Rory said, and he pointed at the vehicle.

I turned to face the car I had ignored. I about dropped dead at the sight of the boy who filled my dreams nearly every day. I didn't have the chance to say a single word though, because just as he stepped out of his car, Blossom burst through the barn doors at a full run.

Perry moved away from his vehicle—the exact opposite of what he should be doing. He needed to get back inside where he would be safe from the rampaging horse. Instead he stood, unmoving, as the she-demon of a horse raced toward him.

Chapter 2

Perry

I should not be doing what I was doing. But nothing could convince me to stop now.

I'd spent my entire drive from Virginia to Tennessee telling myself that I wasn't going to drive past the Triple R ranch. The temptation to stop would be too great.

But here I was doing it anyway. Not only driving past, but parking in the driveway with my beat up Ford Escort as if I belonged there. The massive house and impeccable barns told me otherwise. This was a place for people who had money, who had their lives together, not for someone who didn't know when they'd eat next.

Five years ago, my horse had been sold out from under me to Triple R, by my mother—if she could even be called that. At this point she was more an egg donor than anything else. I hadn't spoken to her in over three years. The phone call last month asking if I'd received any paperwork regarding my trust didn't count. I didn't have a trust anymore, she'd stolen that too.

For a few months after I left for college, I tried reaching out to her like the idiot I was. I had been naive then, thinking that perhaps with time my mother could grow to love me like one should love their child, but that never happened. Eventually I gave up.

I put myself through college because my mother couldn't be bothered to use any of her money, which was actually my dad's money, for me. I didn't have access to my trust anymore. It was supposed to come to me when I was twenty-five, and I was just a couple of years from that. She had stolen that too. If I'd had that, I could really afford vet school, maybe pay off all of the student loans I had taken out to get myself to where I was.

I had spent the last five years learning how to live on an absolute shoestring budget. Every cent I earned was saved for the possibility that I would find Blossom and buy her back from the ranch where my mother had sold her. Then I had to board her somewhere and feed her.

Now that I was out of college, and I had a job for a vet who happened to board a few horses on his property, I was really set up in a way that I could finally give Blossom a home. If I could find her.

The Triple R was where she had been sold to on that day five years ago. After that, I didn't know where she went. I hated to think that perhaps she was gone from this earth, but that was a definite possibility as well. Triple R could have sold her to anyone, used her as a broodmare until her body couldn't take it anymore, or put her down.

Over the years I had stalked the Triple R website and read any article I could on the ranch and its owners, brothers Reese and Rory. Reese had been the one to pick up Blossom, I was sure of it. No articles, no pictures, nothing ever mentioned Blossom.

The Triple R catered to roping and reining horses, and while Blossom was great, I wasn't sure that she was a good fit for that life. She and I had mostly done trail riding together, though my mom had hoped I would get into dressage and eventing, since that was more prestigious than just wandering around in the woods.

When I graduated with my undergrad, I had searched the country for a vet clinic to work at. When that search had naturally narrowed down to a fifty mile radius of Triple R... well, that was not my fault.

I was supposed to bide my time. I'd planned to arrive in Sherfield, get situated, and meet the vet I'd be working for in person. I would start meeting the local ranchers and get a feel for the owners of the Triple R. I wasn't supposed to just show up there.

But I couldn't stop myself as I passed by the sprawling ranch. The entrance gate with the Triple R logo hanging over the center beckoned me.

I found myself slowing down my rickety car and turning into the driveway. I stopped

the car and turned it off. A bit of smoke came from the hood, but that was normal. There were shouts coming from somewhere, but this was a working ranch, so I imagined that people were constantly moving about while they worked, shouting at one another about this and that.

A man rushed out the front door. His boots moved quickly on the paved sidewalk toward the barn.

The barn drew my eye when I had been driving down the road, and it was even more impressive in person. The two story, red monstrosity probably had a hundred horse stalls in it. The white trim was pristine and made the red pop. This was a barn they had put money into, and it made a statement.

Everything about the place screamed high class, which was expected considering what Triple R did.

I didn't get a good look at the man, except to tell that he was naked from the waist up. That set me to blushing like the idiot I was. Working my way through college, and saving like I did, meant I didn't have a lot of time for any extracurriculars—dating being one of them. I needed good grades for scholarships. I didn't make friends very easily. I was poor, but I was raised rich so I didn't connect with the poor kids. I didn't connect with the rich kids, because I was no longer rich. I just kept my head down and worked.

I got out of the car, and that's when I heard her whinny. It was a sound that I would never forget. I almost wondered if I was dreaming as she thundered toward me. I stepped away from my car so that I could greet her. This was how it always was, back when I had her. I'd get out of school, go to where she was in the pasture, and she would run full speed towards me, stopping just in time. And then I'd get a hug or at least the horse version of a hug, where she put her head over my shoulder and pulled me closer to her.

That was exactly what Blossom did. She skidded to a halt in front of me, the stones of the driveway giving way to her hooves. Tears pooled in my eyes as I looked her over. She was older now; some grey hairs covered her nose and made their way toward her eyes, and she was a little heftier, but she was exactly as I remembered her.

“Blossom,” I said, my voice just above a whisper. I lifted a hand to touch her face.

“Get away from her before that horse kills you!” a voice called.

I looked over, expecting to see the man I had seen exit the house, but it wasn't him talking to me. I recognized Rory, one of the ranch owners, from his pictures online.

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Blossom put her head over my shoulder and bumped my back so that I was closer to her. I wrapped my arms around her neck and breathed in her scent.

“What the fuck?” the man said. “Who in the hell are you?”

“Hush, Rory,” the other man said.

I took a step back, putting my hands over Blossom’s face, my fingertips trailing down her nose and tickling her lips. “Hi there,” I said. “Do you want to take her back to her pasture?”

The two men looked at one another. The one wearing a shirt shrugged and shook his head. The other nodded. His eyes narrowed as they looked at me, assessing. Probably wondering where the hell I’d come from.

“Where’s it at?” I asked.

“Follow me,” he said. His face looked familiar. But I couldn’t quite place him. I didn’t remember much from the day that she had been picked up. And I never dreamed that I would find her right here. I guess this was just my lucky day.

Chapter 3

Reese

“Boys! Come on into the house,” Momma called from the front porch. It was amazing that we could hear her from where we were at, but she had many years

experience shouting for us to come inside. Old habits died hard.

Rory looked at his watch.” We best get in for lunch, or she’s gonna holler again.”

I nodded and looked to Perry. He seemed to just stare at Blossom as she ate her grain. We had her tucked away in her stall now, where she could stay for a while. Later she’d go out for her afternoon exercise.

“You might as well come inside as well. I suppose we have a lot to talk about,” I said.

He snapped his gaze from Blossom to me, then looked down at the ground like he couldn’t quite meet my gaze. He nodded, though, and followed when I turned to leave. We trudged our way back to the house and went inside. I slipped off my boots and reached for my hat to put on the hook, only to realize it wasn’t there.

“Goodness gracious, Reese, you’re not even wearing a shirt. Did y’all have to chase that horse down again?” Momma asked as we stepped into the dining room. Perry followed behind Rory and I.

“Yeah, Momma, she got out.”

Rory and I sat down at the table Momma already had set for lunch. It was a large spread, as always. The extras would go to our bunkhouse that the ranch hands lived in.

“And who’s this?” she said. She smiled wide, ever the welcoming host, as she took in Perry.

Perry had kicked off his boots when we’d walked in, same as Rory and me, and now he stood nervously in the doorway of the dining room. He smiled slowly, the corners of his mouth quivering from nervousness.

“Um, my name is Perry. I just...” He looked to me and to my brother. He cleared his throat. “I, um, I used to own Blossom. Well, my mom did, she, uh, sold her.” There was no hesitation to the smile that split across his face. “I’m just so happy she’s still here.” He let out a breath. “I thought I would just stop and see where y’all sold her to and have to track her down, but she’s here. I can’t believe she’s here.” He cleared his throat.

Poor guy looked about as skittish as a newborn colt.

“Well, aren’t you the cutest,” my mom said.” Come on in, lunch is getting cold.”

“Oh, I don’t wish to intrude, but maybe sometime I can come back and talk to you all about... Well, I’d...” He shuffled his feet, nerves seeming to take over his body and render him speechless.

“Nonsense, you’re here, you helped catch a loose horse, that earns you a meal. Sit,” she commanded in that kind way, leaving no room for argument. “We can talk over lunch. These boys have about an hour break before they need to get back out there.”

She looked to me, her eyes conveying that I needed to play nice and encourage him to come in.

“Come on then,” I said. “She’s going to hound you until you do.”

Momma had the food set out on the table family style as she always did. Rory and I both sat down and began filling our plates. Perry sat down, his eyes widening as he took in all of the fixings for sandwiches.

“Oh wow,” he said. “This is quite the spread.”

Ma’s brow furrowed. “It’s just sandwich fixings and some leftover side dishes from

the past few nights. I did make fresh cookies though.”

“Why aren’t they on the table?” Rory asked.

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“‘Cause I know you boys too well. The cookies won't come out til you finish your plates.”

Momma sat down. She didn't make a plate. She usually ate after we came in.

“We haven't seen you around before. Did you come to the area to see about Blossom then?”

Perry nodded. He started fixing his plate, beginning with a small sandwich. “My mom sold her about five years ago to, um Mr—”

“Reese,” I filled in for him.

“Reese. I've been saving for a long time, hoping that eventually I could track her down and buy her back.” Those words held a lot of weight, and he almost looked like he expected me to slap them down with an immediate no.

“Why would your mama sell a horse that you love so much?” Momma asked.

Perry's cheeks colored. “She wasn't much for animals. After my dad passed away, she tried to get rid of a lot of his things. Blossom would have been mine officially, but I wasn't yet eighteen and I didn't have the money to board her anyway. So, it wasn't like I could have cared for her anyway.”

I bristled at that. I had suspected as much. That woman sold her son's horse out from under him just to line her pockets. I wondered just how much she had taken from him that he didn't even know about. I was tempted to hire an investigator to find out,

though that would be a huge intrusion on his privacy.

“Anyway, I’ve been going to college. I just finished my bachelors degree in animal science. I’ll start vet school eventually, but I happened to get a job with the local vet clinic here and I talked with him a bit about boarding a horse at his place. He said he has room. Is, um, is there any way that Blossom could be for sale?”

“You’re going to be working for Doc Marshal?”

Perry nodded.

“He don’t have but one pasture, and he has two horses on it right now. Blossom’s never been pastured with other animals. She eats them alive,” I said.

“Right.” Perry’s shoulders dropped. “When I had her she was turned out with other animals. She didn’t seem to mind. You haven’t been able to keep her with other horses here?” He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and I wanted to run my thumb over it to soothe the teeth marks.

Rory punched my arm. “This is our chance, man. Let’s get rid of that beast once and for all.”

Perry’s brow furrowed. He didn’t like hearing his horse referred to that way, and honestly, neither did I.

“Where will you be staying, dear? If you’re going to be working for the vet, you must have someplace to live near here.”

Perry’s eyes lit up again. “Oh, I’m renting an apartment in town. Cute little place according to the pictures. Mr. Larson’s the owner. I was lucky, it was the last apartment available.”

We all grew quiet. Momma gasped and put a hand over her mouth.

“What is it?” Perry said and looked around. “I didn’t get duped, did I? I researched the landlord. I talked to him, too. He seemed like a real nice guy.”

“He is,” Momma assured him. “Mr. Larson is a fine man. But you see, there’s only one apartment building in town and...” Momma looked to me as if she couldn’t bear to tell him the news.

I needed to rip this bandaid off. “There was a fire just yesterday,” I said. “The apartment was a complete loss. I’m sure Jay was going to call you today. He’s been busy.”

The color drained from Perry’s face. “Was everyone okay?”

I nodded. “They were able to get the other tenants out, but the building was a total loss.”

“Is there someplace else? Maybe a hotel?” Perry’s voice quivered.

I shook my head.

“There were two tenants that were in the other apartments, and last I heard they were going to be staying with relatives. It’s a small town, sweetie. There’s not a whole lot available as far as motels and such. I’m not even sure if we’ve got empty houses.” Momma laid a hand over Perry’s and squeezed.

Perry bit his lip and pushed his plate away.

“Keep eating,” I said. “You look like you’re about to fall over. Did you have any breakfast today?”

Perry shook his head. “I was going to go straight to my apartment. Maybe stop at a grocery store. I don’t have a big budget for takeout food while I’m on the road. It’s kind of expensive. I skipped breakfast because I had already cleaned out my fridge from my old apartment.”

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Fucking hell. What had this man been through these past five years? And why would his family—his own fucking mother—let him live like this when she was likely living the life of luxury?

“You’ll stay here,” I said.

Mom’s eyebrows shot up, and my brother’s fork dropped to his plate with a clatter.

“He’ll do what now?” Rory said.

“There plenty of room in the house. Perry, you can drive to and from work. The vet clinic isn’t that far away.” Of course, looking at his car I wasn’t sure how much farther it’d make it. “You can take one of the ranch trucks if you need to.”

“I think that’s a splendid idea,” Momma said. “I’ve always said you’re too alone in this house with five bedrooms and no one but you living in it.”

“ I can pay. I—”

“You can see Blossom anytime you want.” I pushed my plate away and stood up from the table. “Thanks for dinner, Mom.”

I didn’t know what the hell I was doing offering a room to man I just met. A man who I couldn’t stop thinking about for the past five years and who somehow just happened to land in my lap, looking for a horse that I had no business keeping.

But damn, was I glad I got to see that wide smile on his face when he realized

Blossom was here. He didn't have to look anymore. Perhaps that memory could replace the tear streaked face of a teenager who just had his heart ripped out of his chest that plagued me the past five years.

Chapter 4

Perry

When Blossom got picked up all those years ago, my eyes had been filled with tears and I hadn't really seen the face of the man who had picked her up. Of course, I had seen pictures of Reese in the years since then. I knew the name of the ranch that bought her, and I'd seen pictures of him on their website, and on their social media when their horses won the reigning championships and whatnot. But it wasn't until I saw him move and walk that I realized he had been the one to pick up Blossom all those years ago.

And he kept her. Why?

That question whispered its way around my brain all throughout the meal I shared with Rory and Karilyn, his mother.

I finished the meal that Karilyn had provided. Once Reese left the table, it was just me, her, and Rory. She sat down with me, introduced herself, and told me a little bit about the ranch where they all were raised. Rory talked a little bit as well. He told me about the horses they raised here and the things that they did. Most of it I already knew, but it was fascinating to hear more about the ins and outs of the working ranch.

"Is he going to come back?" I asked, looking at his half finished plate of food.

Rory shrugged. "He might."

“I’ll wrap up his plate and toss it in the fridge. He’ll eat it later. Reese makes his own schedule. You just get used to it,” Karilyn said.

Rory snorted. “Yeah, there’s a reason the two of us manage different branches of this operation.”

I must have had a questioning look on my face, because Rory continued.

“We have cattle on the other side of the ranch. Where we are right now, that’s the horse side and then there’s the cattle side. We run the two businesses separately. I manage cattle, Reese manages the horses. We share our resources. If you kept driving down this road a fair bit farther you’d run into my house, where I live with my partners. Stay here long enough, you’ll probably meet them. Pete works in town as a school teacher and Nick works at home.”

“I really appreciate y’all giving me a chance, but I think I’d like to talk with Reese and make sure me staying here is really a good idea. He lives here, right?”

Rory nodded.

“I come in from town every day to make meals for the whole ranch,” Karilyn said. “Reese is in the house all by himself.”

That was what I was afraid of. “I just don’t want to impose.” But where else did I have to go? Right now I was technically homeless.

“Well, your horse is here, you might as well be, too,” Rory said.

“I have to buy her first. Reese would have to agree to sell,” I said. “I don’t even know what she’s worth now. I’m sure you guys have done a lot of training with her—”

Rory pinched his lips closed. His eyes filled with laughter. “Why don’t you go ahead and talk to Reese. That’ll give you a better idea of Blossom’s place around here and the status of her training.” Rory nodded his head toward the front door. “Reese will probably be in the barn somewhere, if you want to talk to him.”

“Excuse me, ma’am. Thank you for dinner. Should I pick up my plate?” I asked Karilyn.

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She waved her hand in the air. “No, no, I’ve got this. That’s what they pay me for.”

I went outside. Not even sure where exactly I was going, but I figured I could start in the barn that had the stables.

Inside the barn, Reese had a horse on the cross ties, picking at her feet.

“Don’t you have full time grooms for this sort of thing?” I asked, though it was none of my business.

He stood up straight, setting the horse’s hoof down gently. He patted the buckskin’s neck. “I do, but every once in a while it’s a nice way to clear my head. Plus I’m taking this one for a ride. If I’m not willing to do the work to get her ready, then I don’t deserve to ride.”

I had heard similar talk in the stables where I had kept Blossom all those years ago, and it was something we had taught the college students when they came to ride the horses at the college stables.

“Sir?” I said.

He shook his head. “Reese. You can call me Reese.”

“I don’t want to impose at all. And, well, I feel like I’m on a rollercoaster ride between finding out Blossom is here and getting to touch her again. And then finding out that my apartment was on fire... I’m worried that at some point I’m going to find out I don’t actually have a job to start.” I laughed, hoping to ease the tension radiating

through my body, but it didn't help.

"You do," Reese said. "I spoke to your boss."

I raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I wanted to understand your schedule better and what will be expected of you."

My brow furrowed. "I need to get my hours in. It's a requirement of my course work in vet school."

"Looking at that car of yours, it's not going to make it to and from town too many more times before it breaks down. I have trucks you can use. That'll work better if you're hauling equipment around anyway. Marshall's thinking about buying another vehicle for the clinic soon."

I shuffled my feet, staring at the concrete floor of the stable, where bits of dirt lay where Reese had cleaned his horse's hoof.

"I can't accept all this. I have nothing to give in return. I mean, I have money saved up to take care of Blossom and to pay my rent. But—"

"Listen, you've got no reason to trust me. Just my word that you can. We don't expect anything from you. Sure, if you want to pitch in around here mucking stalls or bucking hay, we're not going to be opposed. Blossom can stay here. You can stay here until you find a different place and get back on your feet. If you want to move Blossom to another facility, we can talk about that, too."

"She seems happy here." My voice was low and quiet. I kept my gaze focused on the ground, too afraid that if I looked in Reese's eyes I'd burst into tears or throw myself into his arms for a hug.

Reese barked out a laugh. “Oh, don’t let Rory hear you say that. We’ve had a fair bit of trouble with that horse of yours.”

“She’s not mine, sir. You bought her fair and square.”

Reese smiled. “A horse belonging to you and you owning it are two different things. On paper, sure, I own her. But I saw the way she looked at you, the way you responded to her. You belong to each other. No amount of money is going to take that away. No amount of distance, no amount of time.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I finally lifted my gaze to peer into his eyes.

Reese unclipped the horse from the tie, settled his hat on his head. “I suspect it’s the same reason I’ve kept Blossom for this long even though I’ve never been able to get a single person to ride her.”

“And that is?”

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 5

Reese

As I walked into the vet clinic, I pulled off my hat and held it in my hands. Marcy, the lady who kept the office running smoothy, had the phone cradled between her face and shoulder while she worked on her computer. She smiled when she saw me. I still didn’t know quite what was going to come out of my mouth when she was ready to talk to me.

I hardly ever visited the actual vet clinic. They came to me. My operation was large

enough that anything I needed was delivered to the barns or if it couldn't be delivered, then one of my employees picked it up. The vet came to us for weekly visits to do herd health, and when we needed animals seen they came out. The only time I came here was to bring an animal in for surgery. I didn't have an animal with me today.

“Well, hi there, Reese. It's good to see you,” Marcy said once she set the phone down.

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“You too,” I said. “Is Marshall around?” Marshall was the owner of the operation, and based on what I’d learned from Perry, he was the one who had hired Perry. He had been a longtime friend of mine. Not quite a close confidant, but he was a good man and I trusted him.

Just then, he came out of the back room. He was dressed similar to what I was wearing. Cowboy boots, jeans, and polo shirt with the vet logo on there, whereas I had the ranch logo on my shirt.

“I thought I heard your voice and I had to come see for myself. What can I do for you, Reese?” he asked. “I got the supplements you ordered, but hell, I already packed them on my truck, figured they’d be coming out with me on my next trip that direction.”

“The new vet tech you hired arrived this morning. Perry’s living at my ranch right now.” I blurted out the reason for my visit without a second thought.

Marshall’s brow shot up, then realization struck. “Son of a bitch. He was supposed to move into old man Larson’s apartment, wasn’t he?”

I nodded.

“Well shit. I didn’t even put two and two together. Is he all right? That must’ve been a bit of a shock for him to arrive in town without a place to stay.”

“He’s fine. He, uh, stopped at my place before he went into town. Larson hadn’t gotten a chance to call him to let him know about the fire.”

Marshall's eyes narrowed. Meanwhile, Marcy's gaze ping-ponged between us like she was watching a tennis match or a really good soap opera. "What made him come to your place?" There was a slight twitch to Marshall's lips that I didn't care for. It reminded me too much of how much amusement Rory got from this whole situation.

"It's a long story," I said. "You know Blossom."

"That wild ass horse that you insist on keeping even though she is the very definition of a hay burner and an escape artist to boot? Yeah, I've seen her around." He let out a wry laugh.

"Perry owned her before me. I bought her from his mom. He came here to track her down to see who I sold her to."

Marcy gasped as if I just revealed some state secret. "His momma sold his horse? Why would she do that?"

I had my own theories, but I wasn't about to spread any rumors. "Not sure."

"And he tracked her down after five years?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And now he's staying with you?" Marshall said.

"That's right," I said.

Marshall looked me up and down. I didn't flinch or waver under his assessing gaze. "So that's how it is then," he said.

I nodded.

“All right. It’ll be a longer commute for him to come to the clinic, but it won’t be too bad. Plus it will be a shorter drive when we have visits out that direction. Don’t be poaching my employee, though. You’ve talked about having a vet on staff, but I found him first.”

I didn’t have any interest in making Perry one of my employees. I did have an interest in keeping him as safe as possible. “He’ll be using one of the ranch trucks. His own car isn’t worth shit and likely to break down.” First I needed to get him to agree to that plan.

Marshall nodded. “You know, I only met him the one time over a Zoom interview. He didn’t mention a single thing about your ranch. He had said that he owned a horse before. He’s made real good marks in school, although I got the impression that he didn’t have a lot of support from his family and he’s had to work like hell to get himself through school.”

“That’s accurate,” I said.

“Well, once your mom gets him under her wing, he should be all set, then.”

“Yes, that is a fact,” I agreed. Pretty sure my mom already had plans to adopt Perry as her own. Hell, she had already handed over my house to him.

“Well, you let us know if there’s anything we can do for him. I have a good feeling about him, so we plan to take good care of him here.”

“Thanks,” I said. I nodded to both of them, put my hat back up, and left. I still didn’t know what the hell I was doing. What business did I have housing a young man just out of college, ready to start his career? Especially one I had spent the last five years avoiding thinking about.

I arrived home, but I wasn't quite ready to go into the house. I knew Perry would be there. His car had been moved to park right next to where I usually put my truck. That was the spot that most of the time remained empty. Ever since Rory and his partners moved out, and my mother moved to town, it was just me in the house. It was quiet and peaceful in the evenings once the day's work was done.

It was lonely.

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Though it wasn't my job and wasn't necessarily on my list of tasks that needed to get done, I spent a good amount of time that night cleaning the stalls. Finally, when my arms were aching, and I couldn't take it any longer, I knew I had to face the music. I hung up my shovel and walked back toward the house.

Perry was in the kitchen when I arrived. I nodded hello and went to the sink. I scrubbed my hands clean.

"I warmed up a plate for you. Do you want to eat now?" he asked.

I nodded.

We both went to the dining room table and ate our food in silence. Every once in a while, he looked at me like he wanted to say something. Maybe there were some things that I wanted to say, too. Damned if my brain wasn't communicating with my lips to make the words.

When I was finished, I picked up my plate, took it to the sink, rinsed it off, and put it in the dishwasher and retreated to my office.

Chapter 6

Perry

"It's just too good to be true, Blossom." Blossom let out a nicker. Agreeing with me, I was sure.

The wind blew around us, wrapping us in a cool breeze that fought off the heat of the sun. I sat in the pasture, leaning against Blossom. She was lying down on her side and I was sitting just behind her front legs, my head resting on her belly as she breathed in and out.

Back when I was in high school, this was how I studied for most of my tests. I'd grab a book and go out into the pasture. She'd lay down the moment she saw me, and the two of us would sit for hours. More than once, I fell asleep like that.

"You can probably help me study for vet school," I said.

Blossom let out a sigh and a snort, as if she understood me. I knew of course that she did not.

It had been two weeks since I had arrived at the ranch. Things were so incredibly perfect. I loved my job with the vet office. I was busy. There were always places to go and so much to learn. And every night I came home and had dinner with Reese. We didn't say much, but we worked side by side companionably.

I warmed up whatever food his mom had left, then both of us worked on keeping the kitchen tidy.

A lot of times I found him studying me. But whenever I caught him looking, he looked away, or moved to a different room entirely. Slowly, he started hanging out in the living room with me while I studied for things or reviewed notes on my phone from the day.

Tonight was a dinner with everybody there. Karilyn told me that was something she liked to do every so often. I was grateful for it, because I owed these people so much. Eventually I would have to find my own place. I had talked with the landlord and he assured me that he would be rebuilding, but it would be months before that was

ready. He returned my deposit and promised me he would call me right away if something opened up. I didn't know if I had a few months of hospitality to stay with Reese at the ranch, but I hoped that I did.

The bell sounded throughout the area and I got up. Blossom lifted her head for a moment.

"Time for me to go to dinner," I said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Reese was already on his way in when I finally made it out of the pasture. Like I always did when I ran into him, I kept my head low. I couldn't hold back the smile on that day, though. Everything just was perfect. And fun and exciting. It was everything I was hoping my life would be like when I went off to college and got away from my mother.

I swear I almost caught a smile on his face too, but he turned too quickly for me to be sure.

Inside, Karilyn had the table set out. Rory was there with his partners, plus two of our ranch hands that I had met. They were incredibly nice people who were kind and helpful.

Reese sat down at the chair that was his. It seemed that the only one empty was the one directly next to him, so I took it.

"Did we get the horses back out to the southwest pasture this afternoon?" Reese asked.

Turner nodded. "Yes, sir. They were happy as a clam out there with all that fresh clover."

He nodded. “Check them tomorrow. Make sure they’re not overeating. We can put a muzzle on them if we need to. Y’all starting on rebuilding those stalls, like we talked about?”

“Yes, sir. That’s a project for next week. We’ll get started as soon as the materials arrive,” Turner said.

“That’s enough shop talk,” Karilyn admonished. “Perry, have you met Craig and Thomas?”

I nodded and smiled at them. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Great. How are you liking your job?”

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I grinned so wide my cheeks hurt with it, and she smiled right back at me. “I love it. It’s been great.”

“You’ve had an eventful week then?” Rory asked.

“Yeah, I got to assist with a C-section just yesterday on a sheep. That was something I’d never got to see before. And other than that, it’s been mostly physicals and herd health checks. Very interesting work, though.”

“That’s great, honey. Have you gotten a chance to get out and ride Blossom like you wanted to?”

I shook my head. “No, ma’am. I haven’t gotten a chance. I need to get myself a proper saddle. Maybe even some proper riding boots. There was a man named Paul at the clinic picking up some medication, and he mentioned that he has a storefront I can go to.”

Everybody’s head shot up, and they looked at me.

“Oh, he’s a nice man,” Karilyn said. Her heart wasn’t in the words though. It was like she was lying, but she didn’t have quite the same enthusiasm as she usually did.

I nodded. My cheeks burned from the attention. I squirmed a bit. Paul had been nice, albeit a little upfront in the attention he had given me.

“I hope he was kind to you,” Karilyn said.

Turner snickered. “I’ll bet he was. That man don’t hold himself back when there’s a fresh—”

Reese glared, and Karilyn tsked. “Enough talk like that at the table. I’m sure he was plenty polite.”

I grimaced. “He did ask me to accompany him to dinner this weekend, but I declined. Although it was a little tempting. I haven’t been out to dinner at a restaurant in a long time. Marshal mentioned the local steakhouse was great. Is it true they buy all their cattle from the Triple R? Paul said he’d take me if I wanted to go.” Fuck. I needed to get a grip on my mouth.

Reese slammed his fists on the table and pushed himself up. My eyes went wide as I looked at him. He stormed out of the room.

“Did I say something wrong?”

Rory laughed. “No. No. It’s not you. Don’t you worry about it. If you’re interested in going out on a date with Paul, he’ll be a perfect gentleman. But if you’re looking for a happily ever after, I wouldn’t start there.”

“Oh, I’m not.” My cheeks burned as bright as the cherries in the pie Karilyn made for dessert.

Reese came back into the room. “Perry, would you like to go riding with me this weekend? We can take Blossom out, and I’ll show you some of the trails around here that you can use. We can take a picnic basket.”

My jaw dropped. Was I supposed to answer right then and there? In front of everyone?

Everyone else around the table looked at us, waiting with bated breath.

“I... I would like that very much,” I said.

“Great.” He left the room again, and this time we heard the entry door close as he left the house.

We were all quiet for a moment. Finally, I whispered. “Do I have a date with Reese?”

Rory burst out laughing. “Yeah, I think you do.”

Chapter 7

Reese

Saturday evening I waited for Perry out in the barn. I had my own horse, Patches, saddled and ready for our ride. He waited patiently at the hitching post. I tied on the saddlebags, which were packed with two slices of fresh pie, trail mix, and bottles of water. Along with the customary first aid kit in case anything terrible were to happen.

Perry walked out wearing a pair of tight fitting jeans, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt with the vet clinic’s logo on it.

I handed him one of the jackets we kept in the barn. “It’ll keep the mosquitoes off you,” I said.

He smiled, his eyes flashing with such happiness and delight I was ready to hand him anything he asked for if I could just see that smile everyday. “Thanks. Is there a saddle I can use? Which tack belongs to Blossom?”

My chest tightened. I knew he wanted to ride Blossom, but the thought formed a knot

in my gut. She was regularly exercised, so I knew she was fit and able to handle a rider, only I'd never been able to get a rider to stay on her for very long. She wouldn't tolerate it.

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“She doesn’t have tack. We can use just about anything that’ll fit, or we have a treeless saddle.”

“Do you have a hackamore? She never took too nicely to the bit.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sure we’ve got a couple.”

“No tie down either. She likes to have her head.”

I snorted. “That explains why she never took too kindly to me trying to ride.”

Perry grinned. “Has anyone been on her since she’s been here?”

I grimaced. “A few. I have been. Not for the full eight seconds, though.”

Perry bit his lip. His eyes crinkled as he held back the laughter. “It’s just... I can’t imagine you being bucked off a horse.”

“She was listed as broke to ride. I brought her right home, got her settled into the paddock. The next day I saddled her up. She was fine for about half a second. Then she realized I wasn’t you. Threw me off.”

Perry grabbed a saddle and bridle from the tack room. I watched as he worked, not helping him. He seemed to have everything well in hand. Blossom stood patiently as he put the saddle on, tightened it, then put on the bridle. She was calm as can be as he did all of that. Of course, she was like that when I had tried all those years ago. I was still on my guard in case it all went sideways.

We both walked our horses out to the drive, where the road split off to head towards the trails.

“Are we ready?” he asked.

I nodded. I held my breath as he looped the reins over the saddle horn and grabbed on. He put one foot in the stirrup and then hoisted himself up, swinging his leg over. I trusted that he knew Blossom better than any of us, and I’d seen him with her throughout the last week. She was different, calmer when he was around, but there was still that niggling feeling in the back of my mind since I’d seen and experienced first hand what she was like when others had tried to ride.

Perry didn’t have any of that hesitancy. He grinned widely when he was finally seated. He patted her neck and looked at me. “We ready?”

I nodded, shaking my head to myself. His instincts were right. Blossom stood at the ready, her ears forward, showing no signs that she was going to be anything but perfect.

I swung up on the back of my horse and we started on a walk, our two horses walking side by side.

“As much as I would like to be out here for hours riding,” he began, “if Blossom hasn’t had anyone on her back for a while, we might just make a short loop.”

Pride swelled in my chest, though I had no reason to feel that towards him. He was a man who thought of his mount first and that impressed me. “I think you’re right. We’ll take it slow and do the short loop. I can point out a lot of things from here, or when she’s in a better condition, we can go farther. Or if you’d like we could take one of the other horses.”

He scowled at that. "If you ever need someone to exercise any of the other horses when they need a workout, I'm more than happy to do that. But for any recreational riding, I better stick to Blossom."

"She the jealous type?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't think so. More that I'm the loyal type."

"Me too," I said.

We walked for a while. I pointed out the different pastures and what we used them for, and pointed out the different places on the ranch where I liked to go.

Eventually we got to a small pond area. Pond was a bit of a misnomer. It was just a little watering hole where we had a bench setup and a tie post. We dismounted and tied up our horses. Perry pulled a sugar cube from his pocket and gave one to each of them.

"Bribing the animals already?" I asked.

He grinned. "Maybe a little."

He sat down on the bench with me and I pulled the pie out of the saddlebag. "I've got cherry or apple."

"Which one's your favorite?" he said. He eyed both of them hungrily. I knew my mom had pulled out all the stops this week preparing desserts. She'd wanted him to be comfortable in the house, and what better way to do that than to feed him well?

I shrugged. "I can take either one. Or we can share."

“Let’s share.”

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I handed him a fork while I opened each of the containers. We took turns taking a bite from each pie. Both were equally delicious.

I couldn't help but stare when a bit of cherry filling stuck to his upper lip and his tongue swiped over it. Great. I'd be riding home with a hard-on. Not that I'd let him know that. I didn't need to make my house guest uncomfortable.

He stared longingly at Blossom after we'd finished the pie. "I still can't believe she's here. I don't know that I can ever repay you for keeping her."

"I don't need repayment," I said, my arm slipping behind the bench. "It's worth it to see you happy."

"Thank you," he said. He turned to me. Since moving in to the house and spending time with his horse again, color had returned to his face and he'd filled out a bit. I didn't know what sort of diet he'd been on before he got here, but I doubted it was as filling as the home cooking that he was getting now.

He placed a hand on my thigh. His touch was tentative and innocent, not flirty, not overly forward. "I mean it, Reese. She means so much to me. I... I'd almost given up hope that I'd find her again."

My stomach swooped with a feeling of rightness. I'd debated keeping Blossom over the years, but every time I contemplated selling her, I pictured his face when I'd driven off that day.

Now, seeing him with her and the care and love he had for that animal, it was worth

it.

“I kept her for you,” I admitted. “It never sat right with me, the way your mom sold her off. I never felt right with the sale, but that day I knew if I refused to take her she would have found someone else.”

Perry sucked in a breath. “Thank you,” he said.

I saw an opportunity and I took it. I leaned forward, put my thumb and forefinger to his chin, and lifted his lips to mine.

Chapter 8

Perry

The ride back to the house was quiet. Reese pointed out a few more landmarks, and told me a story or two about his life on the ranch and growing up with his brother. I listened, but my mind was still clouded with thoughts.

My lips tingled from the kiss, and I couldn't help but touch them every so often.

Reese sent me more than one glance, a hunger in his eyes that I was sure meant that he wanted me.

I'd never seen that look in someone's eyes before outside the movies. At least not focused on me.

At the stable, we removed our horses' tack, brushed them down, and tucked them in for the night. Blossom stuck her head out her stall window and I kissed her on the nose. When I stood straight and found Reese staring at me with a blank look on his face, my cheeks heated.

He closed the space between us with two steps and swept me into his arms, one hand cupping my cheek, the other arm encircling me and bringing me closer to him. My feet almost lifted off the ground as I stared up at him. My breath caught.

He searched my face for something. I was like putty in his arms. I tilted my face upwards, my lips begging for his.

I had to look more wanton than I ever had before, but I couldn't stop myself. I did want him, desperately.

"Tell me what you want, Perry," he said.

"You," I breathed. "Just you."

He kissed me. My lips molded against his as if we were made for one another. His hands were on my hips holding me against him, and I felt his hardness through his jeans. I couldn't determine where he began and I ended.

I was ready for him to take me right there in the barn, strip me bare and bend me over a bale of hay. I would welcome it. Discomfort and chafing be damned, I wanted him inside me.

Instead, he laced his fingers into mine and walked with me out of the barn. Inside the house, we shucked off our boots and coats. He dropped the saddle bags on the bench in the entry way. Then he led me upstairs. We went past my room and into his.

His room was bright due to the large window that faced the side of the house. From there he could see the driveway and the barn. The walls were painted a simple white. The bed dominated the room. A California King, I think it was called. Ten of me could fit in there.

I couldn't stop staring at it.

"If this isn't something you want, just say the word, Perry, and we'll stop."

"No. I do. I want. You." I took a deep breath, trying to make my mouth work while my heart was racing. "I want you." The words came out with finality, leaving him no question for how I felt.

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Reese pulled off his shirt and jeans, setting them on the dresser. Next he pulled off his boxers and tossed them into the hamper. I just watched. This was the first time I was in a room with a man naked, and I was frozen where I stood.

Those muscular arms had held me. His torso was peppered with dark hair, not thick but definitely there. The skin of his legs was slightly paler than his chest and arms, like maybe he worked with his shirt off sometimes.

“Would you like to join me?” he asked. A ghost of a smile played over his lips.

I nodded, but my hands didn’t move.

His did. He pulled at my shirt, and as if by magic, the buttons gave way to the pressure, unbuttoning but not breaking. Next he unbuckled my jeans and pushed them down my legs. I had enough wits about me to step out of them.

His thumb trailed over my cheek and I looked up at him. Our faces were so close to one another that I felt his breath on my cheek. He pulled me closer, but didn’t capture my lips. Instead he tasted my neck. I moaned and tilted my head back.

Next thing I knew I was flat on my back on his bed. His mouth never left my skin. He trailed hot kisses over my neck and over my pecs. My hips bucked as I sought the friction I needed against my leaking cock.

I reached for myself, hoping to stroke myself to release, but Reese beat me to it. He fisted my cock while lapping at my skin with his mouth. He pulled one nipple into his mouth, then the other, all while his hand worked me over.

It was all too fast, too many sensations all at once for a man who'd never had anyone's hands on him. My cock was impossibly hard and I was so close to release.

"Oh fuck, Reese! I'm going come!" I wanted him to keep going, but also wanted him to stop so I could savor it a little longer. As it was, I was too far gone to stop then. With a few more strokes of his hand, I was releasing spunk on to my stomach. He let go of my nipple and lapped at the warm come covering my abs. I shivered as his tongue trailed over my skin.

After a moment, I reached for him, wanting to return the favor. He stopped me.

"Is this your first time, Perry?"

I blushed.

Reese tucked a finger under my chin and lifted my face until I met his gaze.

I nodded. "It is."

"I'd like to make love to you, please. If you want that."

I nodded. "Yes. Please yes. So much."

"Flip over, baby. This might be easier on your stomach for the first time. I want to make it good for you."

I couldn't find words; instead I pressed my lips to his quickly, then flipped so I was on my stomach. He guided my legs up, so they were pulled underneath me. I relaxed, despite the very vulnerable position I was in. This was Reese and I knew he'd never hurt me. Not intentionally.

The trust I had for him had been building since the moment I drove into the Triple R driveway and found my long lost horse here.

He was gone from the bed for a moment and when he returned, he palmed my ass cheeks and blew a breath over my hole. I shivered at the sensation.

Then his tongue was there, lapping at my entrance. I moaned and buried my face in the pillow. Thank god he couldn't see how red my face was getting. Oh Lord, I had Reese's tongue buried in my ass!

My cock grew hard while the rest of my body turned to jelly. My skin heated, the room feeling like we were in a sauna. My legs quivered until I was sure I was going to collapse into a pile of goo, but somehow they held me.

"Oh, fuck! Reese!" I cried out when he breached me with two fingers. Or maybe it was three. The sensations were all too much, and I couldn't keep track of where he was at any time. I wanted more of him. I wanted all of him.

I became a writhing mess beneath him. Then he was covering me, his chest flush against my back. He kissed my skin and whispered softly to me. I didn't understand the words, but I knew their intention. I relaxed and opened for him, and he slid his cock inside me. He had put a condom on, I'd heard the foil packet. I wished he hadn't, but it was the safest way, obviously.

"Oh, Reese. More. More!"

He pushed inside me, filling me to the brim. Just when I thought I would burst with need, he pulled out.

His thrusts were constant. He pushed me to the edge, then pulled me back again and again. My body quaked with need, and he was close too. His arms shook as he held

himself above me.

“Need you, Reese. Come inside me, please. Need you!”

He thrust hard, one last time, before his hips jerked as he filled the condom. I gripped the sheets and my body clamped down around him.

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It was several long moments before he pushed himself up and slid out of me. I lay there, soaking in the aftermath of my second orgasm. My body had turned to liquid and I could no longer move.

Eventually he came back with wet cloth and he cleaned me up. Then he pulled the sheets from the bed and got us a fresh blanket. We lay down together. I was in his arms again.

“Should I go back to my room?” I meant to keep that in my thoughts, but the words came out, breaking the silence of the room.

“Only if you want to. I want you to stay here, with me.”

“Okay,” I said.

I stayed.

Chapter 9

Reese

I sat down at the kitchen table, my brother settling in next to me like we did most days for our lunches when we were working side by side on the ranch. Only today, he seemed to have a shit-eating grin on his face. It was a look I knew all too well. One that told me I was going to be goaded into something. I decided then to ignore him. Instead, I dug into the fried chicken and mashed potatoes my mom put together for our meal.

“You know what today is?” he said.

“Tuesday,” I replied. I was sure there was some other significance to the day, but he would tell me in due time.

“Four weeks.”

I grunted in response. That was all the invitation he needed to continue.

“Four weeks since that boy showed up on this ranch. Four full, glorious weeks since that damned horse of his hasn’t gotten loose.”

Momma sat down at the table across from me.

“Four weeks since you and him started courting, and you haven’t even taken him on a proper date,” Rory continued.

That had my mom’s eyebrows rising. Perry and I being together was not a secret. The first morning after we spent the night together he’d turned fifty different shades of red at the breakfast table. When I’d finished my breakfast, I’d given him a peck on the lips and told him I’d see him for dinner.

He was also driving the ranch truck now. The car of his was out of commission. If it was up to me, it would be going to the scrap yard.

I dropped my fork and shot my brother a glare. “One. Perry is not a boy, he is a grown man, and two. Perry and I have gone on plenty of outings and have gotten to know each other quite well. Not that my courting rituals are any of your business.”

“Is he sleeping in his own room?” Rory asked.

“Rory!” my mom scolded. “Your brother is also a grown man and can make his own decisions. No one ever interrogated you about your partners.”

“Thank you, Mom,” I said.

“But really, Reese, I’m sure your nightly horse rides together are very romantic and the two of you like them very much, but you could take him out to dinner and show him the town. Also, as the person who cleans the linens around here, I can confirm Perry is not sleeping in his own room.” She casually took a sip out of her water glass as if she hadn’t just dropped a bombshell.

“Mom!” Betrayed by my own mother. Not that Rory didn’t already know I was sleeping with Perry. It wasn’t a secret.

“I knew it!” Rory shouted.

I folded my arms over my chest. “He has seen plenty of the town. He’s been to nearly every farm and ranch in the county. He’s been to all the restaurants with the vet clinic on their lunch outings.” Perry loved his job and was doing well at it. I was sure that when the time came, Marshall would offer him a full time position within the clinic. Already he had more trust from the vet than most of the other techs I’d seen him go through over the years.

“It’s different,” Mom said.

I sighed. I knew this was not an argument I was going to win. And it would be best to just concede now. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to take Perry out on a proper date, it was that I was selfish and wanted him all for myself. Our nightly rides allowed us to talk without distraction. He got quality time with Blossom and I got quality time with him. Through our nightly rides I learned so much about the man I was falling for. “I’ll see what Perry would like to do. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind going out to a nice

dinner.”

Mom grinned. “Perfect. This weekend will work great. I don’t have any dinner plans. I was going to scrounge up something, but now I don’t have to.”

I bit back a groan as my brother laughed. I shot him another glare, putting more heat behind this one. He saw right through it, though.

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“I guess we’ll see you at dinner this weekend.”

“You’re not invited,” I growled. “My date will be with Perry, no one else is allowed.”

“Hey, if I want to take Pete and Nick out to dinner, that’s my business. You can’t stop me.”

“Rory,” my mom scolded again. Then she turned to me, her gaze softening. “Are you going to let Perry know about Ton yet?”

My gut tightened. I shrugged. “The subject hasn’t really come up. But I suppose I will have to let him know sooner or later.”

“You can give him Ton as a wedding gift,” Rory said.

Well, this conversation with my brother had given me a headache. A glare wasn’t going to cut it this time. But if my mother caught me punching him in the shoulder, she’d likely scold me. I went with ignoring him. I picked up my water glass and took a long drink.

“I noticed you didn’t argue about that,” he said.

“Nothing to argue,” I said. Perry was it for me. Whether he knew it or not, that was the way it was going to be. Rory might as well learn that too.

Rory raised an eyebrow. “You’ve known him for four weeks and the idea of marriage isn’t scaring you away?” Rory shot me a knowing smile.

I picked up my fork and returned to enjoying my lunch. Momma seemed to have joined Rory's quest to find out just how I felt about Perry, and she looked at me expectantly. I assumed my feelings for him were obvious. The man lived in my house. I'd kept his horse for the past five years.

"Perry is... He's my... He's special. Okay?" He was the be all, end all of my world, but I couldn't say that out loud. "We're taking things slow."

My mom rolled her eyes. "Any slower and you'd go backward, Reese," she said. "I'm not getting any younger, and grandchildren would be nice."

"It's been four weeks, Mom. And you know that neither Rory nor I can bear children."

"Adoption exists, as well as surrogacy. You have options. Now, unless you tell me that you don't want children and that Perry doesn't either, I'm going to continue to bring up the subject."

She damn well knew I'd love to be a father someday. Rory would too, he was just being patient with his partners.

"All right, Momma."

Chapter 10

Perry

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The minute I was done with work, I hopped in the truck that Reese had kindly allowed me to drive. My car was fine for short trips, but it overheated easily and

wasn't safe to drive. I'd never had a vehicle this nice. I learned to drive on a brand new vehicle, but my mom hadn't allowed me to buy one to drive to school. I had been chauffeured to my high school and when I went off to college, I had been left without a vehicle or any money to buy one.

Like I did every night when I got home, I parked my truck in the stall next to Reese's and ran directly to the barn to see Blossom. Though she'd liked to be on pasture, most of the time she was brought up to the barn in the evening to have her grain ration. I was told that she had been much more cooperative to the practice now that I was around. The hands here all had the routine down to a science and even though she was a one man horse, she knew where her food came from.

I was petting her nose when a large truck and trailer worth more than anything I'd ever earned in my life pulled into the drive. It was the type of vehicle that screamed money. It gleamed in the sunlight like it had just gotten freshly waxed. The blue diesel truck pulled a white horse trailer that had living quarters and the Triple R ranch emblem on it.

A man hopped out of the passenger side of the truck, wearing a pair of tight black jeans and a hat. The large belt buckle drew my eye. It was the size of a dinner plate. I wanted to make myself scarce. I didn't need to embarrass myself or Reese in any way with his clients or the professional riders who rode under his brand. I knew the Triple R ranch was very successful and some very rich people kept their horses there to train with Reese. This must be one of them.

The man helped a beautiful Quarter Horse mare get out of the trailer and led her to the barn. I had no way to escape now. I needed to just blend into the background until I could escape. The man came in and one of the other hands spoke with him, directing him toward one of the larger stalls that was directly across from Blossom. The man got his horse settled and came out. He looked at me with a question in his eyes.

“You new here?” he asked.

I nodded. “Sort of. I’m Perry.” I held out my hand.

He shook it. “Travis,” he said. “If you’re thinking you’re going to attain that there mare, you’ve got another think coming. I don’t know why the hell Reese keeps her around. She’s a waste of space if you ask me.” He said the words matter of factly, his voice not full of malice, just stating facts.

I grimaced. No way was I going to correct him and tell him who I really was then and embarrass Reese further. My gut churned though. I needed more of a backbone if I was going to defend my horse. It was one thing for Rory to go on about how crazy it was to keep Blossom, but to hear it from a stranger was disconcerting.

Blossom nudged my arm as if she could understand his words. She probably could.

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“I like her,” I said, lifting my chin a little higher. “She has character.”

The man snorted. “She’s a beautiful horse. But not a moneymaker. ‘Round here they need to make money to earn their keep. She seems to like you, though. I’ve tried bribing her with treats and she never so much as looked at me. Good luck with her.” He sounded sincere. He went into the tack room. He obviously knew his way around the place and didn’t need my help or anyone else’s to get his animal settled.

When I had researched Reese’s ranch in the past, I had seen the name Travis before. If I wasn’t mistaken, he was a world famous reigning champion. Any ranch would be lucky to have their name associated with him. I wasn’t going to correct him about Blossom and potentially ruin that relationship for the ranch. The money thing stuck out in my mind, though. Here I was living off Reese, not contributing to anything. My horse stayed here, eating the hay and grain, taking up valuable space. I lived in the house, eating his food and sharing his bed. All for free.

Sure, I helped out with chores here and there. But that was the hands more or less just placating me. They didn’t need my help. They knew how to run this place. I had a horse I could barely afford, at least not to keep her here. I didn’t even have a home, not really.

How in the hell had I ever fooled myself into thinking I was going to earn enough money to go to vet school and keep Blossom?

Eventually, Reese would grow tired of having a freeloader around. He’d want to find someone who was his equal, who could pay their own way. That person was not me.

I swallowed thickly, choking back the tears that threatened to fall. The walls were closing in around me. I was out of my element here. I didn't know what Reese saw in me. I knew what I saw in him.

He was a good man. An amazing horseman and a fair boss. His employees looked up to him, and when he wasn't sniping and teasing with his brother, the two of them had such respect for one another.

He was everything I could ever want in a partner and lover.

I was in love with him.

And he was out of my league.

Chapter 11

Reese

It wasn't often that I was in the house and ready for dinner before Perry, but today I was. Mom had made a roast with mashed potatoes, gravy, and roasted carrots. I fixed my plate and Perry's as soon as I saw him walking in from the barn.

A dark look clouded his features. There were worry lines on his brow that I didn't like to see. I wanted to fix whatever it was that plagued him. The adamant desire within me to take all his troubles away scared the shit out of me, but I wasn't fighting it.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Hm?" he said as he looked at me. He shook his head, as if shaking his thoughts away. "Yeah, fine."

“Long day?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but a good one. We had a herd health check on a flock of sheep. It was interesting, to say the least. Then we preg-checked a bunch of goats. They aren’t easy to wrangle.”

I grinned. “No, I suppose they are not.”

Perry sat down at the table with me. The worry lines had disappeared, but I didn’t like that they had been there to begin with. “Thanks for making my plate,” he said. He dug in, as did I. Both our plates were empty within no time at all. Then we were clearing the table and in the kitchen putting the dishes in the dishwasher.

“Those something you might want some day?” I asked.

He raised a brow. “What?”

“Sheep or goats. Something besides horses.”

He closed the dishwasher, then leaned against the counter. “Not sure. I honestly never really thought past getting my degree and getting Blossom back. I suppose I wouldn’t mind chickens. Fresh eggs are the best, or so I’ve heard. Meat rabbits are easy to keep. Plus they are cute.”

“You have a dream of having your own place?”

He eyes took on a faraway look and a smile blessed his face. It was like sunshine lit up the room, only it was well past dark outside. “I grew up in a big house, right. So much wasted space and rooms that were just for entertaining people. There were rooms I wasn’t allowed in, ones I was only allowed in during certain times of the day. I can’t remember all the rules. It was just... pointless. The house I dream of having is

small, cozy. With some land, so I can enjoy the sunset at night without seeing neighbors or buildings.”

I wanted to give him all that and more. I was about to offer that and more when movement outside caught my eye. Travis, one of the reigners that trained at the ranch, climbed into his truck and left. He would likely park his rig at Rory’s while he was in town, then crash at a hotel. He used to camp out in his trailer, but now that he’d made the big time he could afford a hotel.

I turned back to Perry and found that same dark look on his face that was there when he came in. “You sure everything is all right?” I asked.

His face cleared and his eyes turned again, this time with lust. “Yes, I’m fine.”

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He stalked forward, closing the distance between us. I braced myself for his kiss, but it never came. Instead he dropped to his knees and unbuckled my jeans.

I stumbled back and hit the counter as he pulled my entire length in his mouth. It didn't take long for me to grow hard, not when I had Perry in front of me.

He was the center of my world and had been for longer than I cared to admit. There was nothing I wouldn't do for him.

I threaded my fingers in his hair. It had grown considerably since he'd arrived. I wondered if he'd cut it. He could afford to do those kinds of things now. He could afford to do anything if he would just let me help him. I was too scared to tell him, and he was too stubborn to ask for help.

The fear that gripped me at the thought of Perry walking out of my life someday was unbearable. I needed to tell him. But how did you tell a man you'd only spent a few weeks with that they were it for you? There would be no others for me. Just Perry.

I'd known it when I saw the love he had for his horse.

"Fuck, baby," I groaned. I braced myself with my elbows on the counter. Perry tugged my jeans lower so he had better access to my balls. For as long as I'd lived in this house, this was certainly a first for me.

My cock fell from Perry's lips, a line of spit connecting it to his lips. He licked down the length of me, then buried his nose in my pubes. His hand fondled my balls.

I gripped his hair, tugging lightly.

“Use me,” he said. “Fuck my face like you fuck my hole, Reese. Please. Own me.”

His words had me close to shooting. I tugged at his hair until his lips were positioned at the head of my cock. He opened his mouth, stuck out his tongue, and met my eyes. There was need there, and desire. I matched it. He needed this like I needed him.

I kept hold of him while I pistoned my hips, careful not to hurt him, but giving him the face-fucking he wanted.

His eyes rolled back and his cock pressed hard against his zipper until he finally reached down and freed it. Each graze of his tongue over my shaft brought me closer to release, but it was the moans that escaped his lips that brought me to the edge.

When he fisted his own dick and shot his load with a sharp cry, I followed suit. My come covered his face and his lips. He smiled and licked his top lip, moaning at the taste.

“Thank you,” he said.

I was breathing quickly, and I let out a laugh. “I think I should be thanking you,” I said.

I helped him to his feet. He was a bit unsteady, and I held him until he had his feet under him.

“We have some cleaning to do.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I suppose we do.” It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him what that was about and what had brought the worry lines on his face. I didn’t though. I

wanted this moment just for us.

Instead, I pulled him into my arms. I cupped his face with my hands and brushed the tears that had fallen on his cheeks.

“Are you all right? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

He shook his head. “I wanted that.”

I searched his face for anything to indicate that I’d been too rough, but saw nothing. “If you want something like that again, we’ll have to come up with a signal or safeword you can use if I get too rough. I don’t ever want to hurt you, Perry, but I will give you what you need.”

Chapter 12

Perry

I followed Reese as he led me into the restaurant. The hostess smiled when she saw him and picked up two menus.

“Good evening, Mr. Richards. This way, sir,” she said. Clearly, he had the forethought to put in a reservation. Though it didn’t look like the wait would be that long anyway, or perhaps they just knew him here and whenever they saw him they seated him right away. Reese wasn’t a man to be kept waiting.

I tugged at the sleeve of my jacket, a holdover from my days when I had lived with my mom and expensive things were easy to come by. I had been smart enough to keep at least one suit and a few other of the high end things I had owned, but it was clearly out of date from what was actually popular and the color had faded with time. My gaze roved the room and found that most others were wearing nice suits, the

women in fancy dresses and dazzling jewelry. I didn't even have cufflinks.

My grandfather had given me a pair when I turned sixteen, but I had sold them when I went to college.

Reese wore a pair of dark jeans and a jacket over it, somehow looking as if he just stepped out of a magazine. He took off his hat and hung it on the side of the chair.

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“You look really nice today,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“Dressing up wasn’t necessary.”

I grinned. “Every once in a while I need an excuse to get this thing out. It’s certainly not something I can wear to work. What is good here?” I asked.

“Well, honestly I usually just have whatever’s on special. Everything has been good. So far, no complaints from me.”

“It’s been a really long time since I had a good steak.”

“Let’s get you a steak,” he said.

I bit my lip. There were no prices on the menu. I opened my mouth to ask, and Reese shook his head, as if reading my thoughts. “Dinner’s on me tonight, Perry. Let me treat you to something special.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can I treat next time?”

“You packed the sandwiches for our last picnic. Wasn’t that you treating?”

I let out a sigh. “Making food from the fridge doesn’t count. Especially when you’re footing the bill for the groceries. I have money. I have a job. I can pay for things. I mean, I might not be able to afford this restaurant, but I could take you somewhere.”

Probably a fast food restaurant. Or maybe one of those diners that sold breakfast all day.

Reese's brow furrowed, and he reached a hand across the table. He opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted.

"Reese!" a voice boomed, and a shadow fell over our table. "I feel like we are two ships passing in the night. I've been here a couple of days and I haven't even seen you yet." Travis stood next to the table. He reached out a hand and Reese shook it. Travis clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's good to see you. Your mare is looking really good," Reese said.

"Thanks." Travis looked over at me with surprised eyes. "Oh my, I'm interrupting a date." He turned back to Reese. "Look at you, dating one of the ranch hands."

My cheeks flushed. The man didn't seem to have an indoor voice, and more than one person was looking our way. I didn't think Reese wanted to hide our relationship, but that was different from shouting it from the rooftops.

Reese shook his head. "Perry's staying at the house, and he has his horse boarded at the ranch, but he's not a ranch hand. He works at the vet clinic. He's a vet tech, going to school to be a veterinarian."

"Really? Well hell, had I had more time the other day when I met you, I would have learned all of that, but traveling takes a whole lot out of me. Which horse is yours?"

I swallowed thickly. "Blossom," I said.

Travis winced. "Well, hell, man. This is why I ought to just keep my mouth shut. I didn't mean to say what I said about her. She's... well, she's a nice looking horse."

“That’s all right,” I said. “She’s not for everyone.”

“What did you say?” Reese asked. A protective tone entered his voice.

Travis held up his hands in surrender. “Nothing I haven’t said to you before. None of us understood why you kept that horse on the property. Even if she did toss that nice foal one time. But I’m glad she has Perry now.”

“Foal?” I said. I looked to Reese. Blossom had a foal? When? Why hadn’t he told me?

Reese pinched his eyes closed.

Travis sucked in a breath. “Well, I know when I have said too much, and clearly I have, again. Reese, it was good to see you. Let’s catch up before I leave town. The facilities are looking great, obviously, and I do appreciate that I can train there.”

“Yeah, man, we’ll talk soon,” Reese said.

The waitress came by and dropped off water.

“Just two specials, please,” Reese said, and she was on her way again. His eyes bore into mine. “I think we’ve got a lot to unpack here.”

“I suppose,” I said. I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned back. It wasn’t much distance between us, but it was enough.

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“Did what he said about Blossom get to you?” Reese asked.

I shrugged one shoulder. My gaze focused on the neatly folded napkin on the plate in front of me rather than on my date. “He made a comment about how horses should pay their own way, and he didn’t understand why you kept her around for so long.” I shifted uncomfortably. “And I got to thinking that people should pay their own way, too. When they’re adults anyway. I feel like I’ve been taking advantage of—”

Reese growled. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

I didn’t listen. I needed to say my piece. “Ever since I moved in I’ve paid for nothing. You won’t even let me buy you dinner.”

“The other night at the house after dinner when you...”

My cheeks flushed and I looked away.

“Was that supposed to be some sort of payment?” he asked.

“No!” I bit my lip. “It wasn’t like that. I mean, the thought did cross my mind.”

Reese looked away. Focusing on the corner of his plate. “We haven’t known each other long, Perry. Damn, I thought you knew me better than that. I thought I showed you better than that. I don’t expect anything from you, least of all that.”

We were quiet for a moment. I didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to repair the damage that had been done.

“Was any of it real?” he asked.

I moved forward, hitting my knee against the table, and our water glasses sloshed and spilled over the white table cloth. “Of course. Reese, please. Nothing I have done with you was meant to pay you back for your kindness. Even the other night. I... I didn’t feel like I measured up to the type of people you are used to being around, and I wanted to show you that I was your equal.”

“You’re not my equal, Perry.” Reese reached his hand across the table and gripped mine. “You are worlds better than me, than any other horseman I’ve come across. I kept Blossom all these years because she was never mine to buy. She belongs to you, and you to her. I spent countless hours hoping that horse would see in me what I saw in you that day. I knew if I kept her, I’d see you again.”

My throat closed up. The emotion was too raw, too exposed for me to even respond to his words.

“He mentioned a foal,” I said quietly.

The waitress chose that moment to set down our salads. I reached for my fork, but Reese did not reach for his.

“Three years ago, after I kind of came to terms with the fact that there wasn’t anybody going to be able to get up on Blossom, I thought maybe she’d throw a nice foal. I debated about it for a long time. The vet gave her a clean bill of health and essentially told me it was now or never, so I had her bred to my stallion. She did great, produced a nice, healthy baby.”

“Really?” I said.

“Blossom’s a little up there in age, so it’s not really worth the risk to breed her

anymore.”

“And the foal?”

“His name is Perrington’s Return. We call him Ton. He’s intact. A good horse with solid prospects. I have been working him through the circuit right now. He’s doing well.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I likely am going to breed him to another mare of my choosing soon.”

“Wow,” I said. “Can I see him?”

Reese nodded. “He’ll be back next week. I work on his training, along with his rider.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t quite sure how to bring up the subject, but you know now. I don’t need you to pay your way, Perry. I like having you around because I like you. I kept Blossom because I wanted to see you again and I hoped someday you’d find her.”

“Perrington’s Return?” I raised a brow.

Reese shrugged, the corner of his mouth lifting up a bit. “I didn’t want to be too obvious.”

Chapter 13

Reese

I had my computer open in front of me, but it had long since gone to sleep after not interacting with it for long enough. I had mountains of paperwork to figure out, applications to submit, applications to review, plans to solidify for upcoming shows, transport to arrange, but I was doing none of it.

Usually paperwork was a nice break from the back-breaking work that was my everyday. But today it was nothing of the sort.

“There you are,” my brother said as he came into my office. The office was a little room attached to the tack room, out of the way so that most people didn’t even realize it was there. It allowed me to be a part of the barn, without being front and center. It also helped to minimize being interrupted all the time.

“It’s a nice day. I’m surprised to see you tucked in here,” he said.

“Trying to catch up on work,” I said. There was no emotion in my voice as I said the words. I couldn’t even fake it. My brother would see right through it.

He leaned over and looked at the screen. “Yes. Hard at work, I see.”

I flipped him the bird.

“What troubles you, Mr. Decisive? I’ve never seen you so contemplative.”

“Perry,” I said.

“Yes, man troubles. I hear you.”

I sighed, deciding that it was bound to come out sooner or later. It wasn't as if my family wasn't going to know my intentions toward Perry sooner or later. “At dinner the other night, he expressed concerns that he is mooching off of me, not pulling his weight. I did my best to change his mind, but I am not sure if the message was received.” The fact that I was revealing this to my brother surprised me. Generally, he gave good advice, if I could decipher any of it through the merciless teasing and jokes.

Rory chuckled softly. “For a man who grew up in a pampered lifestyle, he's sure got a different work ethic.”

I nodded. Both Rory and I had done some digging into his family since having him move here. His mother was a piece of work and if I had it my way I would have her cut out of his life completely. Perry hadn't mentioned her to me, so I didn't even know if they kept in contact much. I'd learned all I needed to know about her the day she sold her son's beloved horse to a perfect stranger and didn't bother to let him say goodbye or tell him where the horse was going.

“If it was up to me, he wouldn't lift a finger for the rest of his life unless he wanted to.”

“You want to keep him home?”

“I want to keep him.” The where didn't matter to me. I just wanted Perry happy. Content. And wanting for nothing.

“So, it's not really indecisiveness. You're contemplating how to keep him? You know for sure that this is the man for you, but you need to convince him?”

“Exactly.”

“Time.”

My brow furrowed.

Rory shrugged. “I’m serious. It will take time to convince him that you are sincere. I’m guessing you want to lock that down right now, put a ring on it or whatever. Sign over half the ranch to him, whatever it takes to get him to understand that you are his and he is yours.”

“Exactly.” I’d already drawn up paperwork so that he had sole ownership of Blossom and her colt.

“It’s not going to work like that. It’s going to take time.”

“Blossom’s title is in his name. He’s listed as owner of her and her colt. I’ll sign over half the ranch if that’s what it takes. He’s it for me. I don’t care about his bank account or how little or how much he works. I don’t care if I have more than him. He’s mine. He’s... Perry.” It was as simple as that. I’d given my heart to the man, whether he knew it or not.

“I don’t think Perry wants assets. He wants to be useful and contribute. He has a work ethic not unlike your own.”

“He is contributing. He’s always helping with chores.”

We were quiet for a moment.

“I want to pay for his vet school, but I’m afraid if I even mention that, he’s going to go ballistic. I’ll scare him away.”

Rory narrowed his eyes. “Why do I get the feeling there’s something you’re not telling me?”

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Damn my brother for knowing me too well. “I already called the university. I arranged to make a sizable donation for the next four years. He had already been accepted, so I didn’t buy that. I just made sure his tuition is covered.”

“You haven’t told him?”

“I meant to. I thought it would be a nice surprise. But then he came at me with wanting to pay rent and work around the ranch, and how he doesn’t think he’s good enough for me.”

Rory scoffed. “You’re not good enough for him. He’s way too pure of heart.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Perry was everything good in the world. Pure of heart and soul.

“What do I do now?”

“Time,” Rory said again.

I flipped him the bird again. “Your advice sucks.”

He shrugged. “My advice is accurate. Definitely keep talking to him, but—”

He cut off when my phone rang. I pursed my lips when I looked at it. The vet clinic was calling. That wasn’t normal. We weren’t waiting on tests or medication. There was no need to be calling, unless...

“Hello?” I said.

“Don’t freak out,” Marshall’s voice came over the line. Of course I immediately began freaking out.

“What is it?” I said. My fist clenched and I went on high alert.

“I need you to come up to the hospital. Perry is here. He is conscious, but—”

“I’ll be right there.” I ended the call and sat up abruptly. “You drive.” I tossed my keys to Rory. I didn’t trust myself to be able to get there without crashing my truck. That wouldn’t do us any good. “Fuck time. Perry’s mine and he’s gonna figure it out today.”

“What the hell happened?” Rory asked; already we were half way to the truck.

“He’s at the hospital.”

“Okay, but like what happened? Is he hurt? Was there a car accident or an incident with an animal? How bad are his injuries?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t give Marshall a chance to explain.”

Rory rolled his eyes, but didn’t argue.

“Let’s go!” I shouted the minute we were in the cab.

For once, my brother listened without comment.

Chapter 14

Perry

“You really don’t have to sit here,” I said to my boss, the man who had had to carry me out of the pen after I had been knocked down by the very angry horse we had been working on. I couldn’t blame the mare. She had been protecting her foal, and we had been trying to make sure she didn’t bleed out after giving birth.

After I’d been knocked on my ass and had the air forced out of my lungs, they had been able to help the mare. At least she and the foal would be fine.

Marshall didn’t even look up from his phone. “I absolutely do have to wait here. Not just because I care about your well being, but also because I guarantee that Reese would have my balls if I left you alone. I let him know you were here. He should be arriving any moment.”

I looked down at my arm currently being held within a sling. When I had been knocked to the side by the horse, I dislocated my shoulder and fractured my elbow. All in one go. It hurt at the time, but the pain was non-existent now thanks to the pain medication they had given me. I hoped to hell I would qualify for some sort of payment plan. The hospital visit was going to cost a fortune.

My muddy clothes were in a trash bag on the chair next to Marshall. The nurse insisted I take them off because they were covered in blood from the mare’s wound, and shit from the pen we were in. Marshall had had to pick me up out of the pen because as I was scrambling to get myself up, I couldn’t move my arm. The whole thing had been humiliating.

“I really think I can work with this thing on,” I said. “It won’t be too much trouble. The nurse even said that these types of injuries heal quickly. I can still work.”

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This time Marshall did put down his phone. “The doctor said he wants you to take two weeks off from any field work. I would like to see you take a week off from work at the very least. Let yourself relax a little bit. Next week, you can work in the office, learn that side of things.”

I groaned. “I don’t want to be a burden.” I didn’t want to lose my job. I needed this experience to get into vet school.

Of course Reese chose that exact moment to push his way inside the room. I started to sit up, but he was at my side pushing me back down on the bed.

“You’re okay? You sure you’re alright?” His face was pinched with worry. I wanted to smooth the lines from his face.

“Yes, it’s just a small thing with my shoulder.”

“And your elbow,” Marshall said. He stood up, slipped his phone into his back pocket, and smiled at Reese. “Take care of this one. Don’t let him leave the house for a week. We’ll talk soon about having him come back to work.”

My gut twisted. Did that mean I might not have a job?

“Thanks. I appreciate it,” I said. “I really think I can work. Just a few days—”

Marshall cut me off. “Your job is safe, Perry. We’re gonna miss you for sure this week, but that’s why we want you to take the whole week, so you come back refreshed. Injuries happen to the best of us. This won’t be your last. Don’t you

worry.” He put a hand on my good shoulder and squeezed.

I smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

Reese growled at that. “Thanks, Marshall,” he said, and Marshall left.

I let out a long sigh, holding back tears, but just barely. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“What are you sorry for, baby?” Reese moved his chair closer so that he was right next to the bed.

“We just talked about how I’m not contributing anything to the ranch or to the house and now I have to do nothing for a week. If I help with chores and get hurt, then I won’t be able to get back to work and—”

“Two weeks,” he said. “I talked to your doctor on the way in here. Two weeks of taking it easy, then after that we’ll determine how ready you are for anything.”

This time the tears did fall. This was worse than the time I’d come down with the flu and missed three shifts at the diner I was working at in college. I’d had to decide between buying groceries or paying my heat bill. I’d paid the heat and went hungry for an entire week. This time it wasn’t about money. I needed Reese to see me as capable as his equal. I wasn’t a charity case.

Reese gathered me into his arms. “You can get out of here real soon. I’m here now. Let me take you home.”

“Everything was just so perfect, and of course this happened. It’s like two steps forward and five steps back.” I couldn’t stop the words. Later I could blame the pain killers. “I don’t know what you see in me. I was stupid to think I’d ever save enough money to buy back Blossom.”

“There’s no need—”

“I need to, Reese. I need to be able to stand on my own two feet. Even if I can’t afford Blossom, I still can’t be dependent on you.”

“Is that you what you think you are? You think you’re dependent on me?”

I couldn’t look at him in that moment. I stayed focused on the thin, white blanket that covered me.

“You don’t need me, Perry. I know that. You put yourself through college. You earned a degree on your own. You got a job at a very well respected, highly sought after vet clinic on your own. You could leave the ranch tomorrow and be just fine without me. The thing is, I don’t want that to ever happen. I want you here, in my life, for the rest of our lives.”

I gasped. “It’s too soon for that—”

“Perry, I knew you were special five years ago. I saw it in the way you cared for Blossom. When you came to my ranch, I knew. You were it for me.”

“I’m no one, Reese.”

“None of that,” Reese said. “I don’t want to talk about you that way. You’re perfect in every way. If you told me right now that you never wanted to work again, I’d be fine with that. You want to be a vet and we’re going to make that happen. This is not a setback, Perry.”

“How can you be so sure of us?”

He cupped my cheek and looked into my eyes. The love and care I saw there stole my

breath.

“How can you not be scared?” I said finally.

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“I am. I’m scared that one day you’ll wake up and realize that I’m over a decade older than you, boring as fuck, and I work too much.”

I laughed. “Doubtful.”

“Then don’t doubt that I do care about you. Trust me when I say I won’t wake up one day and think you’re too young or not my equal, because you are my equal. In every way. Hell, you’re better than me in most ways. Can you trust that I wouldn’t lie to you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I trust you, Reese. I love you.”

He kissed my lips. “I love you, too. And I have your discharge papers. You are free to go. I would like to get you home and get you in bed.”

My brow raised at that.

“To sleep,” he clarified.

“I don’t think it takes my shoulder to do the kinds of things I’m thinking of.”

He groaned. “Perry, you’re pushing your luck.” He kissed me on the lips, then pushed his chair away to let me get up.

Chapter 15

Reese

Perry was settled on the couch when I came in from getting my early morning chores done. He had a large textbook in front of him, but he was staring off into space rather than reading.

“Someday when you’re partners at the vet clinic with Marshall and you have more appointments than time in the day, and we’ve got horses here that you want to look at or exercise, or maybe you don’t get as much time with Blossom as you’d like, you’re going to wish you could have a day to just to sit.” I leaned against the doorframe and took in the sight of him. He had his arm in a sling, his hair rumpled from laying around all day. He was dressed like he was ready to walk out the door any moment and go for a ride, but I knew he had stayed on the couch while I had been working. He had promised that he would relax today.

He had only been out of the hospital for a day, so he was nowhere near ready to work.

Perry shot me a look that led to a genuine smile. “I suppose you’re right. For right now, I’m still a little annoyed that I’m sitting here and doing nothing while everybody else is working.”

I sat down next to him and pulled him into my arms carefully. I didn’t want to jostle his shoulders or elbow. “Well, I am the boss of this operation, and that comes with certain perks.”

“Oh, really?” he said, leaning into my embrace, letting himself completely relax against my chest. “Tell me about these perks.”

“Well, for one I can tell everyone that lunch is on me and they should go into town, leaving the entire ranch empty except for me and you. And I can take the whole rest of the day off where I don’t do anything at all. Except for chores later.” As much as I wanted to be inside with Perry resting, we still had animals to care for.

“Can I walk through the barn with you? I promise not to pick anything up.”

I kissed his neck and nuzzled my nose against his skin. “I suppose you can do that.”

He sighed and tilted his head, giving me better access to kiss his neck more.

We were quiet for a moment, savoring the feeling of being in each other’s arms. I rested my cheek on his head and breathed in his scent. I never wanted to live another day without him in my arms.

“You know, this might be a little soon, but have you ever thought about getting married?” I asked.

He stilled, going completely silent. I wasn’t even sure if he was still breathing. Then he took a deep breath. “So many of my last few years have just been survival. My mom was not the loving type, so I really shouldn’t have been surprised when she basically sent me to college with nothing. I wasn’t prepared for it, but I learned quickly. I saved up as much money as I could with the end goal of getting Blossom back and going to vet school. Those were my only two goals. I never really let myself think about anything else. Since I’ve been here, though, maybe something like marriage and a future beyond vet school has crossed my mind.”

“I’ll be honest, Perry, if I thought you were ready to hear it, I would get down on one knee and propose right now.”

Perry chuckled. He laced his fingers into mine. “Maybe wait a week or so, okay?”

“All right. I can do that.”

“So, I can safely assume you’re pro marriage. What about kids?”

That perked my interest. “My mom would sure love that. Honestly, that’s not something I’ve really thought about a ton . I wanted to settle down with someone. I still do. That someone is you, in case you’re not fully aware of that.”

Perry laughed. “I had a sneaking suspicion. I do want kids. When I saw you with the field trip class that came in a couple of weeks ago at the ranch, you were adorable. They were adorable. I want to teach our kids to ride. I want to get them little ponies that they can learn to care for.”

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“I can’t imagine raising kids is much different than taming horses.” I laughed. “Though, none of my horses have talked back to me.”

“True. If that’s not something—”

I kissed his head. “It is. Maybe not next week, but it absolutely is something that I can see myself doing with you. I’d give you the world, Perry, whatever you ask for.”

Perry chuckled. “You’ll find that I’m a pretty simple guy. I’ll be pretty content with you.”

“Good. We ought to get you through vet school first. Don’t you think?”

Perry nodded. “Yeah, I suppose that’s why I picked up this textbook. If you really are serious about me continuing with school sooner rather than later, I might as well prepare for it now. I have a spot at the university if I want it, I just need to make the tuition payment.”

“I do want you to go to school very soon.”

“Then I might as well start thinking about classes. Signing up, doing all the things.”

I kissed his cheek. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks. I’m... I’ve never been this happy, Reese. I love you.”

I shifted as much as I could without jostling him too much and I captured his lips

with mine. “I love you,” I said.

Epilogue

Reese

Five Years Later

“Let’s go! Let’s go! We’re going to be late,” I shouted up the stairs, something I really didn’t enjoy doing.

My brother got up from the kitchen table, downed his last bit of coffee, and rolled his eyes. “We are not going to be late. There are at least two hours before the ceremony starts and you know these things never start on time.”

Pete patted his shoulder. “Being early is never a bad thing. I think it’s cute how worried your brother is.” He shot me a wink.

I was getting so irritated, I was sure smoke was going to come out of my ears. This was not an event I was prepared to be late for.

Finally, my mom came out of the bathroom and came down the stairs. “I just needed to fix my hair. It got messed up on the drive over.”

“Mom. I love you dearly, but no one cares about your hair. We’re going to be late if we don’t get there—”

“We have plenty of time,” she said. “Why did Perry have to be so early anyway? Was there something he needed to do there?”

Perry had left the house an hour earlier. Something about getting pictures and being

lined up. “I don’t know. He just did.” I wished now that I had just gone with him when he left so that I didn’t miss this very important moment. It wasn’t every day that I got to attend my amazing husband’s graduation from vet school, and I’d be damned if we were going to be late for it.

“Let’s go, let’s go.”

“Don’t forget the most important thing,” Rory said.

I shot my brother a glare. “Of course not,” I said. I looked down at the car seat that was waiting patiently by the door where I had sat it just a moment ago. As soon as I buckled in little Bailey, she had fallen right to sleep like she usually did when going on car rides. We had taken more than one midnight drive to calm her down in the past six months that she’d been with us.

Adopting had been our plan after we had gotten married. We just assumed it would be after Perry had graduated from vet school. But then he started researching, and then researching turned into applying, and then applying turned into actively working with a social worker to get a placement. Then we’d gotten a call in the middle of the night that a six week old baby had been surrendered and could we take her. Even though that week was the final week of a semester and Perry had exams and I had shows, we made it work. It hadn’t been easy, but damn had it been worth it.

Bailey was the light of our world.

“Come on, princess. We have to go see your daddy get a very special piece of paper.”

Rory chuckled. “A very expensive piece of paper.”

We settled Bailey into the back of the truck. My mom and Pete sat back there with her to ooh and ah over her the entire drive.

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We arrived to the university on time. The seats weren't as good as I would have liked, but I was able to get pictures of Perry as he walked across the stage. I held Bailey in my arms and pointed to her daddy. "There he is, sweetheart. See him?" Somehow he found me in the crowd and smiled and waved.

He was Dr. Perry now, with a permanent placement at the vet clinic. I couldn't be more proud of him.

Afterwards, it wasn't easy making our way through the crowd, but we managed. Tears came to Perry's eyes as he hugged me and our daughter, giving her lots of sweet kisses.

"I never thought this day would come," he said. "It seemed so far away all those years ago, and now we're here. It's gone by fast."

It had, but we made a point to cherish every moment. "I'm so proud of you," I said. I kissed him.

Our daughter squealed she was pressed between the two of us.

"Let's get a good picture of you three," my mom said. "We don't have many family pictures yet."

We smiled for the camera. My family.