



The Cowboy Papi Takes Me Home

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: If you read Merry Christmas, Papi, and wanted more, this is your chance to see what happens after Adriel and Jules' happy-for-now ending, and if they can make it to a happily-ever-after.

Dirty Talking Cowboys:

Sitting on the outskirts of town is the Santiago Ranch, home of the last rancheros in the area, and four cowboy brothers that are more different than they are alike.

Tying them together is their love of the land and their family's support. Each thought they were happy with what they have, until chance pushes them outside of their comfort zones. With love flitting within their reach, they're each faced with the choice of staying in their comfort zones or reaching for love and all the complex feelings that come with it.

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Chapter One

Jules

“I’m washing the sheets. Toss me your blanket,” my younger sister, Justine, asks after kicking open my door.

I tighten the blanket she’s asking for around my back and say, “No, thanks. It’s still good.”

How can I wash it when it still smells like him?

“You’ve had it wrapped around you the entire time you’ve been home. You’re acting like a child with a lovey, and it’s so gross. Trust me, it needs a wash,” she says, plopping herself next to me on my bed. “Yuck. There’s even a leaf on it.”

“It’s only been a week. I don’t need to wash it.” I turn away from her and reflexively sniff the corner.

Wrinkling her nose, she asks, “Did you just smell it?”

Deny. Deny. Deny.

“Of course not. Now let me enjoy my book before the family party in an hour. These friends are going to turn into lovers any chapter now.” Looking away, I flip the page.

I’m waiting for the familiar sound of my door closing after she leaves, but it doesn’t

come. I can feel her weight shift on the other side of my childhood bed as she sits down.

Suddenly, she gasps and hits my butt through the woven blanket.

“I get it now. It all makes sense. I understand why you didn’t come home for Christmas last week, why you check your phone every hour, and why you keep sniffing that gross blanket. How did I miss it?”

I guess I wasn’t hiding it as well as I thought.

“Tell me about the guy,” she says triumphantly, as she props her hands behind her head and leans back.

In that position she looks exactly like me, but with long hair. We’re both 5’5” and have matching brown skin with red undertones. We blush on the tips of our ears and our hair is so dark it looks black, except for during the summer when it lightens up from swimming most days as kids. On this winter day, it looks as dark as charcoal.

My twin has always been able to sniff out my lies. During dinner every night, my whole family shared stories from the day. Anytime I’d share a story about a crush that I was trying to pass off as a friend, she’d always kick me under the table. While I blissfully kept my secrets from our parents, Justine always knew when to ask me the same questions alone in her room to get a completely different answer.

There’s no use denying my crush with her, even if I’m not totally sure it goes both ways. “Okay, I met a guy.”

She squeals, and we face each other while lying on our sides.

Curling her body into a cove of listening, she waits for me to open up. She’s always

been good about inviting me to say more without saying a word.

“His name’s Adriel and he’s from the small town I moved to. He visits the library I work at every week like clockwork with his daughter Ana.”

“Single dad?” She asks with a raised eyebrow.

I flick away her young judgement with a shake of my head. “She’s ten going on thirty and so much like you.” I light up thinking of her at that age. They’re both precocious and most likely to spend saved money on books than anything else.

When Justine was ten, I just about graduated from my two-year community college and went to UCLA. I stayed home so I could keep helping at the family business between classes, and easily watch Justine on weekends when my parents were at the restaurant. I’d do anything to ease their load. They had businesses to run, but still made it back home every night for dinner. We all had to endure my parent’s hustle.

That struggle feels so far away.

Now, Justine is almost eighteen and graduating from high school in a few months to pursue her goals, while I’m thirty and barely getting to mine.

“How did it change from seeing him at the library to outside of it?” She asks with a self-satisfied smirk.

I’m going to spare her the details of how I mentally undressed him for months before I had the nerve to really talk to him.

“It was nothing at all, then suddenly it was everything. He signed up to volunteer with me at the library, and then it was Christmas and I saw him at a party.”

Rolling her eyes, I can see her writing off Adriel.

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“I see. He’s the reason you stayed away from home during Christmas.”

I don’t know how to explain to her that I needed space from everything and everyone at home without making it sound like I needed space from her.

She means everything to me. Family is at the center of my life.

It’s my duty to come running whenever they call for help with the family restaurant, to take care of my younger sister, and to show up for family events. I’m always there.

The only problem is that when a dozen aunties, and twice as many cousins, live within an hour of each other, your weekends fill pretty quickly.

We’re always celebrating something. It’s always someone’s baptism, or it’s my aunt’s birthday, or someone’s promotion, or a young cousin’s receiving student of the month. As the oldest, I have to set an example. I have to sacrifice as much as our parents did to come to America from the Philippines. I have to put the family first. I’ve always been proud of it.

But, when I realized my sister has more plans for her future than I do, I knew something had to change. I’m an adult with one hobby, am afraid of my shadow, and just barely started living on my own.

I’m ready to reclaim my life and my choices. Ready to try at least. But how do I say all of that without making her think I abandoned her?

Lie. Lie. Lie.

“He’s not the reason I didn’t come home. As the newbie at work, I drew the short stick and had to work. That’s all. My coworker felt sorry for me and dragged me to her family party at night, and that’s when I hit it off with Adriel.”

“He already sounds better than your overbearing ex. I don’t know how you lasted for a year with that guy. Tell me more about Adriel.”

She’s right about my ex. During that entire year, I think I was more swept up in dating someone, than dating him. Loneliness blinded me from our obvious incompatibility. Only after I met Adriel, did I realize that dating should be much easier.

Everything I shared with Adriel boils down to one night of passion at a party. It felt sudden and amazing, and I want so much more, but in hindsight, it feels more like a fever dream. How could it possibly be as good as I remember?

“His name’s Adriel Santiago. His family runs the oldest ranch in the area, and we have a lot in common. Big families, hardworking, and book lovers. He’s the oldest too, so he has a lot of responsibility on their ranch.”

Shooting up, she exclaims, “Your boyfriend is a cowboy?”

I never thought of him as that. He’s a rancher, a farmer, a businessman, but I guess he is a cowboy, too. He’s got the boots and wide leather Stetson hat to lasso the title. But a title I’m hesitant to claim is boyfriend.

Even though that immediately unlocked a bunch of fantasies, I don’t want to share any of them with my little sister, so I just say, “We really hit it off that night.”

She sighs dreamily and says, “He sounds great. How are you supposed to see him if you’re coming back here all the time?”

“Sister’s first. I’ll just commute back here while mom and dad sell the family property in the Philippines for a few weeks. Don’t worry about me.”

“That’s such a burden, ate Jules.” She still adds the ate respectful title for older sister to my name. “You don’t want to drive here after work. It’s too much.”

I agree. It is too much. It’s adding hours of commuting every week back into my life, when I finally shortened my daily drive to minutes, but I’d never admit to it to my baby sister. I want to give her the stability I never got in high school. “It’s fine. It’ll be fun. We’ll have sleepovers and have the entire house to ourselves.”

“I could just stay with you,” Justine says quietly. “I haven’t seen your place since you moved in. We could go to the beach on the weekends. I’ll cook you food every night. It’d be so much fun.”

That would make it so much easier. I’m just as far from her school as this house is. But I don’t want to go against what our parents told us to do. “I think we should stick to the plan. This is best for you.” I nod my head to convince myself and her. Tightening her lips in a bud, I can tell she wants to say something, but she holds back.

“Will you get to see him when you go back to work tomorrow?”

I honestly don’t know. We haven’t talked since I left. “Maybe.”

I share the excitement of the night, but keep the real magic to myself. I’m not ready to talk about it yet. It feels like if I put words to that unbelievable time over the holidays, that I might wake up from the dream of him. That I might lose my grip on the instant connection I would swear we both felt, and see signs of a one-night stand, instead.

Chapter Two

Adriel

Another morning, another moment to desperately check my text messages.

“Tonight was fun. I have to go home unexpectedly, but I’ll talk to you when I get back.” That was my last text from Jules.

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I replied to her message with a basic smiley face emoji a week ago, but I'm feeling anything but happy. It hasn't been that long since our magical night under the stars but considering that the last time we saw each other it was a different year, it feels heavy. Crossing the new year barrier after sharing a steamy Christmas night together adds an uneasy queasiness to my gut.

It's been a while since I've dated, but being easy and not adding pressure is what you're supposed to be to a woman you're seriously interested in, right?

When she says something's come up and that she needs to go home for a while, you give her all the space she needs.

Not texting her goes against every fiber of my being, but for now it's my way of showing patience, understanding, and support. I'm sure that if I texted her as much as I thought about her, would be a dealbreaker for her. Bordering stalker territory.

Don't be clingy. Play it cool. Don't scare her off.

Like a fine wine, you've got to give any newfound relationship space to breathe.

What do I know, though?

I haven't dated for ten years. I've raised a pre-teen daughter, mostly on my own since Ana's mom left when she was born. Her mom wanted to travel, and I wasn't going anywhere, so the writing was on the wall early on. As hard as it was to meet when I was young and have a baby so early in our relationship, I'm still thankful it brought Ana in my life. She visits when she's in California, but she keeps her space. So far,

it's been working for us.

I'll happily give Ana all my time and energy, and I haven't wanted to ask for more from life. It already feels like I've received more than my fair share of blessings. We have a supportive family, that's just this side of overbearing, and I love that I get to continue my family's ranching legacy. The bounty on my table is overflowing. But now that I've been given more with Jules, I feel like a starved man.

I can't help but feel like I should have showed up at her home the next day and made my intentions clear. Made sure she knew that that what we shared wasn't a one-night stand, but the start of something much bigger.

If I did, maybe I'd be waking up next to her instead of alone in my bed long before dawn, like I always do.

Time to get on with it, then.

Waking up before the sunrise to do hard labor every morning is enough to make most people run towards another job. It might have been too much for my brothers, too, but not for me. I'd shrivel up behind a desk at an office job. I wouldn't be me without grabbing a mound of fresh tilled earth every day.

Instead of a clock, I listen for the rooster's call. Instead of a calendar, I have the changing seasons. Instead of overhead lighting, I need the sun's kiss on my cheeks.

Who am I without this land?

I might have to figure out the answer to that soul-stirring question sooner than I like.

But not today. That's future Adriel's problem. Today, I've got a barn to prep for this end of winter chill coming.

I pull on my uniform of a flannel button up, jeans, boots, and a thick coat to keep the winter air at bay.

Taking the video monitor of a sleeping Ana, I head out the door. If Ana were awake, we'd go through our script of her saying that fifth graders don't need baby monitors, and I'd follow up with, she could be an adult with kids, and I'd still worry about her. Since she's never awake at four in the morning, we don't have to run through our preteen battle for autonomy right now.

Instead, I lock the front door to our two-bedroom home and take the short walk to my parent's hacienda style ranch home across a small herb garden.

Like every day, I enter the side of our kitchen wing and wake up with the scent of a fresh pot of coffee.

"Hi mamá," I say to her shuffling shadow in front of the stove, as I lean over to microwave my breakfast burrito. I prop the video monitor humming with the soft sound of Ana's snoring next to her, and she caresses her grainy image on the small screen.

"I can make you a better breakfast than that, mija." She follows up with a quick suck of air between her teeth.

"It's okay. I have little of an appetite this morning." She knows it's because of our talk from last night. Leaning against the kitchen island behind her, I say, "There's got to be something else we can do."

"Your dad and I tried everything we could to make the ranch profitable. We even expanded into hydroponic farming by hiring Dev a few years ago. It's still not enough." She paces as her words spill out. "Dev's even expecting another baby soon. How can I possibly tell him we're closing when the work he's done is the only

profitable area of our business? It's never enough. Now you're thirty-five and it's your turn to take over, so we had to tell you."

She's as overwhelmed as I am. Still facing the coffee pot, she hasn't looked me in the eyes since they told me last night.

I just wish I knew about our financial issues sooner, and not as a precursor to adding my name to the deed. It mustn't have been easy for them to keep this close to their chests. They're always the first to offer money to relatives in need, or to offer their home to a rotating list of family in between jobs. I know there's a lot more on the line with our viability than just pride.

At least they told me now, and not after they already sold the land that's been in our family for generations.

Still talking to her back, I say, "Before you sell it, give me the season. There's got to be something we can do."

"We'll talk to the bank about it. I'm in no rush to throw away your legacy, but they need to see some profitability soon, or we'll default on our loan. Plus, we're hesitant to add your name to a failing business. It might be time to sell." Wringing her hands, she drops the topic for now and busies herself by pouring me a fresh cup of coffee in a tumbler. "See you in a few hours."

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With a quick embrace, she goes back to bed with the video monitor, and I get to work.

Riding my horse before the sun comes up has always given me the answer before. I love the feeling of being up before everyone else and using that quiet time in the morning to figure out how I want to tackle the day. I can put my neatly curated task list of work for the day into boxes in my head, then corral them into place while I ride the perimeter of our 20-acre ranch.

Everything I need is here. My parents' home. Mine with Ana. My brother Javier's handmade cabin, even though I barely see him. Barns. Fields. So much land on this hilly California coast. Everything's lined up and in its own tidy multi-acre plot.

Then my parents break the news last night and it's like someone shook up the completed puzzle I just finished.

This morning, nothing is where it's supposed to be. It's colder outside, the cattle have strayed, and the west fence was knocked over by the heavy winds last night. All the years I had meticulously planned are out of order.

The vision of celebrating Ana's quinceañera under the seaside gazebo feels hazy. Generations of longstanding accounts for our cattle are in disarray. Tomorrow is as hazy as this overcast morning.

Today, no amount of early morning riding can clear away the anxiety that's rolled in with the fog late last night.

While that burden will continue to weigh me down, I do have something to look forward to. This afternoon is the day I finally get to see Jules again after our one steamy night together. I signed up to volunteer with her before she left town, and seeing my calendar reminder for today's meeting is enough to keep me going.

Chapter Three

Jules

"Happy New Year, Jules!" Viv says sliding her chair over to me as I settle down behind the circulation desk.

I lean into her hug and smile widely. I feel like I'm in high school again, hugging friends between classes as if I'm not going to see them in forty minutes.

"I missed you, Viv. Did you have a nice time with Jackson and Lola over the holidays?"

"It was terrific. It's a big year for us. Before we were together, Jackson and Lola always had a daddy-daughter day to celebrate Halloween. They welcomed me in last year, and now we've built up Christmas to be our shared holiday. The second fall hits, our house is packed with a rotation of holiday decorations. I love it!"

"I'm a Christmas girlie too. I collect those small ceramic homes." I'm almost embarrassed by my admission since I don't know of anyone else that shares my cozy hobby.

Before I can get too self-aware, Viv yelps out, "Me too! Lola and I made it our thing together. We just found streetlights at a garage sale."

I laugh to myself for my short burst of embarrassment.

That's why work is my happy place. I love what I do, I'm good at it, and the women I work with are already like family. Viv welcomed me in the moment I came through those sliding glass library doors. She's Filipino like me, but much more confident.

The more time I spend with her the more I think we have in common.

She's like looking into a crystal ball, and what I imagine I'd be like if I left home after college, like everyone else. Time to make mistakes and build confidence surrounded by other people slipping and stumbling together.

"Damn. I know I only saw you a week ago, but it feels like we've got so much to talk about," Sydney says, coming up behind Viv and me.

Completing our trio is Sydney. Fittingly, she's in charge of the teen department and leads our library's events. Outgoing, boisterous, and thoughtful, she knows everyone in town and loves connecting people. She ran my orientation when I started, and we've been attached at the hip ever since.

She's also Adriel's cousin and the reason I was able to spend more time with him over the holidays. Inviting me to her family's Christmas party, I finally had more than a fleeting moment with Adriel in passing at the library, and he was better than I imagined.

Plopping down onto a third chair behind our circulation desk, we catch up while checking in the rolling basket of books she retrieved from our outdoor receptacle.

"How were the holidays, Sydney?" Viv asks, taking a book from Sydney to check in.

"A lot of family time at home. More tamale making, late night bonfires with my tias and nieces, catching up with family from out of town. I loved it." Sydney says, pulling out another armful of books to stack next to Viv.

I'm going through my emails from volunteers confirming their upcoming shifts while they talk, but the one volunteer I'm desperate to see isn't in my inbox.

"So, did Jules tell you how she's been flirting with Adriel?"

Viv's chair makes a loud squeaking noise as she pivots to stare at me. "You let me go on and on about holiday decorations when you've been sitting on Adriel? I mean, not telling me about him." We all laugh at how that sounds naughtier than Viv intended.

If only they knew that's exactly what happened.

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Still facing my screen, they spin me around and are face-to-face with my truth.

“I knew it!” Sydney says. “She didn’t tell me the details either, but her pink ears are a dead giveaway.

Usually, I love my pixie cut black hair. I love how I don’t have to spend much time styling it. I love how washing it doesn’t start an hour-long cycle that ends with another chunk of time needed to blow-dry it all. I do not love how it exposes my ears and offers a clear view of my embarrassment by blushing whenever I am trying to keep something to myself. I don’t always get pink on my cheeks, but I always show it on my earlobes. No use lying about it now.

“We had a great time that night.” I nervously tuck hair that isn’t long enough to pull behind my ear and continue. “I really liked spending time with him. But it was just one night. We haven’t talked about it, or at all. I don’t know what he’s looking for, but I had a nice time.”

“Well maybe you’ll find out when he comes into volunteer with you today,” Sydney says, leaning back against her springy chair.

“The plot thickens,” Viv says, wide-eyed and slowly sipping her hot tea.

“He told you he’s coming in today?” I ask.

He signed up a while ago, so I wasn’t sure if he was starting today. The thought of him coming in is making me bead up with sweat. Will he want to talk about that night? Did it mean anything to him? Was it a fluke? It’s not like it was a date.

The last time we were together, it got steamy fast, and I'm not sure how to act around him now. Are we dating? Was it in the heat of the moment? Maybe it meant nothing to him.

Sydney rolls closer to me, and tones down her enthusiasm in front of my clear nerves. "Jules, relax. He's a good guy. Trust me, he wouldn't know how to lead someone on if he tried. He's as earnest as they come, and I think he really likes you. Just trust your gut and let him get to know you. You're irresistible, babe."

I know she meant for that to be a pep talk. To lift my spirits. But it only makes me more nervous about seeing him again. How am I supposed to let him get to know me when I barely know myself. That's why I moved out. I'm a thirty-year-old with one hobby, whose social life revolves around my family and work. I'm as boring as they come. With my track record of eagerly fitting the mold of whatever guy that was interested in me, I don't know if I have much more to identify myself than my job.

It's midday and he hasn't come in for his volunteer shift yet in the used bookstore we have attached to the library. With each passing hour I become more and more of a jittery mess.

Last night I dreamt of him coming in and forcefully taking me against a low shelf of erotic books, scattering covers of bare-chested men with each thrust. With that fantasy on replay in my mind, how am I going to focus on his volunteering now?

The chime above the opening door rings, and my daydream vanishes. Time for the real thing.

Jeans and a snug black tee make up his daily outfit. Now that it's getting cooler, he's rotated in his collared flannels. Today he's wearing rugged leather work boots.

Most days he covers up with a basic baseball cap, but some days he comes in with a

wide Stetson. Those are the days he looks most in his element. Paired with an embellished buckle, the wide black brim dips over his brow but I don't have to lean down to catch his dark eyes on mine because he's at least five inches taller than me.

Strong brows frame his deep-set eyes and a tall bridge along his nose beckons me to touch it. I'd follow it down the front of his broad chest if I could have my way. His rolled-up sleeves are giving me all the forearm eye candy I need.

"They said I could find you back here. Hi Jules."

"Adriel," I say, while tucking back that errant imaginary hair again. "Umm, well, hi."

It's been a week, and suddenly I don't know how to act.

This man has been in me, and now I don't know if I should even kiss him on the cheek. This is ridiculous. The second hand on the old clock seem to tick in a mocking side eye. The pressure builds up on my shoulders and makes me awkwardly lurch towards him. Changing my mind in the last moment, I jut out my arm to shake his hand.

His callused grip dwarfs my hand and just holds mine.

How does such a simple move bring me back to that night? I want that hand in other places.

He smiles and simply says, "Hi. It's been a while."

He's so cool. Steady and in control, to my daydreaming stutters. Maybe it was just a one-time thing. If we had talked while I was gone, if we had gone on a date, if we had time to get comfortable around each other, this could be so different. Instead, I'm a bumbling mess. I know I want more of him, but I have no clue what he wants.

“Sorry I didn’t reach out while I was gone. Things got a bit chaotic at home,” I say.

“I was worried about you.” He tightens his grip on my hand, which I just realize he’s still shaking. “I wanted to reach out, but I also wanted to give you your space. I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“You wouldn’t have scared me off.”

“I don’t know. If I called you as much as I thought about you, you might have blocked my number.” He tries to laugh that last sentiment off, but his brows furrow, and I get the impression that he’s not as unaffected as I think. Maybe I wasn’t alone in my pining after all.

Knowing that he’s as nervous as I am emboldens me.

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“Now I feel like I missed out. What would you have said if you called?”

Put an end to my wondering. Are we dating or are we something else? Was it one night, or the first night?

“I’d ask if you were okay. Ask how your family is. You left suddenly.”

Damn. That makes sense.

“Thank you. It caught me off guard. I was planning on staying here for the holidays and enjoy winter on my own, but my parents asked me for help. They’ve got property in the Philippines that they need to sell before some new tax law goes into place over there, so they took advantage of a flash sale on tickets to fly back and asked me to watch over my sister while they’re gone.”

He nods. “Are you close with your sister?”

“Yes. I practically raised her when my family was in the trenches of starting a new business when she was born. She’s twelve years younger than me, so she’s part my little sister, and part my kid.”

“Is she moving in with you for a while?”

“No. I’ll be moving back home.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you here like pick up your mail or anything, just let me know.”

“It’s not too far away, so I’ll just be commuting. Thanks though.”

He clears his throat and takes a small step back to look at the crowded library bookstore that we’re in. “So how can I help today, then?”

You could take me on your book stack of choice.

I wish.

There I go unnecessarily pushing back my short pixie hair as another naked thought runs through my mind.

“Let’s go to storage. You can help me sort a huge donation that just came in.”

He follows me out back.

Built on a hill, I take him outside of the building and around the back to a set of steps that lead down to a semi-basement level. There are long narrow windows along the top of the exterior walls, but otherwise it’s closed off. Around the perimeter are mismatched bookshelves labeled with subjects for sorting, and in the middle of the room is a large wooden table covered in boxes of books.

It’s musty, quiet, and doesn’t get much attention outside of weekend book sales.

I prop open the door to let air in. “Our library isn’t that big, so most of these will go up for donation and raise funds for programming. Unless it’s a pristine, new book that we don’t have, it will go for sale in the store eventually.”

“Makes sense.”

I sit down on one side, and he sits down on the other.

“The donated books are on this desk, so the first step is to go through the boxes and pull out the books in good condition to shelve by genre. That’s all you have to do.”

“Got it.”

We start sifting through boxes of musty books across from each other. I’m practically in a side bend to see him past the boxes, but my obvious interest earns me a dimpled cheek smile when I see him looking back.

Chapter Four

Adriel

Catching her glance under my hat, she drops the book she’s holding and looks away.

Do I make her nervous? I knew she makes me nervous, but the thought that I could have the same effect on her is intoxicating. It makes me feel confident. Makes it easier to say what I want.

I noticed her as soon as she started her job at the library. She’s tall and curvy and always wears fun and bright clothing with catch phrases on them. Her short hair makes her cheekbones seem higher, and she’s got a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks that are as entrancing as the night sky and make me want to stare at them to find a shooting star.

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Today she's wearing a snug blue cotton skirt that hug her long legs, and takes off her sweater to reveal a shirt that reads, "Book boyfriends do it better."

I noticed her cat accents the first day I saw her in the library. It was paw earrings that day, a tail on her bag the next week, and today, a cat paw cuff. I love looking for where her homage to her favorite animal is for the day.

"Do they now?" I say leaning around my pile of books and point to her shirt.

"In my experience they do."

"I think you need to up your experience then." What am I saying? Does that include me? I guess I never was her boyfriend, but doesn't one magical day count for something? Am I jealous of a shirt right now?

She's blushing and fights back a grin.

"What do book boyfriends do that's so good, anyways?" I ask.

"They communicate, they're attractive, and they always..." she says trailing off.

So far, so good. I can do that. "What's that last one? What do they always do?" I ask.

"Umm, they always open the door," she mumbles.

I don't think that's the third thing.

I stand to pick up a pile of romance books I've been sorting and put it on the correct shelf behind me.

I walk back to find her laughing to herself.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"That's not the third thing, is it? About the book boyfriends always opening the door." I sit back down and pull out another box. This one is full of pocket-sized paperbacks with bare-chested men gazing out at me. "Come on. Tell me the truth."

She still doesn't budge.

I hold up a small romance book that has a particularly revealing cover. The heroine has her hair wafting towards the castle behind her. A buff man is just wearing jeans and is grabbing her from behind.

Holding the book up to her, I say, "What does Fabio here do better?"

She laughs loudly and has a huge toothy smile. I haven't made a woman laugh like that in years. It's like pure honey. Sweet and sticking to me, I want to lick her off my fingers and hear her laugh some more.

"You got me," she says.

I wish.

"I can't lie while Fabio is watching. It's fiction, but romance book boyfriends all do three things. They communicate, sometimes a little late, but they get there in the end.

Somehow, they all have six-pack abs, even though nothing in their routine creates them, and they always make sure their lady comes first.”

She spills the truth and I drop Fabio.

“What? Too crass?” You can be crass with me.

“No. I just didn’t expect that.” I say, picking up the book and putting it on the shelf.

“Is that what you want?”

I walk back over and see her eyebrows up high, and her mouth opening and closing.

“Everything okay over there?” I say, with a grin.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” She asks with hooded eyes.

I had plans to drive a few towns over to check out a tractor for sale, I’ve got to train the new ranch hand to wash the cows in the morning, and I’ve got to bail the hay in the barn. Tomorrow’s a busy day, but I say, “I can make some time if you need me.”

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We hear footsteps coming around the outside and then Ana and one of her friends are in the doorframe. Turning my head away from Jules is as hard as swimming through molasses.

“Hey Ana. Ready to head out?” I ask.

She looks over. Her eyes ping pong between Jules and me, then she smiles broadly.

“Can I get the keys, dad? I’m going to check out and then I’ll meet you in the car.”
With a tiny wave, the girls are gone in a fit of giggles.

“You were saying?” I ask.

Her soft eyes are now alert. She looks up as if she’s recalculating what she was going to ask a minute ago. “Umm. Could you volunteer tomorrow, too?”

“If it helps you, consider it done.”

“That’d be great.”

“I’ve got work on my ranch in the mornings, but I can be here in the afternoon,” he says.

“That’s perfect.”

I thought we were heading towards a flirtier path. Possibly some time for just her and me. The only thing that changed in that moment was my daughter coming in. Was

that a dealbreaker for her? She seemed fine talking about her earlier. I'm not sure. The only thing I'm sure of is that before my daughter came in Jules was not going to ask me to volunteer.

I can't leave like this. We were building up momentum, and I try to seize some of it before it slips away completely.

"I have to bring Ana and her friend to their sleepover, but can I come back and drive you home?"

"I only live two blocks away."

It's a no without the blunt edge of a short rejection. The end to my hopes of more with her. I must have been imagining the flirting, and everything else. Why would she be interested in a single dad like me?

Before I can run out with my tail between my legs, she adds, "But I'd love the company. I get off at five."

I'm so excited. I've waited a long week to see Jules again, but the next few hours can't pass quickly enough.

Chapter Five

Jules

Before my shift is up, I see Adriel come in and takes a seat facing away from me at an open table. He pulls out a book and begins to read.

I appreciate that he can show me he's here but not put any pressure on me to hurry up and go. Most of my life feels timed out, and running from one thing to another, so his

easy patience is a nice change in pace.

Sydney nudges me to switch places with me for the growing line.

“Your carriage awaits,” she says.

I snort. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Well, he is here for you, isn’t he?” She says to me, then rotates my chair to exit while she steps in at the circulation desk. “I can help who’s next.”

I grab my bag from below the desk and give her a hug from behind. “Thank you.”

“Tell me all the details tomorrow.”

Having everything I need, I walk over to Adriel, and notice his foot tapping the moment I’m behind him.

Maybe he’s as impatient as me.

Laying my hand on his shoulder, he looks back towards me, and I’m greeted by a dimpled smile as inviting as a sunset.

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When I'm with him, the worries and questioning his intentions melt away. Instead of a dance I don't know the moves to, we naturally move in sync. Following his lead, we walk out of the library, and he guides me as if he knows where to go.

"I already know the two blocks won't be enough. Can we walk around first?" He asks.

I eagerly nod. Walking towards the coastline a few blocks away, I ask, "How's the last week been?"

He hesitates, and then settles on saying, "It was okay."

"Sounds like it could have been better. Want to talk about it?"

"My parents gave me some news I wasn't expecting."

I can tell there's more he wants to say so I stay quiet, giving him an in to expand on it or change the subject.

He continues. "They told me that the ranch my family has been working with for generations isn't doing as well as I thought."

"That must have been surprising," I say.

"Definitely. I love the land. My family has been here for generations. I can't imagine living anywhere else, or doing anything else, but now we might have to. They were getting ready to pass it on to me, but they don't want to hand me a failing business."

“But what do you want to do?”

Immediately he says, “I’ll do anything to keep it. I asked for a season to turn things around. It sounds absurd to think I can do anything when they haven’t been able to in years of trying, but I’ve got to try. That land is my life.”

His conviction is breathtaking. What was the last thing I fought for? The last time I risked failure for a dream. Hearing his passion, makes me want to help him, but I don’t want to overstep.

“If your brothers are anything like you, I wouldn’t bet against you making some waves in a season or less.”

“My brothers don’t know.”

“How come?”

“This isn’t their battle. I chose this. They didn’t. Luis is a musician, and Mateo keeps to himself up the mountain. Javier is our head veterinarian but doesn’t get involved in the rest of the ranch.”

He’s a classic oldest child like me. Taking all the burden for himself. I bite my tongue.

After a while, he asks, “What is it?”

I stay quiet a moment longer, then he says, “I want to know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m very similar. I’m the oldest too. I bend over backwards to take care of my sister, and to show up for my family. I literally had to move away to setup some boundaries for myself. I almost didn’t when I thought about leaving my sister, but she’s the one

who pushed me to go.”

“How’d she do that?”

“She borrowed my laptop and saw my tabs full of apartment listings. When I caught her, she just pointed to the listing for my apartment and told me that I should choose that one. She wanted to show up for me, I just never gave her the chance. It’s still hard.” I turn to look at him, “Maybe your brothers would like to be given the chance too.”

“Maybe.” His voice trails off. It looks like he’s taking it to heart. “I never thought about that.”

Happy to be helpful, I push a little more. “Tell me more. What have you thought up so far?”

“We don’t have to spend all our time talking about my problems.”

“If you’d like to vent, or are open to advice, I’m happy to hear it. I can tell it’s on your mind.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so distracted.”

“No. It’s okay. I like that you’re sharing this with me.”

“At the end of the day, the most valuable asset we have is the coastal land. If we sold it, we’d definitely be comfortable. The whole lot of us. My brothers and parents would all walk away with more money than we could reasonably use. Even Ana would be taken care of.”

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“And you don’t want to do that?”

He takes a deep breath. “How do you sell an organ. You might as well take my hands or my eyes. How can I separate myself from that land?”

I can feel his connection to it. Everyone always thinks about the beginnings of projects and relationships, but rarely the end. Who wants to think about closure and the finality of ending things, when starting things is so much more exciting?

My business training is kicking in. I may have gone to school for library sciences, but I took business classes as electives to help my family business.

“Is there any way to focus on what is working?”

His eyebrows shoot up on my direction of questions.

“Sorry, am I overstepping? Maybe you just wanted to vent? I’m happy to listen, too.”

“Not at all. I love where you’re going with this. It’s just not what I expected.”

“I was raised with entrepreneur parents. I may have studied to be a librarian, but entrepreneurship was practically my second major. I worked at my parents’ restaurant, and we always talked about business ideas over dinner.”

“I’m in awe, and in dire need of advice. I haven’t been able to talk about this with anyone.”

As we talk, our stride falls in step. I haven't been holding back with my opinion, and we've moved close enough for our hips to bump in passing often. While the sun sets, we've wandered for miles until I'm naturally heading home before it gets too dark.

My usual five-minute walk home has turned into an hour, and I'm looking forward to a long goodbye.

It feels nice to connect with him like this.

In the glow of the setting sun on my doorstep, I can't seem to pull out my keys and turn away from him.

Closing in on the distance between us, just as I think he's going to kiss me, he changes the direction of his lips and moves towards the side of my face. But before I can become disheartened, he whispers, "Can I kiss you?"

I nod.

Turning to me with a smile, he gives me the most tender kiss I've ever felt.

After a steamy start, this minor gesture feels just as hot.

I don't want this to end.

"How about some coffee?" I ask.

"That sounds perfect."

I turn around to unlock my door, and he nestles my back to shower me with more kisses. On the top of my head, on my cheeks, pulling back my hair to trace around my ear and go down my neck.

Enshrouding me with his body, as eager to get in as I am, I open the door and am shocked by what I see.

We're not alone.

Closing the laptop propped on her lap in my living room, my sister says, "Oooh. Is this the cowboy?"

Chapter Six

Jules

"How did you get in?"

"Surprise," Justine says, moving her laptop to the sofa and hiding behind my cat shaped pillow.

Frozen in place, Adriel looks back and forth between my shocked face and Justine's half hidden one.

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Long past the promise of a nightcap to restart our steamy setting, Adriel must be getting ready to run out of here. This is too much. Too embarrassing. Too fast.

Stepping around me, he walks over to the sofa and puts his hand out to greet my sister. “You must be Justine. Nice to meet you. I used to love when my brothers surprised me with visits. It’s been a while since that’s happened though.”

Color me surprised.

Where I would have turned away from seeing someone's family drama clearly unfold before me. Adriel turns toward it.

He eases the tension between my sister and me by just being present.

It feels like he aced a test that I didn't realize I was giving him.

Justine lights up knowing that we’re not going to have a sisterly blowout. I’ll have to talk to her about this later. This wasn’t the plan.

She moves her laptop to make space for Adriel, and he sits next to her. Justine looks him over in an assessing way that only a little sister could get away with. It’s over-the-top and ridiculous, but I like her protection. I’m usually the one doing all the care.

“Nice to meet you too, cowboy.” Justine tucks her legs under her seat and angles to face him and asks, “When did your little crush on my sister begin, cowboy?”

Showing no signs that her line of questions is too invasive, he plays it all off with

ease.

“Your sister doesn’t know this, but when she started at the library, I saw her help some kids pick out picture books. She knelt down every time she spoke to them to be at their eye level and spent nearly an hour picking out books and reading each one to them. It was that small thing that showed how big her heart is. I knew I wanted to get to know her more.”

I didn’t know that. My initial intentions were a lot thirstier than that.

“Plus, I like cats too,” he adds.

“Well, you better not just like them, you better love them. She’s a decade away from being a crazy ‘ol cat lady.”

I burst back in the room and say, “That’s enough of the interrogation there, sis. He doesn’t need to know that.” I see her tactic of trying to weed out unfit guys early by gauging their reaction, but today’s not the day. “Shall we do a rain check for that coffee, Adriel?”

“I’d love to stay if you don’t mind. Coffee still sounds perfect,” Adriel says.

Now that he’s staying, Justine has picked up her line of questioning.

“Any siblings, cowboy?”

“I’m the oldest of four brothers. They’re around.”

“You can tell a lot about a person based on their relationship with their siblings,” she says.

“My brothers and I are all a bit introverted, so we’ve got our own things we’re pursuing right now. Very competitive as kids. I’ve also got four guys that are practically my brothers. They know me better than anyone. Luke is bit of a celebrity, but I just think of him as a kid with bowl cut. Kenji took over his family’s Japanese inn in town, and we used to talk about how we’d update our family businesses together when we were young. We both have big shoes to fill. Brandon is the principal at the elementary school. Great with kids and can ease the tension in any situation. Then there’s Jackson. He’s my best friend. Really pulled through for me when I could barely recognize myself. I’d do anything for any one of them.”

He really seems to be taking my sister’s questions seriously.

“You’ve passed my preliminary test. I’m inviting you to stay for dinner. I’m about to make my specialty,” Justine says.

“What’s that?” Adriel asks.

“Chicken adobo. Classic Filipino dish, and Jules’ favorite. She loves to eat it but hates to cook it. Not much to it, she just doesn’t like chopping garlic, and there’s a lot of garlic.”

“Well, if it’s her favorite, you should probably teach me how to make it too.”

“I love that for you two.” Justine pops up and walks over to the kitchen. “I bought all the ingredients on my way over.”

I love that for us, too.

Chapter Seven

Adriel

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“Why don’t you get settled, sis? Unwind and do some of that home self-care stuff you told me you’re trying when you get home. Leave the adobo to us.”

Jules looks at me with sympathetic eyes, but I wish she wouldn’t. I am thoroughly enjoying myself. Justine reminds me of Ana. She knows exactly what she wants, so we might as well get out of her way.

“I’m already looking forward to cooking with your sister,” I reach for the apron on the wall and tie it on before Jules can try to give me another out.

Justine scurries over to her and places a book in her hand from the bookshelf and hands her a sparkling water bottle. “Trust me.”

Jules nods and slowly makes her way down the hallway.

Justine deftly weaves her way around the kitchen and places the chicken, soy sauce, whole pepper, bay leaves, garlic, and vinegar in front of us.

“This is all we need to make my specialty. There’s also a secret ingredient, but as the name implies, it’s a secret. Only family gets to know that one.” She emphasizes that with a wink. She places a knife and a bulb of garlic in front of me in place of actual instructions. I get straight to it.

Justine rinses the chicken in a pot and eyeballs pouring in soy sauce and vinegar, then tops it off with my pile of garlic. “Toss in a couple of bay leaves, and we get it to boil, then leave it to simmer for an hour.”

“Two or three leaves?” I ask, while opening the jar of pungent leaves.

“Always four.” She starts to clean up the kitchen while I fish out the dry leaves. She seems as adept in the kitchen as I am in the stables. I love seeing people in their element. Before I know it, the kitchen is clean, a tangy aroma has taken over the apartment, and she’s making a pot of coffee.

“So, what do you like to do, cowboy?”

“I’m a bit of a homebody. I really spend all my time on the ranch with my horses and my daughter. Any day that I get to ride my horse and stand in the sun for a while is a good one.”

“Hmm... Well, my sister is already a homebody. Needs some help getting out of her shell if you ask me.” She nods to herself. “She’s told me about Ana. Ate Jules practically raised me.”

“How so?”

“Our parents were starting their business when I was born. Jules was already twelve, so they leaned on her a lot for babysitting.”

From the wince she just made, I get a sense that there’s something she’s not saying.

“It looks like it made you two very close.”

“Yes, but at what cost?”

“What do you mean?”

Justine cracks her knuckles and swirls around the galley kitchen to line up three

mugs, creamer, and sugar, while she talks.

“In our family, the oldest has a lot of obligations. She stayed home to work during college, she spent a good chunk of her childhood raising me, and she only just left our family home to move here.”

“Justine, come over! Mom and dad are calling from the Philippines,” Jules says from down the hallway.

“Be right back.” She lowers the heat to simmer, grabs her coffee cup, and makes her way down the hallway.

The end of the kitchen has a counter that opens into the living room. I’m drawn to the eclectic room as much as I am to Jules. It fits her perfectly.

Plants hang from the ceiling, bookshelves are stuffed with romance and cozy murder mysteries, and a hook in the corner holds a dozen lanyards. Before I get the chance to inspect her shelves closely, I realize that Justine only grabbed her mug. I’ll go pour some for Jules and bring it to her.

Halfway down the hallway I overhear a sudden outburst, “You’re staying where? I told you to stay with Justine at home, Jules.”

Coffee in hand for Jules, I freeze outside of her open door.

Justine answers quickly. “Ate Jules was going to, dad. It was totally my idea. I came to Jules’ home and gave her no choice. It’s just as close for me to commute from school to her apartment, as it is to go from home to school. She just moved here, and I didn’t want to add hours to her commute every day. That doesn’t seem fair to me.”

“Who’s taking care of whom over there?” an older man roars. He sounds as stern as

mine.

“I’m taking care of her,” Jules mumbles. It’s clearly an argument they’ve had before.

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“No. Jules has taken care of me since I was born. I’m an adult too, dad. We take care of each other.”

“Talk to your mom.” Some things get mumbled in Tagalog, and a gentler voice comes on the line.

“His bark is louder than his bite, girls. You know that. He’s just not used to you girls being adults yet. I’ll talk to him. But Justine,” their mom says.

“Yes, mom?”

“I think you’re right. You staying with Jules does make more sense. But you should have asked Jules first. We love you girls. Take care of each other.”

“Love you too.”

They hang up and my phone beeps with a text message. Shit.

“Adriel?” Jules calls out.

I come around the corner with the mug of coffee for Jules, “Sorry. I noticed Justine only grabbed one cup, so I wanted to bring you yours.” I look down and see Jules already holding a mug.

“I’ll take that,” Justine says with a wink. “Thank you. How’s our adobo doing?”

“I turned the chicken over and it smells great.”

It just dawned on me what Justine is doing. She's not trying to scare me off, she's trying to help me out.

Just like I helped her out earlier, she's helping me now by ushering me back down the hallway towards the kitchen. I think we both know Jules needs a minute to decompress after that call.

As effervescent as Justine is, there's clearly a lot of depth to her character. As much as Jules takes care of her, it's obvious that Justine is trying to do the same for her.

"Try this chicken." Justine holds up a fork towards me with some chicken on it.

I take it, and it's the most appetizing bite of chicken I've ever had. There's a hint of sweetness, too. "That's phenomenal."

"You'll like it even more with rice," Jules says coming up from behind us.

"Doing okay?" I ask her.

"No use denying that that was a shitty call. But they did give me an idea for your ranch."

Always looking for ways to take care of everyone around her.

"I'm eager to hear it."

Bracing the counter in front of her, Justine sets the table behind us.

"My parents went home to sell some of their family property in the Philippines. They haven't been back in a while, so they were shocked to see that the area around their old home has really developed. Instead of going along with the sale, they decided to

convert the space into apartments and rent it out. It'll give them a steady stream of rent, and a business reason to travel home more often."

"That's great. How does that work for my ranch?" I ask.

"What did you say is the most valuable thing about your ranch?"

"The land."

"But you don't want to sell it," she says.

"Exactly."

"Instead of selling it, how about you convert some of the land in the back into a rentable property? Our small town has been growing with hotels, and there's never any vacancies during the summer or winter."

Catching on, I say, "So, between now and summer, I could build some homes in the back corner and keep our property private on the side. If I start now, I could probably get a cabin up by myself before winter is over. That's perfect!"

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“Imagine if you got help from your brothers, and your friends in town? We could get up way more than one. The problem is, it’ll take a lot of money to get all the materials. My parents had to renovate quite a bit, and it was double what they expected.”

“I can do it on my own over a few months, and I’ve got some money saved up. You’ve got to spend money to make money, right?” No one needs to know the money is my savings for Ana’s college fund.

During dinner, we brainstorm the expansion of the ranch together.

Justine pulls out her laptop and sets up accounts for me on a handful of home sharing sites. Jules makes vision boards for some simple decorating I can use in the cabins that would attract families and long-term renters.

Even though we didn’t get to follow up that kiss, being able to create something with her and her sister ended up being satisfying in its own way.

I think she might have just saved my ranch.

Chapter Eight

Jules

“I’m here to volunteer today,” Adriel says, showing up at the library the next day.

“Can’t get enough of me, eh?”

“You caught me,” he says with a grin.

We get comfortable in our seats across from each other in the back detached storage room, and he asks, “What would you name this one?” Adriel raises a book with another bare-chested man on the cover, but this time he’s glaring at the reader while standing in front of a sunny beach.

I smile. “Looking for love?”

He nods and says, “Sandy serenade?”

“How about, sex on the beach?”

“There’s that crass mind of yours again.” He laughs.

“Well, he’s not looking for a drinking buddy with his chest out like that. What’s it called?”

“Sweet Spot.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed that.” I say nodding.

I look at a few more books in my box and hold up a cover featuring a couple. I quickly put my hand over the title and hold it up. The man is cuddling the woman from behind and they’re standing in front of a Christmas tree forest. “What would you name this one?”

“Christmas tree couple,” he says, moving behind me to get more boxes.

“Too on the nose. How about, Christmas tree farm love?”

“That’s a terrible title.”

“It is,” I laugh.

I peek at the cover and laugh even harder. “You’re not going to believe it.”

“What is it? It’s not even Christmas themed, huh?”

I laugh and drop the book because he’s not wrong.

I reach down, wanting to keep him in suspense a moment longer, but he’s quick. He reaches over and picks it up, but my instincts kick in and I grab it out of his hands. Suddenly it doesn’t matter that I don’t know if he wants to date, or that I’ve imagined him in my bed since I saw him walk into the library with his wide Stetson hat months ago. This mini competition pushes us past strangers. He’s practically curled over my back reaching around me to get the book.

Instead of letting up, he tickles me, and I drop the book on the ground again.

“You’re ruthless,” I laugh. Turning around to face him, I lean back onto my elbows using the table behind me.

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One hand next to my elbow, he bends down to pick up the book and laughs too. He comes back up and squares his hips inches away from mine and reads the cover out loud.

“Cowboy Christmas? Where’s the cowboy? We don’t dress like that. This guy looks like he’s never set foot on a ranch.”

He’s right. The guy on this cover looks more like a stereotypical librarian than a ranch hand. He’s got eyeglasses, a beanie, and wearing sneakers. Adriel should be on a book cover. Tan skin, abs peeking through an unbuttoned jean top. I can imagine what’s under that flannel, but shirtless would work too. Just from his fit physique and stance, anyone could tell he does something physical for a living. He clearly works on his ranch with more effort in the morning hours than most of us move all day. Top him off with a cowboy hat, and it would surely be a best seller. I’d buy it for the cover alone.

Pointing to the book between us, I say, “There’s a cowboy hat there. Even a hay bale next to his truck if you look close enough.”

Still towering closely over me, he says, “If this is what you have in mind about cowboys, then book boyfriends don’t always do it better. I could show you what a cowboy really does, if you want.”

I want.

Pushing off the table my back’s against, I know that if I step towards him, he’ll naturally sit on the chair behind him.

I do, and he sits.

Why is it so easy to flirt with him? It's so easy to push past my hang-ups.

I put my hands on his shoulders and I wait to see what he does.

At this point, we could laugh it off. I could step back and make a joke. He could stand back up and reach for another box of books to sort. It could be a misstep. A funny miscalculation.

Instead of either of those options, his eyes trace up my chest and meet my eyes. The desire in his eyes meets the fire in mine and he slowly reaches up the back of my thighs and rounds my hips to hold still. I move forward over his waiting hips and straddle his lap.

There's no mistaking what's happening. No confusion. Just clarity and leaps forward to make up for our slow start.

"What's a cowboy really like?" I ask.

He widens his thighs, and grips around my thighs. Reaching under my butt, he tucks me tight against his hips.

Hand to my chin, he tilts it back and I automatically open my mouth by way of welcoming him in.

Lightly grazing over my lips, then jaw, and earlobe, he says, "First, we ask for permission. Is this okay?"

How does him asking for permission before anything happens turn me on even more? Adriel unlocks something feral in me and I make it clear that he has my permission. I

ride his growing length under my hips, and the friction from riding him over his jeans is driving me wild. With a gravelly exhale by my ear, he moves backwards to kiss along my jaw and finds his way back in front of my mouth.

“Say it,” he commands.

“Take me.”

As sudden as a pouncing animal, he opens my mouth with his and stands up to wrap me around his waist. He walks me to the door and kicks the wooden wedge holding the door propped open, so it slams shut. I reach back and lock it.

Gripping my ass and locked around his waist, he walks us back to the center table while I unbutton his flannel and pull it off to find a ribbed, snug white tank top. He pushes a few boxes away from the edge to clear enough space for me to lie down and starts to pull up my shirt.

“Is this okay?”

“No one ever comes back here.” With my bra already exposed, I unclasp the front latch and he watches me spill out.

“You’re so beautiful, Jules,” he says catching my eyes before greeting my neck and moving further down to worship my breasts with his mouth, one at a time.

I tip back his wide brimmed black cowboy hat and place it on a box behind me so I can run my hands through his shorter, wavy hair. Just enough for me to grip between my fingers.

Without his hat, he reaches back over his shoulder to pull off his tight sleeveless top and hangs it over his shoulder. Taking it off reveals a tan chiseled chest, and even

darker arms.

I've never had sex at work before. I've kicked kids out for kissing in the stacks. This is wildly unlike me, but I don't want to stop.

Fingering every exposed area of skin comes with a new moment for approval.

I mutter yes over and over again, and glow from our immediate connection.

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Relaxing my neck on a small stack of pocketbooks, I tilt my neck up to close my eyes and focus all my sensation on following the scrape of his stubble further down my body as it follows the panties he's pulling down. My moaning gets too loud for the surroundings, but I can't help myself.

Before I can get too comfortable, I whip my head forward when he pinches my nipple. I look down to see him nestled between my knees. "Eyes on me. But keep it down Jules. We're in a library." With a wink, he moves back down, and I prop my elbows back to watch him like he asked.

Circling my slit, he pulls back to blow on me and open me wider with one hand while his other one rounds the small of my back and tugs me down a little.

I close my knees around his face, but he brushes his rough chin against my knee to move them where he wants.

Message received.

I open my legs wide and bite my bottom lip as he moves closer to taste me.

Moving up to keep eye contact with me while he laps up my excitement, I hear the metal of his buckle, and his zipper go down. I sit up a little more to see him take himself into his own hands.

Damn. This man is unbelievable. I've never witnessed a man so confident he could handle himself in front of me. Even from a distance, he looks like a lot to take. His length will forever be etched into my fantasies.

“Not fair. You’re taking care of us both.”

“You can take care of us both another time, mi amor.”

I don’t know how things can get any better from here. But they do.

He’s moaning as much as I am, but his vibrations go straight to my clit and continue up my spine to catapult my heart into an echelon of faster beats that I haven’t experienced in a long time.

His groans turn into a deeper noise between my legs. I watch him tuck his tongue away to properly shush me. “Shhh. It’s a library. Keep quiet.”

I lose my sense of place for a moment and laugh loudly. How does this man take me switch from flirty to funny in moments?

Back to flirty, he dives back down and flattens his tongue on me, while I hear him pick up the pace on himself too. Every stroke, every lick, every murmur is pulling me closer.

“Papi, I want you so bad.”

Suddenly he thrusts three fingers in me and sucks my clit to make me plummet over the edge.

Still pumping himself hard, he stands up and watches his name repeatedly fall off my lips like a mantra luring him closer. “Adriel. Papi. I want to come on your cock next time.”

I reach up and pinch my own nipple to give him a show, and he comes all over them both.

He rests his forehead on my shoulder, and pants. “Was that okay? Fuck. I couldn’t control myself when you said that.”

I swipe my thumb down through the mess of him on my chest and lick my fingers clean. “You’ve got my permission to do that again, too.”

He kisses my neck and pulls his tank top from his shoulder and uses it to wipe me clean.

Watching this beautiful cowboy clean every inch of my chest makes me feel like the sexiest I’ve felt in years. Makes me feel like I really want to date him.

I’d love to ride this high a bit longer, but, as good as this has been, I can’t help but feel like it’s not serious. It’s too fast. Too intense. It feels like a hookup, and it’s clear now that this isn’t enough.

Is this all he wants?

Chapter Nine

Adriel

Luckily, we stopped when we did because the next thing I hear is a knock on the door and my Ana talking through the crack.

I kiss Jules and shuffle the boxes back into their positions on the edge of the table and move to open the door.

“Mija. Good you knocked; the door must have swung shut while we were moving books in the back.”

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If she thinks something's up, she doesn't show it.

"Ready when you are," Ana says. "See you later Miss Jules."

"See you soon. Thanks for your help again, Adriel."

"I was happy to come."

Jules coughs and her eyes bug out, then we both laugh in our private joke.

"Dad, your hat."

I move back to the table, and Jules picks it up to hand over, but I lean forward for her to place it on me.

I wave once more and say, "I can come to help tomorrow, too."

"I'd like that."

I don't know how I'll keep myself occupied until then.

When we get home, I'm excited to see my parents in the kitchen.

"Adriel, Ana, come on in for dinner. I made tamales," mamá says.

"Ana, go wash up and meet us in the dining room."

“Okay, dad!”

We sit down for dinner and there’s three different kinds of enchiladas. Ever since we were kids my mom has gone out of her way to accommodate everyone’s different tastes. She’d start prepping hours before dinner to make sure everyone got what they wanted.

We’ve been different from birth. Always choosing different things, we chose vastly different careers too. After we settled with two careers on the ranch, and two of us off, it’s generally how we’ve squared off on arguments and meals too.

The only thing that always brought us together was building. I may be the main rancher now, but they’ve all got building in their bones.

When each of us turned eighteen, it was a rite of passage for us Santiago men to build our house on an acre of land nearby. Knowing I’d want to raise a family soon, I chose to build my house next to the main ranch so my kids could grow up near my parents. Javier, the veterinarian, chose some land upwind from the stables so he could be closer to the animals. Mateo built his cabin on our outlying property up the mountain. Luis chased his music career after high school, and we all watched him soar. He hasn’t built his home on the land yet. Maybe one day.

Just like when we were kids, we’ve each pursued our own paths and supported each other from a distance.

Seeing multiple tamales for dinner tonight reminds me of so many childhood meals. As different as we are, I miss them on nights like this.

“Mom, dad, my friend Jules gave me an idea for the ranch.”

“Jules from the holiday party? I really liked her. Could you two be more than

friends?” Mom hints.

“Oh, they’re definitely more than friends,” Ana blurts out.

“What’s that mean?” I ask, a little nervous.

“I see the googly eyes you give her at the library.”

“Googly eyes, eh?” My dad asks.

“Oh yea, very googly papa,” Ana says, helping herself to another tamale. “I catch him looking at her when I check out my books. You need to ask her out dad.”

I wasn’t sure if she noticed, but I like that she’s encouraging me. That feels like a nudge in the right direction. As much as I’ve been falling for Jules, I wouldn’t feel totally comfortable dating someone that Ana wasn’t comfortable around. She volunteers with her at the library, but she hasn’t mentioned anything in the last week, so this is like a boost to my heart.

“You like her, Ana?” Dad asks her.

She nods, and he says, “Then I like her too.” Ana gets up to kiss him on the cheek and asks to be excused to do her homework.

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After I watch her safely walk across the garden to our home, I say, “Okay, well thank you for your strong opinions on something I didn’t ask for. But I wanted to bring up her good idea about the ranch, and not us dating.”

“Okay, okay. Tell us your plan Adriel,” mamá says.

“We were talking about the value of the land and how I don’t want to sell it, so she asked what I thought about renting.”

“Renting the land? To another farm?” dad asks.

“No. She was thinking about how crowded it gets here over the summer for the arts festivals and suggested building property to rent.”

“We’ve never done that. We’re ranchers, Adriel, not landlords.”

“Sure dad, but that’s not working for us right now. I’ll try anything to keep this land in our family.”

“I said no,” dad slams his hand on the table and leaves.

I’ve grown up around these outbursts my whole life. I hate when he acts like that. I’m just glad Ana left when she did. He’s her biggest fan and he hers. I want to keep it that way.

“He’s not used to change. Give him time,” mom says, trying to smooth over his anger with another serving of food.

“I’m going to do it mom. I’ve already ordered lumber to be delivered tomorrow and am going to use the blueprints for my home. I really think it’s the best idea we’ve got so far.”

“It’s funny how similar you both are. But I think you’re right. We’ve tried everything we know, and it hasn’t worked yet. It’s time to try something new.” She places her hand on mine, and I know I’ve got all the approval I need.

The next day starts like normal, and I’ve got nearly a dozen hours of work time ahead of me before I meet up with Jules to volunteer again.

I accept the lumber delivery, pull out my old blueprints, and start pulling the rest of my supplies from the back of the barn and tool shed. Gathering all my material, I load up my utility cart and drive to the land by the back entrance of our property. Close to a separate entrance that connects to the main road, this is the perfect space for some rentals that overlook the ocean from our cliffside land.

After I’ve been working for an hour, I hear an old truck rumbling my way.

It’s my dad.

“I’ll work on cutting the wood for the flooring since you’re already working on the foundation,” he says.

My mom is right. We are so similar. More for action than words, I appreciate him the only way I know how.

I point him to the Miter saw in the corner and get back to work.

Chapter Ten

Jules

I hear Adriel knocking at my door.

Opening it with a brace around my hand, he picks up my wrapped hand tenderly and asks me, “Jules, are you okay? You weren’t at our volunteer hour, so Sydney suggested I check on you at home. I hope that’s alright.”

“You’re just who I was thinking of, but I’m so sorry I forgot to tell you I went home. I slipped and hurt myself at work.”

Rubbing my shoulder, I slowly shake my hand in a brace and smile weakly.

“Want some company? I can cook for you?”

“That’s so thoughtful. I was just planning to wait for Justine to come home and make me food tonight, but she has a school newspaper deadline, and won’t be back for hours.”

“It’s settled.” He slides off his shoes by my entrance, and for some reason, the jarring size difference of our footwear makes me smile.

“Hot food sounds amazing.” I rub my head and follow him to the kitchen.

“You just sit down and relax. I got you,” Adriel says.

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“Let me get you an ice pack and pain medicine.”

“I have a bag of frozen okra in the freezer, and I don’t think I need pain meds. They gave me some strong medicine when they set my wrist.” I tip up his hat. “Damn, I love your cowboy hat. Makes me want to ride you again.” I can’t seem to hold my tongue between what I think and having it spill out of my mouth. What did they give me?

“I’ve been thinking about you too.” He gives me a quick kiss to my cheek. “But I think you need some rest today.”

He’s piling up all the ingredients on the counter. Frozen okra and meat, fresh carrots and tomatoes, a jar of chicken broth, and a jar of dried barley.

Wow. Now that’s attractive.

“I’m glad you think so,” Adriel says.

Did I say that out loud? These pain meds are making the barrier for keeping inside thoughts inside harder than I expected.

When was the last time I was taken care of like this? I’m usually the planner. The nurturer. The one to support people and bring healing homemade bone broth. Feeling it reflected on me brings me a warmth I don’t recognize.

“I’m going to add some extra garlic, since you love it so much.”

“You remember what Justine said. You must really like me,” I say.

He laughs a little and says, “I do.”

I watch him chop everything up and get a nice savory scent wafting around the house. After it’s all simmering, he comes back over and stands behind me to rub my shoulders.

This is nice. It feels so much more like something serious than something frivolous. I feel more vulnerable in front of him now that he’s shown up to take care of me even more than when we were naked together.

As the stew heats up, my swaying emotions are vacillating between being turned on and needing to take off another layer and ask him the truth. “I’ve got to be honest with you, Adriel, I don’t want to just hookup.” My voice is soft, and my emotions are bubbling over in a way I can’t keep contained anymore.

“Good. I don’t either. I’m not good at it, and I don’t want to try. I like you. A lot. I’d probably second guess me too with how quickly everything heated up at your work the other day. It’s hard to explain, but it just feels right.”

I was prepared for a fight. A back and forth of clarification. This is much nicer.

Whenever I spoke up before, I was always met with one of two things. Shock or disgust. My ex would either act confused, surprised, or react angrily because he was gaslighting me again.

I clear my throat and say, “I like you too.”

He doesn’t stop there. He keeps going. “I lied to your sister. I noticed you before that moment with the kids in the library. I saw you volunteer at the pet shelter too. I was

thinking about surprising Ana with a cat for her birthday, but I was too nervous to talk to you then. There were all these people waiting to meet cats that day, I tried to wait for an opening with you. But before I knew it my time was up, and I had to leave.”

He drags a hand down his embarrassed face. I take it and kiss his palm. I guess we’re confessing now.

“I noticed you first at the library. You came in on my first week on the job. I was checking in books in the front office and saw an interesting mix of books come in. Gentle parenting. Woke parenting. Family values. Then a pile of Babysitter’s Club books and Braiding Sweetgrass. That’s my favorite recent read and I had to see whose books these were. I peeked from behind the door and saw you with your daughter. I was into your books, but when I saw you, I knew I needed to meet you.”

“Jules, you are so much more than I was hoping for. Will you please go on a date with me this weekend?”

As much as I want to stay awake, my eyes are drifting closed. I’ve been waiting weeks for this conversation, and now I’m falling asleep from this pain medicine. Not right now! I like him so much, how will he ever know?

“I know, Jules.”

With a kiss to my cheeks, I fall asleep cocooned in sweet thoughts and a savory smell filling my apartment.

I wake up hours later in the dark, layered under blankets and propped up on a pillow, with my phone next to me.

“Adriel?” I whisper.

“It’s me, Justine. I’m here sis. Adriel called me before he had to pick up Ana. He just left a little while ago.”

“I had the best dream of him being here and taking care of me, but we were also riding cat unicorns and flying. I’m not sure what I said.”

Justine laughs and hands me a bottle of water. “I don’t know what happened either, but I do know your cowboy couldn’t hold back his smile when I asked him how you were doing. He said to let you know that half the stew is in the freezer, and the other half is on the stove for us to eat now. The said something about how he’s been waiting for that conversation too, and that he can’t wait for your date this weekend.”

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As dreamy as that felt, I'm glad all my memories weren't just wishful thinking. I've got a date to get ready for.

Chapter Eleven

Adriel

Eager for our date, I get out of bed easier today. The forecast says it's the coldest temperature of the month, but I don't notice.

I find my mom in the kitchen and she's bracing the counter while coughing into her sleeve.

I rush over to pat her back, then guide her to a chair. "Are you okay, mamá?"

"I thought I'd be okay, but I think I picked up a cold last night. I'm sorry mija but I don't think I'll be able to take care of Ana tonight."

"Don't worry about that, mamá." I tuck her into bed and finish my rounds on the ranch. By the time I bring Ana to school, I've gathered the courage to call Jules about our change in plans.

"Hi Adriel." I hear giggling in the background.

"Hi Jules. Tell Justine I say hi."

I hear some mumbling, and then I hear Justine on the phone, "Hey Adriel. I hope you

have fun plan for your date tonight. Jules is looking forward to it.”

I must be on speaker phone.

“I’m sorry to do this, but my mom was going to watch her but she’s sick. I called to reschedule.”

Some more mumbling, and then I hear, “Adriel, leave it to me. I can watch her. We’ll make dinner and have a movie night. I’m a great babysitter.”

If she’s anything like Jules, she’ll be great with Ana. I usually have a system of vetting people though, family included. I’ve heard too many horror stories about babysitting gone wrong. But, if she’s at home with my cameras on, maybe I’ll feel a little more at ease.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable watching her?” I ask.

“Absolutely.”

“I’m a bit overbearing when it comes to Ana. I’ve got cameras around my house, and I’ll probably call too many times.”

“Wow, quite the mother hen. Yes, sir. Those terms are acceptable. I promise to protect her with my life.” I can practically see Justine saluting the phone.

Even with all my security measures in place, I still feel a bit uneasy about it.

“She’s a great babysitter and has been a camp counselor since she was thirteen, if that makes you feel more comfortable. I’m also totally fine with rescheduling.”

“No, let’s go. I think Ana will love Justine too. Maybe you can teach her how to

make that adobo for dinner? She loves to cook.”

Justine erupts with laughter and claps. “We’ll come to your place by two, and you can leave with Jules from there.”

“Wow. Thanks for setting up our date, Justine. We’ve got it from here,” Jules says.

Jules laughs on the phone and takes me off speakerphone. “Did that sound okay with you? Really?”

“Our date is long overdue. See you soon.”

This is the first time we’ll really be out together. Every time we’ve been alone before felt like stolen moments in separate timelines. Snippets of conversations at the library. A few afternoons sorting donated books. Each experience had different intentions behind them, but tonight is about getting to know each other.

Eagerly watching for their arrival through the window, I see Jules as soon as they park in front of our home. Every time I see her, I can’t stop myself from staring. I’m thankful for these few precious moments where I get to stare without judgement. She’s wearing a pastel lavender corset style cotton dress that drapes around her hips and ends at her calves. Asking her to get ready for a lot of walking, she completes her outfit with white, leather sneakers. Today her cat paws are back on her lobes with cute stud earrings. That’s more perfect than she knows.

“Caught you,” Ana says from behind me. “You sure are excited for this date, dad.”

“I really am,” I say.

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“When you two get married, remember who told you to ask her out first,” she says, pointing at her own chest. Ana walks over to open the door for them.

Before Justine can walk in, Ana asks, “Do you like The Baby-Sitters Club books?”

“I love them. The new graphic novel versions are so cool,” Justine says.

“Which one are you?” Ana asks.

Without missing a beat, Justine says, “Claudia for sure. I even brought some temporary-colored hair spray for us to play around with if you want.”

Ana’s eyes light up and then she turns to me and says, “Bye dad!”

Not my style of vetting, but it seems to have worked for her.

“Bye cowboy, take care of my sister,” Justine says.

She leads Justine down the hallway, and it’s finally just me and Jules.

“You look amazing.” I square off my hips with hers and hold her in an embrace I never want to leave.

“You do too.” She says to my navy t-shirt, jeans, and boots combo. “No hat today?” She asks looking up at my gelled black waves.

“Not today. Give me one more minute to make sure everything is set, and we’ll get

going. Help yourself to a drink from the fridge for the drive. It's almost an hour away."

"Okay, I'll grab another for you. What are we doing?" Jules asks.

"It's a surprise," I say walking around my house and putting a few security cameras on.

"How mysterious. I'm excited to get to see what you're into."

"I'm excited to get to see what you're into, too." She has no idea what's in store for today. Neither do I, if I'm being honest. Let's just hope she likes surprises.

I've always gotten the sense that Jules likes to take care of other people. She's always helping at home with her family, practically a parent to her sister, and she's so nurturing at the library. She even converted a family conversation into an idea for saving my ranch. Always taking care of others, who's taking care of her? Does she feel seen?

I'd love to be a space for her to shine as herself. I'd love to really see her in her element. Doing something that makes her. After what Justine said about her needing someone to draw her out of her shell, I knew how I could fit into her life. Finding inspiration from her shelves, I want her to know that I see her. Today is all about celebrating Jules.

Chapter Twelve

Jules

"We're almost there. How about you put on the blindfold in the glove compartment?" Adriel says while exiting the freeway.

What is this boy up to?

I open his glove compartment to find a blindfold with kitty ears and laugh as I put it on. “How do I look?”

“Purr-fect.”

I love whatever this is already.

After another mile or so, he stops the car.

“Before you take off your blindfold, just know that I really want to get to know you. I’ve been wanting to ask you out for a while now, but I knew I didn’t want to just take you to dinner and a movie. I really wanted to find something special for you, and so I found something I think you’ll like.”

Is he nervous? I would have been fine with a dinner and movie, but now I’m excited, and scared, by whatever’s waiting for me.

“You can take off your blindfold now.”

I slide off my kitty mask and gasp at the sight. I feel like I’m on display in a way I haven’t shared with anyone before, and I’m a little embarrassed by being so obvious about something I thought was hidden.

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I turn to Adriel and see that he's not wearing his signature Stetson. Not even his baseball cap. Instead, he's got a headband with cat ears on. Immediately my embarrassment is replaced by giddiness, and I launch myself towards him on our shared bench seat in his truck and laugh while burying myself in his chest with a hug.

"What is happening right now?" I squeal.

He places a matching headband on me and says, "Welcome to Cat Con."

I've never had a pet, but I've always been desperate for a cat. I begged for a kitten every year for my birthday gift, but somehow my mom insisted on being allergic to them even though her best friend had cats and she never came home from her place out of sorts. Suspicious, to say the least. Instead, I've been relegated to celebrating them with cat accessories and volunteering at the humane shelter.

We slide out of the truck and are immediately in a stream of other people wearing cat ears, tails, wearing clothing with cats spewing rainbows, cats riding rainbows, and rainbow-colored cats. Inside the enormous convention center are exhibitors hawking cat food, cat toys, plushies, and posters. Every few paces I have to pick up my jaw from how amazed I am.

"How in the world did you find this?" I ask.

Adriel says, "You clearly love cats, and I remember being shocked when Ana came home from volunteering one day and saying you didn't have a cat."

"My mom's allergic, so I never had one."

“Well, you’ve got your own place now. Would you like to find your cat? They have cat adoption in exhibit hall E.”

He’s right. I do have my own place now. I’ve been so used to putting myself on the back burner and hiding. But here I am, living on my own for nearly six months and I’m still doing that. In case my parents were to visit, I still haven’t gotten a cat. But they haven’t visited, have they? I’ve been so used to self-sacrifice, that I’m still recognizing what my own self-care looks like. It’s about time.

Wow. He knows exactly where to go, too. Clearly, he prepped for this date. My heart is fluttering so much, I can barely distinguish the subtle difference between the variances of emotions ricocheting through me. Whatever it is, it’s long past the stolen moments we’ve been getting.

Without a doubt in my mind, I say, “Let’s go find my cat.”

Adriel takes my hand and leads the way through the crowd.

Finding the adoption line, there’s nearly forty people already lined up. It’s going to be a while.

“It looks long. Do you want to go somewhere else?” I ask.

“No way. I’m happy to be anywhere you are.” With a squeeze to my hand, we join the queue.

“Would you like to check your cameras to see how the girls are doing?” I ask. He seemed so nervous about leaving Ana with Justine earlier. “I take it you don’t often leave Ana with babysitters?”

“Thank you.” He moves next to me so I can see the app with five different camera

angles setup around his house. “I’m an overprotective dad, I know. It’s just been the two of us for so long, that letting in other people has never been easy.”

Spotting them in the living room making a garland with a big bowl of popcorn on their laps releases a deep breath from Adriel.

“They look like they’re eating as much as they’re putting on that string,” I say.

“They look happy together, don’t they?” He says wistfully.

“Yes, they do.” He’s got quite the journey ahead of him with raising his daughter, and it’s clear that he’s game for anything that comes their way.

“Your family has been around to help, too, right?”

“That’s true. My parents have helped a lot, but my brothers aren’t around much.”

“You’re not close with them?”

“We were when we were kids. Even though one brother lives up the mountain, and another is our veterinarian, we all tend to stick to our own spheres.”

“You have one more brother, right?”

“Yes. He’s home the least. He’s the lead singer of Lynchpin.”

“Wow. I think I just saw him on the cover of Entertainment Weekly.”

“That’s him. We were so close until the end of high school. We even went to a music camp that last year and started a band with a girl named Kat. It was perfect. He even had a crush on her. Then one day he quit the band and he left to start Lynchpin. He’s

home for big parties, but it's never been the same. I don't know what I did to push him away. I'm not even very musical. I just went to the camp because he didn't want to go alone."

I wonder what happened there.

“You’re lucky you have your sister. You two are so close and she tries to take care of you. You two have a nice balance. You might be more introverted, but Justine has an extroverted energy that brings out another side of you.”

“What’s it like with you and your other brothers?”

“We’re all introverted.” He seems to laugh without any warmth. “Somehow we all take after my dad and have a head down and get on with it, kind of isolated energy.”

“Hmm. I don’t feel that at all with you.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I wouldn’t describe you that way at all. You welcomed my sister’s antics long before I did when she showed up at my door, and you’re always lighthearted with Ana. I never see you without a big smile on your face when you’re with her at the library. Then of course, there’s how you are with me.” I point at the cat ears atop his head.

“I guess I have changed a bit since having Ana.”

“There’s always room for you to move towards who you want to be. If you want to get closer with your brothers, there’s room for that too. I never would have thought to be at this con, but here we are having the best time.”

He nods slowly to himself.

More people join the line behind us, and it seems like we've made company.

"Adriel and Jules," exclaims a familiar voice. "Of course, you're here, too."

Viv, Jackson, and his young daughter, Lola, join us.

"Nice ears uncle Adriel," Lola says with a jump to touch them.

"Thanks squirt," he says kneeling down for her to give them a good rub.

"I never thought I'd see you here Adriel," Jackson says.

"We're a cat family now," Adriel says with a grin to me.

My cheeks are on fire with how much I'm blushing. He includes me in his life so easily.

"Where's Ana?" Lola asks.

"She's at home today. We're on a date," he says to Lola.

Conspiratorially, she winks at him. "Then you should take her to get paw shaped cotton candy after this. You should have something sweet on a date."

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks." Adriel gives her a wink back and stands up to rejoin us.

"A date, eh? I can't wait to hear more on Monday," Viv says to me. "He must be serious if he's got anything other than a cowboy hat on."

They point out several special exhibitors in the other rooms, and make sure to highlight some famous meme cats that are here. Adriel takes out an already highly marked up printed map he prepped, and I feel so taken care of as they plot out our best route through the con.

As Adriel continues to go over details with Viv, Jackson comes next to me and says, “I haven’t seen Adriel look this happy in a long time. He’s lucky to meet you.”

“He’s planned this whole date that’s clearly out of his wheelhouse and has helped me feel seen for the first time in a long time. I don’t doubt for a second that I’m the lucky one here.”

Looking at Adriel and Viv, Jackson continues to talk to me. “Sounds like you two are both lucky then. We have a group of friends that grew up together. The two of us and, Kenji, Luke, and Brandon all live in town, but we rarely get to see this goofy side to him. He had to grow up quickly.

When Ana’s mom left them, he really went into his shell. Made a safe bubble around him and Ana. He never asked us for help. Only after I had Lola a few months later did I realize he probably needed us the most when he pushed us away. I bought a double stroller one day and came by in the morning saying I’d like to walk the girls around while he slept. He fought me about it for an hour, but then he let me take the girls around their ranch. I went back after the hour so he wouldn’t be worried, but that guy slept for three more.

After that, I had the guys come by on a daily rotation to check on him and Ana. He’d never have asked us for it. This is all to say that his M.O. is to turn inwards. Just know that that’s when he’ll probably need you more than ever.”

Jackson has given me a gift. Shared a part of their friendship that is probably still tender to think of. “Thank you for sharing that. I’m taking everything you said to

heart. Sounds like he's lucky to have you too."

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We share a knowing smile and get looped into the afternoon planning once again.

The five of us get to go into the adoption room together, and while a bunch of cats run up to us, I've got my eyes on a cat that's been looking over at me but keeping its distance. It's almost like she's playing peekaboo from behind her cat tower. I know she's the one.

While everyone plays with the rambunctious cats vying for their attention, I slowly make my way to a rattan seat next to my quiet cat.

After a while of just observing everyone in our private space of cats and friendship, the quiet cat bats at the hem of my skirt and gingerly jumps onto my lap as if she's chosen me too.

Too soon, our time is up for the next batch of people. Adriel puts his hands up to stop me from getting up and buys me a little more time by talking to the volunteers and pointing towards us as if he already knows that this cat is the one.

They usher us into the next room of paperwork and details, then ask for her name.

Inspired by Adriel, I say, "Corazon. Let's call her Cora for short."

"That's perfect," he says.

Chapter Thirteen

Adriel

After wandering around for hours and eating all sorts of cat-shaped foods, my favorite being the siopao buns stuffed with barbecue pork and embellished with cat ears, we go back home covered in Cora's cat hair.

Bumping into our friends was a pleasant surprise and being on an impromptu double-date for part of the afternoon was more fun than I expected. It's something I would never have planned to do, but I liked it none-the-less.

Viv and Jackson have been dating since last Halloween, and after spending time with them together, I realize that it's nice to see your friends in love. A single dad like me, he has had his fair share of trials with Lola's mom but rose to the occasion by being an amazing girl dad.

He's showed up for me in ways I couldn't even fathom about asking for, and I'm thankful every day for my friendship with my guys in town. Since I'm the only true introverted one of the bunch, it's what I can only imagine having a close relationship with my brothers would look like.

Who knows who I'd be without them.

In the same vein, that's what it's feeling like with Jules and me. Everything she does feels like a welcome addition to my life.

Being with Jules replenishes me as much as it energizes me, and all the effort I put into this date feels like it was worth it.

I'll never forget the look on her eyes when she slid off her cat eye mask. It was like Christmas morning as a toy-hungry child but seeing the joy on her face was better than any toy I could have unwrapped.

"Sorry I didn't take you to a fancier dinner for our first date," I mumble on our way

home, realizing we just made a meal of random snacks at the Cat Con.

“Please don’t be. I had the best time, and I don’t think I would have had a tail shaped churro otherwise. Besides, I’m so full, I couldn’t eat out after this, even if you had a reservation set for an amazing restaurant.”

She squeezes my hand on the drive and I know she’s not playing down her joy.

“How do you feel about coffee at my place before we go back?”

With that reminder of a prelude to more, I can barely stop myself from speeding all the way to town.

When we get up to her apartment, Jules moves towards me faster than I expected.

Like last time, the connection is turned on as fast as a light switch, and it’s instantly hot. There’s no simmer. No bubbles before the boil. We were holding hands one moment, and now our hands are all over each other the next.

She runs hers over the front of my jeans and I can’t kiss her deeply enough. I can’t get satiated. I want so much more. I want to devour her. The instant attraction we had from before feels more grounded this time. Like we’ve already built something from the all-out devastatingly sexy intimacy we had in the library.

Still kissing, I reach between us and pull her soaked panties to the side and rub her heat.

“Jules. You’re soaking wet for me.”

“It’s all for you, Papi.”

The way she moans turns me on so much. Panting and calling me Papi absolutely undoes me. That earns two fingers in her pussy. I feel her tighten around two, and I edge in a third.

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I barely pause before I fill her up again and lean over her to take in every expletive she mumbles under her breath.

One moment she's riding my hand, and the next she quickly gets off and bends on her knees to focus on pulling off my shirt and tugs down my jeans to release my cock below her waiting hips.

"Adriel, please. I need you in me. I want to come on your cock this time."

"I don't have protection Jules."

"I'm on the shot, and I got tested before I moved here. There's been no one else."

"There hasn't been anyone else for me for a long time. I've been tested too. But are you sure?"

She nods.

I lean my forehead on her shoulder for a steadying breath, and when I look back up her eyes are so hooded, I swear my cock jumps in agreement. I cannot wait to fill her up.

"Papi, please."

That's all I need.

I lift my hips to pull down my pants and boxers down to the floor. Widening my

knees, I say, “Take what you want and come on my cock, Jules.”

The straps from her dress fall off her shoulders and I pull the formless lacy cups down from her breasts and play with her nipples as she takes in my tip.

I reach around to hold her ass and follow her lead to slowly bounce on me. It takes everything in me to hold back and not fuck her. The way she’s slowly teasing me is holy torture.

Tilting forward to sway her breasts right in front of my mouth, I suck on her nipples one at a time to add some tension to our mix, refusing every urge I have to punish her so good from dripping down my cock. She’s barely on me and I want to come.

Rolling her peaks around my mouth and hearing her moan is almost too good to handle. But like a good book boyfriend, I refuse to come before her. Especially not when I’m far from filling her up.

It’s as if I’m having an out-of-body experience. She notches me at her entrance and my mouth stops. My body freezes as she sinks onto me for the perfect slow fuck. She’s easing down me, inch by inch, until she’s close to the bottom, but not all the way down. I’m still not fully seated in her.

I think my girl needs a little motivation. What did she say book boyfriends do? Clear communication?

Deep in her, I reach between us to rub her clit and say, “Be a good girl and take me all in Jules. I know you can.”

She slams down until I bottom out, and I feel absolutely everything for her all at once. Every sensation is at its peak, and I’m undone. Tight around me, she’s grasped every part of me fully. I can’t feel more connected to her than I do in this moment.

Riding the length of me, over and over again, I can't stop myself anymore from giving it all to her. She fists my hair and moans so loudly I'm sure we've alerted her neighbors to what we're doing.

She whispers, "Fuck me," right into my ear just before she sinks onto me once more.

With those two words, I effortlessly lift her up, still wrapped around my waist, to lie her on her back and give her everything she wants until we both release in quick succession. I've never felt so dismantled and whole before. I feel like Jules is the start and end of me.

The next few weeks go by quickly.

We spend time in and out of bed having fun and exploring each other's desires. Something new comes up every week. This week it's some light spanking for her, and for me it's enjoying when she rides me while wearing my cowboy hat.

When I think it can't get any better, building the new cabins on our property with my dad has turned into a fun activity. I was reluctant to work on it with anyone, especially my seventy-year-old dad, but he's more spry than I expected. After he turned around on the idea, he's added quite a few marks of his own craftsmanship to the project.

We still don't know if it'll definitely be the thing that brings us the money we need, but working on this is better than the incremental shifts in profit from new crops and alterations at the farmer's market. Go big or go home.

It's good, but not good enough. My goal to make some major progress towards the bottom line by the end of winter is fast approaching, and we're barely done with the first of three cabins that I proposed to make on my own. With Ana's college savings on the line on top of my family legacy, I spend every daylight hour working.

I've just got to work harder. That's the only thing to do. Head down and focused, I'm on my way to my deadline working the hardest I've ever worked.

Chapter Fourteen

Jules

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Thick in the afterglow of early dating, I can't get enough of Adriel and Ana. Justine even tags along whenever she's not studying for finals.

If I'm not at their cabin, they're over at my apartment cooking up a storm with my sister, and spoiling Cora with new toys and fresh trays of cat grass every week. It's been a rotating door between our two spaces, and I can't think of a barrier we haven't surpassed.

I kept holding back how I was really feeling in the beginning. Not wanting to address the center of my concerns about us being a one-night stand or only good for random hookups, but once I spoke up, I've been able to feel like my most authentic self. I'm following my gut and I know it's exactly what I want. There's no more holding back or bending over to make space for others. I've been showing up exactly as me, and I know who I am, and Adriel can't get enough.

While they're all taking turns with our new tray of cat toys, I excuse myself for a call from my mom.

"How's it going out there?" I ask.

"It's great, anak. We miss you both, but I know you've got it all handled. I'm not worried about a thing." That's a great compliment coming from my worry-wort of a mom. "Our new apartments here are already leased out, and the restaurant by you is running smoothly on its own with the new manager we hired. We can finally relax for once. Not so much hustle all the time."

They deserve it. They've been working hard since I was a kid. I'm glad there is some

ease in their lives for once.

“Good. We’re having a nice time together too. Justine’s plan really worked out best for the both of us. It’s been nice sharing my town with her and enjoying some quality sister time in between her classes. She’s growing up, and soon she’ll be finding her own place to live.”

It’s hard for me to not see her as my child as much as my sibling, but she’s really pulled through on stepping up around the house. Her plan to stay here instead of my commuting has worked out so well. If I had been commuting from our parents’ house, I would never have been able to get to know Adriel as well as I have been these last few weeks. Justine did exactly what I wouldn’t have done, but I’m recognizing the merit in not blindly following my parents anymore if I expect to keep growing.

“I’m glad to hear that, because we’re planning on extending our stay.”

Something about the way she says it, makes me hesitate to reply.

“We really love it here. I forgot how much I missed it, in fact. Since you’ve got it handled at home, I’d love to see the rest of our family in the province that we haven’t seen since I was a girl.”

“That’s nice mom. When do you think you’ll come back?”

“I’m thinking about July, for Justine’s birthday.”

“Wait a second. Justine’s birthday is after she graduates high school. You can’t be planning to miss her graduation, right?”

My mom’s quiet on the phone. “I haven’t been back for so long, and now that we’re

here after that eighteen-hour plane ride, we'd like to stay as long as possible."

I can hear the barely hidden thrill in her voice. Who am I to stop her journey back home. That's what old Jules would have thought. But now, I'm ready to share my reservations.

"Mom, you can't do that."

"Excuse me?"

I've felt so confident lately. By being surrounded by Adriel and Ana making me feel seen and admired. Being encouraged by my little sister Justine this whole time, I've got to stand up for her.

Taking a deep breath, I say "You know I've been happy to step in with Justine. As her sister, I get to see her in a way that you never can, and she's more aware and fragile than we all give her credit for. I think it's a bad choice to even consider not being here for her graduation. She's grown so much in the past few years, but she's still a young woman. She won't say it, so right now I'm going to, she'll want her parents at her graduation, and we'll both be disappointed if you're not back before then."

It's dead silent on the line.

I don't really know what to make of it, and I don't think my mom does either. I've never spoken back to her, but if there's something I'd gladly put myself into an uncomfortable situation over, it's this. I may not have had the confidence to do this a year before, or even a few months before, but today, I am.

Quietly, my mom says, "Ok, anak. I'll talk to your dad about what you said, but we'll be back."

She gets off the phone before I can say goodbye. I think she's as stunned by my speaking up as I am.

Before I rejoin the group, I sit in my pride a little longer before I'm greeted by the warm scent of date and walnut blondies fusing together and baking in the oven. It's the smell of Food for the Gods. My favorite Filipino baked good.

"Everything okay, hon?" Adriel says, kissing my neck and snuggling up from behind me at the table.

"Honestly. In this moment, everything is perfect." I turn back to kiss his cheek and lean into him. "How's building the cabins going?"

"I need some of your confidence to rub off on me because I'm falling behind. I lost a few days of work with the rain last week. Should be dry enough to work out there soon. I promised my parents that I'd show some change to the bottom line by the end of winter for the bank to extend our loan, and we're almost there."

"I think you need more help than just you and your dad."

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“Everyone’s so busy, I think I’d rather just put my nose to the grindstone and work a little later.”

“When’s the next time you and your dad are working out there?”

“In two more days when everything’s dry again. This may be a lot to ask, but would you mind picking up Ana from school that day? I’m close to missing this small window I’ve got in finishing this first cabin, styling it, taking pictures, and making some new listings for those rental sites Justine already set up for me. If I can show interest in the cabins, that might be enough for the banks to give us more time.”

“I’m happy to pick her up any day you need. Absolutely anytime you need support with Ana, I’m here.”

I feel like this is another milestone for us. This is the first time he’s asking me to help her outside of work. He has always skirted away from asking Justine for more babysitting, even though he’s confident in her as a sitter. He’s just barely there in letting me in on this level with Ana, so it’s understandable.

He never wants to impose on people, but he doesn’t recognize how much people want to help him. I’ve got to do something. It’s good to know when he’s starting up work again. I’ve got some calls and favors to ask for before then.

Chapter Fifteen

Adriel

I'm eager to get out to the newly built cabin today. It's been a few days of rain last week, and today's cutting it close with making sure we're working with dry wood, but I can't wait any longer.

Jules is picking up Ana today, so I can get a few extra hours before the sunset. With the flood lights I just bought, I'll even be able to work a little later.

Everything is set.

After dropping off Ana at school, I pull on my work gloves, and stop by the main house to energize with a second cup of coffee for the long slog ahead of me.

"Hi mija," my mom says with a sly smile.

"Hi mamá. You sure look happy today."

She passes me a cup of coffee in a tumbler and turns to face me and hold my face in her hands. "You're doing great out there. I'm proud of you, Adriel. I think we're going to make it yet."

Wow. She must have a lot more faith in my plans than I do, because I feel like I've still got loads to do.

"Thank you mamá. That's a bit of the extra motivation I needed today."

I head out the back door and start up my work cart to get to the back of the property where the cabin is being built.

On twenty acres, it takes nearly fifteen minutes to cross our property on my work cart. I pass our homes in the front that's got the closest access to the main road, a lake, four barns, an expanse of land that just curves along our hilly coastline, and then

I see our new cabin in the making.

Looks like a few more cars lined up by the back. My dad must have gotten the extra lumber, lights, and tools delivered, like we talked about last week.

Among the vehicles, I see Jules' car. She must have wanted to stop by and wish me luck. She knows the crunch I'm in.

Driving closer, I see her holding a box of donuts.

"Hi Jules. That's sweet of you to come by." I'm so happy to see her I practically hop off my cart before it stops. I make my way over to swing her around with a hearty hug. Tight in my arms, I hold her in the air and pull back to see her glowing face.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Sometimes it feels like so much flows between single words between us.

"I've got a surprise for you."

I place her down as slowly as I can. I always love seeing her, but I've never felt great about surprises. Trying to keep my anxiety at bay, I keep smiling.

Rubbing her hands up and down my arms, she gets behind me and pushes my back towards the cabin. "I promise this is for your own good."

I don't like the sound of that.

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We make our way around the corner, and I'm face to face with my best friends, and some of my brothers. Mateo came down from the mountain, and Javier is standing there in his chinos and polo as if he'll be leaving to make a veterinary appointment soon. But still, he showed up. Only Luis is missing. Seeing the crew in front of us, I'm sure they tried contacting him, but he must be touring right now if he's not here. Who am I kidding, he may not have even showed up if he lived down the street based on the last time we talked.

Of course, all my friends are here. Kenji must have taken the day off from his inn. Jackson must have dropped off Lola early today to be here before me. I don't know how Brandon got time off from being the principal at school, so I imagine he's playing hooky for whatever this is, and I didn't know Luke was in town. He must be between filming projects right now.

Used to working with just my dad, since he's barged his way into my work plans, now I've got a crew of guys I didn't ask for.

I turn straight around and walk back to my cart having nothing good to say.

"Adriel, hold on. Let me explain," Jules says.

I take a few steps more and then turn back to face her. "I didn't ask for your help."

She steps back at the shock of my words.

I feel the tears starting to burn behind my eyes, so I keep lashing out to keep them at bay. "Jules, I told you I got this. This is my burden. Didn't you believe in me?"

They all have things going on. I promised myself I'd never ask them for anything else. She doesn't know how much they've done for me already.

Keeping her distance, she says, "Adriel, I know it's not easy for you to ask for help. It's not the first thing you do when you're in need, but you've got to know that I didn't beg them. I didn't coax them into being here. I called them and the second I told them what was happening, they told me they'd be here. They want to show up for you. They love you and want to support you just like I do."

She pauses hearing her slip in practically admitting that she loves me in the middle of her calm response to my tirade. Because of my tantrum, my aversion to receiving help, I can't even celebrate her confession the way I want to right now.

"I told them what was at stake because apparently you didn't share that your family ranch is about to go under in two weeks."

I can feel her gaining momentum. Putting her heel down and not letting up on the gas to the fire that's burning within her. "Look around. It's time to pull out all the stops to keep this land that you said you love. The land that you said was part of your soul. Don't lose it now because of some deep-seated pride that isn't going to replace this soil and your family's generations of hard work when it's gone. You working alone into the late hours is not going to cut it, Adriel."

"If you knew I'd fail, why'd you encourage this idea? We're not landlords, we're ranchers. This is a mistake," I say.

"It's not a mistake, it's just time we call on your community, so I did."

This is too much. It's all my deep-seated fears of thinking everyone around me will leave if I ask for too much. Just like Ana's mom, my brother Luis. They knew me the best, once upon a time, and they had no problem walking away from me. How could I

possibly put that burden on everyone here when I've already leaned on them too much. I must be near my limit with them. Jules must be at her limit now.

She's never seen me upset, but I am. I didn't ask for this, and it's embarrassing that she told them my business. As much as she takes care of her sister and family, I can't take care of mine. This is my failure. I'd rather fix it on my own.

Before I can mumble a response, she puts up her hand and says, "I need to go right now. I'm already late for work, and you have work to do with them." Then she turns around and walks to her car and drives off.

She's right. I've got work to do. I might as well face their pitying looks now and get on with it.

Every step I take away from Jules is another moment for the weight of my lashing out at her to crush my spirit. I know I need to apologize.

One crisis at a time.

I walk back to behind the barn and see everyone standing around my floorplans. They're clearly giving me space to process what happened. How I made a fool of myself in front of everyone I love. To do what they came to do and get to work.

"We've split it up. With everyone here now," Mateo pauses to lightly acknowledge my hissy fit. "I think we'll be done with this cabin today and can get started on the framing for the next two buildings." It sounds absurdly fast but considering how much experience my brothers have with constructing our homes on our land, and how much my dad and I have already done in the days that haven't rained, I don't doubt Mateo for a moment.

They start to move off in different directions, but I have to say something before I

lose all their respect. I've never been a man of many words with them, but I can't move on without saying something. Let's see what comes out.

“Wait. Before you start, I just want to say thank you. You all know how bull headed I can get and having you all show up today really makes me feel like you believe in the plan I made with Jules to try to save this ranch.”

“Adriel, when will you get it into your thick skull that we've got your back no matter what. We would have been here on day one if you had said something,” Jackson says.

My friends each walk over to me and give me a hug and get to work.

Mateo and Javier linger around me after Jackson catches up to the guys. “This is our land too. This shouldn't have been just on your shoulders.”

“I'm sorry. I know there's a lot for you to contribute too. I just thought I had to come to you with a plan. I didn't want you to worry.”

“No burden is lighter alone. Expect me here from sunrise to sunset until we're done. We're not losing this land.” Mateo moves away before I say anything else.

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Then it's just me and Javier. "I take it you haven't talked to Luis about all of this yet?"

"No. I thought I'd tell you all at the same time when he comes home next month for our spring festival like he always does."

"You didn't see his recent headline?"

"No. Did his tour get extended? He's not coming home, huh?" I'm always the last to know any news about Luis.

"No, Adriel. It looks like he's on the verge of being cancelled. This might be his last tour from the sounds of the recent headlines. But you know he says that stuff's all bullshit. Maybe we should reach out to him together after we're done here. Tell him about your plan with Jules. You're lucky you've got her." He walks off before bringing the conversation to a proper close.

I like that he recognizes it's her plan. She deserves all the credit.

All day long I think of things to add that Jules would like. A bookshelf, a hanging planter, and a kitchen island that people can cook around. She's in every detail.

I've been a fucking idiot. She was absolutely right. She showed up when I needed to be hit with the truth, and I lashed out at her. I feel like shit. The only good thing is that I know exactly how I want to make it up to her. First, I need to ask Jackson for a favor.

“I was an idiot with Jules, and I know what I want to do to make it up to her, but I’ll need some help.”

“Say no more. I’ll be here as long as you need,” Jackson says.

Not that she wants it. Shoot, she might not even want me after today. But I hope my plan for making this up to her at least makes it hard to walk away.

Chapter Sixteen

Jules

After work, I pick up Ana from school and drop her off at the ranch and give her a big hug. I honestly don’t know when I’ll see her again. I don’t feel welcome here right now.

Everything’s a blur after that. Day after day of work, meals, and sleeping early bleed into one another.

I know Adriel is working nonstop on this week’s deadline for financial proof of long-term viability with these rentals for the bank, so I don’t even expect to see him.

Even though I can wrap my mind around a fight being just a fight with a loved one, his reaction still hurt, and he hasn’t made a lot of effort in healing it either.

Sure, he’s called and texted daily. He’s even come by every night with bouquets and boxes of flowers, and different meaningless gifts, but right now I’m not interested in apologies and promised nothings. I couldn’t handle so little from him right now. It’s almost like not seeing him lets me hold onto the magic of our meeting a little longer, even though a sad ending feels like it lies right outside of my grasp.

It just feels like he'd show up or do something more if he really cared. Calls and texts just aren't going to cut it, and now that I've stood up to my worth to my parents, I refuse to bend past my will again.

"Get in the car," Justine says.

"I'm not in the mood."

"Something's wrong with Ana. She texted me saying she's home alone and I'm heading there now."

I zip up my staying-at-home-onesie and slide on my sneakers before I have a moment to second guess what I look like and run down the stairs.

"Umm, you can have a minute to change your clothes sis. You look ridiculous in that cat onesie."

"No. You said Ana asked for help. I don't care what I look like. Let's go," I say with a little more heat than I mean to.

Justine raises her hands in defeat and follows me to the car.

While she's driving, I assault her with questions.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I have no clue."

"But when did she message me?"

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“The moment before I told you to get in the car.”

“What do you think happened?”

“Jules. Chill. I’m going as fast as I can, and your questions aren’t helping. Let’s just listen to music.”

She flips on the radio, but I can’t recognize any song over the thumping beat of my heart drowning out every song.

We finally pull up to his ranch, and I slam the door and run over to his house and bang on the door.

“Ana, are you okay? Let me in, sweet girl.”

Then around the corner pops out Ana and Adriel. I don’t understand what’s happening.

“I’m so sorry to bring you here under false pretenses, but I need to show you something.”

I lean down to Ana and still need to know she’s okay from her to calm my racing mind. “Everything is okay, for real?”

“I’m okay.” She leans over and gives me a big hug, and I can rest a little easier. “I missed you,” she whispers.

“We can hang out anytime you want. If it’s okay with your dad. I’m still here.”

My fear is quickly replaced with anger.

I get close to Adriel and say, “Don’t you ever do that again. That was horrifying.” I say, starting to tear up with the fast relief of knowing she’s safe.

He holds me and looks more apologetic than he did when I left last week.

I step back and give myself more space between us.

“Say what you want to say, then I have to go.”

“Jules, I’m so sorry. I messed up. Big.”

“Huge.” I add.

“Enormously. I’m so sorry I don’t know how to ask for help. Her mom left us, and my brothers left me when they chose their own careers, and I took all of that personally. I selfishly claimed their growth as examples of no one staying around me. Always afraid to find that upper limit with everyone, I’ve relied on myself. I’ve done everything on my own for so long that I built up my walls so high that no one can scale them.”

I nod.

“Until you came along. As high as they were, you not only climbed over my barbed wire, but you threw down a ladder for everyone else to climb over too.” He’s crying now. “I’m so sorry to put my hang-ups on you and push you away when I couldn’t be more proud of you, and I couldn’t be more in love with you, either.”

Now I'm crying.

I'm still mad too, but I can't listen to his genuine honesty with a cold heart because the truth is I still love him.

"As soon as you left, I knew you were right. Everything you said was right. From my not wanting to ask for help, to my letting my ego ruin everything that my family had built."

As much as my icy attitude is starting to thaw at his sincerity, I can't deny that the words are nice, but I still need more. Want more than just his words.

As if he reads my mind he says, "Even though I haven't been able to see you for a week, please don't think for a second that you've been far from my mind. You're in the heart of every detail I built into these cabins, and more importantly you are at the center of something else I built. I need you to know that now that I've had you in my life, I can't picture it without you. The guys stayed to finish the first cabin, but I asked them to help me with something else before we started the next cabins."

"What're you talking about?"

"It's something I've been sketching since we met, but I know now is the right time. Come with us." He takes one of my hands, and Ana takes the other and they walk me into their house.

When I walked in before, you were enveloped in a warm living room, that flowed into an open kitchen with windows on either side of the stove. The hallway used to move to the left of the kitchen to Adriel and Ana's two bedrooms. That's all there, but there's so much more now, too.

I was so focused on Ana and rushing over here that I didn't notice what is so clear in

front of me now that I'm looking around.

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Now that I enter the house with open eyes, I see there's a whole new wing added to the house. Just like how the hallway moves towards the left to their bedrooms, now there's a hallway that goes towards the right of the kitchen that leads to something else.

"I want to show her," Ana grabs my hand and pulls me towards the opening.

"It's not done, so use your imagination, but this open room is your space, and next to it is space for your library. I even suggested steps for Cora to climb the wall next to it." Ana holds her hands up like a spokesperson showing off a fancy new car.

"You want me to move in?" I ask, looking at the room, with him behind me in the hallway. I like that he's giving me space to move around. Time to imagine what this could be for us. Imagine our lives together.

The bedroom is just an empty room right now, but he's only been working on this for a week. This is remarkable. This is not where I expected him to be spending all his time right now. He even added a rug that I earmarked on his Pinterest board as one that I loved for a family home.

I turn around to flick my gaze down to see him on his knee.

"I love you, Jules. Please marry me." He opens a box and holds it up for me to see. It's a large emerald with five small diamonds hugging the top of it.

"Is that a cat paw?"

“I knew you’d get it,” Ana says. “I helped him pick it out.”

Adriel says, “You don’t have to answer right away. You don’t have to move in right away. Just please know that we love you and want you here. That we want you in our lives.”

Just like with our date, I can tell that nothing here is half-hearted. And as immediately as I knew our feelings were instantly in bloom when we first met, I know what my answer is right now just as fast.

“Yes. Yes to Ana. Yes to you. Yes to your plan. Yes to our life together. Just, yes.”