



# The Cowboy's Temporary Solution

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Young Adult

**Description:** The curvy little historian seated next to me on the plane looks like she's never been out of the city. With her tight little skirt and high heels, she's about as out of place in Slow River's ranch lands as it gets— and she's exactly what I need.

As I step on the plane that'll take me back to the life I walked away from over a decade ago, I know I'm heading back for good whether I'm ready or not. That means making things right with my brothers and stepping up to run the family's cattle ranch alongside 'em like our father expected me to. It also means breaking my mama's heart when I have to explain that her match-making isn't much appreciated.

What I need is a good, old-fashioned, pretend girlfriend. A woman who'll charm my family while hanging off my arm looking at me like I hung the stars just for her. Someone who'll fool Mom into thinking I'm ready to settle down so she'll stop hassling me till I can get settled in.

Too bad Serenity only agrees to the ruse to get first-hand access to the local history that will help her score a job promotion back in the city, because when I say she's what I need, it turns out, I mean forever.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

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## SERENITY

My connecting flight terminal is in a separate building so far from the main airport that it requires a shuttle ride. Not that that seems unusual, but the shuttle in question is barely more than a glorified golf cart and the building it drops me off in front of looks more like a temporary office on a construction site than an airport terminal.

I've already walked farther through the SeaTac International Airport than I'd expected to in the four-inch heels that I realized were a bad choice by the time I'd trekked through the Cincinnati airport to make my first connecting flight. By the time I made my second connection in Denver, I was looking for one of those vending machines that sells those little ballet flats-- no luck.

When I looked up the air time from Baltimore to Seattle it seemed doable. It's a longer flight than I'm used to, but still less than my typical day in the office.

I should have known Estelle would book the cheapest possible flight she could find. With three connections, and a three-hour layover in Missoula, before arriving in Seattle where I'd expected to be spending a night in a decent hotel before moving on to Slow River after a good night's sleep.

But, of course not.

My boss obviously hates me.

I trudge across the blacktop from where the shuttle dropped me, to the door of the tiny building in my heels and the pencil skirt that I thought would give me a classy, businesswoman air. The emerald green blouse I paired with the skirt has long since lost its crispness and I unbuttoned the top two buttons somewhere over Michigan trying to relieve some of the stuffiness of the crowded plane's recycled air.

There's a run in my nylons and all I want to do is get to my hotel, order dinner, kick off these shoes, and sink into a hot bath.

Inside the building, two rows of standard, molded plastic airport seats run down the center of the room. A couple of vending machines light up a dim corner, promising Coca Cola, and bottled water. The Coke machine is out of everything that contains caffeine.

I've been in the air or running through airports since five-fifteen this morning. I was looking forward to an overpriced latte and a stale croissant like you can't even imagine.

Giving up all hopes of finding a caffeine boost to keep me from keeling over before I reach my final destination, I plop into one of the uncomfortable seats and go over the notes I have so far.

Just what I could find online from the comfort of my office back in Maryland. Which isn't much.

History Vault is the brain child of Estelle and her brother, who, after spending decades to research their own family history, saw the potential in creating a database of small-town history gleaned from places where libraries and museums still aren't online and aren't likely to be anytime soon.

With the growing popularity of genealogy research and curiosity about home town

history, the company was visionary. Estelle and Bruce's company has grown fast, and quickly become the go-to resource for anyone looking for information specific to the histories of the families that have made up rural America for as long as there's been a rural America.

And, as the company continues to grow, we've been able to hire more researchers with the goal of expanding the database beyond the US in both the physical border of the country as well as the time it's been on the map as the United States.

Which is why I'm here. At an airport gate that very much feels like an afterthought in the more complex schematic of the Seattle/Tacoma airport, under-caffeinated and over-dressed, uncomfortably aware of the scrutinizing glare of the man seated across from me, making me feel every bit the fish out of water I most definitely am.

I'm desperate to prove that I can handle a bona fide field researcher position with the company. It's the reason I wanted to work for History Vault to begin with and, as a professional historian and genealogy geek-- it's pretty much my dream job.

Although, I am starting to clue in to the fact that doing field research in small town America might not be a business attire-friendly undertaking.

There are only six other people waiting for the flight that will take us to Slow River, and every one of them is in jeans and boots.

Even the woman scowling at the soda machine is wearing chunky hiking boots with a pair of no-nonsense Wranglers that are a far cry from the Designer label fashion jeans I see in the city.

Nervously, I cross my legs and try to concentrate on the list of families I need to concentrate my research on while I'm out here.

Slow River is primarily a ranching community that was founded in the mid-eighteen hundreds. The land that sprawls the long corridor of the Slow River Valley consists of several ranches split among five family names that go back to the gold rush when it flooded the area with new settlers seeking easy fortune.

Unfortunately, outside of a couple of locally-written books on the history of the town, there's not much available on the web about the history of the people who settled the Slow River Valley.

So I'll be spending the next week sitting in a musty basement or back room of a small-town library, copying acres of microfiche to make sense of once I get back to my office.

It's not the kind of field research that Hollywood action movies make look sexy, but I'm good at it, and it is the kind of thing that I get weirdly excited about.

The man sitting across from me openly contemplates me like I'm a specimen in a petri dish, making me uncross my legs and cross them again in the other direction. I keep my head tilted toward my phone and try not let on that I can feel the heavy weight of his eyes on me.

Ranger

The pretty littlething sitting across from me, looking all kinds of out of place, has my interest piqued and my dick hard.

## Page 2

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Probably because I can't help but thinking that the outfit she's got on would look more appropriate for bending over a billionaire's desk in a city high rise office than for getting on a plane to cow town.

From the disheveled look of her, maybe that's exactly what she was doing before she got dropped off at the airport.

Leaning back against the hard plastic that passes for a chair, I widen my stance and set one ankle on my other knee.

It gives my dick a bit of breathing room and my eyes a better view of her.

Young, curvy, cute as hell. Dark chocolate hair still mostly pinned up in one of them neat little knots woman are able to pull off, the kind where they can loosen the whole mess so it falls down over their shoulders by just pullin' one pin.

My eyes drank their fill of her heart-shaped face and sweet features when I sat down across from her, when I took my opportunity to get a good look at all the things you can look at on a stranger without being a creep.

Now they're determined to cross that boundary and take what they want.

The plane's not here yet and there's nothing else worth looking at in this room, so I let 'em.

From the bow of pouty lips that look like they lost their lipstick a long time ago, my gaze trails down her delicate jawline, following a tendril of dark hair that's found its

way out of its up-do and curled against her neck as it follows the long line of her throat and lays lightly along the contour of her cleavage.

Too many buttons have been left undone at the top of her deep green blouse. Not only are the tops of her full breasts on display but so is the lacy edge of the black bra holding them up. That, along with the wrinkles in her skirt and the thick runner in her stockings, just adds to my theory that she's got a rich boyfriend here in the city who's smart enough to keep her from looking at another man.

Old men like me, leering at her so hungrily that I almost manage to forget why I'm headed home after all these years and what awaits me when I get there.

The plane rolls up to the gate outside and I watch while the roll-away boarding stairs are moved into place and a handful of passengers debark the plane before those of us waiting to board make a move.

Except the pretty woman in front of me.

Before the plane has even pulled to a full stop out on the tarmac, she's shuffling about like she's eager to get on the plane.

"This your first visit to Slow River?" I can't help but grin at her fidgeting. No one dressed like that is ready for the Valley, or likely to be impressed with what they find when they get there.

Thick, dark lashes flutter as her gaze moves up to mine and I'm not gonna pretend that I don't notice the way her cheeks redden and her breath quickens as they do. Then, the prettiest set of aquamarine eyes have me transfixed in their stare and it's me that can't seem to catch my breath.

"Guess it's pretty obvious, isn't it?" Those stunning, jewel-toned irises dart past me to

sweep over our fellow passengers before making a quick trip back down my own body-- taking in the t-shirt, jeans, and well broken-in boots before coming back to meet my gaze.

Getting to my feet, I hold out a hand to help her onto hers. Those fuck-me heels she's balanced on can't be the most comfortable shoes for traveling, but there's not a trace of wobble in her stance as she lets me pull her up.

She's obviously used to wearing the things, which only furthers my theory that she's a pampered city girl.

"What's got you headed for Slow River?" I ask casually, as I pick up her carry-on case in my free hand and follow her out to the plane that's waiting for us.

I tell myself I'm just being the gentleman my mama raised me to be, but the thoughts whirlin' in my head as I let my eyes drop to her plump bottom and the way it rocks with her steps in that fitted skirt are the kind I don't want my ma to know anything about.

"Work," she answers over her shoulder as we make our way up the stairs and into the prop plane's cramped interior.

After following her up the steps and down the narrow aisle to her seat, I stash her case in the overhead compartment for her and touch the brim of my hat in response to the sweet little "thanks" she utters up at me before checking my seat number on my boarding pass.

"Looks like you get to finish tellin' me about what sort of work is sending you out to the middle of cow country dressed in that sexy librarian outfit."

It's a bold choice of words, but no one's ever accused me of being shy about speaking



my mind.

Doing my best to get comfortable in the aisle seat next to the sweet, young thing that's been the best distraction I've found to the thoughts stampeding through my head, I watch her turn her phone onto airplane mode and then fidget with it in her lap.

"Just going there to do some research," she answers. "I work for a genealogical group based in Baltimore. We specialize in rural American family histories-- mostly from small towns that don't have the resources to get their records online."

Those pretty eyes of hers light right up while she talks about the field research assignment that's about to have her spending a week in the library basement with a stack of old newspapers, with Ms. Lassiter going on about her cats and plum jam recipes.

She makes it sound like an all-expenses-paid vacation to a tropical island resort, but it sounds like a day in line at the DMV to me. I'd rather spend my week mucking stalls in the barn.

There's no denying that she's passionate about what she does, though. She's practically bouncing in her seat with excitement about looking up a hundred- and fifty-years' worth of news about the valley and the families that made their millions with cattle when the gold rush didn't work out for them.

## Page 3

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Up at the front of the plane, the door's been closed and the prop-engines are firing up. I'm just about to shut off my own phone when I see I missed a text from Mom. Opening it up, I wish I'd turned the damn thing off before boarding.

As the plane taxis into position and the attendants give their bored safety presentation, I'm left with the image of a woman I don't want to see, my mother's insistent attempts at forcing us together, and a crazy idea coming together in my brain as I turn back toward the woman beside me.

2

### SERENITY

I'm a curvy woman in wrinkled clothes. I obviously don't belong in his world, I'm way too young for him, and the ruggedly handsome cowboy trying his best to fold what has to be a good six foot, four inches of Levis, flannel, and muscle into the cramped seat of the small plane beside me could have his pick of any girl he winks at.

I bet he's on his way back home to a house full of kids and his high school sweetheart homecoming queen wife now.

There's no way the interest he seems to have taken in me is anything more than polite.

My eyes take advantage of the question he just asked me, using the excuse to look his way to slide to where his left hand-- his very bare, with no-trace-of-a-tan-line, left hand-- rests on the top of his thigh while I tell him about my business in Slow River Valley.

Just before we're asked to put our seats and tray tables up and turn our electronics off, the man beside me checks his phone one more time.

A picture of a blonde woman flashes on the screen in his hands and I catch a glimpse of the words "...excited to see you..." in the message the accompanies it.

Not that I'm spying, mind you. But seeing the woman in the photo is a healthy wake-up call to keep my expectations in check.

She's a skinny blonde with big boobs and a vivacious smile, wearing a bright pink t-shirt with a low V-neck.

Everything about the woman in the picture screams exact opposite of me.

She was probably the high school homecoming queen...head cheerleader...woman he's going home to. Ring or no ring.

So when he shuts down his phone and asks me about the boyfriend he assumes I've left behind in the city, I'm one hundred percent sure he's just making polite conversation.

"So, no boyfriend back in the city then?"

"No. No boyfriend."

He seems genuinely surprised that I'm single.

I could swear I see his eyes darken, the pupils widening in the soft hazel irises before a smiles ghosts his lips.

"You've got one now."

"Excuse me?"

My head tilts to one side as if the sand that's obviously gotten in my ears might pour out so I can hear better.

"Hear me out-- you're headed to the valley to do a bunch of research on the local history, right?"

The man beside me leans in, looking far more serious than anyone with those words coming out of their mouth should be.

"So you must already have a list of the people and places you're going to be researching, right?"

I nod cautiously, keenly aware that I'm trapped between the plane's window and the man talking crazy next to me.

"Wouldn't you rather spend your week meetin' the actual families that run those ranches? Maybe touring some of the places? Hearing the family stories that didn't make it into the papers?"

"Well, yeah," I admit hesitantly, "that'd be great. I tried to set up interviews with several of the ranch families but most of them never returned my calls, and the ones that did made it clear they weren't interested.

"The only way I'd be able to get those interviews if I had a local connection."

At that, his handsome face breaks into a full-on grin. The soft caramel eyes creasing at the corners to show how deep the lines there really go. The stubbled jawline growing sharper, white teeth flashing behind lips that should absolutely not have me listening so intently to what he's proposing.

## Page 4

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"Name's Ranger." He extends his right hand for a shake to go with his overdue introduction. "Ranger O'Leary. My dad was Kenny Daniel O'Leary. My grandfather was Michael Ryan O'Leary-- any of them names happen to be in your research notes, by chance?"

His hand holds mine firmly but gently in what surpasses an ordinary handshake, and I tell myself that the uptick in my heart rate has nothing to do with the leathery warmth of his calloused hand wrapped around mine.

Ranger O'Leary, eldest son of Kenneth Daniel O'Leary, and heir to the legendary Delta O ranch is watching recognition dawn across my face, holding my hand and asking me to-- what, exactly, I don't even know yet-- and it's just the prospect of scoring a personal interview with the biggest name on my research list that has me struggling to remember to breathe; and certainly not the way his throat works in a tight swallow or the way the pad of his thumb softly brushes over the pulse point in my wrist.

"Look, I haven't been back home in years," he seems reluctant to let go of my hand, but finally, Ranger releases me and sinks back against his seat. "My dad passed away a few months ago. He'd been battling cancer for the better part of a decade. We knew it was going to get him eventually; we just weren't ready for him to go down so quick once things turned.

"His funeral is tomorrow, and after that, I have to spend my time patching up some sore spots with my brothers and figuring out how we'll be handling running the ranch from here on out.

"It'd make my life a hell of a lot easier if I could show up with a pretty little thing like you on my arm to convince my mom that I'm off the market and don't need her help in findin' me a wife. Give me some time to get settled in without the extra drama."

My mouth literally drops open. I can't believe he's really suggesting this. It's crazy; but then he makes me an offer that's hard to say no to.

"Be my girl for the week. I'll introduce you around, make sure you get to talk to the people you need to talk to and get your first-hand accounts of the family histories that you won't be finding in the library basement."

Ranger

Pretty eyes open round as saucers as those plump lips open in a perfect little "O" that has me wanting to slide my thumb between them. Then the tip of her tongue pokes out and sweeps over that lower lip and God help me-- because I know she's only looking at me like that because she's thinking about what I'm offering her, but I'm lost.

I'm as good as gone and I know I'll be offering her a helluva lot more than just a few introductions around town if she'll allow me.

Our little conversation has taken up most of the short flight time and the captain's voice is telling us we're already beginning our descent while I wait for the angel beside me to deliver my salvation.

The lights go on to buckle seat-belts and the attendants make their way up the aisle, checking on seat-belts and tray tables.

The mountain ranges drop away under us, and the long valley comes into view with the wide, lazy river it's named for running through it.

But it's not until the U&U's range comes into view outside her window, peppering the grasslands along the upper river with the black hides of their Angus cattle, that I get a response.

"What, exactly, does your plan involve?"

Turning away from the view out her window, she licks her lips again and fixes those jewel-toned eyes on me as the plane descends toward the single runway of the valley's rural airstrip.

"I say we start with you tellin' me your name, sweetheart."

"Seri."

This time, when she licks her lips, her eyes have dropped a few inches. I swear they're focused on my own lips as I smile back at her.

"Like the voice on the phone?"

The slightest shake of her head is too much for that hair pin and it finally loses the fight it looks to have been putting up most of the day. Rich, chocolate locks fall around her shoulders, framing her heart-shaped face in soft curls.

"Short for Serenity," she explains, as she pulls a little clip out of her hair and combs through it with her fingers.

I want to do that for her. Only, I don't want to arrange it into the sleek curtain that she's making of it. I want to crush it under my palm while I hold the back of her head with my lips pressed to hers, I want to twist my fingers in it and get it all tangled up against my bed sheets.

"Beautiful." Of course, I mean her. Every damn inch of her from the fly-away strands of hair that refuse to cooperate with her fussing, to the pointed toes of her shiny, black shoes; Seri's a vision. But she takes it as a compliment to her name and I supposed that's for the best, really.

"Thanks. it took me a long time to love it. I always wanted a normal name like Michelle or Brittany."

"I like Serenity," I assure her as we sit back and prepare for the plane to touch down as the runway's blacktop surface rushes up beneath us.

As the plane brings us up to the gate and comes to stop, I fill Seri in on the details she's most likely to need to know and then listen intently to her answers to my own questions.

"This is ridiculous." I hear her mutter under her breath as we wait for our fellow passengers to clear the aisle.

I cover her hand in mine and give it a gentle squeeze.



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She's right, of course. Pretending to be in a relationship with a stranger I met not an hour ago is insane. Pretending to be in a relationship with Serenity, well, I can say for certain that's not something I'm likely to have a lot of trouble with. I just hope Seri can manage well enough to convince everyone she's really head over heels for a rough old geezer like me.

Lord knows she's outta my league, I think to myself as I carry our bags in one hand, with my other firmly wrapped around Seri's-- for show, of course-- as we make our way across the tarmac and into the single building that makes up the entirety of the Slow River Municipal Airport.

"So how in love are we supposed to be?" She squeezes my hand and asks the question with a bit of a giggle that has me looking forward to hearing it again.

Stopping in my tracks, I pull her back to me with a tug on our joined hands.

Seri pivots on the toe of her high heels, spinning in place before snapping back my way where she stops just shy of running into me, her hands resting against my chest and so close she has to crane her neck to look up at me.

Running my hands down her arms, I lean in close and answer her question-- not leaving a bit of room for confusion.

"Madly."

## SERENITY

He leans down so he's eye-level with me, placing both his hands on my upper arms. Their warmth through my silk blouse has me paradoxically shivering. My nipples tightening as if I were standing on the sidewalk back home in January, not in a tiny airport baggage claim in August.

Ranger's face looms so close to mine that the brim of his hat bumps against my forehead. His eyes crinkle just slightly in an expression I can't name as he looks at me closely in silence for a beat.

I think he's going to kiss me.

A million thoughts race through my head. Kissing isn't something I have a lot of experience with. Kissing insanely sexy, older, cowboys I'm pretending to date, in public is something I have zero experience with and I'm under the impression that Ranger is experienced in ways I haven't even heard of yet.

Part of my brain is screaming that we're only pretending to be together. It's a panicky voice coming from somewhere far off in my brain. It sounds muffled, as if some other part of my brain is trying to shut it up.

Because--oh man-- does pretending to be Ranger's girlfriend mean there's going to be kissing? Will it mean there will be more than kissing?

My heart rate goes into double time and I suddenly have questions about our arrangement that have nothing to do with cataloging the details I'll need to know in order to convince his family and friends that we've really been in a relationship for weeks already.

"Madly," Ranger answers my question with a trace of a smirk pulling at one corner of

his mouth, but the single word sounds deadly serious.

For another beat of my heart, he hovers there, staring at me intently like he has more to say.

He doesn't kiss me, and he finally pulls away, standing back up to his full height and adjusting the weathered cowboy hat over his eyes before picking up our luggage in one hand and steering me through the building with one hand resting on my back between my shoulder blades.

This boyfriend thing is going to take some getting used to, but I can't pass up the chance to get an inside scoop on the families I'm here to research. That's the kind of thing that will convince my boss that I'm worth more as a field researcher than I am in the office.

After retrieving my large case from baggage claim, we head for the front of the building while Ranger tells me a bit more about himself, his family, his home town, and the reasons he's willing to go through with this whole fake girlfriend plan.

"Dad and I liked each other fine," he's saying as we head for the doors to the loading area, "we just didn't make the best co-workers. When I took the job in Houston, it led to a pretty big falling out between us and we didn't talk for a few years.

"Of course, Mom wasn't going to let that stand forever. She made sure we patched things up before it was too late...and I'm glad she did."

There's a stoic kind of grief in the man's voice when he talks about his father. It's obvious he thinks highly of his parents, but it's also apparent that he's made peace with losing his dad.

"So why didn't you come back till now?" I wonder aloud. "I mean, not even to visit?"

Your mom sounds like the kind of woman who would want you back for the holidays, at least."

In reply, I get a deep sort of laugh that's a bit more grunt than chuckle.

"Ma's gonna love you," he mumbles under his breath.

"Let's just say, there was some drama before I left town and I haven't been keen on revisiting it."

His phone dings in his back pocket before he can elaborate, and we come to a stop on the sidewalk outside the airport's single, small building while he checks the message.

The relaxed expression that's eased into his rugged features since I agreed to his offer tightens again, and he curses under his breath as he looks up from the screen to scan the parking lot.

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"One more thing I need you to do for me," he says, turning back toward me and holding his phone so I can see it. "Make sure you don't let this woman get me alone, hear?"

The screen is lit with a picture of the woman I spied earlier, this time she's pictured in the passenger seat of a car, blowing a kiss at the camera. A message from "Mom" above it reads "We see you outside. B right there."

Before I can ask for more details, a dark blue Expedition pulls up to the sidewalk beside us and two women get out, both headed directly for Ranger without noticing me standing beside him.

The blonde from the photos leaps from the passenger door and wraps herself around him in a hug that says she knows him a lot better than I do-- and wants to make sure everyone knows it.

Fake boyfriend or not, Ranger's mine, and even if he hadn't just told me to keep this woman away from him, I'd still be grabbing her arm and stepping between them.

"Who do you think you are?" The blonde rocks back on the heel of her boot, crossing her arms in way that makes it clear she's used to using those boobs to her advantage, while she glares at me like I'm the one out of line here.

Behind me, Ranger clears his throat to answer her, but I beat him to it.

"I'm Serenity. Ranger's girlfriend," I introduce myself with as much meaning as I can pack into the words. I hold out my hand to shake hers, with a smile plastered on my

face that should make it clear she won't be helping herself to any more touchy-feelies of my supposed man on my watch.

"Range?" The older woman who was driving the SUV joins our tense group just in time to overhear me drop the bombshell. Her face blanches as she looks between me and the blonde and then up to Ranger in search of answers. "Something you want to tell me?"

Ranger

I love hearing the ownership in Seri's voice as she pulls Bernie off of me and introduces herself as my girl.

I love the sour look on Bernie's face as she gives Seri a thorough once-over while she absorbs the full impact of what she just heard.

What I don't love is the hurt in Mom's confused expression as her eyes settle on me, searching for an explanation of just how it is that I've arrived back home with a woman that I've never mentioned before.

Stepping forward to wrap my arms around Mom, she returns our overdue hug for a long moment before pulling away and quirked an eyebrow at me.

It's the same look she's been giving me most of my life, the one that says I better come clean with her or the consequences will be worse.

"Seri," I reach out to put my arm around Serenity's shoulders, drawing her into my side and doing my best not to get caught up in how right she feels pressin' against me there, "this is my mother, Kimberly O'Leary."

The excited little squeal that ekes outta Seri is completely genuine, and it goes

through me in the most inappropriate way that has me shifting awkwardly in hopes of avoiding embarrassing myself.

"Mrs. O'Leary!" Seri steps out from under my arm and takes Ma's hands in hers. "Oh my gosh, I'm so excited to meet you."

Of course, I know she means it and it's because of Ma's relationship to the ranch and the local history that Seri's so enthusiastic to learn about, but Mom warms right up to the sweet little thing gushing over her so enthusiastically.

Again, pride flows through me. I'm loving how perfectly Serenity is stepping into the role of being my woman.

Mom takes her eager greeting to mean that even though I haven't mentioned Seri to the family, I must have told Seri plenty about them.

"Oh, just Kim, sweetheart." Mom's wide smile is the real deal as she wraps my girl into a warm embrace, but I know I'll have questions to answer as soon as Mom gets me alone.

Left out of our little reunion, Bernie glowers at the scene from the sidelines, obviously not sure what to make of the plot twist.

"Serenity, was it?" Bernie steps in and my hackles go up. "I'm sure Ranger's already told you all about me, but I'm Bernie."

Seri turns from Mom and faces Bernadine.

As I watch the two women silently sizing each other up, tension crackles between them so charged that I see even Mom takes a step back.

Serenity finally smiles, warm but with unmistakable calculation as she holds a hand out in greeting.

Her head shakes just slightly, making that dark hair of hers shimmy around her shoulders as she regards the blonde in front of her coolly.

"No, sorry." She answers, "Ranger hasn't mentioned you."

Bernie smiles politely as she shakes Seri's hand, but she shoots a glance at me that has war written in it.



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"Well, let's get you two back to the ranch and settled in, shall we?"

Either Mom sees the look on Bernie's face, or she just has good timing.

"Serenity looks like she's had a long day." Mom hits the key to open the back hatch on the SUV and I jump to load up our luggage before holding the back door open for Seri to slide in behind the passenger seat.

"Have you talked to your brothers, yet, Ranger?" Bernie shoots over her shoulder from up front as Ma pulls away from the curb and heads toward town. "Gunner was just telling me how much he's looking forward to you being back on the ranch again."

She knows where to strike, that's for damn sure.

Tightening my jaw in order to keep my tongue in check, I bend my neck to one side and crack the joints that have stiffened up in it.

From the corner of my eye, I see Seri watching me with a combination of curiosity and compassion, but this isn't the time or place to fill her in on those details.

Without a word, she reaches across the back seat and slips her dainty little hand into mine. Her touch makes it easy to relax the fingers that have balled into a fist against the top of my thigh. It feels so good to have my hand wrapped around hers that I don't let go all the way back to the Delta O.

## SERENITY

Of course, Kimberly wasn't expecting Ranger to show up with anyone when she picked us up from the airport. She also thinks Ranger and I have been dating for several weeks already-- it's as reasonable for her to only have had one guest room prepared as it was for her to assume we wouldn't need two.

You'd think I'd have slept like shit even after it was me that insisted there was room for both of us in the king size bed.

I should have been tossing and turning and feeling awkward with Ranger's long form stretched out beside me.

I slept like a rock.

Maybe it was just exhaustion from a long day of flights, the fact that it's three hours later back home, or the long, hot bath I took after enjoying a delicious, home-cooked meal in Kimberly's massive farmhouse kitchen while letting Ranger field the questions his younger brothers fired off in rapid succession.

Maybe I liked the feeling of Ranger's weight pressing into the mattress, the heat of his body sharing space with mine, and the comforting sounds of his breathing in the dark.

Even if the man did stay a frustrating distance from me all night. Far enough that there was no way I could "accidentally" end up touching him in my sleep. No matter how hard I might have tried.

"What did Singer say?" Ranger's deep voice sounds gruffer today, the bags under his eyes not hidden by the brim of the black Stetson he wore for the funeral. He's been withdrawn, but that's to be expected since we're at his father's funeral and all.

"She's going to text me tomorrow so we can schedule a time to get together." I reply, feeling entirely too comfortable when Ranger's arm drops over my shoulder.

"Good," he says more to himself than to me. "Sing's about your age now, I reckon. You two will likely get on pretty well."

He's right, Singer Kelly is the youngest sibling of the Kelly family and the last one left in Slow River to run her family's ranch. She's a year younger than me at twenty-five, and has managed to pull the historic Walking Y out of bankruptcy by converting it to a bed and breakfast and trading the traditional cattle for Pygora goats and a small herd of alpacas that she raises for wool.

Ranger introduced her to me after the chapel services, when people begin filing into the small reception area in search of snacks and levity.

We instantly hit it off. If I were to move to Slow River for some reason-- I swear, I don't lean into Ranger's side a bit as that thought wafts through my head-- I'm sure we'd be besties.

Ranger has also introduced me to a handful of other people in the crowded space, but he seems to be looking for someone in particular as he guides me out an open side door, toward the sound of male voices laughing loudly between volleys of language not suitable for the occasion.

"Let me introduce you to the Lazy P." Ranger steers toward the colorful language toward a group of men leaning against a tree and passing a flask between them.

This is where we find Ranger's two younger brothers, Archer Dean and Lance, and another man that's introduced as Lynx Savage and I'm wondering if he's connected to the Savage family that owns the U&U.

Before I get to ask, though, Ranger's pointing between four men while he rattles off their names, giving faces to what have been just random words on birth and property records for the last several months.

"Flint, Beryl, Jasper, Slate."

A hat brim gets tipped or touched with the mention of each name, and the second in the line-up-- Beryl, I think-- hands me the flask.

"Ma'am," he says by way of greeting.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 5:44 am*

"Serenity's my girl." Ranger growls possessively, taking half a step forward without letting his grip around me loosen.

With that announcement, several heads turn to stare at Ranger as if he's just said he's going to the moon.

"Told ya," Archer reaches over and claims the flask that Beryl's still holding toward me. "He just showed up with her. Never mentioned her to anyone, not even Mom."

"Fuckin hell, man." Flint strides forward, gives Ranger what sounds like a very hard slap against his shoulder, and then takes my hand gently to kiss the back of it.

"You ever wanna level up, darlin', you give me a call, hear?"

The man gives me a wink, dropping my hand as he steps back.

"Bernie must be losing her shit." Lynx chuckles as he hands off the flask.

"Should have seen her face when we got off the plane." Ranger chuckles, relaxing beside me and taking his turn with the flask.

"Yeah, real funny." Gunner's gruff voice joins the small group with a disapproving tone that I'm learning is his baseline. "Made Mom feel like a fool and damn near broke her heart."

Ranger and his brother glare at each other in silence for a beat and the tension between them is palpable.

I've only gotten part of the story, but my understanding is that Gunner isn't thrilled about Ranger coming back to run the ranch and Ranger isn't thrilled about his brother not being thrilled.

"Few of us headed down to Virgie's. Thought y'all might want a proper belt or two and maybe get your sinner asses out of the church yard 'fore ya get stuck by lightning out here."

That's all Gunner has to say to the group at large before he turns on the heel of his polished boot and marches toward the parking lot.

Ranger

Gun's been pretty clear about his thoughts on me coming back to the Delta O since long before he walked into Ma's kitchen and saw me yesterday.

He's not in favor.

Too bad it's not his call. I made a promise to our dad before he passed, and I plan on keeping it. I'll be back in Slow River for good soon, and my brother's going to have to get used to me being around to take on my share of the ranch duties.

"Is he always so grumpy?"

Serenity's voice is laced with amused sarcasm as she slips her hand into mine while we head out to the parking lot where we pile into the back of Buck Savage's pick-up along with my younger brothers and at least six other guys for the short ride over to O'Hare's Saloon.

After helping Seri into the bed of the truck while managing to keep Lynx and Beryl from putting their fucking hands on her-- I don't give a damn if they're just trying to

be helpful or not, I don't want them touching my girl-- I answer her question with a rough grunt that serves as a sort of laugh.

"Thatwashappy Gunner. Best mood I've seen him in since we were kids."

"Yeah, Gunner's the only guy I know who actually gets meaner when he's having a good day," Beryl tells Seri as the truck bounces its way along the river road on the back way into town. "I don't expect he's going to be tolerable now that he's all loved up."

I share a short laugh with the guys.

Yeah, seeing my younger brother fuss over his new woman has been a shock, for sure. You'd think he'd have some nicer words for me, seeing as how I'm the one that hired her and all.

But Gunner's been holding a grudge against me since I left the ranch, and he's been sure to make his feelings about the idea of me getting involved with operations after Dad passed clear-- he's happy to run the Delta O with our younger brothers and I'm welcome to stay back in Houston working for in the corporate sector.

Across from us, Lynx laughs, taking one last swig from the flask before pocketing it in his suit jacket.

Not that there's likely to be a deputy on duty who'd pull us over, whatwith most of the department attending the services and anyone left on patrol knowing what's up with all the blackhats and ties that only come out for funerals and court dates around here.

The younger guys cut it up, joshin' each other about whatever shenanigans they've been getting up to of late. Beryl's taking a ribbing about having such a short season after a hard landing where he got stomped by a bull that wasn't quite satisfied with

merely throwing him at the five second mark back in May; Lance, my youngest brother, is giving hell to Lynx over some girl he hasn't closed the deal with yet; while Archer frowns at Rowan when Row mentions his baby sister's holding a table for us at Virgie's.

It's a damn happy group for a bunch of guys coming from a funeral. But that's how Dad would have wanted it-- his boys all together again, emptying glasses around the table in his honor. He might not have been so supportive of the stories that are about to get told in his memory though. I've got a feeling, with this group of ruffians, there's gonna be a lot of shit talk about the old man going down tonight.

Buck hits a rut in the dirt road that catches Lynx off guard and damn near sends him out of the truck. Lynx pounds on the roof of the cab and gets the finger from Colt, who's riding shotgun with Buck at the wheel.



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Seri's arms tighten around my chest where she's been holdin' on for dear life since before the truck started moving.

"No worries there, baby, I've been doing this since Ruger Kelly started driving his dad's old Ford when we were eight years old. It'll take more than the old river road to buck my ass off the back of a truck."

"You were driving at eight?"

The shock on her face makes those turquoise eyes go wide and I've got half a mind to kiss her right then and there just to see her reaction.

Of course, Buck hits another bump in the road as he takes the turn into O'Hare's back lot too fast, forcing me to grip the edge of the truck bed under my ass with one hand and giving me an excuse to hang on to Seri with the other.

My hat almost goes flying, but between the John B. and Seri, I know which one I'd rather have my hands on.

Seri manages to catch the hat, laughing as it topples off my head and she catches it just in time to save me from Beryl's plight—who makes a quick jump and hits the ground with a roll in the dirt when his own hat catches wind and goes sailing.

"Is he okay?"

"No worries," I assure her, as the rest of us unload and head for the bar without waiting up for Bear, "that boy's been fallin' off of bulls since he was three, a little

tumble at ten miles an hour ain't likely to be the thing that does him in."

Taking the door from Colt and holding it open for Seri; I take advantage of the opportunity to admire her as she walks past me into the bar's dark interior.

She never did give back my hat, and the way it sits loose on her head with her dark curls hanging in rows down her back has me thinking I should get her a hat of her own.

Then again, there's a visceral kind of reaction swelling up in me at the sight of her in mine. Almost as good as putting a ring on her finger when it comes to making sure every asshole here knows who she belongs to.

She's got another one of her sexy librarian outfits on today, with a dark gray skirt that hugs her curves and a blouse with buttons that oughta be getting hazard pay for the way they're straining to contain those full breasts.

The woman's had me mixed up all morning, for sure. I was proud as punch to introduce her around to everyone at the services as my own, but she's had my head full of thoughts that shouldn't be allowed in church and especially not while we're trying to listen to the pastor give my dad's eulogy.

Funeral's over now though. There's plenty of things to get sorted before I lose her at the end of the week, but for the rest of this day, I'll be shooting whiskey with the guys, toasting-- and roasting-- the old man, and Serenity's still mine as long as the prying eyes of town are on us.

I plan on enjoying that as long as I can.

Placing my hand on the small of her back, I walk through the long hallway lined with old photos, steering Seri into the main saloon up front to where our party's gathering

around a wide, round table with Rowan's sister, Callie, Bernadine, and a good dozen or so shots of whiskey already waiting.

Bernie's face breaks into a wicked smile as she eyes us approaching and a shiver runs down my spine as she knocks back a shot without taking her eyes off us.

5

## SERENITY

Ranger slips his free hand in mine and Bernie's eyes shoot daggers where we're connected as we make our way through the bar to the big table where Bernadine and a younger woman are waiting on our group.

Several shot glasses of amber liquid are already on the table and they get emptied one by one as the group of men we rode over with start claiming chairs as well as drinks.

A woman who looks like she could arm wrestle Thor-- and win-- brings another round of shots to the table.

"Ya must be the girl Ranger brought home to keep his mama from meddling." The woman gives me a hard look that has me feeling uncomfortable.

"Virgie, this is my girl, Seri," Ranger drops into one of the heavy, wooden chairs and pulls me into his lap as he introduces me to the woman. "She's a historian. I'm sure she'd love to hear what you know about Slow River while she's in town."

Virgie gives me another glare, this one more curious than scrutinizing, then she looks across the table at Bernie and back to Ranger.

"Your mama had different plans for you, Ranger O'Leary. If you're gonna fuck with

those, you better be sure you don't break her heart. That woman's had a rough enough go of it between your father and the lot of you boys."

"Nice to meet you there, Seri. I'm sure today's not the best time to get to know each other. Maybe you can come by later this week-- Range'll likely be happy to bring you by when he's had a chance to recover from tonight."

The Pereira brothers have already downed more than one round, and Flint is telling a story about Ranger's dad, a rodeo clown, and a bet that involved a naked horse ride into a bar in another town.

The men around the table erupt in laughter while I try to follow along without getting distracted by the hard muscle of Ranger's thighs under my ass, or the way he keeps one arm wrapped around my waist while he joins his brothers and the other men in sharing stories about the man who raised him while they down the endless supply of whiskey that Virgie keeps delivering to the table.

## Page 10

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I sip the drink Virgie brought for me and meet Bernie's eyes across the table. She's staring at me with the same cat-like grin she's been giving me since she first spotted me with Ranger's arm wrapped possessively around my shoulder at the chapel this morning.

"So, y'all have been awful clingy." Bernie sips from a long neck bottle, swallowing the beer and leveling Ranger with a grin that's downright malevolent.

I can't help myself. I tighten the arm I have wrapped around the back of Ranger's neck like he's actually mine and glare back at the grinning blonde across the table.

"What's your point, Bern?" Ranger drawls back at her.

For a man who's three shots deep, there's not a trace of slur in his speech. Although I have a feeling that's going to change before long, since Virgie just dropped another round off at the table and the reminiscing hasn't slowed down.

Although, talk about Ranger's father seems to have been put on hold for a few minutes while everyone clues in to Bernie's observation about me and Ranger.

She shrugs at Ranger's terse tone, like she didn't even notice.

"Just sayin' is all," she tells him. "You haven't let go of the poor girl since you got off the plane but I don't think I've seen you kiss her not one time, Range."

Ranger shifts uncomfortably, his entire body going stiff beneath me, while Bernie smirks from across the table.

I know what she's doing. She's calling our bluff, which means she obviously thinks we're bluffing. Which just reminds me that she knows Ranger better than I do...which might be exactly what she's trying to point out.

Well fuck that.

Maybe it's the honkytonk feel of the bar, or letting loose with Ranger's brothers and friends after the funeral.

Maybe it's the fact that shots of top-shelf whiskey have been showing up in front of me all night, or the smug little smirk on Bernie's face as she keeps watching me and Ranger like she's looking for something to use against us.

Ranger wanted a fake girlfriend who would make sure his ex-real one believed he was off the market-- and he's the one with the impossibly hard cock digging into my ass that won't let me get off his lap so I can get some space and catch a fucking breath.

The man wants to convince them? I'll convince them.

Ranger

It was just supposed to be a couple of rounds in honor of the old man, while we shared a few of the stories about him that aren't appropriate for the fancy eulogies.

Somehow, the table that was supposed to just be my brothers and a few of our closest buddies has expanded into a group of a dozen or more of us and I'm in danger of losing count of how many drinks I've knocked back, seein' as how Virgie isn't letting the glasses stay empty.

Now that we're all a few rounds in, suit jackets tossed aside, music's playing, and lips

are as loose as our ties, tellin' stories my old man wouldn't have wanted us passing around, all punctuated with laughter and curse words.

Another shot of whiskey slides down the back of my throat, hot on the tip of my tongue and sweet on the back. The high-end shit that Dad liked-- that'll no doubt leave me with a bar tab that'll hurt worse than the hangover tomorrow morning.

Seri's managed to make herself right at home in my lap and I'm thinking I could get used to having Serenity wrapped around me like this. I could get used to having Serenity wrapped around my body in a lot of ways.

Something about the way Bernadine has been sitting across the table, watching me and Seri like she's trying to solve a puzzle while she sips a beer from the bottle, has me on edge.

Sure enough, just when I'm getting comfortable; with Seri's arm around my neck, and my hand resting over her thigh; just as Rowan launches into one more "that time Kevin O'Leary tried to..." stories that have been going around all evening, Bernie interrupts with what I assume is meant to be a dare; pointing out that she hasn't seen me and Seri kiss yet.

I open my mouth to tell Bernie to mind her own business, when Seri's lip crash against mine. Shutting me up damn good.

This is the point I know I'm good and buzzed, because-- God help me-- I am powerless to put together a single thought as Serenity's tongue pushes between my lips like she's on a mission.

The bar fades away, the hoots and cat-calls sounding around us barely registering through the haze of whiskey and the taste of sweet cola and heat as Seri stakes her claim on me in front of everyone in O'Hare's bar today.

Her arm tightens around my neck, pulling me into her soft curves, like she expected me to put up a fight. Then her other hand rests against my cheek, those soft fingertips lightly rubbing against the stubble that's grown in since I shaved cleaned this morning.

My hands find her body-- one gripping her round hip, the other pulling her closer to me with a firm grasp on her thigh, till she must be able to feel what she's doing to me from the thick bulge diggin' into her ass now.

I like the weight of her pressing against my erection, and the feel of her fingers sliding into my hair at the back of my neck. I can't get enough of her heat or the soft glide of her tongue against mine, and I'm desperate to have more of her sweet curves filling up my hands.

The whiskey and the relief of finally getting a taste of the lips I've been craving since I first set eyes on this girl has me forgetting where we are-- until I feel the icy cold water dripping down my back and over my shoulders.



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It does the damn job, causing Seri to break away from me with a start and bringing me back to reality with a jolt that has me looking for the joker to blame, with my mind on murdering the son of a bitch.

Virgie stands just behind me, an empty beer pitcher clutched in her hand like she's expecting to swing it at me, and the fight leaves me fast enough.

I've seen Virginia Stockebrand put down men twice my size and drag their dead weight out the back door of O'Hare's to sleep it off in the alley. I know better than to mess with the woman.

"The bar's rating only goes to R, O'Leary. Might be time to call for a ride." Virgie levels her humorless tone at me with a narrowed gaze before clearing away the empty glasses scattered over the table and heading back to the bar.

"I think you just got us cut off," Beryl slurs as he stumbles to his feet. "Looks like we're headed to the Toll Booth."

"Joe's on his way." Flint slides his phone into his pocket as he picks his hat up from the table and takes a head count. "Who all's going?"

Bernadine's phone lights up in her hand, causing her to glance down at the message she just got and break the awkward stare she's had Seri fixed in since Virgie reminded us where we are.

"Not tonight, guys, I got a ride coming for me." She gets to her feet, far more stable than the rest of us after nursing a couple of beers to our multiple rounds of whiskey.

"Walk me out, Range? I need to talk to you about something."

Seri's arm snakes around my waist and then she hooks her thumb into my back pocket. The feel of her knuckle pressed into my ass has me missing a step, her pressing her fingertips against my hip doesn't help steady me in the slightest.

There's nowhere for my arm to go except around her shoulders and I'm so caught up in the feel of her that I barely even notice the scowl on Bernie's face

Or maybe Bernie's face pinches at seeing my reaction to it. There's no hiding the fact that I love feeling Seri stake her claim on me in front of another woman. Even if it is just for show.

"I need to settle up with Virg." I shrug unapologetically at Bernie and lean into Seri's embrace, taking advantage of any chance I get to press against her curves while noting with smugsatisfaction that she's doing exactly what I asked of her-- making sure Bernie doesn't manage to corner me off alone somewhere.

Bernie slides an unreadable look to the woman tucked under my arm before rolling her eyes and heading outside with the rest of the guys while I hunt down Virgie to take care of the bill.

6

## SERENITY

"Isaid it was taken care of," Virgie scowls across the bar at Ranger, shoving his credit card back at him. "Take yer girl home and enjoy the rest of the night, O'Leary."

Ranger tries one more time to hand her the card before she manages to shoo him away from the bar.

"Joe's gonna come back for us after he drops the Crazy P's off at the roadhouse," Lance slurs, leaning against the door frame for support.

Gunner and his girlfriend, Clementine, left the bar long ago and, from what I gather of Lance's slurred curses, has no intention of driving back into town to give his drunk brothers a ride back to the ranch.

Leaving the rest of us to wait for Slow River's only ride share driver to come back for us after he drops the "Crazy P's--" as Lance refers to the Pereira's of the Lazy P ranch-- off at another bar in a town called Keller's Ferry.

I have been assured that I do not want to go there. Apparently the Toll Booth has a reputation for cheap beer and expensive bar fights.

Looking around, I notice that it's not just our party that's moving on. The bar crowd has thinned significantly and I wonder what time it is.

Rowan's head has been on the table for quite some time, one hand laying on the table top with his limp fingers still curled around an empty shot glass.

Virgie reaches over and slips it out of his loose grip without disturbing the sleeping man.

Rowan's sister, Callie, and Ranger's brother, Archer Dean, are possibly still close to sober, having slid their chairs over to a nearby table about the time Callie's brother passed out. They've been lost in a conversation that's obviously private enough to keep them oblivious to the rest of the group ever since.

I could use a trip to the ladies' room, but Bernie's still hovering while she waits on her ride, no doubt waiting for a chance to corner Ranger as soon as I slip up and leave him unattended.

Fat chance, lady. I can hold it for a long damn time. I'll pee when we get back to the ranch.

I lean into Ranger's broad chest, resting my head on his shoulder while eyeing the blonde across from me.

Bernie's not quite as glassy-eyed as the rest of us but she still sways slightly on the heels of her bedazzled cowboy boots while she taps out text messages with a light click of her acrylic nails against the screen. Occasionally, she looks up my way with an expression I can only assume is seething jealousy.

It fills me with a sense of triumph that pairs dangerously with the solid drunk I've got going on; drunk on alcohol and absolutely wasted on the sensation of spending the evening in Ranger's lap.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 5:44 am*

"Don't pass out on me now, baby girl," Ranger's voice is far from a whisper as his lips brush the curve of my ear. "I've got plans for you when we get back to the ranch."

If I was tired before, I'm not anymore. I am one hundred percent awake, alert, and down for these "plans" he's promising in that deep voice as his fingers slide along the side of my waist, just above my skirt.

I know I crossed the line by kissing Ranger and no matter how real it felt, I have to remind myself that he's still just pretending. We. Dammit! We are still just pretending; but when I raise my head, he catches my lips in a kiss that does not feel like it's just for show and I find myself thinking I don't want it to be all play-acting anymore.

After Virgie doused us with the ice water, Ranger took his hat back, shook the water from the black Stetson, and inspected my clothes to make sure I wasn't too wet.

If he only knew.

"Joe's here," Lance calls out from the sidewalk.

"You sharin' this ride, Arch?" Ranger interrupts what appears to be more than just a friendly conversation between his brother and Rowan's sister.

"I'll get him home," Callie chirps-- entirely too soberly and suspiciously enthusiastic about the prospect of driving one of the younger O'Leary brothers all the way out of town to the Delta O ranch.

Ranger nods, with one of those low dips of his head and a finger to the brim of his hat

in a gesture that seems to be universal cowboy sign language for everything from "hello" to "I heard you the first time."

Following behind him, I sway a little before steadying myself, enjoying the view of Ranger's ass in the black "dress" jeans he wore today. And who knew the sound of cowboy boots on a hardwood floor was so sexy?

Ranger

"You can't just leave him there."

Seri giggles as I nearly trip over my brother's unconscious body in my haste to get back to her.

"It's summer, he'll be fine."

Lance is lucky I pulled his dead weight out of the back of Joe's car. Joe woulda let him sleep it off in his driveway and charged him rent.

Not my problem the kid's too fucked up to get back to his own place. He can stay right there on the lawn until the sprinklers come on for all I care. Right now, the only thing I'm thinking about is tearing that sexy little skirt off Seri and getting a taste of what's underneath.

I'm done playing to an audience. Fuck keeping things platonic, that line was good and crossed as soon as she gave me a sweet taste of her mouth earlier. I've wanted her from the moment I saw her and as long as she's feelin' the same, I'm not going to waste this opportunity.

"I need to get you inside, baby, before I fuck you right here on my mama's front porch."

Bouncing off one of the posts, I'm reminded of how much I had to drink as I fumble with the key in the front door. Dropping low, I hoist Seri over my shoulder before she has a chance to protest. The surprised little noise she makes does nothing to cool the fever raging through me.

"Looks like Mom installed some of those security cameras," I point to one of the small, black cameras mounted under the porch, even though Seri probably can't see it from her current angle. "I'm sure she'd rather miss this show."

Seri giggles as I make a clumsy entry into the dark house. A sharp sting lands on my ass and I hear her telling me to "giddy up" in the tipsy voice that's had my dick hard so long it's aching.

Somewhere outside of my booze-addled brain, there's a voice of reason tellin' me to put a good night's sleep and several glasses of water between tonight and any thoughts of getting Seri naked and moaning under me.

But that's not the part of my body doing the thinking.

And judgin' by the way Seri's lips crush to mine as soon as we're behind the closed door of our room, she's not interested in anything my better judgment has to say either.

I swear the girl was practically panting when I said I had plans for her tonight and that's all I needed to make up my mind about finally showing her how I'm really feeling about her.

"You were amazing today, baby."

It's hard to tear my mouth off hers, but I want to tell her everything that's been rattling around inside my head since I first laid eyes on her; and I need to taste so much more

of her than just those pouty lips that keep whispering my name.

Serenity's voice hitches as my hands get under her blouse. My fingers slip beneath the cups of her bra and finally, I have those full, heavy tits in my hands.

Both of us groan when I run the callused pad of my thumb over her pebbled nipple before finding it with my mouth.

"Everybody loves you," I mumble around her breast, still trying to get the words out even though the feel of Seri's fingers in my hair and the soft giggles she alternates with gasps as my mouth finds more of her naked flesh is giving the whiskey competition for reasons I can't think straight.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 5:44 am*

"Ranger."

I'm halfway to heaven when she calls my name in a voice that's gone all husky with need.

Her heels came off somewhere between the front porch and the hall, the black silk blouse is undone and pooled at her sides, revealing silky pale skin and a lacy black bra that's all askew from my fumbling to get underneath it.

When I look up from where I've just managed to wedge myself between the soft thighs that are only able to spread for me because her narrow skirt has been rucked up over her hips, the view is nothing less than breathtaking.

"I'm afraid these stockings are trash, baby." My thumbs rip through the nylon material that's impeding my access to the sweetest little pussy I've ever gotten a whiff of.

"Ohmygod, Ranger, wait--"

My target moves suddenly, startling me as she scurries off the other side of the bed.

Seri's unexpected retreat upsets the precarious balance I had on the backs of my heels, sending me to the floor and reminding us both just how much we've had to drink.

"Are you okay?" She's giggling madly as she comes to stand above me, giving me a view that makes my own laughter catch in my throat.

Her skirt is still around her hips, the black nylons destroyed, and a triangle of satin panties peeks out from between her thighs, obviously damp and begging my fingers to explore.

"I just need to...um..."

The smile on her pretty face goes from amused to shy as she gestures vaguely in the direction of the bathroom door.

"...before we...uh..."

My hands slide up the backs of her knees.

"Thought you were tappin' out on me, baby." My fingers trace little circles on the back of her thighs, as far up as my arms reach with me lying flat on the floor.

The shy smile widens, dark curls brushing the tips of those perfect breasts, her blouse still undone to show me those curves in all their glory as she shakes her head with an emphatic "no."

"I'll be right back. Promise."

"I'll be right here. Promise." My hand maintains contact with her for two steps before she's gone too far for me to reach.

Damn, this floor is comfortable. Mom put down new carpet since the last time I was home; feels like she went with an upgraded padding under the soft fiber.

Beyond the closed door of the en suite, I hear water running and what sounds like Seri singing softly. Knowing she's in there primping for me, has me hard as a rock with anticipation.

The room's spinning as I unbutton my jeans, only to realize I still have my boots on.

One boot lands on the floor and I lay my head back down to get my bearings before I reach for the next one.

7

## SERENITY

Staring at myself in the mirror after I've finished taking care of what I'd been putting off while we were the bar, I contemplate the woman looking back at me.

She's rumpled and flushed. Her hair looks like it's going to take forever to work a comb through. The clear, blue eyes I'm used to seeing staring back at me look dark and hooded and more than a little drunk.

"Are you sure about this, Seri?" She asks. Obviously, she must be asking me, because the woman in the mirror looks like her own mind is made up one hundred percent.

My nod in agreement is enough to knock me off balance, and I grab the edge of the sink to steady myself as I share a conspiratory giggle with my reflection. We are definitely on the same page; we are going to go back out into that bedroom and let a rough, older cowboy have his way with us. And we are going to enjoy every minute of it.

The woman in the mirror nods emphatically while I splash a bit of cool water over my face and find the mouthwash. I'll leave the comb-through for another time.

While I do my best to transform the wrecked mess of wrinkled clothes and torn stockings into an image of the sultry, sexually confident vixen that I'm sure Ranger is expecting, I recite words of encouragement to myself under my breath, turning the

affirmations into a nervous song in hopes of convincing myself that I really can go out there and do this without blowing my cover.

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After all, it's still pretend.

Maybe Ranger and I really are attracted to each other, or maybe it's whiskey and the relief of having gotten through his father's memorial service and a day of facing down a woman who's obviously not over him that has us both eager to relieve some tension; but this still isn't a relationship-- and it's not going to be.

So whatever happens is just bonus over the opportunity he's already offering me to get in with the local families and hear their histories in their own words.

Ready, Serenity?

The woman in the mirror nods as she stifles a giggle.

Okay then. Let's go lose our virginity.

With a deep breath, I open the bathroom door and flick off the light.

There's some moonlight filtering in through the bedroom windows that adds to the soft illumination from a bedside lamp.

In the low light, I can easily make out the features of the room, from the chair beside the closet to the queen size bed that takes up the majority of the space.

The bedspread has been pulled nearly off and most of the covers along with it. Pillows are scattered, but no sign of the man that had been so eagerly waiting for me to return.

"Ranger?" I call into the dimly lit room softly. "Where'd you go?"

Coming closer to the bed, I see the sole of a cowboy boot, its heel propped on the edge of the mattress, whatever it's attached to invisible on the other side of the bed.

"Ranger?"

I climb onto the mattress and peer over the other side.

The boot is still attached to a foot, the foot is attached to a muscled leg, the leg is attached to a very naked cowboy sprawled on the floor and passed out cold.

"Seriously?" I grab the boot beside me and shake it roughly.

The man on the floor snores softly but that's all the response I get from him.

I lay across the bed, draped off the edge, and stare at him, feeling disappointed. As my eyes adjust to the darkness on this side of the room, I do admit to taking full advantage of appreciating the view.

Ranger's other boot is laying near his head, the black shirt I'd unbuttoned during our all-too-brief make-out session has been discarded with a hasty toss toward the chair. The black jeans are inside-out, with the black boxer briefs still entwined with the long legs of the denim as they make a dark line across the floor beside the sleeping man.

What has me transfixed, however, is the sight of Ranger's body. All six foot, four of him stretched out and naked except for the one boot.

It's not the first naked man I've ever seen, but it's definitely the first one that's had me wanting to do more than look.

I can see where his tan ends, somewhere at the waist line of his jeans, leading me to imagine him working outdoors, shirtless in the summer sun. His body is all muscle and sinew, from the corded forearms to the thick thighs and sculpted calves.

Of course, the developed pecs and flat abs have my appreciation, and the trail of dark hair that leads down is hardnot to admire, but it's the long, thick, ridge of flesh jutting up from between his legs that has my attention pinned to it.

He's still hard.Veryhard.

And big enough to have my imagination doing loop-de-loops, wondering all kinds of things fromwill it fitto some primal urge to find out. Which, of course, I'm not going to do. It would be wrong to crawl off the edge of the bed and join him down there on the floor. It'd be wrong to run my hands over those hard muscles and along the length of that swollen cock while he's dead to the world.

Frustrated, I shake the booted foot again.

"Ranger!"

This time, his foot falls to the floor with a harsh thud.

A smile ghosts his features and he says my name-- but he doesn't wake up.

With the excitement the night had promised seeping out of my body, the whiskey is left to pull me into sleep.

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Ranger

Sunlight assaults my senses,demanding that I wake up long before I feel rested.

When I finally will my eyelids to open, the damn curtains have been pulled wide open and the sun is practically in the room along with me.

My brain slowly creaks into operation as random bits of information slowly come together to make sense of things.

These windows face south, it's well past nine a.m. for so much sun to be hitting this side of the house.

I'm on the floor of Ma's guest bedroom. Half the bedding is off the mattress and wrapped around me. I'm stark raving naked under the flowered bed cover, except for one boot weighing down a foot that's trapped under the bed.

Serenity.

Stretching my arms out to my sides, I don't feel her near me.

Lifting my head, I have to shut my eyes for a minute. When the spinning stops, I look around. The room is pretty torn up. My clothes are strewn all over the floor around me, some of Seri's stuff lies tangled in with mine. The bed looks like it's seen more than sleep, with only one pillow left near the headboard, and all the covers pulled off the side where they're mostly covering me.



But no sign of Serenity.

My head's pounding, but I manage to pull myself onto my feet. Bracing myself against the side of the bed, I yank at my remaining boot until it comes free, then stumble toward the shower while I wrack my brain in hopes of remembering just what all happened last night.

A shit ton of whiskey is the last thing I remember clearly: Virgie making sure the table didn't go dry while we told lies and tall tales about my dad after we left the service.

Seri nestled up in my lap like a kitten while Bernie eyed her from across the table.

Bernie trying to call us out on not groping each other like horny teenagers whenever we're out together. Like Bernadine hasn't known me practically our whole lives.

That woman knows good and well I've never been the type that was all about public displays of affection. Hell! She used that to her advantage plenty there for a bit and everyone in town knew it was true enough to believe her lies.

The shower tile is cool where I rest my cheek against it while I let the steaming water beat some life back into me.

I'm too damn old to put away liquor that way anymore. Can't remember the last time I woke up feeling this wrung out.

Memories of Serenity's lips on mine flood my mind. Seri doesn't know me like Bernie does. She doesn't know I'm not the sort of man who's ever needed to paw at my woman in public just to mark her as mine.

She took Bernie's bait and made sure no one would be doing any more questioning

about where things stood between us.

Problem is, it left me confused as all hell. Thinking maybe that sweet young thing could see me as more than a ticket to her dream job.

I'm just about woke up under the sting of the shower, putting together the rest of the night bit by bit, when I remember more. Seri scolding at me for dumping Lance's unconscious body on the lawn, her lips on mine, her hands on my body, hauling her down the hall with her over my shoulder while she swatted my ass.

Tusslin' with her here in the room, and ruining those pretty, black nylons she was wearing.

What I don't remember is where we left off, but judging from the state I woke up in, I'd say it's fair to assume the night went as far as nights can go between a red-blooded man and a beautiful woman.

Running my hand through my wet hair, I pound my fist against the shower wall and groan.

Try as I might, I can't remember anything past ripping through Seri's stockings. I don't know how I got one boot off or how either of us managed to pull my jeans and underwear off over the boot I woke up in.

More than that though, I can't remember the sweet taste of Seri coming on my tongue or the velvet clench of her pussy on my cock. Things I have been starving for since I first saw her in the airport back in Tacoma and definitely things I'd wanted to carry with me in my memories as long as I draw breath on this earth.

I didn't want Seri to be a drunken romp on the floor that I couldn't remember come morning. I want her to know she's mine, dammit. I want her to stay here on the ranch

with me and be my wife and the mother of my children.

As I towel off and find some fresh clothes to throw on, I have no idea if I said any of those things to her last night and even less idea of what she might have said to me.

"Lookin' for a little hair of the dog?"

Gunner's voice comes from the back door as I sort through Mom's kitchen cabinets.

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"Looking for what the hell happened to the fucking coffee mugs, jackass."

"Ma moved 'em over to the hutch in the dining room when she got one of them fancy coffee machine that takes those little cups...you'd have known that if you'd been back at all."

While I wait on the coffee maker to deliver a cup of steaming, hot, wakefulness, my brother takes advantage of the chance he's been waiting for.

"I suppose you'll be heading back to the big city in a day or two, now that you feel you've cleared your obligations to Dad?"

"Dammit, Gunner. You know I promised Dad I'd get involved in operations at the Delta O again."

"And you did! You've been phoning in the H.R. shit since the old man got too sick to handle the hiring and firing on his own. You seem to think you can do your part from two thousand miles away, so I expect that's how you'll keep doing it."

I'd like to say I'm too hung over for Gunner's shit right now, but it's not the pounding headache that's got my temper cut shorter than usual.

The house is empty, except for the man harassing me from the back door of the kitchen. I want Gunner to go back out on the ranch and stop picking fights with me about taking up my share of the ranching operations, and I want to know where Seri is.

"I'll be back in Slow River before the end of the quarter, Gunner." I grumble between gulps of black coffee as I check each of the rooms in the house for signs of Seri. "And I'd think you'd be happier with my hiring practices, seein' as how you shacked up with the last employee I hired."

"For the record, I'll be marrying her soon as we settle on the details. That don't mean we need you back here getting in the way of how we do things now days. Delta O's been runnin' just fine without you, we'll keep running just fine without you...what the hell are you lookin' for, Ranger?"

"Look, I'm sorry I left things the way I did, but you remember how it was. Bernie was acting crazy and Dad and I weren't seeing eye to eye. I had an offer in Houston and I took it.

"I'm not looking to take management back from you, Gunner, but I promised Dad I'd come back and I'm coming back."

I set the mug on the counter by the sink and shoulder past my brother.

Mom's SUV isn't parked in the driveway and she rarely pulls it into the garage--unless that's something else she's changed since I've been gone.

"Where the hell is Seri?"

I turn back to Gunner, yelling a might louder than I mean to.

"That young thing you've been making a fool of yourself over since you landed back in the valley? What'd you do? Hire her back in the city to come out and play pretend with you so you wouldn't have to face Ma's match-making?"

I'm standing too close to Gunner when he starts trash-talking Serenity and he knows

it as soon my fist connects with his face.

"Keep Seri's name out of your mouth unless you can do it with respect. Got me?"

"Whoa...uh..." Archer's shocked voice might be enough to keep Gunner and I from getting into a full-on brawl, but it's not enough to stop us fighting.

"Only because I like the girl, Ranger. Any respect I show her's got nothing to do with you. Nobody believes she's your girl except for Ma and you know you're going to break her heart when you finally fess up."

Our younger brother clears his throat, no doubt nervous that he's stumbled into a disagreement that might require him to choose sides.

"One word of that to a single soul and I'll do more'n just kick your ass, Gunner."

Lunging at him, I raise my fist to make my point.

Gunner scoffs and spits on the ground before turning on his heel and heading back out to the barns.

"You seen Seri?" I turn my frustration on Archer.

"Mom took her to town. Maybe an hour or so ago."

Damn. I wanted Mom to like Seri, not adopt her. Gunner could have a point about breaking Ma's heart once she finds out Seri won't be joining the family. Then again, if I have things my way, maybe Ma's gets her happy ever after, and my brother can eat crow.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath as I dust off my hat and head out to the ranch.

"Hey, hold up," my younger brother hails me as he jogs to catch up. "Is that true? What Gunner was saying? About you and Seri not being for real?"

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My steps falter.

Thing is, there's a difference in my mind between tellin' a tale and outright lying and I feel like Archer Dean's direct question puts my toes right up against that line.

"You know how Mom is with her trying to get me and Bern together, man." I stop, run my hand through my hair while I hold my hat in one hand. I put the hat back in place and sigh as I look Archer in the eye. "With Dad's service, and me making arrangements to move back here and all--" I look out toward the barns with a scowl. "I needed some way to keep her from pushing so hard to decide my life for me. Without hurting her feelings. You know?"

Archer considers what I've told him seriously and gives me a nod.

"Is it working?" He asks after a long pause stretches between us.

"I mean," Archer shuffles nervously. "You know how Mom gets, and with Dad gone, now-- I get that she's lonely and none of us have married up and she doesn't have grandkids to keep her busy but..."

My brother shoves his hands in his pockets and kicks at the dirt, then gives me a shrug and half a smirk.

"Ever since Gun and Clem got together, it's like Mom's on a mission to get the rest of us hitched too. And you know I can't be with Cal."

My eyebrows shoot up before I have the mind to keep my reaction under control.



"Mom's pushing Callie at you?" I ask, picking up my pace again. "Damn, man, and I thought I had it bad with her expecting me to settle down with Bernie."

8

## SERENITY

"Honestly, I can't believe my boy didn't tell you to pack a few pairs of jeans."

Kim O'Leary fusses as she hands me another pair of blue jeans and a couple of simple tops.

"These should fit, based on that last pair."

Another stack of clothing gets passed over the door of the changing room where I already have several outfits hanging on hooks, waiting to be tried on.

Ranger's mom insisted we go shopping as soon as she saw me walk into the kitchen this morning in another skirt.

"Thanks, Kim," I say-- again-- taking the new bundle of decidedlycountry chicclothes from her waiting hands, "but honestly, I don't really have jeans."

Kim tsks outside the door.

"She really did a number on him."

I hear the words plainly even though they are definitely not meant for my ears.

"Who?" I don't think before I ask through a layer of cotton t-shirt as I pull it over my curves.

"Oh, sorry. I was just saying that Bernie really did a number on Ranger. Makes sense why he'd have found himself a girl who's so opposite of the one he left behind, you know?"

Shimmying a pair of stretchy jeans over my hips, I arrange the tags hanging off so they aren't poking me in the stomach and frown at my reflection in the full-length mirror.

For the record, the woman in this mirror doesn't look nearly as gullible as the one in the bathroom mirror last night. This woman looks like she's finally putting together the pieces of the puzzle that maybe she hasn't wanted to look at.

"Um, not really, no. Ranger hasn't talked much about Bernie." I go for casually curious, trying to coax more information out of Kimberly.

"How does that last pair fit? Come out and let me see."

I unlatch the door and let Kim assess the way the skin tight denim hugs my curvy body, feeling increasingly self-conscious as a variety of expressions cross her features.

"Okay, try the shorts. I'll find a more flattering blouse to go with those jeans."

Back behind the closed door of the changing room I run my hand down the front of the t-shirt, trying to smooth not just the places where the fabric bunches at the seams, but also the places where my body bunches as well.

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It's hard not to think that the shirt would flatter Bernadine's curves just fine.

A soft, flannel in a feminine plaid appears over the door.

"That one's going to look fabulous on you, I just know it." Kim's voice sounds genuinely excited on the other side of the door. "What about boots? I noticed you did, at least, bring some flats with you, but everything I've seen you in so far is way too dressy for the ranch."

"Uh, no. I don't really have any use for boots back home." I half laugh at the thought, wishing I did have an excuse to own a pair of the pretty cowboy boots I saw lining the shelves when we walked into the store.

"We'll find you a pair to go with those skinny jeans once you're done trying on the clothes."

"So, what were you saying about Bernie and Ranger?" I button the shorts and stare at myself in the mirror.

"Oh, well..." Kim clucks her tongue like she's thinking how to word her response, then stalls by insisting I show her the shorts.

"Wow! Would you just look at that," she mutters to herself as she touches my shoulder to make me complete a twirl in front of her. "Definitely getting that outfit. I knew that blouse would look great on you."

The blouse does look good, it's a button down and the flannel has some stretch to it

that makes my cleavage look amazing.

"Well, you know they grew up together. Bernadine's parents never seemed to be home and Ranger sort of adopted her. The girl practically lived at the ranch till the kids were nearly out of high school."

She tsks to herself again, then lists off all the clothes she tells me to keep before going on.

"I think she about broke Ranger's heart when she started seeing Wyatt."

"Wyatt?"

"Mmm, but he signed up for the Navy right outta high school-- wanted to go fly helicopters like his daddy. "

"Oh. So did Ranger and Bernie get back together?"

Kim looks at me like I'm not following the script.

"What size do you wear?" She gestures at the shelves of boots.

"Eight and half or nine, depending on the style," I answer, running my finger over the decorative stitching on a pair of black boots.

Kim gestures me into a chair and starts bringing me boxes.

"No, honey. Bernie married Brett Cranson just a few months after Wyatt left for boot camp. Of course, their first little one came along only seven months later, so we all saw the writing on the wall plain as day."

The first pair of boots pinches my toes. I really want the second pair to fit, but, of course, my calves are too wide for them. Kim scrunches up her nose in disappointment and returns with another style.

"I didn't know Bernie was married," I grunt as I yank the cowboy boots over my heel by the looped straps at the top.

"Oh not anymore," Kim goes on, "that lasted about ten years. That's when she took back up with Ranger but..." her voice trails off in the memory. "Oh, those are darling. How do they fit?"

The boots are a supple leather with a dark stain that has a weathered effect at the seams. They're comfortable and I like the way they look.

"Good, we'll get those, and let's find you a good pair of muck boots for tromping around the ranch. I know you said you're only here for the week, but if Ranger's going to be moving home..." she looks at me with a furrowed brow and I hear what she isn't saying. "Well, just in case you need them, it'll be good to have a pair here."

Just in case.

Because Kimberly expects Ranger and Bernie to get back together now that he's going to be moving back to Slow River Valley. I'm just a place holder, a temporary solution to a problem that'll get solved soon, and it's obvious that I don't actually belong here.

Not in Slow River. Not on the Delta O. Not in Ranger's life.

"So what happened?" I ask quietly, as Kimberly packs the boots back into their box while I gather up the pile of ranch-appropriate clothing I won't need past the weekend. "With Bernie and Ranger. Why did he leave Slow River?"

Kim adds a pair of tall, rubberized boots to the pile.

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"I've never gotten all the details. Ranger and his father were having trouble agreeing on the ranch operations about that time. Ranger had been spending a lot of time with Bernadine and her kids, but then Brett came back and wanted to give their marriage another try. Bernie made it clear she and Ranger were together, but in the end, she agreed to give the marriage a shot. Ranger left the day she told him. I think it broke his heart."

I try to hide the emotions tearing through me by mentally tallying the cost of what nearly equates to a new wardrobe as I follow Kimberly to the registers.

"Oh! We should get you a hat!" Kim exclaims, veering right at the last moment to make a beeline for an entire wall of cowboy hats.

The stack of jeans, blouses, and boots in my arms is already going to set me back a month, but it's obvious that Kimberly is enjoying playing cowgirl make-over with me and I silently justify the expense by reassuring myself that I'll have use for these clothes with all the other small towns I'll be visiting once I get the field researcher position.

Which is the reason I'm really in Slow River Valley, and the real reason I'm playing pretend girlfriend with Ranger O'Leary-- who just needed a fake girlfriend to take to his father's memorial service and now I know he just wanted to save face in front of the woman who jilted him-- twice.

I'm going to max out my credit card on cute, country girl vibes clothes, spend the rest of my week interviewing the locals, then I'm going home and Ranger and Bernie can work out their second chance romance and live happily ever after while I...something.

I'm still in a daze when Kimberly swats at my hand, insisting that I put my card away and let her pay for the shopping spree.

"It's only fair, I'm the one who dragged you out shopping after all." She taps her card against the terminal while a cute, teenage girl with her hair in pig tails bags my things. "And, like you said, you don't really have any use for all these things back home. I just couldn't resist, everything looked so cute on you."

Kimberly O'Leary is sweet. She's been talking non-stop since she ushered me into the big, SUV as soon as I'd finished my first cup of coffee.

Under different circumstances, I think she'd be the kind of mother-in-law I'd feel comfortable calling "mom." She's been kind, generous, and welcoming. By the time we return to the ranch, she's happily told me the entire history of the Delta O, her family and the O'Leary history in Slow River, and shared her personal sadness of losing her husband and her frustrations with four grown sons who haven't given her any grandchildren yet.

But she's also given me all the information I need to know that whatever chemistry Ranger and I might have-- chemistry isn't enough to compete with personal history if you hope to land a Slow River Valley rancher.

Ranger

It's near supper time when I see Mom's car parked back up at the house.

Glad to get out of Gunner's hair down here at the office, I let the men know I'm calling it a day.

Gun grumbles as I go but it's an improvement over the cussin' he's been doing every other time I've stepped foot on the working side of the property, so I figure things are



going well enough between us.

The person I need to touch base with is up at the house after being trapped with my mother all day, listening to God knows what stories about me.

"Heard Ma took you to town?"

I lean on the door jamb of the guest room and grin at the sight of my girl trying to fit a stack of denim into her already-stuffed suitcase.

Seri nods without saying anything.

"She take you to the big ranch shop and make you try on everything in the store?"

To this, I get a chuckle.

"Pretty much, yeah," she answers softly without looking up at me.

"You girls get dinner while you were gone? If you're hungry, we could go grab something to eat." I want to go to her, grab her up in my arms and kiss her, but the way Seri's acting, I get the feeling that maybe I'm the only one that expected last night to change where we stand.

"Oh. Actually, I called for a ride up to the Walking Y. I'm going to stay with Singer for a few days so I can get the ranch history from her before I head back."

Suddenly, it dawns on me that I'm not just watching Seri put away the new duds Mom talked her into, she's packing up to leave. And I don't have a clue why.

"Seri?" I move farther into the room, closing the door behind me for some privacy.

"Is there some reason you don't want to stay here anymore? Did last night..."

"Last night didn't happen, Ranger."

"I admit to not remembering much of anything past getting through those stockings of yours, but don't tell me it didn't happen just because you want to forget it did."

Serenity latches her suit case and hoists it off the bed and onto the floor.

"No, Ranger, it didn't happen." She huffs indignantly as she rolls the case toward the door despite my attempt to block her way. "You passed out while I was in the bathroom, so nothing happened."

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"I woke up buck nekked on the floor, Seri. We were both drinking, you sure...?"

She holds a hand up to stop me.

"I'm sure. Nothing happened."

She does not sound pleased about that and, to be honest, I'm a might disappointed myself. Even if I am relieved to know I didn't miss anything.

"Damn shame about that," I mutter, giving her my best shit-eatin' grin. "I'd be happy to make it up to you now that we're both sober."

"I think it's for the best this way, Ranger." Serenity opens the door and heads out toward the front of the house, rolling her suitcase faster than I can catch up and take it from her.

"Could you tell your mom and brothers I said goodbye?" Serenity asks, turning back to face me as she makes her way down the front walk toward Joe's taxi waiting on her in the circle drive out front. "I don't have time to round everyone up for one last hug but I really enjoyed meeting your family and, thank you-- for introducing me around and... stuff."

Joe gets out of the cab and puts Seri's things in the back of the little minivan he uses to haul people to and from where ever they're willing to pay him to go in the valley.

Serenity rushes up to me and pulls me into a quick hug; nothing like the intimate embraces we were sharing last night and not a damn bit like the way I want touches

between us to be.

I'm so confused by the way she's actin', I just stand there like a stunned ox while she climbs into the back of Joe's cab and shuts the door between us.

"I hope things work out for you and Bern." Seri's voice comes out tiny through the window that she rolls down as the cab's tires start rolling."

Joe doesn't waste time pullin' out of the drive, even when I snap out of my stupor and chase down the car, waving at him like a maniac to hold up and wait.

Bern and me? Work out? What the mother of all hell is she talking about?

A sick feeling courses through my gut, thinking about how far today's ending from where we left off last night, and the only thing between those two points has been--

"Ma!"

Turning on my heel, I race back to the house.

"Mom!"

I find my chief suspect nonchalantly folding laundry out in the utility room.

"Oh! Hi, honey." Mom smiles up at me as I stalk into the small room, not even pausing her methodical motions as she transforms a heap of towels into a neat stack.

"I had such a nice time with Serenity today. Have you taken her up to--"

"Ma, what the hell did you tell her about Bernadine and me?"

Mom's eyes widen; I can't recall ever speaking to her in such a rough tone before and

the shocked look on her face has me feeling bad for it now.

"I-- uh," I watch Ma's throat work in a hard swallow, which tells me she's caught on to the fact that whatever she told Seri has caused trouble for me. "I was just tellin' her about how hard you crushed on Bernie growing up is all. How you two used to run around together till she up and dumped you for Wyatt."

Between clenched jaws, I glare down at the woman who raised me reminding myself that she loves me. She's been through hell over the last few years and her meddlin' is done outof love; but damned if it's not the reason I've been staying away all these years.

Ma puts the laundry aside, dropping a towel in mid-fold so it falls on the counter in front of her in a heap. With her fists planted on her hips she glares right back at me and gives me the look that used to send my brothers and me scurrying to get chores and homework done when she'd had enough of our horsin' around.

"Don't give me that look Ranger O'Leary, that sweet thing is head over heels for you and she deserves to know if there's some reason she shouldn't be looking to a future with you. I thought you'd have already mentioned your history with Bernie to the girl, but apparently Bernie and I weren't the only ones you blindsided showing up with a woman on your arm without mentioning a word of being involved with someone.

"The fact that you didn't tell her about Bernadine tells me I was smart to warn Seri off of getting her hopes up about the two of you. You'd have broken that girl's heart when you left her."

"Thereisno history between me and Bern, Mom."

I've been trying to convince her-- and half of Slow River Valley-- for years, but the truth of the matter has always been that yes, Bernie and I came up together and we

were close as friends even after she fell for Wyatt Patterson. It was that bullshit she pulled when her marriage was bustin' apart that crossed the line and sent me packing.

"We were friends. Bernie's like a sister, I never saw her any other way."

"Well, I know you stayed closed even when she was running with the Patterson boy." Ma resumes her folding and, for lack of anything better to do with myself, I grab a towel off the pile and start helping.

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"But when she and Brett split up... Well, everyone in town saw you go home together, Ranger. Penny McDaniels said you spent more than one night at Bernie's place. And you never denied it when Bernadine was telling the whole town you two were together."

"I told you and Dad we weren't," I remind her. "Gunner and Archer Dean knew. Bernie was going through a bad time, I wasn't about to humiliate her by calling her out, but I expected people knew me better than to think I'd be the cause of breakin' up a marriage."

"Hell, even Brett eventually came to understand that was just more of Bernie's drama."

I never was good at folding laundry. My stack isn't up to Mom's standards and she's refolding each towel I do as soon as I set it down.

We work in silence for the space of half a dozen kitchen towels. Hopefully, Mom's finally processing what I've been trying to tell her for a decade; she always believed the local rumor mill over my protests when it came to that fiasco.

Thought Bernadine had broken my heart by denying me my second chance at her when she and her husband decided to give it one more try.

Truth was, Bernie and I'd been seen drinking together down at O'Hare's. She'd been pouring her heart to me and I thought I was being a good friend. We'd ended up sharing a ride back to her place-- where I crashed on the sofa. Woke up with a stiff neck that lasted two days. Her neighbor saw me leaving the next morning-- and then

Penny McDaniels watched the show unfold when Bernadine's then-estranged husband brought the kids back before I'd cleared out.

I was down to my skivvies because Bernie'd insisted on putting my clothes through the wash, since there'd been more than one spilled beer involved in our long night.

Things got heated, accusations were made, and Bernadine was all too happy to let Brett-- and the entire town-- believe we'd been having an affair.

Slow River's a small town, and my name gets attention when it's mentioned.

The story got out of hand, my reputation was being dragged through the mud in a place where a man's reputation still matters, and Bernie was too wrapped up in her own drama to give a fuck.

"You really think she's in love with me?"

Mom looks up from her side of the table, giving me a curious look.

"Bernadine?"

"Serenity."

A smile ghosts Mom's features before she looks back down at her folding.

"That girl would follow you through fire, Ranger. I like her. I don't want you to go breaking her heart."

"You think Bernie's in love with me?"

That question gets a terse noise as Ma sucks her teeth, setting the last of the wash



cloths on top of the neat pile of hand towels, and considers her answer.

"I think Bernadine is a sweet girl who's prone to histrionics. She's a good mother and a good person who's looking for love. If she was the one you wanted, I'd have stood by your choice."

"Not an answer, Ma."

Mom grabs up a stack of her folding and gives me a shrug, telling me she knows she dodged the question and isn't planning on changing her answer.

"The fair opens tonight, you know. You should take Seri. Give her a chance to wear her new things."

"Can't, Mom."

I hold the door of the laundry room open so she can make her way through but she comes up short and gives me a curious look.

"Why not?"

"She left."

Mom's expression turns to confusion.

"Left?"

"Yeah Mom. Somebody told her I was in love with Bernie." I heave a hard sigh and follow Mom into the hall.

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"You're going to go get her, right?"

Mom's voice hitches up an octave, sounding almost panicked as she stops dead in the hallway with her load of folded towels and linens and turns back to give me a pointed stare.

"What am I supposed to tell her?"

"Well, if you love her, you make sure she doesn't walk away thinkin' different, Ranger. If she brings up what I said about Bernadine, just tell her I was high."

Mom ends on that note, turns, and heads to put away the laundry, leaving me stuck in place trying to process her last comment.

Kimberly O'Leary might be a rough and tumble country girl, and I'm sure she's got stories that she's never shared with us boys, but "high" is not a thing I'd ever suspect her of being.

I think.

Scrubbing my hand down my face, I try to erase Mom's joke from my memory-- hope it's a joke-- and then my feet get moving.

Ma might have had her facts all screwed up about some things, but she's right about going after Seri-- I can't let her go without letting her know my real feelings.

## SERENITY

"I don't know about this." I laugh, in spite of the dull ache inside me. "I feel kind of silly."

"But you look hot."

Singer Kelly gives a low wolf whistle as she looks me over, a grin on her face as wide as the mountain ranges that cage in the Slow River Valley.

"Ranger's a moron, sweetie, let's go get you a real cowboy."

Singer swings the driver side door of her pick up closed with an emphatic thunk and beckons me to follow her.

I'm feeling self-conscious in the cut-off jean shorts that Kimberly had insisted on tossing in with our day's loot, but Singer convinced me that I should get some use out of them before I leave the valley, so here I am, traipsing through a massive dirt parking lot toward the lights and sounds of a genuine, small town, country fair even though my heart is feeling like it's been run through mud.

It didn't take long after I arrived at the Kelly family's Walking Y Ranch, rolling my suitcase behind me, for Singer to deduce that I hadn't asked about staying at the beautifully remodeled bed and breakfast for the sake of mere research into the family history.

As predicted when Ranger first introduced us, Singer makes an easy friend. One who immediately recognized a broken heart and is now determined to show me that there's more than one single cowboy in this valley.

Her mood is infectious, so I find myself grinning as I follow her into the fair where

Slow River is celebrating opening night with a live band playing classic country, all things deep fried and delicious, 4-H livestock up for auction, and the rodeo that Singer's eagerly dragging me toward.

She says I haven't met the Lazy P till I've seen them in action.

"You need a beer and a funnel cake," Singer informs me as we pass a concession stand that smells like fry oil.

"That sound awful," I laugh. "I want strawberries on mine."

The funnel cakes are good and go surprisingly well with the beer. Singer assures me that my first rodeo is a far cry from the big competitions, but watching the Pereira brothers ride into the arena on bulls intent on throwing them off is enough to convince me I could never be a rodeo cowboy's wife.

"Jasper's up next." Singer leans over and yells in my ear above the applause that breaks out in the stands around us. "He'll go all eight seconds here, but he's not a serious competitor like Beryl and Slate."

She's right. Jasper easily makes the buzzer and jumps free of the bull just as it goes into a spin.

"They make it look easy."

"Right up till they don't." Singer tips her plastic beer cup back and drains the last drop. "You met Beryl at the memorial, right? You should see the video of his last ride. He's still not sure when he'll be ready to get back on the circuit."

"Want another?" She holds up her empty and one eyebrow.

"I don't think so. I'm going to head for the bathroom."

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"Still not feeling better?"

I sigh and shake my head apologetically. Singer takes our plates and cups in one hand and pats my shoulder with her other.

"Sorry sweetie. I really thought he was into you, but at least you met me! I'll make sure you get to talk to everyone around town. We'll impress the snot out of your boss back east."

"Thanks," I tell her, doing my best to drop the sad vibe. "But I don't think the Ralstons are going to talk to me. I've left a few messages on their office number and haven't gotten a call back at all."

Something clouds Singer's eyes momentarily when I mention the Ralston name. "Yeah, they're...they kinda keep to themselves, you know? It's a small town; grudges get held for generations out here."

"It was your ranch, right? So your families are still feuding?"

Singer's mention of the history between her family and the Flying R Ranch jogs my memory. I make a mental note to get the Kelly side of the story, at least, when we have a better chance to talk. Right now, I've had about enough of the fair and just want to go back to my room at Singer's ranch.

"It's...complicated." Singer's eyes track something over my shoulder and, for the first time since I've known her, her sunshine demeanor slips. "My brothers haven't really let it go."

"Your brothers who don't even live in Slow River anymore?"

"Small town politics, I guess. Like I said; it's complicated." Singer's face lights up suddenly and I start to turn around to see who she sees behind me, but she quickly reminds me that I was headed to the ladies room.

"I'm just going to toss these real quick and I'll meet you back at the truck if you're really ready to go. Okay? Gimme like-- fifteen."

Then she's hopping over bleachers, like she's in a rush to get to a trash can.

When I get to the ladies room, I'm relieved to see there's not a line, but when I stop at the sinks to wash my hands, I find myself standing next to the one person in Slow River Valley that I was hoping never to see again.

"You're welcome, by the way."

The blonde beside me winks at me in the mirror as she pulls a tube of lipstick out of her cleavage and touches up her make up.

"I'm sorry, what I supposed to thank you for that?"

Bernie's reflection eyes me from the mirror, a fleeting expression crossing her face like she's actually clueless to why my voice might be carrying just the slightest smidge of hostility.

"Well yeah-- it was pretty obvious you two were dying for an excuse to kiss each other."

She leans in to wipe a smudge.

"I've known Ranger since we were finger paintin' together in kindergarten, sweetie. The man doesn't do PDA. He hasn't taken his hands off you the whole time you've been here, but he wasn't kissin' on you. Even though it was clear you wanted him to.

"I thought I'd help you out. We girls gotta stick together, you know."

The bitch winks at me again.

"You thought you were helping me out by getting me to kiss Ranger before you stole him back?"

I have never been in a fight. God knows, Bernie seems like the sort of woman who knows how to use those nails in self-defense, but I've got close to a hundred pounds on her, so I'm doing the math and thinking I've got a fair shot at kicking her ass.

Before I can plot my first move, however, she stands up straight and looks directly at me. Her eyes widen and a gasp comes out of her perfectly stained lips that sounds slightly horrified.

"I don't want your man!"

"You...don't? But Kim said..."

Bernie leans a hip against the edge of the sink and gives me a long look.

"Look, Ranger and I have history between us, but it's not that kind. I know what people around here think was going on with us and I know I'm mostly the reason they think it, but I told Kimberly plain as day that there was nothing between me and Ranger. Never was, never will be. I've got my own thing going on. I just was hoping maybe Ranger might be willing to talk to me if his mother put in a word for me.



"He hasn't talked to me since my drama ran him out of town ten years back. I was hoping he'd give me a chance to patch things up now that he's coming back to the valley."

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The woman in front of me sounds genuinely sad. I do wonder what the full story is, but it seems clear that it's not the one I've been told.

"Don't let him go, Seri," Bernie gives me a timid grin before reaching out to touch my shoulder gently. "I've known Ranger a long time and I've never seen him look at a woman the way he does you. If you want that man, I can promise you, he's yours."

Ranger

Singer's phone keeps going to voicemail, but I get a text back from Slate Pereira saying that the girls had stopped by the rodeo to wish them luck.

I get to the stands too late. The crowd's already dispersing and I'm swimming upstream, trying to get in while everyone else is trying to get out.

Rebel Ralston leans against one of the lighting poles and glowers at me as I push past him in time to pass Singer as she heads toward the trash can beside him.

"Singer!" I put a hand out to catch her before the current of people carry her past me. "Where's Seri? I need to talk to her."

"Who says she wants to talk to you back?"

"She doesn't have to, but I still have some things I need to say to her before she leaves. Are you gonna tell me where she went or do I have to come up to the Y and bust down your door?"

Singer rolls her eyes. "Depends, are you here to grovel? Or did you come down here so you do something stupid and make things worse?"

"I definitely don't want to make things worse."

With a nod of her head, Singer shakes loose of my hand, "Bathroom. Don't fuck up. I've got brothers, Ranger, I know where how to hurt you."

"Oh, Sing, you might want to head in that way," I point her toward a different exit, "Rebel's down thataway, figured you probably want to avoid running into him."

Anxiety washes over the girl's face as she casts a quick glance in the direction I saw the Ralston.

"Oh, yeah, thanks for the heads up."

There's been bad blood between the Ralstons and the Kellys for generations. I know it's been a long time since I was around, but Mom's kept me up-to-date on the local gossip. I know the Kelly boys are still not living around here, so Singer's got no kin in the area to back her up if the Ralstons decide to take up old grievances with her.

I'm still several paces from the ladies' room when I see a sight that turns my blood cold; Bernadine struts out from behind the cinderblock wall, all her usual big hair and low-cut top, she's grinning like a cheshire cat, chattin' it up with someone behind her. That someone comes into view a second behind Bernie and there's no room left in my head for rational thoughts.

If I thought Serenity was a knock-out in her sexy librarian outfits, I'm completely unprepared for the farmer's daughter look she's sporting tonight.

A feminine top stretches across those fabulous tits of hers, with a pair of Daisy Dukes

wrapped around her ass that have me stopped in my tracks and sputtering for breath.

Suddenly, I'm less concerned about seeing Bernie and Seri chatting like neighbors who've run into each other at the store than I am about knowing that my girl's been down at the fairgrounds on opening night dressed like a country goddess and thinking she's available.

"Seri!"

Damn. It's early August, the nights don't drop below seventy degrees till after midnight this time of year. I'm not even wearing an undershirt, so there's no option available to get those curves covered up and keep the hungry eyes of half of Slow River off her.

"Told ya." Bernie grabs Seri's hands and squeezes her fingers. The girls break their contact and Bernie walks past me, pausing just long enough to quietly say a few words; "I expect to be hearing from you, O'Leary. You can't avoid me forever."

"What'd you tell her, Bern?"

I nervously glance up at Seri and I'm more than a little relieved to see she hasn't taken the opportunity to run off.

"Calm down, Range, I just set her straight on us is all."

The growl coming from the back of my throat is a warning. "The last time you set anyone 'straight about us' you got the whole town thinking I was the reason your marriage was breaking up."

Bernadine winces. "I've been trying to clear that up with you for ten years." She glances over to where Serenity is waiting, looking nervous, with her plush lower lip

working between her teeth. "Maybe when you're finished convincing your fake girlfriend that you for-real love her, we can talk things through. It's been ten years, Range, a lot's different now."

I don't have time to wonder what she's talking about. Bernie walks off, pulling her phone from her back pocket like she's checking a message and I turn to face Serenity.

"You told her?"

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Seri's head shakes side to side, dark curls shimmying around her shoulders with the movement.

"She knew."

A small smile teases at her lips, like she's just trying it on for size.

"She said you never went for the public displays of affection with any of your girlfriends and the way you were already touching me gave you away."

"So she was just testin' us yesterday at the bar, I take it?"

Seri's smile widens. "She said we were looking for an excuse to do it. She thought she'd help us out."

"Sounds like Bernie, all right. The girl's always been one for drama, stirring up shit any chance she gets."

"She seems okay," Seri says, "in small doses."

Swiping the hat off my head, I run my hand up the back of my neck, making a damn mess of my hair.

"My mom buy you them shorts?"

Seri giggles and shimmies her hips side to side in a motion that temporarily has me forgetting about the groveling part of the conversation and dead set on the tossing my

girl over my shoulder and getting her into the nearest bed part.

"It's like she set out torture me," I grumble under my breath. "Ma's feeling pretty bad about steering you wrong, you know. I set her straight as soon as I knew what she told you. Me and Bernadine were never--"

"I know." Serenity answers quick, cutting me off and taking a tentative step in my direction. "She told me."

"Before I left Slow River, she was going through some stuff with her husband-- rumors got spread, she used them to her advantage. It put a pretty big wedge between me and her. Dad and I were already having differences of opinion on how to run things at the ranch. I had an offer to do dairy nutrition in the corporate sector down in Houston; I took it. Haven't been keen on coming back since.

"Bern's tried to chase me down a few times. Mom started hintin' around that Bernie was single when her divorce was final and... I'd been stressing coming back here."

Serenity shuffles her feet; the clipped toe boots scuffling in the dirt.

"I get it," she says in a small voice, "and you thought it'd make things easier if you could show up with a girlfriend. Just someone you could put between you and that drama while you dealt with your dad's service and working out things with your brothers about the ranch."

"So it makes sense to you?"

Seri shrugs, nonchalantly, like she's taking this all in stride and none of it is burning her inside like it is me.

"I may not have understood what the problem was, but I knew I was only a temporary

solution to it when I agreed to your craziness." This time she laughs, a thin sound but painfully genuine. "I admit I was really excited about getting the inside track on the local history, but it was also really flattering-- the idea that you'd be willing to have people think we were connected that way. I mean...especially when I saw Bernie. I'd never be able to compete with that, you know?"

My eyes drag up her body, from the bared flesh of her thighs, over the ample swell of her hips, the full breasts straining at the buttons of the gauzy, floral blouse, all the way to the heart-shaped face with those hypnotic, aqua blue eyes.

She's right about that last bit-- there's absolutely no competition. Not against Bernadine, or any other female in this valley. Or anywhere at all, for that matter. Serenity wins, hands down, on all counts.

"Baby, if you think I'm the better half of this bargain, we need to get you in front of a mirror. I was gone for you the minute you sat down in that airport chair across from me." I can't help but draw a sharp breath at the memory of my first sight of her. "With your clothes all rumpled and your hair a mess, looking like you'd just gotten done with a good, hard, going-away fuck.

"I was sure you had some rich boyfriend with a corner office in one of those downtown city sky-rises who was going to miss you something fierce. Couldn't believe my luck when you turned out to be up for grabs."

This time when she laughs, it's more of a self-conscious giggle; a sound that goes through me and tugs at my dick.

"Definitely never had a going-away fuck," she tells me, dipping her head downward while a blush creeps into her face. With a nervous cough, she clears her throat and confesses, "I've never actually had any kind of...fuck."



If the fair is still going on around us, I've lost track. I can't hear the exhilarated screams from the midway, I can't see the flashing lights from the carnival rides, or smell the fried dough scents and roasting meats and vegetables from the open pit bar-b-ques in the concessions.

There's just Seri and me, and her words have thrown me for a loop while my brain was already spinning.

"Never any kind of...but last night when we were...you were full on..." My hat's in my hand while I scrub at the back of my neck again, trying to make sense of everything I know about the saucy little city girl that's got me all caught up in ideas about diamond rings and floor plans for the house I'll be building alongside my brothers out on the ranch.

"You kinda passed out before I had a chance to bring it up."

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"Probably for the best." With my hat back where it belongs, I step up and run my hands down her arms. The night air's plenty warm, so I know the shiver that I feel move through her is from my touch and that's got me hungry to see just how badly I can get her shaking.

"That's something I want to be sober for."

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### SERENITY

We weren't able to find Singer at the fair to let her know I was leaving with Ranger, but she responded to my text message with a heart emoji.

"No, I'm in one of the little houses out back." I point toward the row of small buildings that line up against a fence pasture behind the main house that Ranger's steers for as we make our way up the long, private road to the Kelly family Walking Y Ranch.

"She got the guest houses put in," Ranger muses more to himself than to me. "Nice to see the place is turning a profit finally."

I point at the first of the little cottages, the one with the porch light glowing an inviting, warm yellow in against the backdrop of stars and the mountains in the background.

Out in the pasture, there are still a few light-colored shapes where a few of Singer's

Pygora goats have opted to stay out in the warm, summer night.

"Come check it out while I pack up." My hand brushes his as I slide out of the passenger side door of the truck he borrowed from the ranch's fleet.

Since Singer's brothers left Slow River in search of better opportunities than the run-down, bankrupt ranch their parents had left to be split between the kids when they passed away a few years ago, Singer's managed to convert it to a thriving bed and breakfast and traded out the failing cattle operation for prize-winning goats that she raises for the fleece.

The barn-style shed-turned-cabin that she put me up in when I asked if she had space for me to stay, is one of five new free-standing cabins that she's recently added, thanks to finally getting the ranch out of bankruptcy and showing its fifth year of running in the black.

From Ranger's surprise at seeing the additions, I thought he might be interested in poking around while I pack up. I'm not sure what the plan is from here, I just know we'll be figuring it out together.

The door of the cabin shuts as he walks in behind me and I hear an audible click from the lock being engaged. Then the clatter of blinds being pulled shut before Ranger's hands are grasping me by the waist and pulling me around to face him when he joins me in the small bedroom at the back of the cabin.

"I have to get you out of this outfit, before I lose my damn mind, baby."

He murmurs the words against the side of my face, nibbling at my ear while his hands slide under my blouse.

"Those tight little skirts you're always wearing get my mind racing, but seeing your

sexy little body all wrapped up in these shorts has me in a helluva state."

His lips seer mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth and stealing any words I was about to put together while his handtakes mine and places it over the very hard bulge throbbing behind the zipper of his jeans.

I feel myself backing toward the king size bed that takes up the majority of the small bedroom's real estate and I can't tell if Ranger's guiding me, or if I'm pulling him along.

Once I land on the thick mattress with the soft quilt cover though, it hardly matters anymore.

Ranger stops short of crawling over me, grabbing up one of my feet and kissing along the inside of my knee before tugging at the new boots Kim insisted on adding to our shopping spree earlier today.

Was that just today?

Ranger pulls my other boot off, adds more kisses to the foot he just freed and laughs.

"I remember now--" his voice is a husky whisper as he hits his knees at the edge of the bed and pulls me to him with his hands wrapped under my thighs. "You went to do whatever ladies do when they sneak off to the bathroom right before getting their pussies licked and I was in such a damn hurry to get inside you, I was pullin' my clothes off like an impatient teenager. Got tangled up in a boot that didn't wanna come off and gave up. Must have worn myself out."

"You downed a lot of shots at the bar," I remind him, wiggling my hips to help him relieve me of the denim shorts he claims are so distracting.

"Not enough to keep me from spending the entire damn night hard as a fucking rod with you in my lap like that. Guess I owe Bernie a thank you if she's the reason for you kissing on me like you did."

Somehow, he's managed to rid me of everything but the cotton undies I opted for when I got dressed for the fair.

The light is on in the front room of the cabin, but I hadn't turned the bedroom light on before Ranger came in. Now I'm grateful for the soft light that makes me feel less self-conscious with a hot-as-sin cowboy between my thighs.

"Baby..." Ranger's voice is low and reverent as he drags his lips along the inside of my thigh, breathing deep when his nose reaches the damp center of the plain, white cotton thong before pulling the elastic down my legs and returning to nestle in the space he just exposed. "...you're as fucking wet as I am hard, Seri..."

If I was feeling self-conscious about having my most private of places opened up to him like this, Ranger manages to drive away those insecure feelings with the guttural sound of the groan he lets out as he drags the tip of his tongue through the seam of my sex.

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Also, it feels so good, that my mind goes blank to everything but the sensation of what he's doing to me.

It's not the first time I've had a guy do this, but that was back in college when I thought I was a freak for still being a virgin and I was out to just get it over with.

My roommate had set me up on a date with a "friend" of hers and I'd gone along with my plan through a lackluster evening of forced conversation. After dinner, we'd fumbled in the back of his SUV and he'd made a couple of half-hearted licks between my legs before tearing open a condom wrapper.

I'd quickly dodged his next move and told him I'd changed my mind.

Since then, dating hasn't been a high priority for me, and I've long since made peace with being a virgin for as long as it took till I felt motivated to change that.

I. Am. Motivated.

Never been so motivated to do something in my life.

Ranger's movements are far from the "impatient teenager" he said he felt like last night. His tongue is hot and agile as it explores between my folds and flicks over my sensitive clit, testing to see what reactions each stroke earns him.

My hands can't decide where to be; gripping the pillow above my head, pressed over my mouth to stifle the lurid sounds I hear myself making, twisting my fingers into Ranger's hair while I beg him to bring me closer to satisfying the need building inside

me.

A blunt fingertip traces a path behind his tongue, then slides easily inside my as he seals his mouth over my bud.

My hips buck against his face, my fingers choosing their grip in his hair as the place they need to stay. I lift my heels to rest on his shoulders before my feet slip down his back and my thighs lock against his ears when a second finger slips into me.

It's too much. I feel my pussy being stretched farther than my own fingers have ever come close to.

Combined with what he's doing to my clit with that wicked mouth, it's more than I can take. The pressure that's been building collapses in on itself and breaks, sending shockwaves that have me clenching muscles I didn't know I had.

Ranger

Feelin'Serenity's tight pussy clamp down on my fingers while she screams for me has my dick leaking in anticipation.

This time, getting my boots off is a feat accomplished quickly and with little need to take my attention off the far more appealing task of tonguing Seri's sweet cream from her thighs as she whimpers and shudders her way down from her climax.

I take my time joining her on the bed; kissing, licking, stroking my way up her body, sliding my rough hands across her smooth skin and marveling at the difference between us.

"Goddamn, baby, you're beautiful when you're coming on my tongue."

Serenity's nipples glisten from my suckling and her chest is heaving from the start of her deep panting again by the time I work my way all the way back to her mouth.

She's shy with the kiss at first and it's a second or two before I realize she tastes herself on my tongue and is deciding whether or not she likes it, but it's not long before she opens for me and twists her tongue around mine.

I love the way her hands move over my body, pulling at my t-shirt till its off and then sliding across my skin like she's memorizing the feel of every dip and plane of my shoulders, my chest, then her fingers tickle as they trail down my stomach where they pop the top button of my jeans and slide beneath the zipper.

"Fuck." Having Seri's hand on me has me seeing stars. My breath hitches, and my heart pounds in my ears. The last thing I want to do is stop her here but--

My hand covers hers, pressing her palm against the aching ridge of my cock and holding it still while I try to catch my breath.

"Baby," I rasp, my forehead to hers as I brace my weight above her on my other arm. "Hang on a minute. You've already got me out of my mind with need for you--" I squeeze her hand around my hardness to make my point. "-- but we're about to get past the point of no return and I need to know you understand what I've been tellin' ya."

Seri's eyes rise up to meet mine; their crystalline turquoise dark from dilated pupils all blown out from her arousal, her lips plump and swollen from kisses and parted slightly in an expression that has me thinking I should put us both out of our misery, fill her up and make her mine forever without bothering to say what needs to be said first.

"Back at the fairgrounds." Seri licks her lips and nods under me, her fingers



beginning their agonizing move against me again, slipping under the elastic of my briefs and gingerly teasing at the precum leaking from the swollen tip of my cock.

The growl she gets from me is all impatient need and struggle to stay in control.

"I don't just want you to come back to the ranch with me for the rest of the week, I want you to stay on the ranch with me. Forever, Serenity. You can do your historical research from Slow River, but I want you to be doing it as my wife."

"Range--"

I cut her off with a kiss. Praying she's not about to shoot me down. If she tells me she's not on the same page I am, I don't know if I can take it. Especially not with her hands working their way along my shaft like they are.

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Hell, I'm a man obsessed; I'd probably follow her all the way back to Baltimore if she asked me to.

"Can we talk about this later?" Seri whispers hoarsely, tipping her hips up to press her naked mound up against me in a silent gesture, reminding me she needs me as bad as I'm needing her.

"We will, but I need to tell you now; once I have you, you're mine forever, Serenity. This is for keeps. So, if you're on the fence about a future with me here in the Valley, you need to make that known right now."

"I'm not on the fence. I want to stay here in Slow River. I want to stay with you."

I'm not playing fair, I've let go of Seri's hand and moved to slip my fingers back into the wetness that's waiting impatiently for me to claim it properly.

"I can work from anywhere." Her voice is all breathless need as her hips twist beneath me, eager for more than the soft strokes I'm giving her.

"You can work from my bed." I groan against her throat. "If you can work with me buried inside this tight little pussy."

Seri's hands are as busy as mine, freeing me of what's left of my clothes till it's just the two of us with our naked flesh burning against each other.

"Could you please do that now? I've never felt this--empty-- before, Ranger."

God help me. When Serenity's nails scrabble at my hips like that, her thick thighs caging me between them as she begs for me to fill her up, I don't have enough oxygen left in my brain to keep playing.

With the broad head of my dick already pushing against her slick opening, I'm fighting the urge to take her fast and hard, forcing myself to go slow.

"I mean it, Seri, I don't have a condom on me. I'm clean, and I'm guessing you are two since no one else has ever been here before me, but if this is the wrong time of the month to keep from getting you pregnant, we're just gonna have to deal with that sooner rather than later."

"I'm on the shot anyway. I trust you. Just...please fuck me."

Whatever control I was hanging onto snaps.

I groan on the feeling of Seri's tight channel parting to make way for my intrusion. Between us, there's enough natural lube to allow me easy entry, even when I feel the last resistance of her innocence give and allow me to slip inside her all the way till I'm bottomed out at the root of my dick.

It's me that needs the moment to adjust. She's so tight, and hot, and wet, around me with her curvy little body pressed so close I can feel her heartbeat against my chest. If I move right away, I'll come like a school boy without a chance to make sure my woman's first time is worth waiting for.

"Ranger?" Serenity's voice is barely audible with her lips brushing my ear.

I answer her by pulling back with my hips, letting my length drag slowly out of her and feeling the way her body grips at me to keep me inside her.

"Range..." This time my name gets lost on a moan.

I know that feeling. I'm lost in it myself. Then I'm thrusting forward again, desperate to bury myself back to the hilt in her warmth.

If I was worried about hurting her, Seri's choked moans let me know I don't have to worry about that. Her fingers slip over my sweaty skin, and when her hands can't get a grip, her nails sink in.

She's got a grip on my shoulders, her legs wrapped around my thighs as I speed my pace, doing my best not to get rougher than she can handle and learning that Seri isn't a fan of me going easy on her.

I can feel her orgasm building; Serenity's breaths become more labored, her hips pumping to meet my thrusts, and her interior walls fluttering around my cock in a series of tiny spasms.

I'm so damn eager to feel her next climax from inside her, I'm on the brink myself. Slipping one hand between us, I manage to slide the pad of my thumb where we're joined, stroking blindly till I find the spot I'm seeking-- the swollen little pearl that Seri's begging for friction against.

It's all she needs.

Watching Serenity come apart beneath me is life changing. I knew I'd be putting a ring on her finger and filling her with babies as soon as she lets me, but the way she cries out, her whole body caught in a hard shudder while her pussy clamps down on my dick like she needs it deeper than it already is; my own orgasm tears through me without warning.

I pump into her, fighting to move against the vice grip of her climax, emptying my

seed deep inside her and wishing it had a chance of taking root.

11

SERENITY

Ididn't expect my first time to feel that good.

*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 5:44 am*

In fact, I didn't know it would ever feel that good.

Ranger collapses beside me, breathing hard, and babbling about how good I feel, how much he loves me, and I giggle when he slips in a "good girl" completely unironically between kisses.

"I mean it about getting hitched, Serenity. You're the only woman I've ever even entertained that notion about, I'm not fool enough to let you get away now that I've found you."

His arms pull me tight to his chest where I curl against his heat and the masculine scent of him.

"I could be talked into it, I guess," I tease, tracing small designs along his bicep. "I've been looking for a chance to move out of the city anyway and I could be busy for years, recording all the history here in the valley."

"If it's history you want, I can take you up to Moonshine Ridge and introduce you to Mable Hart."

His words are mumbled against the top of my head, but not so bad I can't make them out.

"Where's that?"

"Up the mountain. Old gold rush boomtown. Mable's in her nineties now, but it was her great, great something grandfather that transformed the place from a mining camp

into an actual town. Her and her friends run a local history museum up there.

"Archer Dean's got a friend of a friend who's opening a brewery up there, last I heard."

"Sounds fun." I snuggle closer, even though the night is warm and Ranger is even warmer. I don't care. I've wanted to touch him since I first caught him staring at me-- not that I had any clue then that he was thinking the same thing.

"But, um, where are you planning to live now?" I wonder aloud. After all, I'm all for this crazy happy ever after plan of his, but much less crazy about doing it in Kim's guest room. Especially since I plan on doing a lot more of, well, Ranger.

"I have a lot on the property where we can build a house. Till then, we can stay in staff housing-- seeing as how the herdsman I just hired is shackled up with my brother now, one of the bigger houses is empty."

"Oh good..." A yawn interrupts my trailing thoughts. "Otherwise I'd have had to talk Singer into letting us stay here."

Ranger

A few days ago, I was sitting next to a beautiful woman on an airplane, worrying about the turns my life was about to take and begging a stranger to play make believe with me so I could stall long enough to figure out how I was going to get through them.

Tonight, that beautiful woman is falling asleep in my arms, no longer a stranger and there's nothing make believe about how much I'm looking forward to all the turns my life is about to take-- with her.

Tomorrow, we can start settling into the vacant house in staff housing. We'll call the family together to get everyone straight on my and Seri's relationship, and I'll have a proper meeting with Gunner and my other brothers about how we'll be handling the ranch from here on out.

At some point, I guess I need to hear Bernadine out-- but she's going to have to be good with having that conversation in front of Serenity. Maybe she doesn't have the ulterior motives I thought she did, but I'm not taking any chances of Seri feeling insecure.

My brain is still making plans when my eyes close for several hours. Right up until Serenity wakes me up just shy of dawn, with her needy little body begging for mine again.

Days later, after facing my brothers, and settling into the little house Seri and I will be sharing while we get our own built, I find myself pacing nervously across Mom's front lawn.

Serenity and Singer Kelly look to become close friends, and I'm glad to see how quick my woman has managed to fit into the scheme of things.

Small towns like Slow River Valley tend to be close knit and hard for outsiders to break into, but Seri's been an instant fit. Which is good, considering her interest in getting the locals to open up to her about their family histories-- and secrets.

Her boss back east was surprised to hear she was planning on staying out here, of course, but she agreed to keep Seri on payroll and let her work remote.

Sometime in the next few days, Seri and I will fly back and move her out of her place back there. Then we'll do the same for my life back in Houston.



Our lives are here in Slow River now-- together.

"Quit pacing, and come inside before you wear a rut in my lawn."

Mom hollers from the front porch.

She's been watching me pace since I beat Serenity back to the ranch-- Seri spent the day with Singer, up at the U&U talking to the Savages.

I spent my day deciding between round or princess cut. And now I'm worrying a path through Mom's grass, hoping I chose right.

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*Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 5:44 am*

As soon Singer's truck pulls up to the end of the walk in front of Mom's place I'm frozen in place, my fingers nervously fidgeting with the tiny box in my pocket while I wait for Seri to get out of the truck and come toward me.

"Ranger?"

I hate seeing the nervous look in those pretty eyes of hers, the way she glances back at her friend as Singer stands by the truck, waiting to see what's going on, then the look she shoots at the small crowd my family makes as they gather at the front door, already knowing what's up.

"Is everything okay?"

Truth be told, I'd come to the conclusion that I'd never find myself doing this. In a town where people tend to get married and start their families fresh out of school, I thought it wasn't in the cards for me.

I'm for damn sure wishing I hadn't told my whole family I'd planning on proposing properly at supper tonight because right now, I'm wishing Ma, all three of the boys, and Gunner's girl, Clem, weren't all staring at me from the house, waiting to see if I make a damn fool of myself and how.

"Ranger? You look--off. Why's everyone staring?" Serenity stops directly in front of me, and speaks low, like she's scared of the answers.

I clear my throat and let her take my hands.

"You gonna do it, or what? We got food going cold in here!" Lance calls out, snapping me out of my daze.

"Yeah, baby, everything's perfect," I promise, leaning in for a kiss. "Almost."

I hit my knee, digging the box out of my pocket as I do.

"Serenity--" I start but don't get far into my practiced speech before Singer squeals from where she's still waiting by the truck.

Then Seri's eyes are lit up like Christmas tree lights and she's already shaking her head yes.

"You gonna let me ask properly?"

"Okay, but yes! The answer's already yes, Ranger, you know it is."

"Serenity," I flip open the little box and slide the ring onto her finger. My entire audience has already gone into celebration mode but I'm determined to get the question out in its entirety.

"Seri, baby, will you marry me?" I rush the words out, getting back on my feet and speaking right into her ear when she throws her arms around my neck.

"Of course, I'll marry you, Ranger."

On some level, I'm aware of the noise around us; Mom askin' Singer to stay for supper, Gunner saying his proposal to Clem was better, Lance askin' if we can eat now, and Mom trying to sound casual when she asks Archer Dean if he's seen Callie lately-- but my fiancée is kissing me like she's got a fire to put out and the last thing I care about is going inside for baked chicken and zucchini when I could stand out here with Seri all night long.