



# A Cowboy for Christmas

**Author:** *Kelsey Hodge*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Austin

It's been fifteen years since I have been at the ranch. Everything is the same, except Colt. His eyes now hold hatred. I don't blame him. I never meant to hurt him but I did. Colt has no option but to work with me, even though it's tough. I need to show him that I care and the only way I can think of is by helping Colt with the Christmas Festival. Slowly barriers are broken, but the doubt is still there. Now, there is one last thing I must do, I just need to prove that I am home. That I belong here with him.

Colt

The moment he left, fifteen years ago, I hated him. He hurt me more than I thought possible and now he is back. I have no option but to work with him. I do everything to keep my distance but then he is helping with the Christmas Festival. Memories return. The walls I built to protect myself start to crumble. I need to risk my heart and hope that he wants to call this ranch home, with me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

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15 years ago

“We’re going to need to head back inside soon, they’re going to miss us,” I say over to Colt, but I don’t really want to go anywhere. I want to stay right here.

“No one is going to miss us. They know you’re with me. We’re fine.”

I haven’t had the guts to tell Colt that I’m leaving early. He thinks I’m here for another week. But in less than two hours, I’m going to be gone. This is our last chance, for a while, that we’re going to be able to spend any time together. Now is the time to tell him that I have loved our summer together. That what I’m feeling for him is more than just friends.

“Is there anything that you want to do over the next week before you leave?” Colt asks me.

Well, having my first kiss with you , is the first thought that comes to mind. But, I have no idea if that’s something that Colt even wants, and this is a friendship that I don’t want to destroy. It’s probably best for me not to say anything.

“No, not really,” are the words that come out of my mouth.

“We can go for a few more rides, if I get the time,” Colt answers, giving me a little smile.

“Yeah.” But even I can tell that it’s a lame reply.

Colt is one of the local boys my grandparents took on, to help with their ranch over the summer, with the idea to keep him on part time once school starts. The idea came about when my dad announced that we were going to have to move at the end of the summer. Dad had been offered a great job, one that he couldn't turn down. I had tried to argue that I could stay here, help with the ranch, but it had fallen on deaf ears. Mom and Dad believed that I would have more opportunities in a bigger city.

"You ready for school yet?" Colt asks, as he makes his way over to one of the horses in the stalls.

"Not really." Which is an honest answer. I have no idea what my new school is like, and I hate the fact that I'm going to be the new boy on campus. My only hope is that the school has a good football team.

"Really? You're normally really excited to get back to school, and the team."

"Yeah, it's just, you know..." and I shrug my shoulders.

"I know I'm not looking forward to it. School is just so boring. I love it here. Being on the ranch," Colt replies.

"I know. The animals love you. Gran and Pops love you, too."

"Your grandparents are lovely. So different compared to mine." And I can hear the hint of sadness in his voice. I've met Colt's grandparents once, and they were extremely strict. He had to be home by a certain time, and at fifteen, I even think he had a bedtime. Considering Colt and I went to school together, I don't know much about his past, other than his parents died in a car accident a few years ago, and he had been living with his grandparents ever since.

"They love you," I say over to him.

“I know, but it’s just, they don’t understand me. Don’t know me. I think they want me to become a doctor, or a lawyer, or something. But, that’s not me, and...” Colt trails off and looks over to me like there is something else he wants to say.

“They want you to be happy. But it’s been a long time since they’ve had to look after a teenager,” I say, hoping to make him feel better, but knowing that’s not going to work.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Colt says, turning back to face the horse.

“Are you asking me or the horse?” I say, walking over to join him.

“Both,” Colt replies, looking at me, and smiling. I swear it makes my heart skip a beat.

Rubbing the front of the horse's nose, I look back over to Colt, and give him a smile, hoping that it will encourage him to talk.

“I think I like boys,” Colt whispers, and if I hadn’t been standing next to him, I might have missed it.

“Boys,” I repeat.

“Please don’t say anything,” Colt says, rushed, and suddenly panicked.

“I won’t,” I confirm, “but why do you only ‘think’ you like boys?”

“I don’t know,” Colt replies, and I know he’s lying. I’m not going to push him, but I might be able to help him confirm it, and grant my wish, too.

Taking that small step closer to Colt, I watch as he pauses, and stares at me. Before

he has a chance to question what I'm doing, I lean forward and connect my lips with his. They're firm and rough against my own.

"That help?" I ask, stepping back.

"You kissed me," Colt mutters, the shock in his eyes clear as day.

"I did."

"But..." Colt adds, and I can't help but smile at him. Seeing Colt lost for words is a fun sight to behold.

"Was that okay?" I ask, suddenly worried that he didn't like the kiss.

"Are you fucking kidding? That was epic. I definitely like boys, but I wouldn't mind double checking."

"I think I can do that," I say with a smile. But this time I run my hand in his hair at the back of his head and pull him to me, like I've seen in the movies, and connect our lips together. I gasp when I feel his tongue run along the seam of my lips, and all the blood rushes south as I open my mouth to him. Our tongues twist and dance together. As first kisses go, this has to go down in history as one of the best.

"Austin." Hearing my mother's voice, I jump back from Colt. The pair of us are breathing hard.

"Austin, it's time to go," my mom's voice sounds again.

"Coming, Mom," I shout back, but I never stop looking at Colt.

"You're leaving early?" Colt asks.

“Yeah.”

“Well, that sucks. Can I at least see you at school?”

“Actually, I won’t be going back to school. We’re leaving the state. Dad got a new job. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Austin, come on, love,” Mom shouts.

“Bye, Colt.”

Turning, I run from the barn as quickly as I can. Never once looking back, so I don’t have to see the hurt on Colt's face.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

15 years later

“Austin Brown, it’s good to see you, wish it was under better circumstances.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Mr. Smith,” I reply.

“You know, the high school football team was never the same, after you left.”

I don’t really want to make small talk. I just want to get this meeting over with so that I can head back home. Mr. Smith is the family lawyer, well, he’s the only lawyer in this town. He had cornered me at my grandpa’s funeral to say that he needed to see me, and could I come to his office. So, twenty-four hours later, I find myself sitting opposite him.

“I heard they did pretty well, without me,” I say back, wondering how I can move this conversation along.

“I know that you are wondering why I called you here today,” Mr. Smith finally starts, and I nod my head in agreement. “Well, it has to do with your grandparents’ ranch.”

“The ranch?”

“Yes. Your grandparents have left the ranch to you,” Mr. Smith states, and I wonder if I heard him right.

“Me? But surely it goes to Dad?”

“Not this time. Your grandparents were very adamant that it got left to you. Your dad is aware, I believe, of their wishes, but they left some stipulations.”

Growing up I had loved spending time on the ranch. I spent all my summers there. Hell, I even had my first kiss there, but I haven't been back to the ranch since I left when I was fifteen. Mom and Dad never seemed to be able to make it back, always encouraging Gran and Pops to come visit us, instead. So I couldn't, for the life of me, think of why they left the place to me.

“Which are?”

“Considering how long it's been since you've been at the ranch, they thought that you might want to try and sell it straight away. Well, you can't. In order to be able to sell it, you must first have lived and worked there for a year.”

“A year?” How the hell am I supposed to live there for a year? I had my job. My life.

“Yes,” Mr. Smith repeats. “You're allowed to refuse it, but the ranch would be given to a third party. I'm not allowed to tell you who. As per your grandparents' wishes.”

“So, we would get nothing?”

“No, there is some money that your grandparents saved, that is being given to your parents, but the ownership of the ranch would be transferred.”

“But after a year, the ranch would be mine?”

“Yes, but you should know that, if at any point during the year, you quit, the ranch will be given to the third party.”

“But my entire life isn't here, anymore,” I say, thinking out loud more than talking to



Mr. Smith.

“I think your grandparents knew that, but they remembered the love you had for the place, and hoped that maybe they could ignite it again.”

“When would the year need to start?”

“Immediately.” And I can see that he feels a little awkward saying that to me.

“But Christmas is, what, three weeks away?”

“It’s not ideal,” Mr. Smith starts. “I think your grandpa was hoping to get through this winter.”

There is a part of me that just wants to tell Mr. Smith to give it to this mysterious third party. It must be someone who loves the ranch as much as my grandparents did, for them to want to leave it to them. But that is not something that I can do, not without discussing it with my parents. After all, it’s the home my dad grew up in, and it had been in his family for generations.

“I’m going to have to talk to my parents. Am I able to call you later?”

“Yes, but, unfortunately, I will need your answer today. With it being so close to Christmas, we need to get all the paperwork handled.”

“Of course, Mr. Smith.”

Getting up from my chair, Mr. Smith copies me, so that we’re both standing, and I stretch out my hand to him. He takes it in a firm handshake.

“I hope that you decide to stay. It would be a shame to see the ranch leave the

family,” Mr. Smith adds, as I let go of his hand.

“Yes, it would, but some things can’t be helped. My dad was never cut out to be a ranch owner,” I say over to him. “I’ll call you as soon as I’ve made my decision.”

Leaving his office, all I can think about is what the hell am I going to do? The easiest option is to give up the ranch, but there is this knot of something, deep within me, that hates the thought. Would my grandparents be disappointed in me? They obviously thought that I could run it. But it had been a long time since I had worked the ranch, and I wasn’t sure if it was something that I could do anymore.

The ranch was just about a ten-minute drive outside of town, and all I could think about on the drive was the last time I had been there. At the time, I hadn’t realized that it would be the last time I would see the place for fifteen years. I thought I would still be coming back every summer, but football took over my life. Instead of coming here, I went to football camps. Worked on being the best football player. My parents had hoped I would get into the NFL, and it had been a dream of mine for a while, too. But college changed all of that.

I stopped enjoying the sport that had consumed so much of my life. I found myself missing practices, to the point that my coach pulled me aside to tell me that he was putting me on reserve. Instead, I had quit right there and then. My parents had been disappointed, hoping that I would change my mind, but they never forced me to go back. Instead, I was drawn into the world of computers and graphics. I switched majors, and soon discovered a passion that had never gone away. In fact, it became my livelihood, designing and programming video games.

Turning off the main road, I take my time driving up the dirt road to the ranch, just waiting for the house to come into view, before pulling my truck to a stop and staring at it. It hadn’t changed, and I chuckle to myself as I remember thinking that it looks like it just came off of a movie set. The house is a two-story building with white

wood siding, surrounded by grass, but my favorite feature of the house is the wrap-around porch. It covers two sides of the house, the roof held up with pillars, and the yard is surrounded by a white fence. There are steps that lead down onto the grass, and at one end of the porch is a gorgeous wood bench swing that could fit more than two people at a time.

I had spent many evenings there with Gran, that last summer. Sipping iced tea and talking about what it was going to be like living so far away, football, school, and girls. I never imagined it would be the last time I sat there with her.

Moving the truck forward, I pull up to the side of the house and look around. Could I make this home again? Could I face being away from the noise, the hustle and bustle of the city? My job allowed me the freedom to work from home ninety percent of the time. With the occasional trip into the office. Mainly for meetings, but even they were starting to be more and more online. Which meant that, as long as the internet connection was good, I could continue to work from here.

Mom, Dad, and I had been staying at the house since we heard about Pops. We were told that there was a ranch hand that would keep looking after the animals, who had a small property on the land. So, it would give us our space to grieve. There was a part of me that wondered if it was Colt, but I was sure that he had his own place by now. It hadn't stopped me from scanning the crowd at the funeral, but I hadn't seen him.

"Mom, Dad," I call out as I enter the house.

"Hey, Austin. We're in the kitchen," I hear Mom shout back.

The kitchen was at the back of the house, and it was really the heart of the home. It was Gran's favorite room, she spent hours in here making pies, cookies, and preserves. There was always something delicious in the oven, spreading warmth throughout the house.

“So, Mr. Smith told you?” Dad asks, as I walk into the kitchen. He’s sitting at a huge oak table that can seat eight people, easily, with a book in his hand.

“Yeah. Gran and Pops left the ranch to me,” I confirm, as I walk over to join him at the table.

“They told us years ago that that was their plan,” Mom adds. “So, what now? Put it up for sale?” As she pulls out the chair next to Dad.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Dad asks, shooting a look over to Mom.

“Gran and Pops had said that I have to live and work on the ranch for a year before it’s mine.”

“That can’t be right,” Mom exclaims.

“Mr. Smith was very clear. Plus, if I refuse, the ranch will be left to a third party. And, before you ask, Mr. Smith couldn’t tell me.”

Dad suddenly chuckles next to me, causing both Mom and I to look over to him. For the first time since Pop’s death, he’s smiling, which wasn’t the reaction I really expected.

“Dad?”

“Gran and Pops were crafty little sods. They told me they were going to leave the ranch to you, the day you were born. They knew I was never going to be a rancher, so I didn’t mind. They loved watching you grow up here. How you loved the animals. When your mom and I told them we were leaving, I was told that they would figure

out a way to get you back here permanently, and it looks like they did.”

“You think I should stay?” I ask him.

“I think that is a decision only you can make,” Dad replies. “We were left some money, more than I expected. Whoever else they left the ranch to, must have been someone very important to Gran and Pops. So, the ranch would be in good hands, if that’s what you decide.”

Looking around the kitchen, I take in the surroundings before getting out of the chair and making my way over to the kitchen sink. It’s placed right in front of a window that takes up most of the wall. It has views out over the fields where I can see some horses grazing. The field stretches for miles before they merge into the distant hills.

“I’m going to stay, for Gran and Pops,” I tell the window, before turning back around to face Mom and Dad.

“It won’t be easy,” Dad says.

“I know, but I want to try. Plus, if I fail, it goes to the third party, anyway. But at least I can say I tried. Mr. Smith explained that I would need to take over immediately. So, I can’t come back with you.”

“What about your job and apartment?” Mom asks.

“My job, I should be able to do from here. I have no idea about my apartment. I will try and sub-let it in the new year. I honestly hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“We have to leave tomorrow,” Dad starts. “I’m needed back at work, but maybe we can come back in a few weeks for Christmas.”

“I know, Dad.” I hated the thought of them leaving, but Dad loved his job. My mind was made up. I had fifteen years of ranch life to make up for.

Pulling out my cell phone, I type in the number for Mr. Smith’s office, and I wait to be connected.

“Austin,” Mr. Smith says.

“Mr. Smith, I have decided to stay,” I say down the line.

“Oh, Austin, that’s good to hear. I will get the necessary documentation done as per your grandparents’ wishes. I know that your parents are due to travel home tomorrow, so I will contact the ranch hand to meet you the day after. Be ready at six am.”

“Six?” Wondering if I heard him right.

“Yeah, and Austin, you better get yourself some durable clothes. You're gonna need them.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

He hadn't spotted me. But I'd seen him looking around. Had he been looking for me? I highly doubt it. I had hoped that he would've changed somehow, but, of course, he hadn't. Austin had looked as handsome as he had that day in the barn. God, I hated him. Well, that's what I was telling myself, anyway. It was the reason I'd hidden in the back of the church at Pop's funeral.

"Colt." Mr. Smith, calling my name, pulled me out of my thoughts of Austin.

"Sorry, Mr. Smith," I say, trying to pay more attention.

"I know this isn't the news that you wanted to hear, but Austin has confirmed that he's going to stay. I told him that you would meet him tomorrow at six am."

"It's okay, the ranch has changed since he was last here. Gran and Pops got more livestock. I give him a week, two tops."

"Colt, you are going to have to play nice. He needs to quit on his own terms," Mr. Smith says, and I know he's right.

"Does Austin know that the ranch will come to me if he decides to leave?"

"No. It was one of the stipulations. Austin wasn't to be told."

This surprised me. Gran and Pops always told me what they planned to do with the ranch. I hadn't liked it, but this was their ranch, not mine. This place was my home, too, though. After Austin had left, I continued to work on the ranch during school holidays. Eventually coming before and after school to help with the animals. When I

graduated high school, I asked Pops if I could work here, permanently. I could see that it was getting to be too much for him on his own. Plus, I was able to look after the place when they went visiting.

When I lost my grandparents, and had been trying to figure out how I could afford their house, Gran and Pops told me to sell it and use some of the money to build a home on their land. It was also at this time that I started calling them Gran and Pops. It happened by accident one day. We had been in the kitchen for lunch, and I had thanked Gran. I will never forget the smile on her face, or the laughter from Pops, as I tried to apologize. After all, I wasn't their grandson.

"Colt." Mr. Smith says my name, again, and I really try to stop daydreaming. This is important shit. Looking over to him, he gives me a slight smile. "There is one more thing. They have gifted you the truck, and they left you some money."

"Money?" I knew that Pops was planning to sign over the truck to me. In fact, he had done so at the start of the winter. I'm guessing he told Mr. Smith just to make sure everyone was aware.

"Yes. It's not a huge amount, but it could be enough to help you get your own place," Mr. Smith explains.

"Rustic Valley is my home," I reply, there is no way that I could move away. If Austin ends up keeping the ranch, then I'm going to have to hope that he keeps me on.

"You're a good man, Colt. I'm sure everything will work out."

"Me too."

"So, I think that's everything for today, unless there is something else you need me to



go over?" Mr. Smith adds.

"There is one more thing," I say.

"Of course, what can I help with?"

"Well," and I pause for a moment. "Christmas." And I hear Mr. Smith groan. I can't help but smile.

"You're still planning to continue the Christmas festival?"

"Of course. Gran and Pops loved it. Why on earth would I stop it?"

"Won't it be too much for you to organize on your own?"

"But, I'm not on my own, Austin will have to help, too," I tell Mr. Smith. "So, can I count on your donation for the silent auction?"

"Yes, you can."

"Don't pretend to be unhappy about it. You love the festival just as much as me," I say over to him.

"Fine," Mr. Smith says, giving me a smile. "But I'm going to miss the Christmas cookies."

"The ones Gran used to make?"

"Yeah. They were so good."

Looking around the room, pretending to check for spies, I lean forward and watch as

Mr. Smith does the same.

“Well, if you can keep a secret,” I whisper. “I’m the one that’s been making them the last few years. Gran showed me when her arthritis started to affect her fingers. So, they will be there.”

“Wow. I never even noticed,” Mr. Smith replies, and I can hear the surprised edge to his voice.

“Now, Mr. Smith, do you really think Gran would let anything but perfect cookies be given out?”

“You have a good point there, Colt. Make sure there is a box with my name on it.”

“I can do that, but it might just cost you extra.” Giving him a smile, I see him roll his eyes. “Mr. Smith, the festival is for a good cause.”

Gran and Pops had started the festival as a way to make money for one of the local animal rescue centers. They had always donated what they could, but one year they saw that the center needed more than what they could give. So, they came up with the festival. Gran and Pops just set up tables with games, there were food stands in the barn, decorated, of course with Christmas trees. There were horse rides and of course a Santa for the kids to visit. Initially they hadn’t wanted to call it a fundraiser, but thought a festival would attract more people, and it worked. Soon it became the highlight of everyone’s Christmas

“Right,” I say over to Mr. Smith. “I need to get back to the ranch. Get ready for Austin’s first day tomorrow. I will come back and pick up the donation in a couple weeks.”

Getting up from my chair, I reach across the table and shake Mr. Smith’s hand. I

make my way out to my truck and start my way back home. I need to check on the cattle and make sure that the horses were all locked up in the stables. Then, I need to work out what to do with Austin tomorrow. I needed him to know, very quickly, how hard it was going to be.

On the drive back to the ranch, my mind drifts to the festival, and what I need to get ready. There's the barn that needs to be cleared out, so that all the tables can be set up. Then there are the Christmas trees, and I also need to find a replacement Santa. Pops had been playing him for years.

Pulling off the road, I look up at the wooden arch sign that marks the entrance to the ranch, and I can't help but smile. Rustic Valley Ranch. Each letter is painstakingly carved by hand, maybe over a century ago. Pops made sure that the wood was treated and preserved. It was the first structure built by his grandfather when he bought the ranch and named it after the town.

Pops always had so much pride telling the story of how the ranch started. How the townspeople had called his grandfather crazy for purchasing this land so far out of town. The first year had been tough. That first winter had been harsh, but the townspeople had rallied around, got his grandfather through it. That was when he decided to name it after the town.

It's a shame that after almost a century, the ranch was no longer going to be part of the family that started it, but I promised Pops that I would keep the ranch going. I just had to hope that Austin didn't take to ranch life after being away from it for so long, because, in a year, there is no way that he wouldn't try to sell the place. I suppose I could offer to buy it off him, but even with the money I had been left, I wouldn't be able to afford it, and I doubt that a bank would consider me for a loan.

Pulling the truck to a stop outside the stable, I get out, making my way inside. My little homestead is just on the other side of the stable. I like being close to the horses.

Don't get me wrong, I loved looking after the cattle and the few chickens that we had, too. But the horses were always my first love. Over the years, the number of horses on the ranch had declined, and Pops had been talking about getting some more. Something I guess I will have to talk to Austin about.

Before going into town, I had let the horses out into the fields to get some exercise. Giving me the chance to clean out the stables and put out some fresh hay and water, before calling them back in.

I try to keep my mind focused on the task, but my eyes keep wandering to the stall in the corner, just by the doors to the stable. The stall where my life changed completely. That final summer with Austin had been amazing. We had been pretty much inseparable. Then, on that final day, I had decided to tell him that I like boys. I was hoping that maybe he felt the same and we had kissed. Fuck, I still remembered that kiss. The way it had made me feel. I think I fell in love with Austin in that second, but then he left. Literally, ran away, never once looking back. In the space of five minutes, I had gone from elation to heartache.

For those first few weeks after he left, I had been sure that he was going to call me or text, but there had been nothing. I had sent the odd Hey text but still got silence in return. It had hurt. Regardless of how I felt, I thought he was my friend. I thought we had become best friends that summer, but I had been wrong.

When school had started back up, that was when I missed Austin the most. Missed seeing that friendly face. I was the kid that lost his parents and had to live with his grandparents. I was never invited to parties, coz who wanted the odd one around? Then rumors had started about me being gay. They hadn't really been mean to me, maybe a few comments here and there, but if I was a social leper before, coming out made me a complete outcast.

What was worse was when my grandparents had found out. They were traditional and

found it very hard to accept that their grandson was gay. It was when I turned to the ranch more and more. Pops and Gran had heard the rumors. At this point the whole town had, but they didn't care. They didn't treat me any differently. To them I was the same Colt. In a way, the ranch became my sanctuary. A place I could be me. The animals didn't care that I liked boys. They didn't answer back when I talked to them about school. All they knew was that I was the person that gave them food.

I never wanted to admit it, but it took me a long time to get over Austin. Fifteen years was plenty of time to get over someone, and to move on from the hurt. We had to be very different people, and yet the thought of seeing him tomorrow had the butterflies coming back. God, I hated it. Hated that he still had this effect on me.

The more I brushed the stable floor the angrier I got at myself, at Austin, at Gran and Pops for doing this to me. This ranch deserved to belong to me. I was the one that stayed. I was the one that had spent years tending to the animals, mending fences, making sure the ranch still made money. There was no way that I was going to let Austin take that away from me, just like he did all those years ago when he took my first kiss.

Austin was going to find out, very quickly, how much the ranch had changed. How much hard work was needed to keep a place this size going. Also, winter was coming, there had been a noticeable chill in the air for days. This was going to make our tasks harder. If the water buckets froze, then the animals didn't drink. Breaking frozen water wasn't an easy task. But, the animals' needs always had to come first, and suddenly tomorrow couldn't come fast enough.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

This was a completely unholy hour to be getting up. Hell, it was still dark outside. I think you had to be a special kind of person to want to get up at this hour every day. Mr. Smith told me the ranch hand was getting me at six, so I had set the alarm for four thirty. I reasoned it would give me enough time to shower, get dressed, and have some breakfast. But I snoozed the alarm a couple of times, rookie error. I had then, of course, overslept. I had the quickest shower ever, shoveled oatmeal down in record time, and was ready with about two minutes to spare.

So here I was, staring at the front door, waiting for the knock. Waiting to meet the man who was hopefully going to help me become the ranch man that my Gran and Pops thought I could be. Pulling out my phone, I unlock the screen, and watch as the time ticks to six o'clock. Sure enough, there is a knock on the door, but it sounds like it came from behind me. From the kitchen.

Going back to the kitchen, I'm just walking in when I see the door open, and a man walks in. His head is bent down, and the cowboy hat he's wearing is covering his face, but not the rest of him. Fuck. His torso is filling out the shirt that he's wearing, and his jeans seem to hug his legs perfectly. So this is going to be sweet torture, working with this sexy, and no doubt straight, ranch hand.

"Hi," I say, going over to him, arm outstretched. Then he looks up, and I stop dead in my tracks. My arm falling back to my side. There in front of me is a face that I thought I would never see again. He looks the same, except a little older. His eyes are still the deep brown, Colt Jackson and his name falls from my lips unaided "Colt."

"Austin." Oh, his voice has taken on a deeper edge, but it's the same.

“I didn’t...” but the words dried up in my mouth. What the hell do I say to him?

“You ready? We have a long day ahead of us, and we are already behind,” Colt says, but he isn’t really looking at me.

“Behind?”

“Yeah. Ideally, we should be up at four.”

“But, Mr. Smith...” trying to defend myself. This isn’t how I wanted things to start.

“Mr. Smith is a lawyer, not a ranch hand. So come on,” Colt replies, turning to leave the kitchen.

I grab my new coat that I was reassured would be needed, even though at the moment, it feels incredibly too warm, being denim and fleece lined. But the moment I get outside, the cold hits me, and I’m scrambling to put it on.

“Here, you’re going to need these,” Colt shouts over to me as he throws something brown in my direction. Catching them, I see that they’re some brown suede, heavy duty gloves.

“Thanks.”

“Right, first thing first, we need to sort the livestock. I’ve already done that today. So now we’re going to check the chickens. Take stock of any eggs laid overnight. Then there are the horses.”

“Livestock? Chickens?” I don’t remember them from when I was fifteen.

“The ranch has changed since you were last here. More animals now, so we really

need to get moving.”

Colt looks and sounds the same, but he is so different from the boy I left in the barn. This man is harsh. There is no kindness in his voice. He is just all work. Was he like this with my grandparents?

“Austin, come on!” Colt shouts over to me.

“Sorry.”

Fuck, I’m tired. Muscles I never knew I had are aching, and it's only lunchtime. The ranch has changed so much. There is so much more to do. I knew that this wasn’t going to be easy, but I have no idea how the hell I’m going to cope.

“Austin,” Colt’s voice sounds.

Colt seems to be getting more and more annoyed with me. I’m trying my best, but it’s been so long since I’ve had to do anything physical, and I’m slow. I just wish that he had some patience with me.

“Colt, will we be stopping for lunch soon, or am I able to have a break for five?” I hate asking, but I know my limits, and I also know that I’m getting to them.

“Yeah, we can stop.”

“Great.”

“I have a few bits and pieces that I need to do. Come back in an hour.”

“Oh, we aren’t having lunch together?” I always remembered us having lunch together. Sitting in Gran's kitchen.



“No.”

I keep watching as Colt makes his way over to the barn. I knew that the ranch had changed. Gran and Pops had spoken about it, but looking around now, I realize they never explained how much. The barn, for one, was bigger, then there was the chicken coop and cattle shed. The biggest surprise was when Colt explained that a few years ago, they purchased some more land, right on the edge of the ranch, a bit closer to town. He explained that Gran and Pop hadn't told him what the land was for, but that he thinks they were going to build a small home there. Something that was smaller than the ranch house, to retire in.

Turning, I make my way over to the house, going in the kitchen door, I feel a blast of heat hit me. The kitchen was always the warmest room in the house. Both physically and mentally. Gran always made sure this room was full of love. So much so that you could almost feel it. But without Gran, all you were left with was the heat.

Taking off my boots, I leave them by the back door and make my way to the center of the room. I suddenly feel lost. Gran always had food ready for us, and there is a small part of me that expected to walk in and find her in here. Standing at the window watching us work. But she isn't, and she hasn't been for a long time.

Right, I need to get some food in me, and a drink, and I need to make sure I watch the time. I can't be late getting back to Colt. I don't need to give him any more reasons to be annoyed with me. Sandwich and chips. A quick and easy lunch that will fill me up and keep me going, hopefully, till we finish.

When I get back to Colt, he's on his cell. I try not to eavesdrop on his conversation, but I really can't help it.

“So, do you think you can be Santa for us?” Colt says down the line. “It will only be for a few hours. Please.”

Santa. Why the hell does Colt need a Santa?

“You will. Great.” Colt pauses, and the smile that spreads across his face, I feel it in my knees. His whole face lights up. Fuck, it’s beautiful. “This doesn’t mean that you forfeit a donation.” And whatever the other person says, causes Colt to start laughing. Shit, I am done. That man, there, is my Colt. My fun, loving Colt. The boy I had my first kiss with. But when he looks up and sees me standing there, the smile drops from his face. And, for a second, I thought I saw hurt flash through his eyes.

“So, I will be over in a week or so for the donation. Thanks, again.”

“Donations?” I ask, wondering if he’s going to explain what is going on.

“So, are you still able to ride?” Colt asks, ignoring my question completely, and my heart sinks. The friendly edge in his voice, from a few minutes ago, is gone. He’s just all business again.

“It’s been a while,” I confirm.

“Well, Gran and Pops have different horses from when you were here last, so...”

“You called them Gran and Pops?” I didn’t mean to say the question out loud, but I had noticed him calling them that a few times.

“Yeah,” is the only response I get. “We need to get moving. There’s a fence down in one of the top paddocks that needs to be repaired.”

Colt walks over to the stable and opens the door. The second I walk inside, the memory of the last time I was in here hits me like a freight train. Just like now, it was with Colt. I remember the feel of his lips against mine. The hardness of his chest as it was pressed against me. That kiss had been everything.

“Austin. Come on,” Colt commands.

“Sorry, it’s just...” I start, but decide that it’s best not to mention what I was thinking about.

“We have three horses here at the moment,” Colt starts. “Over there,” and he points to a beautiful chestnut brown horse, “is Rodney, and in the stall next to him, is Trigger.”

The stall looked empty, but on hearing their names, a horse pops its head out. I can see that Trigger is a stunning light brown, with a dot of white on his forehead.

“And this beauty,” Colt continues, as he goes over to a stall, “is Brody.” His voice takes on a softer edge as the horse appears. I’m transfixed as I watch Colt go over to the horse, run a hand down its snout. From what I can see, Brody is a gorgeous white horse with what might be flecks of gray, hard to tell without seeing all of him.

“You will probably be best to saddle up on Rodney. He will probably be the gentlest. Saddles are over there. Where’s your hat?”

“My hat?”

“Yeah, your hat. Please tell me you have one?” Colt demands.

Shit. I never even thought about a hat when I had been picking up my clothes yesterday. Great. I’m sure this is something else that Colt is going to be pissed at me about, and I am also going to have to now find time to get back into town and get one.

“Here, take this,” Colt says, handing me a hat. “It was your Pops’, it’s too small for me, but I think it will fit you fine. I’m sure he would want you to have it.”

“Thanks.” Taking the hat out of his hand, I can remember my Pops wearing it. He always had it when he came to visit. Never understood why. But I loved this hat, it was a light tan colored Stetson with a small dark leather band around it. I almost want to smell it, see if it still has my Pops scent on it, but I don’t. Placing it on my head, it fits perfectly, and somehow, it’s like I can feel Pops there. Encouraging me.

It took me a few attempts, but I eventually managed to get Rodney all saddled up. Colt still came over to check that everything is in the right place, and secure. I wanted to ask him what his problem was. What had I done, today, to piss him off so much? I had listened to everything he said. Paid attention. Did as he instructed me. There was nothing else I could do.

“Ready?” Colt asks, as he grabs hold of the saddle on Brody, and effortlessly jumps so that he is seated on the horse.

Fuck. I know I shouldn’t find that hot. But watching all his muscles as he pulls himself up is just hot. At some point, he put his hat on too, and its dark brown suede with a slightly darker band. He looks like he’s walking straight out of a Clint Eastwood movie.

Taking a deep breath, trying to calm my beating heart, I grab hold of the saddle, and amazingly, manage to get up on the first try. I spot the surprise on Colt’s face, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Follow me. Some of the trails have changed, and I really don’t have time to find you if you get lost.”

“I think I would be able to find my way back, Colt,” I snapped at him.

I hoped me snapping at him might get some reaction out of him, but there’s nothing. He just stares at me for a second before making a clicking noise with his tongue to

get Brody moving. Making the same noise, I get Rodney moving and follow Colt. The land around the ranch hadn't changed much. It's like time had stood still. Looking across the mountains, I could be fifteen again. Out riding the trails with my best friend who I have been shamelessly crushing on. But I'm not fifteen, and the man on the horse in front of me, isn't my best friend anymore.

No, this man feels like a stranger, and I hate it.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

One week later

Damn it.

I want Austin to hate the ranch life so badly that I'm showing him the worst of it, and yet he was, well, thriving. I saw glimpses of that sexy fifteen-year-old boy. The boy who loved the ranch and the horses.

"Colt." Oh fuck, I was starting to love him calling my name. The sound as it rolled off his tongue.

"What now, Austin?" I'm trying to keep my tone neutral. I don't want to be his friend. Well, that's what my brain keeps telling me.

"Can you look at this? Something isn't right."

We're in the back paddock, looking at a fence that I spotted down. Every weekend I try to get a ride in. Just an hour, for myself, where I try to forget about what's going on at the ranch. It's time for myself, but I normally spot something that needs my attention. Like today's fence.

"Show me?" I ask, as I stand next to him, and try my best not to breathe in his scent.

Fuck, I'm in so much trouble. For fifteen years I have hated this man. Hated what he did to me, and, in less than a week, my heart is already telling me to forget the past and ask this man if he still likes guys and if he could like me again.

“It’s this piece of wood. You asked me to straighten it, but I think it might be rotten. Maybe this is what caused the fence to come down.”

Picking up the piece of wood, I can see that he’s right. I know that I could congratulate him for spotting this, but I can’t. Him doing so well was never part of my plan. He was going to come in and hate it. He’s supposed to be going back to wherever home is now, with his tail between his legs, and yet, he is fucking excelling.

“There are some new posts in the back of the quad trailer. I’ll go get one.”

Pops had bought a four wheeler and trailer a few years back on my suggestion. It makes transporting materials around the ranch easier. Pops, of course, had still used the horses to get around. He admitted that the four wheeler was a good idea, but nothing would ever compare to the feel of a horse. Austin had actually done the same today, even though there was room for a passenger behind me.

Seeing Austin riding Rodney, he looked so much like his Pops. It had made me stop for a second. Austin’s green eyes, shining bright from the ride, his cheeks had that hint of red from the cold wind catching them, and then there was his smile. Fuck, that smile.

“I can get it,” Austin replies.

Austin makes his way over to the trailer, and I watch as he checks each of the spare posts. They are all good, I had checked them when I put them in there. There is part of me that wants Austin to fail, wants to shout over to him to hurry up. To get him flustered. But Mr. Smith’s words still roll around my mind ‘you’re going to have to play nice.’

Austin picks up the piece of wood effortlessly, places it on his shoulder, and carries it back over to the fence. Austin had turned out to be stronger than I thought, and there

had been a few times I had wanted to ask him if he worked out. But I hadn't.

At the beginning of the week, Austin had tried to make conversation while we were out working, and I know that it had been petty of me, but I always tried to give closed answers. I didn't want to get to know him. Austin was the person who was potentially going to be taking my home away from me. As the days progressed, I found myself wanting to talk to him. But I'm stubborn, so I wouldn't grant myself that luxury.

"We are going to need to get moving. It's already late and we still have a lot to do before nightfall."

Together we worked on the fence, and within a few hours, it was fixed, sturdy, and I begrudgingly had to admit that we had worked well together. His mannerisms were so much like Pops'. It was like working with him again, but somehow better. Pops had slowed down over the years, while Austin was quicker. Well, he had gotten quicker over the week.

"Is it getting colder?" Austin suddenly asks.

"There's a cold front moving through. Temps are predicted to drop below freezing tonight. Might mean some ice breaking tomorrow."

"Do you think it will snow?"

"The forecast isn't saying so at the moment, but it's something you need to be aware of. This ranch is on higher ground. All you need is one snowstorm, and we're snowed in."

It had been a while since we'd gotten completely snowed in. In most cases, the town rallied together, and within a couple of days, the plows would come along the outer roads to clear them off, and we were able to get out again. I never told anyone, but I



liked those days. The ranch covered in this blanket of white. Yes, it was hard work. The animals couldn't feed themselves, they still needed to be looked after.

"When you say snowed in?" Austin questions.

"It's not a complicated answer. It means snowed in. No one is able to get out, and of course, no one is able to get in."

This has to be the first time that I genuinely saw worry on his face. Austin has to remember what the winters were like here, and I almost go to remind him, but don't. That would be making conversation, and I'd decided we wouldn't do that.

"If you'll sort the chickens out, I'll check on the livestock."

"On my own?" Austin asks.

"Yeah, on your own."

"But..."

"Austin, seriously. I can't hold your hand all the time. This is your ranch. You need to learn to work it on your own."

"Yeah, but..."

"What are you going to do when I'm not here?" I have no idea where these words came from, or why I said them out loud. I didn't plan on going anywhere, and yet, here I am threatening to do just that.

"Where are you going?" The sheer panic in his voice was clearly evident.

“Austin, just go handle the chickens,” I reply.

“No!” Austin snaps, and reaches out, grabbing hold of my arm. This is the first time we have touched in fifteen years. It’s like a spark of electricity hits me, and I snatch my arm out of his grasp. I try to ignore how fast my heart is beating. “Answer me. Where the fuck are you going?” His voice now angry.

“I have no fucking idea,” I snap back, anger filling me. “You will sell this ranch, kick me out of my home, and just leave. Just like you did last time.”

Fuck. I did not mean for that to come out. Why the hell did I just say all that? I need to get away. Racing over to the quad, I quickly turn on the ignition and drive off. I thought I might have heard Austin shout my name, but that was all wishful thinking.

I shouldn’t have said that to him. I wanted to leave the past in the past. I didn’t want him to know the pain he had caused, and yet, I just gave him a glimpse of it. I am such an idiot. Hopefully, he will forget about it. Not push me for answers. But I doubt that’s going to happen.

Getting back to the stable, I quickly saddle up Brody and am leaving the stable just as Austin comes into the courtyard. I had pushed the quad, needed to get back here. Austin’s confidence on the horse is growing, but there’s still that hesitation, and he hasn’t really braved a full gallop yet.

“Colt!” Austin definitely shouts my name, but I ignore him, not looking at him as I ride past.

I take a lot longer than is necessary to sort out the livestock. Making sure that the water buckets are full, making sure all their feed is right, and getting them into the cattle shed overnight. In fact, I probably could have done it in half the time, and by the time I was finished, night time had fully taken hold. I could see my breath

hanging in cloudy mists as I made my way back to the stable. Austin would have finished the chickens long ago, and hopefully, was in the ranch house away from me.

Looking around the courtyard, I can see the lights on in the ranch house and breathe a sigh of relief. I get to avoid him for the night. Tomorrow he might have forgotten the outburst, and we can just get on with working the ranch. Jumping down from Brody, I take his reins and walk in front of him, guiding him into the stable.

“Colt,” Austin’s voice sounds.

Fuck.

Looking around, I see him standing in the corner, just in the shadows so that I didn’t see him when I first walked in.

“You need me for anything?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as normal as possible as I lead Brody over to his stall and take off his saddle.

“Can we talk?” Austin asks.

“About?”

“What you said?”

“There is nothing to say. It’s getting late,” I say over to him, as I walk to the back of the stable, retrieve some brushes and start to brush down Brody. Not looking in Austin’s direction at all.

“You said I left?”

“I was stating a fact.” I’m not lying. Austin did in fact leave, and then forgot all about

me.

“But...”

“Austin, I don’t want to talk to you,” I snap. “Mr. Smith said that you have to stay for a year, so let’s just keep it business. I don’t need you to be my friend.”

Walking Brody into his stall, I remove his headstall, hang it on a peg by his stall door and turn to leave the stable. My heart is beating so fast, it feels like I’m going to have a heart attack any moment, or die of a broken heart.

I wondered if Austin was going to follow me, but the courtyard remains eerily quiet as I make my way to my home. Glancing over to the ranch house, I see the kitchen light still on, and I feel the tears start to run down my face. On these cold nights Gran would invite me over. She would make Pops and I hot chocolate. Pops would light a fire in the living room, and we would sit around and talk. Pops and I would discuss the ranch and changes we wanted to make. Gran would ask me when I was going to meet a nice young man to set up home with. She was always trying to set me up with someone. By the end of the night, she always made me stay over. Said she hated me being on my own, even though they encouraged me to build the house. I missed them so much. Probably missed them more than my own grandparents.

But Gran and Pops are no longer here. There is never going to be hot chocolate by the fire, and I was going to have to get used to that. Times have changed, and I really needed to move on. I need to realize that this is Austin’s home now. It’s a home that I no longer have any say over. I used to be family, now I’m just the ranch hand.

Walking into my house, you walk straight into the kitchen. It might be a strange little set up, but it works for me. The kitchen is the warmest room in the house, and I can kick off my work boots, leaving them right by the door. I like to walk around the place with just my socks on, anyway.

Going over to the stove, I turn on the gas under a saucepan. I had a chunky vegetable soup with some beef left in the refrigerator. It was a great meal to have on these cold nights, with bread. Going over to the kitchen table, I pull out a chair and look at the papers I had left there from the night before. It's my plan for the festival and the list of things that I needed to handle.

Very little money was spent on the festival, it was all built on donations, but it was time consuming work, getting those donations. Most of the town donated the same thing every year – trees, food, presents for Santa to give out. But with teaching Austin, I was beginning to wonder how I was going to do it all. I told Mr. Smith that I would get Austin involved, but I kept finding myself keeping it a secret. This was my thing with Gran and Pops, and I wanted to keep it that way.

A knock on my kitchen door makes me jump. There is only one person that could be knocking on my door. I should ignore it. Maybe pretend that I have gone to bed, but the kitchen light is still on.

Getting up from my seat, I open the door to see Austin standing there.

“Can I come in?” Austin starts. “Please?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

I had no idea if Colt was going to open the door for me, much less let me inside his home, but I had to try. I need to talk to him. Need to clear the air. I know what he meant when he said just like last time. I have to try and explain. Colt needs to know that the kiss we shared was, hell, is the best kiss that I have ever had.

Colt just keeps looking at me, not saying anything, before he moves aside and lets me into his home. I try my best not to stare at him. He's removed his hat and coat and he is breathtaking. At fifteen he had this mass of dark blond hair, but now it's cut short and it makes him hotter.

"Thank you."

"What do you want, Austin?" Colt asks, as he walks over to the stove top, turning it off.

"I need to talk to you," I say.

"I told you; I don't need to talk to you. So, if you don't mind, I was about to sit down and have something to eat," Colt says, turning his back to me and looking at the stove top.

"Bullshit!" I shout, my anger getting the better of me. For the past week I have been trying to reconcile the man I have been working with to the boy I spent the summer with, and they feel like two very different people.

"What the fuck, Austin? Just drop it. I don't want to talk to you about anything other than the ranch." He pauses for a moment before turning to look at me. "I think maybe

you should leave.”

“No. I’m not going anywhere. We were friends,” I start.

“Friends.” His voice is now laced with disdain. Like the word has left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Yeah. Friends,” I repeat.

“Friends don’t lie and then vanish without a trace,” Colt spits back. “Friends stay in contact.”

“Colt,” I start, because he might not have realized it, but his voice is now laced with pain. This has to be linked to me leaving. But what can I say? I did lie, and for weeks.

“Fine, you want to talk. I can talk,” he says, his eyes now ablaze, and now I’m not so sure that I want to hear what he has to say. “That summer we spent together was the best summer of my life. I thought you were my best friend. And then you were gone.”

“I tried to tell you I was leaving,” I mumble back, but the hurt I caused Colt is written all over his face. I can’t turn back the clock. I can’t change what happened. I, frankly, have no idea what to do.

“You didn’t try very hard.”

“I fucking couldn’t,” I spit back at him. “That was your best summer? Well snap. I spent the whole time crushing over you. So, yeah, tell me how the hell I was supposed to say anything?”

“By saying, Colt I need to tell you something. You don’t kiss the boy, run away, and then ghost them. That was a really shitty thing to do.”

Ghost him? I never ghosted him. But then I realize, oh fuck. Yeah, I did. He's never going to believe this story now.

"I never ghosted you," I start.

"You just ignored me, then. Thanks Austin. Just get out. I'm done here," Colt spits back.

"I never ignored you."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I swear," I tell him.

"I texted you," Colt tells me, and I had a feeling that's what he was going to say.

"I lost my cell," I tell him quietly. The anger I had been feeling dissipated. "Lost all my contacts. My mom and dad only got me a new phone once we were settled. I needed a whole new sim, and number. I lost contact with everyone."

"But you never thought to ask Gran or Pops for my number? Do you know that, for the first few times they visited, when they came back, the first thing I asked them was how you were? Not once did they say, here is Austin's number. You forgot about me."

"Colt, I never forgot about you," I tell him.

"That kiss changed my life. Do you know that?" Colt starts. "My attraction to you confused the crap out of me. I was supposed to like girls. That's what my grandparents told me. And yet, all I could think about was you. What your lips felt like."



“But...”

“Let me fucking finish!” Colt snaps. “It made me realize that I like boys more than girls, and when I told you, and you kissed me? Fuck. It took me a while to accept that I was gay. You did that. Imagine having a kiss change everything you know about yourself, and then watching that person literally run away from you.”

“Colt, I was fifteen.”

“So was I,” Colt responds. “I really don’t want to talk about this anymore. It’s in the past. We just need to leave it there.”

“I can’t,” I tell him. No matter how much I have been trying to fool myself that I have been fine with Colt not being friendly, and all business. I know I haven’t. I have watched and wanted this man.

“Well, I’m sorry. I can leave the ranch if you want,” Colt says. “I know some guys, probably only take me a few weeks to train them.”

“Why the fuck would I want you to leave? You don’t really want to either. You love it here. You have always loved it here,” I tell him.

“Austin, I have no idea what the fuck it is that you want.”

“I want you, Colt. I have since the moment you walked into the kitchen last week,” I snap.

Colt just stands there staring at me. I can see that he’s breathing faster. There is nothing more I can say. I need to wait for Colt’s next move. The ball is in his court now. The one thing I know for sure is that I hurt him. More than I ever imagined.

Suddenly, Colt is striding across the distance between us, and before I can comprehend what's happening, I feel his hands on either side of my neck, and I'm being pushed backwards till I'm flush against the wall behind me. Then his lips are on mine. It takes a moment for my brain to register what's happening, but then Colt is kissing me.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, to keep him in place, and deepen the kiss. I run my tongue along the seam of his lips. He parts his lips, and I slip my tongue inside his mouth. Our tongues twisting around each other. I had thought our kiss at fifteen had been good. Oh, how wrong I was. This kiss, it's everything.

Then, just as suddenly as the kiss started, Colt is stepping back. Both of us are breathing fast.

"Please leave," Colt whispers.

"No." There is no way that I'm going to leave after that.

"Austin. I can't do this."

"Colt, I never meant to hurt you, and I can see that I did. Please, let us start over again. We're not those kids anymore," I try.

"You are just going to leave again. I need to protect myself," Colt mumbles back.

I have no intention of leaving. This past week has reminded me of why I loved the ranch. I should've never stayed away as long as I did. It might only have been a week, and my body might be aching in places I never thought possible, but at the moment, I had no intention of leaving.

Sidestepping around Colt, I take a look around the kitchen for the first time. It

reminds me of the kitchen at the ranch house. My guess is that Pops and Gran had something to do with it.

“Austin. It’s getting late, and I still have a lot to do this evening,” Colt says.

“With ranch stuff? Maybe I can help.” As I spot the table covered in papers and make my way over to it.

“No, not ranch stuff,” Colt says, rushing over to me, but I am closer to the table than him, and snatch up a piece of paper, and see the words Rustic Valley Ranch Christmas Festival.

“This says Rustic Valley Ranch, care to explain how this isn’t ranch stuff?” I ask.

“It’s nothing,” Colt says, taking the paper out of my hand.

“I know it’s the festival Gran and Pops put on every year,” I start. From the look on Colt’s face, I don’t think he expected me to know about the festival. I had been waiting for him to bring it up. Ask for help, but it looks like this was something he was trying to keep secret.

“How?” Colt asks.

“Gran and Pops told us. Remember how they always used to come to us for Christmas? Well, one year they asked if they could travel to us on the twenty-sixth. When my parents asked why, they explained about the fundraiser.”

“Oh,” Colt replies. “They never told me that you knew.”

“They loved this festival so much. I’m glad that you’re still doing it.”

“I had to. This is their legacy, and the town loves it, too,” Colt replies.

“Can I help?”

“I think I’ve got everything covered,” Colt replies, but I think that he's lying.

“Really? This,” and I point to the table, “looks like a lot of paperwork for someone who has everything covered. Please let me help.”

“I can do this on my own, Austin,” Colt tells me.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Colt. I’m not going anywhere, so you’re just going to have to pull your head out of your ass and let me help you. This is my ranch now, and this was my grandparents’ festival. So, you know what, I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. I’m helping with this festival.”

Pulling out a chair from the table, I sit down and fold my arms across my chest in an act of defiance. Colt may say he doesn’t want me here, but he’s lying to himself. I have no idea how I’m going to do it, but I’m not going to let Colt push me away. There was no mistaking the emotion behind that kiss. The feelings that we had for each other are still there. I just need to get Colt’s trust back somehow. If that means pretending not to care, and being all business, then I can do that...maybe.

Colt still hasn’t said anything, and he hasn’t grabbed me by my shirt collar and escorted me out of his home, so I’m going to take that as a good sign.

“If you want to keep this just business between us, Colt. I can do that.” No, I can’t, but at the moment, I’m not going to tell him that, “but the festival comes under that. The town knows I’m back. They are going to expect me to be there. So, you really don’t have an option,” I tell him.

Colt opens his mouth to say something, but then closes it again, before he takes a big sigh and mutters, “fine.”

“Good,” I say and look down at the papers. “Care to bring me up to date on everything?”

“Have you eaten?” Colt asks, ignoring my statement.

“No. I can get something when we’re done,” I tell him, and turn my attention back to the papers. It looks like Colt has organized everything into groups – decorations, food, and donations. I had to admit it was impressive. He had done so much already on his own.

A bowl of soup appears in front of me. The smell of meat and vegetables invading my senses makes my mouth water. God, this smells good, and my stomach growls loudly in agreement.

“Thank you,” I say as Colt hands me a spoon, and I take a mouthful. A groan falling from my mouth, unaided. This is so good. So much better than the sandwich I planned to make. They had become my staple this week. At lunchtime they’re quick to make, and in the evening, I don’t have the energy. I need to see if Colt will give me the recipe.

“No problem,” Colt replies. “It’s easy to make. Gran gave me the recipe; I’ll dig it out for you. She always said it was great for these cold nights. I always make too much, never did figure out how to do the amount for one.

Colt is trying to make small talk, though I can tell he isn’t happy with the situation, but right now, I don’t care. Operation get Colt to forgive me and to kiss me again is full steam ahead.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

For days I have been playing that kiss around in my head. I had no idea why I did it. But in that moment, it had seemed like the only thing I could do. I had wanted him. Wanted to feel his lips against mine again. And, fuck, it felt good. His lips were firmer, and yet, softer than fifteen-year-old Austin, but God, it was better than I remembered.

After he left that night, I swear, I could feel his hands wrapped around me. His heat having been somehow etched into my skin. I had let my guard down. Austin knew now that I wanted him, and yet, he had been doing exactly as he promised. We just talked about business. This was supposed to make me happy. But really it was starting to annoy the shit out of me.

I really didn't want to kiss him again, but my heart was telling me to cut the crap. I could, hell, I wouldn't allow this to become anything more. Ideally, I would be keeping my distance, but now that he was helping with the festival, we were spending even more time together.

"Colt." Austin's voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I look over to him. I'm sitting opposite him at my kitchen table, trying to figure out the timing of the festival events, so that it is fun for everyone.

"What?"

"Did Mr. Smith one hundred percent confirm that he would be Santa?" Austin asks.

"Not yet."

“How about Mr. Rodgers at the hardware store? He would make a great Santa.”

“Mr. Rodgers died two years ago,” I tell him.

“Really. Oh, I liked Mr. Rodgers.”

“Have you actually gone back into the town since you’ve been back?” I presumed that he’d gone into town to get the new clothes.

“Not really. When Mr. Smith told me that I needed to get some new clothes, I got some at the same time as I was returning the rented truck.”

It didn’t even dawn on me that I hadn’t spotted the truck Austin had been driving. I have been so caught up in avoiding him. But at least that explains why he didn’t know that Mr. Rodgers had passed away.

“In that case we need to make a trip into town. I need to pick up some donations anyway.”

“Okay.” But Austin doesn’t sound so sure.

“We can go tomorrow afternoon. We shouldn’t be more than a few hours, so the ranch will be fine. I could do with some more food supplies, too.”

“Me too. My cupboards are also pretty bare.”

“Why the hell didn’t you ask me to borrow the truck?”

“Didn’t want to bother you,” Austin replies. “Plus, it’s your truck.”

“For fuck’s sake, Austin!” I swear to God, this man. “If you need to go into town for

food, or anything else, then take the damn truck.”

“I’ve been thinking of getting my own,” Austin starts.

“Why?”

“So I have my own means of transportation.”

“We don’t need two fucking trucks on the ranch at the moment. Just use mine,” I snap, and wait for Austin to argue with me, but he doesn’t.

“Thank you. Now we need to get back to the festival,” Austin replies, looking down over the paperwork, and I’m not sure why, but this irritates me.

“All you’ve been interested in is the festival. We have a ranch to run as well,” I snap.

“I know,” Austin answers, still looking down at the papers on the table. “I think we should get the Christmas trees a day earlier.”

“Austin, I’m fucking talking to you, so look at me,” I demand.

“When you stop acting like a dick, I will,” comes his reply.

“I’m not, I’m just thinking about the ranch,” I state back.

“What the fuck is going on with you? You have been nothing but snippy for days, even worse than when I started,” Austin tells me, and I just look over to him.

“We kissed and you haven’t said anything,” The words fall from my lips unaided. I had been thinking them, but hadn’t meant to say them out loud. Now they’re hanging in the air between us, and I can’t take them back.



“We did, and you wanted to forget about it. Wanted us to be all business. So that’s what I’m doing. So, yeah, let’s get back to work, or shall we call it a night?”

Fuck, he’s being the most infuriating shit. Why the hell is he deciding to listen to me? I didn’t want him to fight for us, so why am I now so annoyed that he isn’t?

“Call it a night,” I tell him.

“No problem,” Austin replies and starts sorting the papers on the table. “See you in the morning. I’ve been checking the forecast and it looks like the temps are dropping again tonight. Long range forecasts are pointing to a possible snowstorm next week too.”

“Austin.” Suddenly, I don’t want him to go. I want him to stay. Want to talk to him.

“Good night, Colt.”

Austin gets up from the table, walks out of the kitchen, and closes the door behind him. I have no idea what’s going on with me. I knew Austin coming back was going to stir up so many emotions in me, but I wasn’t expecting this. I swing from hating him to wanting to push him up against the walls to feel his lips against mine.

I have no idea what to do. My brain tells me to leave. Go find another ranch, away from Rustic Valley. Away from all these memories. I have the money Gran and Pops left. It would keep me going. I can start afresh somewhere. Away from all the memories that have been torturing me for weeks, hell who am I kidding, they have been torturing me for years. Yet, I know that I could never leave, which means I’m somehow going to have to fight my feelings for Austin. Fight the attraction that is burning deep in my soul for this man. Time, I just need to give myself time.

Austin had been right; the temperature had dropped overnight, and I knew that the

water buckets for the animals would have frozen. Forgoing my shower, I made myself a quick breakfast and headed out. Some alone time out on the ranch was just what I needed this morning.

The air was still cold, so cold that I could see my breath hanging in wisps as I made my way over to the first paddock. The coldness filled my lungs, and I loved it. Some people like summer with all the heat. Me, I like winter. The dark nights, the crisp mornings where frost would hang on the grass like a thousand diamonds, and the crunch of the leaves under your feet. There was something almost magical about it.

I still need to meet Austin at the ranch house at four, and so I have about an hour left. It would be good to take out some of my pent-up aggression on the ice. It wouldn't be thick this morning, but it would still feel good to break it. Getting to the paddock, I open the gate, look around, and that's when I spot him. What the hell?

"Austin," Saying his name as I go over to him.

"Morning, Colt. Thought I would get a head start this morning. I've already done those paddocks," as he points behind him.

"How long have you been up?"

"An hour or so," Austin replies, but doesn't offer any more explanation, "Do you want to start on the livestock while I finish this, and then I will come join you? Oh, I had an idea about the festival as well."

"Okay." But I keep standing there. Looking over at Austin as he breaks the ice. I had been right; it was barely a covering and with just a few taps of the hammer it was broken.

"Colt, livestock," Austin states, looking over to me. "If we get all the animals

checked, maybe we can pop into town earlier.”

I have no idea what comes over me, but instead of turning around and making my way over to the cattle shed, I stride over to Austin, stopping just in front of him. He doesn’t say anything, just looks at me. For the first time since Austin had returned, I really looked at him. The echoes of the fifteen year old boy were still there. We were still the same height at about six feet but being this close to him, I can see that I am broader. His muscles have become more defined, even in this short space of time he has been back. His hair was the same deep brown that reminded me of Rodney.

Austin is wearing his Pops’ Stetson again; I think he might have worn it every day since I had given it to him. I like seeing him wear it. It made him look like he belonged here. Maybe even belonged with me.

“Colt,” Austin whispers my name. His breath hung in the cold air between us.

Taking off my gloves, I place my hand on his neck, and run my thumb over his cheek, feeling the coldness under my fingers.

“I missed you,” I tell him. “When you left.”

“I missed you, too,” Austin replies. “But Colt...”

I know that I’m confusing him. Hell, I’m confusing myself. But when he had stood there giving me orders, it had felt good. Just like it had all that time ago, and I had needed to touch him. Needed to feel the warmth in my fingers.

Leaning down, I place my lips on his. Gently. It’s a feather light kiss, and I pull back before Austin has the chance to deepen it. I know what I’m doing isn’t fair. That the signals I’m giving him are going from one extreme to the next.

“Colt,” Austin says my name softly.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, and I feel a tear fall down my cheek, then a sob breaks from my throat, and I’m crying, the emotions finally getting the better of me. Austin wraps his arms around me and just holds me as I cry into his shoulder.

“Talk to me Colt, please?” Austin asks, and I can feel his arm run up and down my back for a moment. Trying to comfort me.

“I hated you,” I tell him, the words finally coming out. “For years. I thought I was over you, and then you stormed back in here, looking as sexy as ever, and everything came flooding back.”

I need to stop. I need to walk away. Need to put that distance back between us. If I stay here, I’m only going to end up getting hurt again, but it feels so good to be wrapped in Austin embrace, and to feel his whole body against my own. To be held tightly in another man’s arms. It has been a long time since I have been held like this.

“Why did you come back, Austin? Why didn’t you stay away? I was happy,” I ask him, even though I don’t really want him to answer, because even now, I want him to say he came back for me.

“I couldn’t stay away, Colt. Gran and Pops wanted me to come back,” Austin replies. “I had forgotten how much I loved it here.”

“What happens now? How do I move on?”

“Colt, we don’t move on,” Austin replies gently.

Those were not the words that I wanted to hear, and I try to take a step back out of Austin’s embrace, but he just holds me tighter.

“We cannot forget the past or the pain I caused you. What we need to do is start again. I know that we can be friends again,” Austin continues. “Build that trust again.”

“Until you leave again,” I say to him.

“Colt,” Austin says, as he pushes me away from him, and looks me in the eyes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“But in a year.”

“I can’t tell you what is going to happen in a year, Colt. A lot can happen in that time. Let’s just concentrate on the festival, and the ranch, and getting to know each other again. Maybe we don’t have to be all business.”

“Maybe,” I say over to him, because that is the only word that I can say to him. Maybe we will become friends again. Maybe he will stay, but maybe he won’t. So yeah, maybe is the only word that feels right at this moment.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

Watching Colt break down and cry was heartbreaking. Colt was always so strong, even at fifteen, so seeing him like that was brutal, but God, it was needed. I had barely gotten any sleep that night, the way I left Colt's house kept playing in my mind. Something tells me that I should have stayed and talked to him. In the end, I had given up on trying to sleep, so I thought I may as well go and smash some ice. But two days have passed since that morning in the field, and I could already feel that something had shifted between us.

"You know that we still need to clean out the barn," Colt says.

We're back at his place going over all the festival planning. We only had a week to go and we still had so much to do. We've collected some donations that will be safely stored in a spare bedroom in the ranch house.

"Couldn't we leave it as is, and maybe call it rustic? Like the ranch."

Colt laughs at my words and it's so good to see him laugh. He has this deep throaty laugh, that you can't help but smile at.

"No, Austin, we can't. It needs to be tidy."

"Fine." But I pretend to pout, all the same, which triggers another smile.

"Right, the next thing is the Christmas trees. We have ten to collect and decorate. That is going to take up a lot of time. Plus, we need to wrap the presents for Santa to give to the kids," Colt adds.

“Oh, that sounds like so much fun...not,” I add.

“The present wrapping is painful. I hate it. But the tree decorating, I love that. The only thing is that we don’t have the facility to light up all the trees.”

“How come?”

“Nowhere to plug the lights in,” Colt adds.

“Can’t we run some extension cords?”

“Um, no. We can’t have cords running across the floor. Someone could trip on them. But the decorations Gran and Pops have are still in great condition, so they still look pretty.”

“They just miss the sparkle of the lights,” I add, and Colt nods his head in agreement.

“Anyway, I have arranged to go and collect the trees tomorrow,” Colt adds. “They’re treated so they won’t lose any of the needles.”

“They’re real trees?” I have no idea why, but I thought that they might be fake, and we were going to a storage facility to collect them.

“Of course they’re real. I would never get those awful, fake trees.”

“What’s wrong with them? They’re so easy to use.”

The look on Colt’s face is almost comical. I think it can only be described as a mixture of surprise and horror.

“You’re kidding right? They have no smell to them. They’re just so lifeless,” Colt

adds.

“Lifeless. Really, that is a little extreme.”

“No, it’s not. A good tree can make Christmas magical,” Colt says over to me, and for the first time, I can see just how much he loves this festival, or maybe it’s Christmas too.

“Yeah, well, I left my fake tree at my apartment, and I haven’t gotten around to getting a new one yet. So, I think this year I will just go without.”

“You haven’t decorated the ranch?”

“When have I had time? You make me get up at an ungodly hour and then we have been working on the festival. Plus, I don’t really have any decorations.”

“Even I have managed to put up some decorations, and what are you talking about, no decorations? You have Gran and Pops’, they’re in the loft.”

“I haven’t seen decorations,” I state, ignoring the comment about Gran’s decorations. “And when the hell did you get a tree?” Over the past week, I don’t think I have seen him leave the ranch.

“The tree is the last thing I do. Normally, the farm that donates the trees gives us a couple extra ones. One for me and one for the ranch. And I don’t have any decorations in the kitchen. That’s the only room you’ve been in at my house.”

“Good point. So, can I see the rest of the house?” I ask, as I look at the door that leads to another part of the house.

“I’ll show you when my tree is done,” Colt replies with a smirk.



“I’m going to hold you to that,” I tell him. “Now, let’s get back to work. My bed is starting to call me.”

“Lightweight.”

“Hey, you’ve been working the ranch longer than I have,” I tell him.

“That’s your fault. You shouldn’t have stayed away,” Colt retorts, but I can see that there is no malice behind his words.

“Touché,” I tell him. “Now, tell me about the trees.”

“You didn’t tell me they were an hour away,” I say over to Colt the following day, but he isn’t looking at me, he’s just staring at the road in front of him.

“I’m sure I did,” Colt replies.

“No. You told me that we were collecting twelve trees. Ten for the festival, and then one for each of us. I think you even told me what type of trees they were. You never mentioned the distance.”

“Oops.”

“You know, I think I’m starting to prefer when you didn’t talk to me,” I say, smiling.

“Really? You can go back to that if you want. But that kiss you gave me makes me think you like us being friends.”

“Colt, if I remember correctly, you kissed me,” I add.

“I do believe it was you who slipped me the tongue.”

“After you locked lips with me. But fuck you can kiss,” I add with a smile.

“You aren’t too bad yourself. You got better,” Colt adds and shoots me a quick look.

“I got better?”

“Yeah. Fifteen year old you was a little sloppy.”

“It was not sloppy. And you were the first boy that I had ever kissed. Hell, you were the only person that I had kissed. I had no idea what I was doing.”

Colt starts laughing, and I know then that he’s been teasing me.

“You’re fucking mean,” I say, but I’m smiling over to him.

“Sorry Austin. That first kiss was pretty epic. I think that’s what you called it.”

“Okay, enough kissing talk,” I say, because it’s reminding me of Colt’s lips on mine, and sending all the blood in my body south, and I really don’t want a hard on for the next hour.

“What do you want to talk about?” Colt asks.

“I have no idea,” I say, because, literally, all I’m thinking about now are Colt’s kisses.

“Actually, I meant to say that Mr. Smith confirmed that he’ll play Santa for us,” Colt says.

“Oh, that’s great.”

“Yeah, and not just that, he donated a weekend away in his vacation home.”

“Really? Do you know where the home is?”

“Aspen,” Colt replies,

“Holy shit. That’s very generous.”

“Mr. Smith normally gives something nice. I think last year it was some type of game console with a game. I didn’t really pay much attention.”

“What game?” My interest suddenly piqued.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think a road was involved,” Colt replies.

“Road to Valhalla.”

“Yes, that’s it. How the hell do you know about that? Apparently, it’s quite the popular game.”

“Yeah, that was a fun game. The graphics were a bitch to get right,” I say over to him.

“Austin, no offense, but what the hell are you talking about?”

“Did Gran not tell you what I did, or do, for a living?” I ask.

“Austin, I never spoke about you. If Gran mentioned your name, I tried to change the subject,” Colt replies.

“Oh.” Which seems like a lame response, but it’s all I can give. With our friendship

growing by the day, maybe even by the hour, I forget how much pain I caused him.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, Colt,” I say. “But anyway, I’m a game developer. Road to Valhalla is one of mine.”

“Holy shit. The teenagers in the town are going to go nuts when they find that out.”

“I’m sure that they’ll have no idea who I am.”

“They will now,” Colt says, giving me a smile. “And they’ll probably be asking you what you’re working on, and if they can get a freebie.”

“I don’t even get freebies, and I haven’t been working on anything since I started at the ranch. Work gave me some time off for Pop’s funeral. When I explained to them about the will, they gave me a leave of absence till the new year. My plan had been to do both. Work the ranch during the day and do some developing in the evening.”

“What are you going to do in the new year? That sounds like a lot of hard work.” Colt asks.

“Honestly, I have no idea. I suppose I might have to give up the games.” It’s not something that I’ve really thought about, or maybe it was something that I didn’t want to think about. I loved the ranch, and I loved gaming.

“You love developing the games, don’t you? I can hear it in your voice,” Colt asks.

“Yeah,” I say quietly. It feels like I’m being disrespectful to Gran and Pops by saying it out loud.

“Could you do it part time?” Colt asks.

“I could. But it still means evening work.”

“What if you had some free days?”

Colt is confusing me with all these questions. I don’t, and won’t, have any free days. So there is no point in me even thinking about it.

“That would be nice,” I say.

“I can give you two days. Tuesdays and Thursdays would be best,” Colt states.

“Colt, what the hell are you going on about?”

“I can cover the ranch on those days so you can work on your games.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” I exclaim.

“You’re not asking. I’m offering. I covered the ranch on my own for Pops towards the end. But two is the maximum.”

Staring over to Colt, I’m not sure if I heard right. “You can’t do that.”

“Austin, yes, I can. Obviously, the ranch must come first,” Colt adds.

“Yes, of course,” I reply, but I’m still in shock, “Thank you.”

“No thanks needed. I can do that for you. We’re friends, right?” And he glances over and gives me a smile.

“Friends,” I repeat, but God I want you to be so much more than my friend .

“Then that’s decided. We can work out the logistics in the new year,” Colt replies, and it looks like it’s settled. “Now, turn on the radio for me.”

Leaning over, I turn on the radio, and Christmas music blasts out of the speaker. I go to turn the dial, so that we can listen to something else.

“You change that channel, and you are going to lose that hand,” Colt warns, but there is a smile on his face.

“I thought it was the festival that you loved, but it isn’t. You love Christmas too, don’t you?”

“Growing up, Christmas was the one time of the year that my grandparents eased up on some of their rules. I was able to stay up later. We would decorate the tree together, etc. It was my favorite time of year. Then, when I moved to the ranch, after my grandparents died, Gran and Pops, well...” Colt’s voice trails off.

“Gran and Pops always loved Christmas,” I finish for him.

“Yeah, they did,” Colt confirms. “I swear that Gran started playing Christmas carols from the first of December.”

“Oh, I remember that,” I say laughing.

“It’s going to be so strange without them both this year,” Colt adds, and I can hear the note of sadness in his voice.

“Oh, they’re still with us, so let’s make them proud, and make this the best festival ever.”

“I plan to,” Colt confirms. “Starting with getting the best trees.”

“You and your damn trees,” I say over to him. Colt doesn’t reply, but I see a smile play at the corner of his lips.

Looking over to Colt, he is back to concentrating on the road ahead, and I have no idea why, but I remember what he said about the trees not shining, and an idea hits me. Pulling out my cell, I find what I’m looking for. I have no idea how the hell I’m going to do it, but I hit order anyway, because if I pull this off, the smile on Colt’s face will be everything.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

I didn't want to admit it, but being friendly with Austin was better than being angry at him. It took up a lot less energy. It was nice. I was learning more about him and his life away from the ranch. Learning that he was a game developer was a surprise, even though I remember seeing him draw, when we had our summer together. I had always begged him to show me, but he never did.

"So what's the plan for the big day?" Austin asks.

"You know the plan?" Wondering why Austin is asking about the festival. We had been working on the schedule together.

"Not the festival, Christmas Day."

Oh, that day. To be honest, I hadn't really thought about it, or truthfully, I had been avoiding thinking about it. This was going to be my first Christmas on my own, and I had no idea what to do.

"Not sure yet," I say, hoping that Austin will drop the subject.

"I would've thought you'd have the entire day planned out. Like the festival. Nine am get up, open presents. Eleven, start cooking dinner." Austin is smiling as he reels off the list.

"I am not that regimental." But in truth, I am.

"Tell me that I'm wrong."



I open my mouth to tell him, but know I can't. "Shut up."

"Well, my parents are planning to come back for a few days, hopefully," Austin replies. "I think they're going to try and make it for the festival."

"That will be nice."

"If you don't have any plans, come and have Christmas with us," Austin adds.

"Umm." I'm not sure how I feel about this. Christmas with Austin and his parents sounds like something a couple would do, and even though I have joked about our recent kiss, we are better off as friends.

"Sorry. I'm sure you've already made arrangements. I was just thinking out loud," Austin adds, talking faster.

"Austin. I have no plans," I tell him, I think because I'm feeling a little sorry for him. "This is my first Christmas without anyone to celebrate it with."

"No family?"

"My dad was an only child. So...." I could've sworn he knew this, but then again, I could be wrong. I can't really remember many of the conversations we had when we were younger.

"What about your mom's side? Any aunts and uncles there?"

I really don't want to get into this conversation with Austin. I don't want him to feel any pity for me. But I get the feeling he isn't going to let the subject drop.

"I have no idea. When I was little, I remember my mom telling me that her family

wasn't very nice. I think I had asked her about my other grandparents, but I never got the full story. So, there was only Dad's side."

"Oh Colt. I'm sorry."

"Austin, it's okay. My grandparents did their best, and I had Gran, Pops, and the ranch."

I really couldn't complain too much. Yeah, I had gotten a bum deal losing my parents so young, and it made me grow up quicker than I should, but it also made me the man I am today. I cherish the memories that I have.

"Well, in that case, there will be no argument. You are having Christmas with us. Come over on Christmas Eve. We can do carols and hot chocolate around the fire. Like Gran did."

"Austin. I'm sure that I'm going to be okay on my own."

"No. This is what friends do. But I might need to ask for your help with some cooking. My mom and dad, bless them, but yeah they couldn't cook like Gran. Your food is always so good."

"So that's it," Smiling over to him, taking my eyes off the road for a second. "You only want me to come over so I can cook dinner."

"No. I would want you there anyway, you cooking dinner is an added bonus."

"Bonus," I laugh.

"Yeah."

“Okay, I will think about it,” I say, but I already know that, come Christmas Day, I’m going to be at the ranch house cooking dinner. Because it sounds infinitely better than staying on my own.

“Thanks.”

Silence descends in the truck, and I thought it might feel a little awkward, but it’s actually really nice. Austin might not realize that he’s doing it, but he’s humming along to the Christmas song on the radio. Which makes me smile.

A part of me had been dreading the road trip. Yes, things had gotten better since my breakdown in the field, not my proudest moment over the last few weeks, but sitting in close proximity, is a whole other ball game altogether. But it has been fun.

“Oh, I love this song,” both Austin and I say at the same time, as Austin turns up the radio.

I sit and listen as Austin sings along. His voice sends goosebumps over my skin. It’s so smooth, and velvety, and when the song ends, I wish I could play it again, just to hear him sing some more.

“You have such a good voice,” I say, when the song ends. “I thought I was the only one that loved that song.”

“You’re kidding. Bing Crosby and David Bowie. It’s magic. I think it might be my favorite Christmas song.”

“Mine too. There is just something about their voices together.”

I can’t help but smile over at Austin, and when he looks over to me and gives me a smile in return, I try to ignore the little skip that my heart gives at seeing it. No. I

won't go there again. Austin and I are destined to be friends. I need to remember that.

"So, what are some of your other favorites?" Austin asks.

"Oh, there are too many, but one of my other favs is a song by a British band," I start, and out of the corner of my eye I see Austin shift in his seat.

"Merry Christmas Everybody by Slade," he exclaims loudly.

"How the hell do you know that song?"

"A few years ago, I had to travel to London for a meeting with a gaming company in December. That song must have been playing in every shop I went into."

"It's so...." But suddenly I can't find the words to explain this song. I wasn't expecting him to know it.

"Happy and Christmasy," Austin finishes for me.

"Yeah. That's it."

"Next time you come over, I will play my Christmas playlist. Let's see how many songs you know."

"I bet I know more than you think. That trip to London was an eye opener. Don't get me wrong, they still played Micheal Bublé and Mariah Carey, but it was nice to hear other songs." Austin pauses for a moment. "But how the hell do you know about it? I hadn't thought you'd left the ranch."

"Ummm." I'm not sure if this is going to be one of those awkward conversations considering our history. "I was sort of seeing a British guy for a while. Nothing

serious. He introduced me to them.”

“What, long distance, or something?”

“No, he was traveling in the US, we had a little fling while he was in the area, and then he moved on.”

“Oh.” And I think he sounds almost disappointed.

“Austin, I hope you didn’t think I was some kind of thirty year old virgin.”

“No, of course not. Well...” Austin starts but his voice trails off and I burst out laughing.

“Oh my God. Austin. Seriously?”

“Oh come on. Give me a break. I kept you on a pedestal. You were Colt. I didn’t want to think of you with someone else. It kept you as mine, always.”

Well shit, what the hell do I say to that? I can’t go and say that I did the same, because I didn’t. When I eventually got over Austin, I went out and had some fun.

“Sorry Austin, but you’re going to have to take me off that pedestal. I have calmed down now, but I think I was what you would call a player. I never wanted a serious relationship. Just fun.”

“Do you still want that?” Austin asks, and suddenly I’m not sure I want to continue this conversation.

“No,” I tell him honestly. “I want what Gran and Pops had. Maybe one day, but at the moment the ranch comes first. When I meet a man that can accept that, I will be

happy. Until then, I'm happy being single."

Austin goes quiet on me after this, and now there's an awkward tension in the truck, one that wasn't there earlier. I knew talking about relationships was going to be a bad idea. I need to figure out a way to get this back onto a lighter topic.

"So, I'm guessing you have traveled quite a bit, doing the games. Been anywhere else during Christmas time?" I ask.

"I've traveled, but London was the only place that I traveled to at Christmas. The developers always want to get the games released close to Christmas to maximize sales." Austin adds, but his voice has changed. I want to kick myself, but neither of us can change the last fifteen years.

"Austin," I ask, gently. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," he replies, but there is more behind that word. "It's just that part of me wishes I had been there. Been your first for everything, not just kisses."

"But you weren't. I thought you were never coming back, so I eventually moved on."

"But I'm back now. We kissed. It was epic again."

"Austin. We are better off as friends." Even as I say the words, I'm not sure I believe them. I said I had moved on, but had I really? In the back of my mind, I always wondered what Austin was up to. Had he met someone, had he settled down? Most importantly, was he happy?

"Friends." Austin says back to me, but I don't think it's in confirmation, more like he's trying the word out.

We don't say anything more, but at the next bend in the road, I see the Christmas tree farm ahead of us. It's all lit up, and looks like a giant Santa grotto. Hopefully this will cheer Austin up, and get us off this subject.

"Look," I say, glancing over to him. "Up ahead."

"What the..."

"Welcome to the Christmas tree farm," I say over to him.

Pulling off the main road, I drive up the dirt road, pulling into a parking lot. Every year, getting the trees had been my favorite task, and even after the tense conversation in the truck, I was glad that Austin was here, too.

"Colt," A voice sounds behind me.

"Holly." I go over to her and pull her into a hug. "So good to see you."

"You, too. I was so happy to hear that you were still doing the festival. Sorry about Pops, he was a good man."

"He was," I confirm. "Holly, let me introduce you to Pop's grandson, Austin."

"Hi," Holly says, reaching out her hand to him.

"Austin is taking over the ranch and likes fake trees," I say, and Austin's head snaps in my direction, before looking over to Holly.

"Fake trees!" Holly exclaims and turns to me. "You brought a heathen to my farm and now expect free trees?"

“I, um,” Austin states, nervously. “I’ve never had a real tree before.”

Holly and I burst out laughing at the look on Austin’s face, and when he realizes that we’re teasing him, he mumbles something under his breath, that sounds very much like ‘I hate you’.

“The trees are this way,” Holly says, as she leads us over to a pile set aside for us. Holly and her family have always given us the best trees, they said it was for a good cause and saves them from going to waste. Plus, it helps that we’ve been friends for years, too. As always, they look lush and green, and I can already smell them, that rich pine smell you can only get from freshly cut trees.

“Oh my God, they smell so good,” Austin states.

“Told you,” I say, giving him a smile.

Austin walks over to the pile and runs his hands over the netted trees, and I can’t help but smile, watching him.

“I approve,” Holly says, coming over to me. “He’s cute.”

“Shut up, Holly. We’re just friends,” I say.

“Then stop looking at him like you want to devour him.”

Before I’m able to answer her, she’s walking over to Austin, and talking to him about the trees, and you can just see from Austin’s reaction that he’s listening, paying attention and loving every second, and I can’t help but smile again. Because Holly is right, he is cute.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

So there was no way that I was going to admit this to Colt, but he'd been right, having a real Christmas tree in the house is amazing. The smell of it seems to have spread to every room. The house smells like Christmas.

It's been two days since we came back from the Christmas tree farm. All ten trees had been placed in the barn. Two outside, and eight inside, all set in different places. We had them all decorated already. It didn't take us long to get them finished because there wasn't a huge amount of decorations, but they still looked good. My favorite thing that we, well no, I purchased at the farm was a huge Christmas wreath. I had seen Colt staring at it, knew that he wanted it, and I also knew that it would look so good above the barn door.

Holly had explained that they were a new venture this year. Made with branches from trees that couldn't be sold. So, she stripped the branches off and made them into wreaths. They even came with lights, not something Colt was aware of, he just thought it was for display purposes. Colt hadn't been happy I bought it, especially when it just barely fit in the back of the truck once all the trees were in there. He kept saying that the trees were enough.

When we had gotten back to the ranch and spent far too many hours getting it in place, Colt had to admit that it did look good, and that he was glad that I had bought it. That it had been nice to add something new to the festival.

But that was two days ago now, and we really hadn't spoken much. We had been so busy that I'm amazed that we had any time to eat. Between collecting the donated toys that Santa would give out, to sorting out the animals, I was exhausted. Especially as I was staying up later working on my surprise.

“Austin!” And I can’t help the smile that is already on my lips at hearing Colt shout my name.

“Living room!” I yell back from my position on the floor.

At the moment, I have all the toys laid out in front of me, and I’m trying to organize them into ages, so that age appropriate toys are given out. Something that’s taking me a lot longer to sort out than I had planned, and they still need to be wrapped. Maybe I can persuade Colt to stay and help.

“Hey,” I say over to him, as he walks in the room, but then he stops dead in his tracks.

“You haven’t decorated the tree.”

“What?” And I follow his line of sight to my tree in the corner. “Oh, no, not yet.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because we’ve been busy.”

“That’s not a good enough excuse. Mine is all done. I couldn’t leave it bare like that,” Colt adds, and he genuinely looks appalled that I haven’t decorated it yet.

“Colt, I still have no decorations,” I argue.

“Bullshit. Come with me.” He holds out his hand to me, and I’m not sure if it’s to lead me to the decorations, or help me up off the floor, but I take his hand and try to ignore the jolts of electricity running up my arm at the connection.

Colt doesn’t let go of my hand like I thought he would, and leads me through the

living room, up some stairs, and then down a corridor to another door. Only then does he drop my hand, and I miss the connection already.

“Here,” Colt states as he opens the door and flicks on a light switch, illuminating the stairs, and the space above. “We are getting Gran’s decorations out and taking care of this house.”

“Tonight?” As I look at my watch and see the time.

“Yes, tonight.” He spots me looking at my watch. “You can sleep in tomorrow. Meet me at six,” Colt huffs out.

“I can get up,” I argue, but the thought of having an extra couple of hours in bed sounds appealing.

“Yeah. Okay. I will believe that when I see it. Now come on. I know where the boxes are,” Colt says, and he walks up the stairs.

For the next ten minutes we carry boxes down from the loft that are labeled Christmas, and place them on the living room floor

“Now, one of these is all the Christmas tree stuff. If we can get that decorated tonight that will be something,” Colt adds.

“But what about all the toys? They need to be wrapped. We’re running out of time,” I tell him, as I point to the pile of toys.

“I’ll come around tomorrow and help. With the two of us doing it, it won’t take long,” Colt adds, but he’s already opening boxes, and yelps in triumph when he finds the box he was looking for.

My only problem is that I don't want to help Colt decorate the tree, or the rest of the house, I want to stand on the sideline and watch him do it all. The smile on his face is breathtaking. Joy is pouring out of him as he starts to pull out baubles and lights.

"Test these," Colt asks, as he hands me a coiled up string of lights. "I know that I checked them before I put them away last year, but still..."

Doing as I'm told, I plug in the lights and they all start lighting up. I thought that they might be multi-colored ones, I always remember Gran having multi-colored lights when I was little, but these are all clear.

"They're not colored lights," I say, but I'm not really talking to Colt, more like talking out loud.

"Yeah, Gran changed them a few years ago. When they're on the tree, they look a lot better, trust me," Colt replies, as he takes the lights out of my hands.

I watch, fascinated, as he strings the lights around the tree, taking his time, and then once he's done, he steps back to look at his handiwork, before going over and adjusting the lights.

"What are you doing?" I ask, as he walks over and turns the living room lights off.

"Checking for gaps?" Colt tells me, like I'm going to understand that.

"What gaps?"

"Gaps on the tree where there are no lights. Look, here," Colt answers, as he walks back over to the tree, and points to an area that is darker, before he adjusts the lights again, and walks back around the tree.

“Happy?” I ask, biting my lip to stop laughing.

“Light placement is the most important part of tree decorating. It can make or break the look,” Colt replies, and I lose it. I’m not able to contain my laughter anymore.

“Seriously, Colt. It’s just a tree,” I say over to him.

“Maybe. But it’s the focal point of Christmas. For me at least,” Colt adds, and there is a hint of something in his voice, and I remember him saying something about decorating the tree for Christmas with his grandparents.

“Okay,” I start. “Show me what to do. Is there a special plan for where to place the baubles? Do they need to go a certain way?” I ask, as I turn the lights back on, and go over to stand next to him.

“Shut up,” Colt replies, as he gives me a smile. “I like doing this, okay?”

“Colt. I can clearly see that, but it’s still just a tree.” And I bump my hip with his and am rewarded with a chuckle.

“Fine. There isn’t a special technique to bauble placement. It’s a feeling. Like, you know, the bauble wants to hang there,” Colt says.

“Oh my God. You’ve got to be kidding me. There is no way you think that.”

Colt doesn’t say anything for a moment, and he looks so serious. Holy shit, he genuinely thinks that. Oh, I can’t.

“Of course I’m teasing you.” Colt finally says a smile spreading across his face, “lights are important. Baubles, it’s a free for all. Gran had favorite ones that she liked to place at the front, but other than that there isn’t a plan.”

“You enjoyed that way too much,” I say over to him.

“Just like you enjoyed the teasing about the lights. I would say that we’re even.”

“Fair point,” I reply, and the smile that Colt gives me has a warm glow rushing through my veins, and I have to fight the urge to reach out and touch him. To pull him into my arms and kiss him. To tell him that we could be so much more than friends.

“Austin, standing around is not going to get this tree done. Come on. I want to get to bed at some point tonight.”

“You could stay here.” The words fall from my lips, unaided, and hang between us. I only meant in the house, but even I could hear the invitation laced in the words to join me in my bed.

“We’re friends,” Colt replies, gently.

“I meant the spare room. I swear.”

“I’ll go home, Austin,” Colt confirms, before he bends down and picks up a small box, opening it up, and starting to place decorations on the tree.

Needing to put some space between us, even if it’s just the tree, I pick up another box and go to the back of the tree, and start placing the decorations on the branches, but I soon find myself taking them off and rearranging them.

“Okay, my turn. What are you doing? I have seen you put that decoration on the tree at least three times now,” Colt asks, making me jump, and when I look over to him, he has a bemused expression on his face.

“The colors,” I reply, like this is going to explain my thinking.

“Yes, they’re colored decorations,” Colt replies.

“No, look,” I say over to him, because I don’t think that I’m going to be able to explain my thinking.

Colt comes over to stand next to me and I show him what I’ve done. All the decorations have been grouped by color but done in a way so that they almost blend into the next shade.

“Holy shit, Austin. That is amazing. We’re going to have to move the tree. This can’t be at the back,” Colt exclaims.

“Or I can just do it at the front,” I tell him, and walk around him to where he was decorating, and within a few minutes, I have moved all the decorations around so that I have the same effect.

“There is one special decoration that Gran always left till last, before she added the angel,” Colt adds, as he reaches down and pulls out what looks like a ball of bubble wrap. He carefully unwraps it and holds up the most gorgeous decoration. It looks like it’s made of glass, with a wide ball at the top that has bands of blue and red that start at the top and twist around to the bottom, which is edged with gold. The bottom then extends down into a thin point.

“Oh, that is gorgeous,” I exclaim.

“Pops had it made for Gran. It became her most cherished decoration,” Colt adds. “Here.” And he hands it to me. Taking it from him, I gently hold it in my hands before placing it on one of the center branches.

Taking a step back, I look at the tree and I have to admit that the tree looks stunning. The clear lights, reflecting on the shiny surface of the decorations makes it look enchanting. There is something missing, but I have no idea what.

“Something is missing?” I say over to Colt.

“This,” Colt replies, holding up an angel figurine.

“I remember her,” I say, as I take the angel out of his hands, and run a finger over the gold dress and over the wings. I remember Gran giving her to me to place on the top of the tree. I can’t believe she still has her. “Colt.”

On hearing his name being called, he looks over to me, giving me another smile, and I can’t help but copy him as I hand him the angel.

“Austin?” he questions, confused, looking at the angel, but not taking it from me.

“I wouldn’t have decorated this tree tonight. I wouldn’t have learned about ideal light placement if it wasn’t for you. I think you deserve to give the tree its crowning glory.”

Colt takes the angel, and standing on his tippy toes, places her on top of the tree, and even moves her dress about so that it’s bent in at places.

“Thank you,” I say over to him, and not for the first time, I wish I could kiss him, and in that moment, tell him how much he means to me. Because over the space of this evening, watching Colt’s joy at decorating a tree, I have realized that I love that man more than I ever thought possible.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

It hadn't been my intention to stay and decorate Austin's tree, I only came over to talk to him about the weather forecast. The winter storm they predicted, which I'd hoped was going to miss us, looks like it was hitting us directly. If it's bad, then the whole festival is going to be in jeopardy. But all thoughts of the weather had gone out the window on seeing the bare tree.

The tree was now decorated, and it looked stunning. The way Austin had placed the baubles was something else. I swear this tree wouldn't look out of place in a window display at those fancy department stores.

"Oh, look, it's snowing," Austin states.

Shit. I really didn't need to hear that.

"Crap," I exclaim, more loudly than I intended.

"What's up?"

"That was the reason that I came over." I join Austin, who has moved to one of the windows, and is looking out. "The winter storm I told you about, looks like it's going to hit our area, and this could be the start of it."

"How bad are we talking? Enough to close the festival?"

"Enough," I confirm. "I'm hoping that they got it wrong, or that it shifts direction, but considering that it's already starting, it's not looking good."

“So, what’s the plan?”

“The animals will take priority over the festival, keeping them safe. With regards to the festival, we keep going. Just in case a miracle happens.”

“Okay,” Austin confirms, but I can hear the uncertainty in his voice.

“It will be okay. If the festival needs to be canceled, it can be rearranged for the New Year, or something.”

“It wouldn’t be the same.”

Austin was right, it wouldn’t be the same, and all of our hard work would have gone to waste. In all the years Gran and Pops had been running it, the weather had never caused it to close. We’d had some close calls, but not like this.

“Let’s just see what tomorrow brings. But I better get going.”

“You can still stay,” Austin states again, and there’s a part of me that wants to. But I can’t. I need to stay level headed. I need to keep Austin in the friend zone, regardless of the amount of time I’ve wanted to pull him into my arms and kiss him.

“I’ll head home. See you at six.”

“I can make four,” Austin says, but I don’t think he even believes those words.

“It’s okay.”

“No, I will see you at four.” And this time, there is a more determined edge to his voice, “Especially with the weather.”

“Okay, Austin. See you at four.”

I pause for a moment before turning and walking out of the living room, into the kitchen. Putting my boots back on, I open the door, and a blast of cold air hits me. The temperature has dropped in just the few hours that I was with Austin. All signs that I didn’t want to see. I love winter, but I hate the storms.

Looking up at the sky, all I can see are small flakes of snow falling. It’s not falling fast, but it’s already starting to settle, and a thin layer of white is covering everything. As I open the door to my home, I mentally cross my fingers that it stays like this, because it would mean that maybe only a few inches would fall. That amount of snow is something I could cope with.

Slowly opening my eyes, I wait for them to adjust to the darkness, when a sound catches my attention. Pausing, I wait, and there it is again. The slight rattle of my windows. And my stomach hits the floor. If the wind is blowing hard enough that it’s causing my windows to rattle, then the storm has hit us.

Throwing back the covers, I ignore how cold the house feels, and race over to the window, and as I peer out, I don’t see the small gentle flakes from last night, I see large flakes swirling around in the wind. The weather forecast never mentioned a blizzard, but that looks like what we have.

Quickly getting dressed, I race downstairs, completely forgoing my breakfast, and get outside. The snow is deep. Really deep. I’m guessing that the road is already blocked. But that’s something to check later. First, I need to check the animals.

“Colt.” I hear my name in the wind, and when I look around, I see Austin racing over to me.

“Austin, what are you doing up?”

I have an alarm set every morning for three, but I always seem to wake just before it goes off, and considering I just raced out of the house, it was still too early for Austin to be meeting me.

“The wind woke me up,” Austin states. “Then I saw this,” as he points around us. “I thought you might be up, so I came out to help. Where do you need me?”

I’m not sure what I was expecting from Austin, but this cool and ready for action Austin wasn’t it. I thought that maybe his first experience with a storm might be the one thing that pushed him over the edge. That this would get him to re-think the whole idea of running a ranch, but here he is, eager and waiting for instructions.

“Chickens,” I start, “check on them. Make sure they can’t get out. We should have put some heaters on last night, so hopefully, we haven’t lost any. When you’re done, come find me in the cattle shed.”

Austin doesn’t say anything. Instead, he turns around and heads off towards the chickens, and I can’t help but smile and allow myself the thought about how nice it would be to run this place together. I wanted a man who understood that the ranch and the animals came first, and it looked like here he was. No. Shaking my head to dispel the thought, I turn and head over to the cattle shed. I need to stop thinking about Austin as boyfriend material. I need to think of him as my boss, and friend. In the new year, I’m going to need to start dating again.

I have no idea how long Austin took in sorting out the chickens, but when he comes into the cattle shed, there is a sad look on his face, and I’m guessing we lost some. I know that face. That’s the face of someone dealing with the death of an animal for the first time.

“How many?” I ask, as I go over to him.

“Two,” he mumbles, and I almost want to laugh. From the look on his face, I would have thought we’d lost at least half of them. But chickens can withstand the cold. Their feathers are great insulators, and they fluff them to create an even warmer coat.

“Just the two. We were lucky,” I say over to him. but I don’t think my words have helped, and without thinking, I pull him into my arms.

“But...” Austin says into my shirt.

“Austin,” and I push him back to look at him. “You live on a ranch; you are going to lose animals. That’s sadly a fact. Yes, it sucks.”

“So, what do we do with the chickens now?”

Oh, I don’t think he’s going to like this answer. “Well, they were good chickens. I can prep them and....” I trail off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

“You want to eat them?” The horror in his voice is actually kinda cute.

“Yes. I can get them ready. There’s a good chance we’re going to get snowed in. This is good food. These weren’t pets. These were livestock.”

Austin lets my words sink in for a moment before he steps forward and wraps his arms back around me. I think that he needs the comfort, and so, I wrap my arms back around him, and just hold him.

Eventually, Austin takes a deep breath, and steps out of my hold. He still looks a little lost, but some of the sadness has left his eyes. This is the harsh reality of what this life is like. If he’s going to stay here, then this is something he’s going to have to get used to it.

“Okay. What’s next?” he asks.

“Can you check on the horses? Make sure they have enough hay etc. and then it will be time to retreat indoors. We’ll check on the animals again when we can, and hope it stops snowing soon.”

It didn’t stop snowing. This had to be one of the worst storms I have experienced in more than a decade. The local sheriff called my cell to check on us and he confirmed that the roads were blocked. Not that we had any chance to get to them even if we wanted to.

Austin seemed to be coping better, and he was there when we went to check on the animals, but I was exhausted. I had been trying to shovel snow so that we had clear routes around the ranch, but it felt like as soon as one area got cleared it was full again, and by the time I called it a day, I was ready for a hot shower, food, and bed. I know I promised Austin to help wrap the presents, but there wasn’t really any point. The festival was going to be canceled.

Opening the door to my house, I was expecting the heat to hit me, and I was surprised when it didn’t, and then I had a vague memory from this morning of the house being cold. Going over to the kitchen sink, I turn on the taps and nothing. Fuck. The pipes must have frozen. Not what I needed.

Going over to the stove, I look at the pot of soup that I had made yesterday. My stove was gas so I would be able to heat it up, and that would warm me up, but all I really wanted was a hot shower. I needed to feel warm water all over my body. Looking over to my kitchen door, I wonder if my idea is a good one or a bad one, and before I second guess myself, I grab my sleeping bag from a storage cupboard in the corner. Then I pull my boots on, before getting the soup from the stove top, and heading back out into the storm.

Walking across the ranch feels like it takes forever as I battle the wind and snow, but finally, I'm at the ranch house, and I open the door. Maybe I should've stopped and knocked and waited to be invited in, but old habits die hard. I had gotten used to walking in whenever I wanted.

"Colt?" Austin says, sounding surprised as he looks up at me from the kitchen table where he's currently surrounded by wrapping paper and toys.

"Sorry. I should've knocked."

"Nonsense," Austin replies, giving me a smile that fills me with warmth more than the shower I want.

"The pipes froze at my place," I start. "Can I grab a shower, and I was hoping maybe I could crash here?"

"Oh, shit. Yes, of course," Austin answers.

"I come bearing soup as a thank you," I tell him.

"Yes. That's a thank you I like," Austin states, as he gets out of the chair and comes over to me, taking the pot out of my hand. "And that?"

"Sleeping bag. I guessed that there wouldn't be a bed made up."

"Well, I never stripped the beds from when my parents were here. It was on my to-do list, but then I also thought, what was the point if they were coming back?" A slight blush tints Austin's cheeks at admitting that, but if I had been in his shoes, I would have done the same thing.

"You might want to check that. My guess, all flights are grounded, and the sheriff

called me. Confirmed that the road is closed.”

“That never even occurred to me. I’ll need to call them, but for now, you go have your shower. I will slowly warm up the soup, and make some space over there, and when you’re done, we can eat.”

“Sounds good.”

“Didn’t you bring a change of clothes?” Austin asks, as he looks around me.

“Um, no.” Now it’s me feeling embarrassed.

“Well, I would offer you some of mine, but I think they might be a little small on you. You are more buff than me.”

“You think I’m buff?” The words fall from my lips, and I can feel myself smiling.

“Have you seen your arms?”

“It’s not something I have noticed.”

“Believe me, they are noticeable. All big and strong.” I actually think Austin sighs on the last word, which is my cue to leave before I do something stupid like pull him forward and kiss him till morning.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

I know that I shouldn't be happy that the pipes froze in Colt's home, but I am. It means he's here with me. He's going to be spending the night. I just wish I could figure out a way to get him into my bed. We wouldn't even need to do anything, but having his body lying next to me? God that sounded so good, yet I think it's also a fantasy.

Walking over to the stove, I turn the flame to low, so that the soup heats up slowly, but it still doesn't take long for the smell of the soup to fill the kitchen. My mouth starts to salivate with the aroma. Hopefully, Colt isn't into long hot showers, so we can eat soon.

Going back to the kitchen table, I try to get back to the task I was doing before Colt walked in, but I can't focus. All I find myself doing is listening for sounds of the shower turning off. Which, in itself, is useless as I'm not going to hear it in the kitchen.

"God, that feels better," Colt's voice sounds behind me, causing me to jump, and Colt to laugh. But his laugh is deep and throaty, and it's like I can feel it in my bones. Fuck, it's hot.

"Ready for some food?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Definitely. But I can dish it up if you want to make some room on the table," Colt replies, with a nod in the direction of the table.

"Deal."

Colt moves over to the stove, and I give myself the opportunity to look over at him. I was expecting him to be in the same clothes that he was earlier, but he's dressed in gray sweatpants, and a matching hoodie.

"You found some clothes?"

"Well, you sidetracked me with the whole buff thing. Gran always made me leave a spare change of clothes here, just in case."

"Sounds like Gran." But I send a silent thanks to her, because Colt dressed like that was a sight to behold.

"So, are you ready?"

"Sorry, yes." I quickly move the toy that was on the table, and the wrapping paper as Colt places a steaming bowl of soup in front of me.

We both sit and eat in silence, but after the day we've had, it's not surprising. Yet, it's also comfortable. Like it was when we went to the Christmas tree farm. There is no need for small talk. Eventually, we both finish, and Colt gets up from the table, and takes both of our bowls over to the sink, rinses them out, and places them on the side to dry.

"It's still snowing outside," Colt says, and I'm not sure if he's just talking out loud or telling me.

"Is that bad?"

"It's not good," Colt replies. "Any tracks that we made to get to the animals will be gone. So that's going to mean more shoveling. But they'll be okay overnight, which is the main thing."

“We can do it together in the morning. You know the saying: two pairs of hands are better than one. Do you know when it’s supposed to stop?” Giving him a smile.

“The forecast said that the storm should pass overnight, and I’m hoping that they have that right,” Colt adds, looking out the window before turning back to me. “What are you doing, anyway?”

“Wrapping presents, for the kids.” But I would’ve thought that was obvious.

“Again, why?”

“For the festival.”

“Austin, there is no way the festival will be happening now. Even if it stops snowing overnight, it’s going to take a few days before we can get out.”

“Well, I’m going to get everything ready just in case. We have two days. Anything can happen in two days.”

Colt opens his mouth to say something, but closes it again, turns back to the window and looks outside again, before heaving a big sigh, turning and coming back over to join me.

“Pass me some toys. I may as well help, it will give us something to do.”

Laughing, I hand over some toys and wrapping paper. “Those are the toys for ages eight to ten. They go in that pile.”

Colt nods his head and starts to wrap, and you can see the concentration that’s on his face as he folds and tapes the paper in place. I keep thinking that at any moment he’s going to stick his tongue out. But he doesn’t.

“Done,” he announces, holding up the toy in triumph.

“Are you hoping for a trophy?” Smiling at him.

“That was a tricky present to wrap.”

“Colt, it was a square box. That’s not a tricky present to wrap. Those are the easiest. This,” and I hold up a baseball glove, “is an awkward present to wrap.”

“Okay then, you show me how it’s done.”

“Oh, the pressure.”

Placing the glove on the table, I measure out a length, making sure that it covers the glove with a little excess. Placing the glove to one side, I fold the paper so that the seam is in the middle, and overlap it, and tape it in place. Folding up the bottom by a couple of inches before opening it up, and folding in the corners, I seal that up with tape to make a bottom. Picking up the glove, I place it securely into the bag before folding down the top.

“You made a bag,” Colt exclaims.

“Yeah. Was a trick I learned a few years back.”

“You’re going to have to show me how to do that.”

“No problem.”

Getting up from my chair, I go and sit in the chair next to him, and help him make a bag, trying to ignore the jolts that tingle up my arm every time our fingers accidentally touch. Being this close to him, and not touching him, is torture.

“You’re a pro. Look at that,” as Colt finished his bag.

Just as Colt turns to me, the light flickers in the kitchen, before going out completely, throwing us into darkness.

“What’s happened?”

“I’m guessing the storm has knocked out the power,” Colt says, and I hear him shift next to me. The next thing I see is the kitchen being illuminated, via the light on Colt’s cell. “I’m going to check the fuse box, just in case. Gran used to keep some candles, holders, and matches in the drawer over there. If you can get some of them lit.”

Colt leaves the kitchen, throwing me back into darkness. Pulling out my cell, I turn on the light and make my way over to the drawer that Colt pointed to, pulling out the candles and placing them into the holders, before lighting one then turning off the light on my cell. If the power has gone out, then I’m going to need to conserve the battery.

A few minutes later, Colt reappears in the kitchen. “Fuses are fine. Looks like we’re out of power.”

“What do we do now?” And I don’t want to admit that I’m a little scared.

“We do what Gran did?” Colt replies, looking like his normal calm wonderful self.

“Which is?”

“We light the fire in the living room, get some blankets and hot chocolate, of course,” Colt replies, like this is something that I’m supposed to know.

“Of course.”

Even with the meager light from the candle, I can see the smirk on Colt’s face, and instead of annoying me, it makes me want to kiss him harder. Especially the way the shadows dance on his face.

“Give me a couple candles, I will get the fire going and get the blankets. You do the hot chocolate. Blackouts were one of the reasons Gran and Pops purchased the gas stove. It meant they were always able to get hot water that way.”

“Okay,” I reply, but I’m still not sure.

“Austin.” Colt calls my name. “It will be fine. This isn’t my first blackout, and it won’t be my last.”

“Yeah, but this is my first one,” I reply.

“It will be okay. Trust me. Just start making the hot chocolate, alright?”

I’m not sure if Colt still sees the uncertainty on my face, but he takes a step closer to me, and places a hand under my chin, lifting my head. I hadn’t even noticed that my head had dropped so I was staring at the floor.

“Austin, I promise it will be okay.”

We stare at each other for a moment, and I’m willing Colt to close that gap between us. I think he wants to kiss me, and I know that I could initiate it myself, but I don’t, and then the moment is gone. Colt lets go of me and leaves the room.

I place my candle on the side, and I busy myself with getting some mugs, pouring some milk into a saucepan, and getting it on the stove. It might have only been

minutes since the power had gone out, but to me, the house was already starting to feel cold, though that could just be my mind playing tricks on me.

“How’s the hot chocolate coming?” Colt shouts from the living room.

“Almost done.”

Spooning some of the chocolate powder into the mugs, I pour in the steaming milk. Giving the hot chocolate a quick stir, I clean out the saucepan, placing it on the side to dry with our soup bowls from earlier.

Picking up the mugs, I walk into the living room, and I can feel the heat from the blazing fire, but what stops me in my tracks, and causes me to almost drop the mugs, are all the blankets and pillows laid out on the floor. The candles Colt took are placed around the room, casting shadows, and there is Colt sitting against one of the couches. It’s a scene right out of a romance movie. I had thought, when Colt mentioned blankets, that we would be sitting on the couches with the blankets wrapped around us.

“You, Gran, and Pops did this?” I ask, finally finding my voice, and getting my legs to move.

“Yeah. It puts us on the same level as the fire, and the blankets are for the cold floor,” Colt explains.

“I also grabbed Pops’ sleeping bag for you, and I got mine from the kitchen. We have enough wood to keep the fire going for a few hours, at least.”

I try to ignore the pang of disappointment that courses through my body at hearing Colt explain about the sleeping bags. On seeing the blankets on the floor, an image of the two of us lying on the floor, curled into each other, and covered with blankets had

popped into my head.

“That’s good,” I reply, handing Colt his mug.

“Want me to hold that for you?” Colt asks, as I look for a place to put my mug, so I can get on the floor.

“Thanks.”

Handing Colt my mug, I get down onto the floor and cover my legs with one of the blankets. When I’m settled, Colt leans forward, hands me my hot chocolate, and I take a sip.

“This will add to our day tomorrow, but we will have to bring in more wood. Thankfully, the pile is protected, so at least it won’t be damp. But you know that this officially cancels the festival.”

“Yeah,” I confirm. There is no way that it will be able to continue without power. This is not how I wanted my first festival to go.

“Gran and Pops would’ve been so proud of you. You know that right? This isn’t your fault,” Colt says over to me.

“I’m gutted,” I tell him, not just because the festival is canceled, but because I’m no longer able to do my surprise for Colt. Last night before the snow had gotten too heavy, I had managed to finish. I was so excited. It won’t be the same showing him after Christmas.

“I know. Me too. But this happens. It’s the life of a rancher,” Colt adds.

“But you love it. You have thrived,” I say over to him.



“I couldn’t do anything else. I wasn’t like you. I remember how good you were in school.”

“And I remember how good you were on the ranch,” I tell him. “I’m glad that you stayed with Gran and Pops, when I couldn’t.”

“Yeah well...” Colt doesn’t finish the sentence, and I think I know what he was going to say. That he loved this place, and there was no way he could leave. Because, honestly, I now feel the same, or maybe it’s that I can’t leave him.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

Cold. Why am I suddenly so cold? Opening my eyes, it takes me a moment to realize that I'm in the living room of the ranch house. Of course, the power had gone out, thankfully, after my shower. So at least I had been warm.

Poor Austin had looked terrified. He looked like a lost puppy in the candlelight, and I had wanted to kiss him so badly. Pull him into my arms, tell him that it was going to be okay, and that I was going to keep him safe. But I couldn't. There was that voice in the back of my mind telling me I would get hurt again.

So I'd walked away, gotten the fire going, and set up the blankets on the floor. We had talked for hours, and it had been nice. Eventually, the day had caught up to Austin and he'd fallen asleep. I made sure that he was covered with a blanket, and I had stoked the fire, but unusual for me, I must have fallen asleep too. My guess is that I was too preoccupied in making sure Austin was okay. Going over to check on him, he shivers slightly. Crap. This isn't good. I need to get him warm.

The fire has died down and there is a chill in the air. Going over to the fire, I blow on the embers, and am pleased to see them glow amber, it's not completely dead. I quickly get some kindling back on the embers, and keep blowing until a flame ignites, and quickly build up the fire.

I move the pillows from behind me, and place them in the middle, in front of the fire, and go over to Austin.

"Austin," I say gently, giving him a little shake.

"Colt," he replies, sleepily.

“The fire died down. You’re cold. Come and lie down in front of the fire.”

Austin doesn’t argue, and shuffles in front of the fire to lay down on the pillows. Getting all the blankets, I throw them over to him. I know I should go and get the sleeping bags. If I could get Austin into that, he would warm up in no time, but I don’t. Instead, I find myself shuffling up behind him, and pulling him up against my body, so that his back is flush against my chest.

“Colt,” Austin’s voice sounds.

“Body heat,” I whisper into his back. “Quickest way to warm you up.”

Austin doesn’t say anything more, but I feel him relax in my arms as he falls back asleep in my arms, and I just keep holding him tight against me, as I feel him warm back up as he lays next to me.

Once his body is warm, and he isn’t shivering, I know that I should let him go. That he will be fine. But I don’t. I’m enjoying lying here with him in my arms. Making one of my many Austin fantasies come true. I lost count of the number of times I dreamed of this situation. Although we do have more clothes on than in my fantasy.

Needing to feel that warmth, I gently pull him closer to me for a second. I need to make the most of this before he wakes up, and this is over, and I know that I shouldn’t, but, leaning forward, I place a kiss in the middle of his back, just at the base of his neck. The one place where there is some skin exposed.

Austin twists in my arms so that he’s facing me. He was awake. He doesn’t say anything. Just lays there looking at me, but he doesn’t need any words. I know that he wants me, and who am I fooling, I want him.

Leaning forward, I connect our lips. His lips are slightly damp beneath mine, from

where he licked his lips, and I need more. Pushing my tongue forward, Austin opens up for me, as he shuffles closer, and wraps an arm around me. Our tongues twist and turn around each other as the kiss deepens. Fuck, this man can kiss.

Austin runs a hand underneath my hoodie, and it's like he's trailing lines of fire over my skin, then he's grabbing hold of the bottom, and I can feel him pulling it up my chest.

"Colt?" Austin asks, pausing, and I know what he's asking. Do I want this? And I know that if I told him to let go, he would.

"Take it off," I reply.

"You sure?" Austin asks.

"No," I reply, honestly. "But I know that I want you."

Austin lets go of my hoodie and tries to pull out of my arms, but I don't give him the chance. I'm mentally kicking myself for being honest, while at the same time loving Austin even more for stopping. Love. Where did this come from? Austin looks over to me, and I can't say when it happened, but over the last few weeks, I fell back in love with him. I know that. I might have been telling myself we were friends, but I was wrong.

Every morning, I look forward to seeing him. I look forward to walking the ranch with him. Talking like we used to when we were fifteen. The walls I had built after he left had slowly been dismantled, and I hadn't even noticed.

Austin has shifted away from me, and I can't have that. I need him. Want him. Sitting up, I grab hold of the hem of my hoodie, and pull it over my head, and watch as Austin's eyes widen slightly at the sight. I think he likes what he sees.

“Austin.” His name feather light on my tongue.

“I won’t do anything you aren’t sure of,” he replies, and God, this man is going to be the death of me.

“I know that I want this. Want you.” And deciding to be bold, I reach forward and take hold of Austin’s hand. I run it down the front of my chest but keep going until it rests over my dick.

“Fuck me!” Austin exclaims, as he cups my dick.

“Actually, that’s what I was hoping for,” I whisper back.

“Colt, I want you too, but I want this.” And he points to me and him. “This can’t be a one-night stand, power outage thing. I can’t go back to just being friends. If that’s what you want, it needs to stop now.” And he lets go of my dick.

“I’m not a one-night stand type of guy. I can’t deny this anymore. We have something.” And I close the gap and seal his lips with mine. I need Austin to know that there would be no going back from this for me either.

“Colt,” Austin says, pushing me back. “Condoms, lube?”

“Umm...” Fuck, I don’t have either. When I came over this evening, this was the last thing on my mind.

“I have some in my room,” Austin says. “We can move there.”

“Fire,” I say. “Warmth, plus it’s kind of romantic.”

“Okay, I’ll run and get some,” Austin says, as he gives me a quick kiss, throws off

the covers, turns on the flashlight on his phone, and vanishes upstairs. The candles have long since burned out. I should go and get some more from the kitchen, but all I do is add more logs on the fire.

“Colt,” Austin states.

“Hey,” I reply, as Austin joins me back on the floor, a strip of condoms and a tube of lube in his hand. “Hopeful, are we?”

“With you, I’m always hopeful,” Austin replies.

Fuck, this man. Pulling him forward, I lock lips with him, we are spending way too much time talking. I need to explore this man. I need to learn every inch of his body. Need to learn what he likes, and more than anything, I need to hear him scream my name as he comes.

I deepen the kiss as I slowly unbutton the flannel shirt he’s wearing, running my hands over his chest before slipping it off his shoulders. Only then do I break the kiss, so I get my first glimpse of his naked chest, and he’s stunning. He has a small patch of hair in the center of his chest, and I can’t resist running my finger through it. Fuck, it feels so good.

“I’m not like you,” Austin whispers.

“No, you’re not,” I confirm, as I place a small kiss on the patch of hair. “I need to see all of you.”

“Undress me then,” Austin replies.

There is no need to ask me twice, as I pop the button of his jeans, and pull them down his legs, taking his boxers with them. His dick springs free. My imagination hadn’t

done justice to Austin's dick. Throwing his jeans and boxers away from us, I take hold of Austin's dick in my hand, slowly pumping up and down his length, and I am rewarded with a moan from Austin.

"Not fair," comes a breathy response from Austin.

"What's not fair?" I ask.

"You're not naked."

"True."

Getting up to my feet, making sure that I'm standing in the light of the fire, I push down my sweats, and I hear the gasp from Austin as I pull them off, leaving me naked in front of him.

"Jesus Christ," he exclaims.

"You like what you see?" I ask.

"Yeah." Austin rushes the word out and I can't help but chuckle.

Getting back down onto the floor with Austin, we lay opposite each other for a moment. Just looking at each other. For me, this has been fifteen years coming, and part of me wants to savor every second of this, but I also want to feel him wrapped around my dick.

"Kiss me?" Austin asks.

I am not going to deny this man anything at the moment, and I close the gap between us, locking our lips together, our tongues instantly twisting around each other as the

kiss deepens. Our hard dicks are rubbing against each other, when I feel a hand go around us. Fuck, he's pumping us together.

"Colt, I have wanted you for fifteen years, please..."

"You can't wait a few more minutes?" I ask, as I place kisses on the side of his cheek.

"No."

"Lube, condoms."

Austin reaches around and passes me the condoms and lube. I rip off one and throw the rest onto the couch, as I move so that I'm lying on top of him, grinding my dick into his. Placing a quick kiss on his lips, I begin to trail a line of kisses down his body, resisting the urge to take his nipples into my mouth.

When I reach his dick, I know I'm going to need to taste him. Running my tongue up his length, I lap up the pearl of pre-cum from his head, before swallowing him whole, causing Austin to yell out 'fuck'. I travel up and down his dick, running my tongue around his head.

"Colt please..." Austin begs.

Letting go of his dick, I sit back on my heels and spread his legs open, pushing his feet so they are flat on the floor. Picking up the bottle of lube, popping it open, I squeeze some out and cover my fingers.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Hell yes."



I run my finger around his entrance before slowly pushing it inside, pausing when I get to my knuckle, so that I allow his body to adjust to my finger, before pushing further, until I hit the ring of muscle. I stop again and watch Austin, waiting for the signs that he's relaxing. Loving the light from the fire dancing over his skin.

Austin takes a deep breath, and I feel him relax around me. I push forward past the ring, crooking my finger and hitting his prostate, making Austin moan out in pleasure, and I can't help but smile. Sliding my finger in and out of him a few times, I hold for a second and take my time again. I want this to be good for him.

I start to scissor my fingers, stretching him open. I know that I'm not small, and I don't want to hurt him, but I want to make sure that he feels me tomorrow. I want to be the best he has ever had. It might make him stay.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Yes."

Picking up the condom, I rip open the packet, pulling it out and rolling it down my dick. Reaching for the lube, I squeeze some out, covering my dick. Placing my hands on his knees, I line myself up, and slowly push inside. It feels like some crazy dream, as I watch my dick slide into Austin. Something I have done a thousand times in my dreams. Reality is much better. Oh, fuck is it better.

Austin is warm and tight around me as I slide in and out of him, and before I know it, I can feel my orgasm building. I want us to come together.

Letting go of his knees, I cover his body with mine, taking hold of his hands, spreading them out as I place kisses on his neck, and I begin to move again. Slowly, but gradually picking up speed. Austin squeezes my hands as more moans fall from his lips. I adjust my angle on the next thrust in, and I hit his prostate. More moans

escape him and fuck, I have never been with someone so expressive, and I love it.

On my next thrust in, Austin clenches around me, and he screams out my name as he comes, pushing me over the edge, Austin's name falling from my lips. Fuck, this might have been quick, but holy hell, it was amazing. I collapse on top of him, both of us breathing hard, my head resting on his chest.

"That okay?" I ask, needing to know he enjoyed it just as much as me.

"Jesus, Colt. You are fucking amazing." He wraps his arms around me, placing a kiss on my forehead.

"I need to clean us up," I tell him, even though neither of us move.

"Do not fucking move. I have wanted to hold you like this for too damn long to let you go now," Austin whispers, and pulls me tighter to him, and I can't help but sigh with contentment.

I may have fought this. Told myself that this wasn't supposed to happen. I have tried to fool myself into believing that our chemistry wasn't there, but it was. This night has just proven that. I can't, and won't, lose this man. When I was fifteen, I didn't fight for him, but I'm older now, and I won't let him go again.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

Holy shit, I have just had sex with Colt, and he's still lying on top of me. I don't want to let him go. I just want to lie here, my arms wrapped around him. Keeping him close. Keeping the fantasy of us alive. If I let him go, what happens next? We both said that we didn't want this to be a one-night stand. That we both wanted more. But were these words just muttered in the moment? I know that I meant every word. I can't go back; I won't go back to being platonic friends.

"Austin, sweetheart," Colt whispers.

Sweetheart. Did I really just hear that right? I hadn't thought we were at a nickname stage, but I loved hearing it, all the same.

"Sweetheart?" I reply.

"Ummm." And Colt tries to wriggle in my arms, but I'm not going to let him go. "Sorry, that just slipped out."

"No, I'm not letting you go," I say and place a kiss on his forehead.

"I need to clean us up," Colt states, trying again to get out of my arms.

"But...."

"Austin please, I need to clean up. Dispose of the condom," Colt adds, and I reluctantly loosen my arm, because we really can't stay here. "Thank you. I'll only be gone a few minutes."

Colt shifts off me, and I miss his body warmth, so I move closer to the fire. I can hear Colt moving about in the kitchen. I have no idea what he's doing, but he's taking a long time to come back to me. Leaving me with my thoughts.

The sex was thousands of times better than what I ever imagined. Colt's body was firm, and my God, his dick. But, what now? We need to talk. We need to discuss what happens next. Where we go from here, and it needs to be an open and very honest conversation.

"Hey," Colt's voice sounds, as he gets back onto the floor with me, and wipes down my chest with a warm cloth.

"It's warm," I mumble.

"Yeah, I heated up some water," Colt explains. "That's why I took so long. Didn't want you to get cold again."

"Oh." Because I'm not sure what else to say.

"Are you hungry? I think we still have some soup."

"No, I'm good," I reply. "Colt?"

"Yeah."

"We need to talk," I tell him.

"Don't," Colt states, and there is an edge to his voice. "Don't do it again."

"Do what?" Wondering what the hell he's talking about.

“Don’t hurt me again.”

“Colt, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“You said we needed to talk. Every conversation I have ever had that started with those words has not ended well,” Colt adds.

“Colt, get rid of those clothes, and get your ass over here,” I demand.

Colt proceeds to throw the clothes into the corner of the blankets and sits next to me. This is the type of conversation that needs to happen face to face. Not when one is sitting and the other lying down. So, I shift positions so that I’m leaning against the couch.

“Colt,” I start. “I have no intentions of hurting you again,” I tell him. “But I think we’ve both been denying our feelings, or more likely, you have been fighting your feelings for me. I know full well how I feel about you.”

“Oh,” Colt starts.

“Yeah, oh, so come over here,” I say over to him, and hold out my arm to him in invitation to sit next to me.

Colt moves over and sits next to me, and I wrap my arm around him and pull him closer to me. Loving that his body warmth is next to mine. The fire is good, but Colt is better at keeping me warm.

“I never imagined I would be sitting here naked with you,” Colt says into the room.

“Me too. After that first day, I thought you were going to hate me forever.”

“I never hated you, not really,” Colt replies. “I just wanted to. You stood in that kitchen looking sexy as hell. You hadn’t changed, and I hated that I instantly wanted you again.”

“You know, I thought the same thing,” I say, laughing.

“So what, are we dating now?” Colt asks.

“I don’t know what we are,” I reply honestly. “As you said, the ranch has to come first for the both of us, and I know that I want to work with you.”

“Me too,” Colt confirms.

“But I also want to be able to hold you, kiss you, and you need to fuck me like that again, because holy hell.”

I hear a chuckle come from Colt and I think I feel him relax.

“I like those terms.”

“Good.” I pause for a minute. “Do you think we need to get some sleep? Do you have any idea what the time is?”

“No idea, but I would guess that we would need to be getting up soon,” Colt replies, and then, as if on cue, my cell starts beeping as my alarm goes off, causing Colt to laugh, “told you.”

“Do you have to get up?” Wondering if I can try and persuade Colt to maybe sleep in with me.

“The animals still need to be checked.”

“But maybe with all the snow we can delay it for an hour? The animals aren’t going anywhere today.” And I try to give him my best puppy dog pleading look.

Colt hesitates for a moment, and when I turn to look at him, I see the smile on his face, and his resolve wavering, “I thought we said that the ranch came first.”

“Oh, it does,” I say as I remove my arm from around him and move so that I’m straddling his lap. “But maybe we can bend the rules today. Plus, I set my alarm for an hour before we normally meet. So…” And I lean down and connect our lips, our tongues invading each other’s mouths, deepening the kiss instantly, and I feel Colt getting hard underneath me, and wiggle against it.

“Oh, shit, you are going to be the death of me,” Colt says, and he wraps an arm around me, flipping me onto my back.

Colt places a kiss on my jawline, then one on my neck, and in the middle of my chest. I thought that he was going to trail kisses down my neck, but he doesn’t, instead, he takes one of my nipples into his mouth. Bites, and teases, and pleasure explodes through my body, and I can’t stop the moan that falls from my lips.

“You are so expressive,” Colt states, letting go of my nipple.

“Yeah,” I manage to get out, and I want to tell him that I have only been like this with him. That he seemed to understand my body better than anyone before him, but the words vanish as Colt goes back to placing kisses on my chest. He explores my other nipple and he is taking his time now. There is no rush, even though we should be, the animals need us, but I’m not going to stop him. I’m going to let him explore and taste every inch of my body.

Finally, he begins to travel down my body until he reaches my dick, where he runs a tongue up my length, before taking me whole. I don’t think he has a gag reflex, as I

feel my dick hit the back of his throat. Then he's sliding up and down my length, each time he gets to my head he runs his tongue around it.

"Colt." I breathe out his name as I feel my orgasm building under his touch.

"Think you can handle round two, or are you too sore?" Colt asks.

"I can handle it," I tell him, because I need to feel him inside me again.

Colt shifts around, and I hear the sound of the lube bottle being opened, as he spreads my legs, and I bend them, so my feet are flat on the floor. Then there is a cold finger running around my entrance and being pushed inside, and God, it feels good. I can feel the stretch, but he's still taking his time. I want to tell him to take me, that I'm still stretched enough, but I let Colt take control. Last time it was rushed, both of us needing to fulfill the fifteen-year-old fantasy.

Now, he's taking his time. He's learning what I like, what gives me the most pleasure, which is basically everything that he's doing to my body at this moment. A second finger is added, and I force myself to relax around him. Colt places a kiss on the side of my knee, and I feel the goosebumps travel over my skin.

"You ready?" Colt asks.

"Yeah," I breathe out.

Next thing I hear is the condom wrapper being opened, followed by the lube bottle, and then he's at my entrance, pushing in, my body stretching around him. Again, he takes his time, pausing to make sure that my body adjusts to him before pushing forward.

When he's fully seated, he leans forward and takes hold of my hands, lacing our



fingers together, and squeezing tight. Only then does he start to move, slowly at first, and then starts to quicken his pace. I can feel my back arching up off the floor, pleasure flowing through every inch of my body.

Colt adjusts his stance, and on the next thrust in, he hits my prostate, causing me to yell out. He keeps this position, sliding in and out of me, and my orgasm starts to build, and I want to ask him to slow down. I'm not ready to come. I want this to last longer, but I can't hold it back, as my orgasm crashes through me, and I'm coming all over my chest, without him ever having touched my dick.

The force of my orgasm has me tensing around Colt, and it pushes him over the edge. My name falls from his lips as he slams into me one last time, before collapsing on top of me, and letting go of my hands. He lies there on top of me for a moment before leaning back and carefully pulling out of me.

Part of me wants to pinch myself. Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe working in the snow yesterday has triggered some type of exhaustion-fueled sex dream, but when I feel a cold damp cloth being wiped over my chest, I know it's not a dream.

"Be right back," Colt whispers to me, as he gets up from the floor, goes into the kitchen and turns on the tap, and then I hear the sound of a cupboard opening. I really have no idea what he's doing, and I also don't really care.

When he returns a few minutes later, he joins me back on the floor, pulling blankets over us.

"Come on, let's nap. Only thirty minutes," Colt states, as he adjusts the pillows.

Rolling over onto my side, I face the fire and feel Colt's chest against my back, but it's freezing, and makes me jump.

“Shit, you're cold,” I tell him.

“I told you; body heat is the quickest way to warm up. So shut up and come closer,” Colt demands, and I nestle into Colt’s body as he throws blankets over us.

“What about the animals?” I ask, even though I can feel my eyelids closing on me. The whole night is starting to catch up with me.

“We’ll go see to them soon. But you get some sleep,” Colt tells me.

“What about you?”

“I’m awake now,” Colt replies. “I don’t think I can sleep. But I want to hold you for a while.”

“If you aren’t sleeping, then neither am I,” I demand, as I yawn, giving away that I’m tired.

“I can’t risk you being tired,” Colt adds. “So sweetheart, please get some sleep.”

Sweetheart, there is that name again. I don’t think he even noticed that he called me that again, but hearing it makes me smile. It’s a side of Colt that I never knew about. The thought makes me sad for a second, reminding me that there was more stuff that I missed out on.

“I like it when you call me sweetheart,” I mumble, and I feel Colt pull me closer to him, but I don’t hear what his reply is as sleep finally takes me.

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I don't fall asleep, but then I knew I wouldn't. I just lay there, Austin in my arms, wondering if this is real. If what happened tonight, twice, was real. But if this was a dream there is no way I would've made it this cold. So, yeah, this is real. Wonderfully real.

"Sweetheart," I whisper in his ear, a nickname that I never intended to call him, but the word had slipped out of my mouth. My grandpa used to call my grandma sweetheart; I always remember the smile it brought to her face. I never imagined that, one day, I would use it and get the same reaction.

"Hmmm," Austin mumbles.

"Your alarm is about to go off. Time to get up."

"No, stay comfy." And he snuggles in close to me and I can't help but chuckle.

"Animals, ranch. Remember?" And I place a kiss on the back of his head, just because I can now. "How about I stay tonight?"

"Yeah," Austin's sleepy voice sounds.

"I'm going to start on breakfast."

Detangling myself from Austin's grasp, I get up off the floor, find my sweatpants and hoodie, and quickly pull them on. I'm tempted to stoke the fire again, but there really is no point with us having to leave soon.

Once in the kitchen, I busy myself with lighting some candles and placing them on the kitchen table, and by the stove, before I start making some oatmeal and coffee. Both are warming, to keep us going while working in the cold. It's going to be a long day, but looking out of the window, I can see that the snow has at least stopped falling. The forecast had said that it could brighten up today. Which means that we should be able to clear some paths around the ranch.

"I don't think I'm ever going to get used to getting up at this time of the morning," Austin says as he walks into the kitchen with a blanket wrapped around him, and he goes over to the table and sits down.

"Austin," laughing at him, "you could have gotten dressed."

"No. Blankets are warm. Clothes are cold."

"If you stay, you are going to have to get used to cold winters. Putting on cold clothes."

"Colt, baby, I'm staying," Austin replies.

I don't think Austin realizes what he said, and I want to ask him about it, but I don't. Our relationship has changed so much in twenty-four hours. Part of me loves it and another part is completely scared shitless.

"I need to finish wrapping these presents, once it's daylight again."

"Why? The festival is canceled. We're snowed in. No one can get to us. There really is no point." I love the fact that he still wants the festival to go ahead.

"Colt, I still have hope that somehow it's going to happen."

“How? Do you think we’re going to have some kind of unseasonal heatwave that will melt the snow?”

“I don’t know, but I have hope. Okay? It’s just something to cling onto,” Austin replies, giving me a smile, and it’s the cutest thing.

“Right, breakfast is ready. Eat up, we need to get going,” I tell him, as I place a bowl and cup in front of him.

Going back over to the stove, I pick up my own breakfast and join Austin. We don’t talk, but it’s nice, and it also feels rather domestic.

With breakfast over, we both brave going upstairs, to get dressed and tough it out, in the snow outside. Between the two of us, we manage to clear a path over to the cattle shed.

“Do you think you can get over to the chickens by yourself?” I ask Austin.

The snow hasn’t drifted too much over here, and he should be able to walk over there without too much effort.

“Yeah,” Austin states, but there is a hesitation in his voice.

“The chickens will be fine. We shouldn’t have any more dead ones. But I can come over with you. Hold your hand if you want.”

“No. I need to be a grown up. As you said, this is ranch life now.”

I don’t think he believes what he’s saying, but I do love the fact that he’s trying.

“Okay. Well, you know where I am. Meet me back here in an hour and we can make

our way over to the stables.”

“Okay,” Austin replies, as he takes a step towards me and kisses me, briefly, before walking away.

Well, that’s new. Is this something that we’re going to do now? Kiss like that? It’s strange and nice all at the same time. Does this mean that we’re a couple? Are we in a relationship? That kiss makes me feel like we are, and I can’t help but smile as I turn and head into the cattle shed.

An hour later I’m outside the cattle shed, waiting for Austin to join me. Pulling out my cell, I open my weather app and check the forecast. Looks like the storm has passed and there isn’t any more snow due. Hopefully, that means in a few days everything will have thawed enough that the roads will be clear, and we can get into town.

“Hey,” Austin’s voice sounds, as he comes over and kisses me. Yes, I can definitely get used to these partings and greetings.

“Everything okay with the chickens?”

“Yeah. Thankfully, no dead chickens, and I managed to collect some eggs.” Austin holds up a basket that is kept in the chicken coop, with what I can only describe as a very satisfied smile on his face.

“Nice. I can make some scrambled eggs for lunch if you’d like, or we can keep them for breakfast tomorrow.”

“We’re having lunch together? We don’t normally.”

“Last time I checked, my pipes were frozen. Actually, I will need to go check the

house.” But I’m hoping that the pipes are still frozen, so I have an excuse to stay with Austin again tonight. Not that I need an excuse.

“And we need to try and clear the snow up to the barn.”

“Okay,” I say with a chuckle. I can’t deny him this little seed of hope that he has, even if I know that it’s useless, “Let’s get to the stable. Check on the horses. Then after lunch we can look at clearing outside the barn before it gets dark.”

“Sounds good. Have you checked the forecast? Is there a chance that we might get more snow tonight?”

“No, it’s all clear. Temperature is set to drop again, which means we will need to build the fire up in the living room again and stay downstairs.”

“Good.”

“Good. Why is that good?”

“Oh, nothing.” But Austin pauses for a second, before adding, “I’m just glad that there’s no more snow coming,” Austin replies, but I think there was more behind that statement, but I don’t want to push it.

“Come on. Let’s get to the stables.” And as I reach Austin, he holds out his hand and I just stare at it. Does he want me to take hold of it, or shake it?

“Colt, baby, take my hand,” Austin says.

“Baby,” I say over to him. “That’s the second time that you’ve called me that.”

“Well, you call me sweetheart.”

There is no arguing with that statement, and so I just smile and take hold of his hand, and we head over to the stables, but as it turns out, me holding onto Austin's hand was a good thing. He managed to find every patch of ice, and I kept having to almost catch him to stop him from falling over.

"Was me holding your hand all a ploy to make sure you didn't fall over?" I ask, as I push open the door to the stable.

"It was my attempt at being the cute boyfriend. You being able to stop me from falling over was an added bonus."

"Boyfriend." The word caught me completely off guard.

"Yeah," Austin replies. "That's what we are, aren't we?"

I have no idea what to say, because, for me, boyfriend isn't the right word for us. Back when we were young and na?ve, maybe, but not now. Not after everything we have been through to get to where we are now.

"No," I state and see Austin's face fall, and I know I should correct him, but I have just spotted which stall he's standing in front of, and decide to tease him a little.

"Oh, sorry," Austin states.

"I think I like boys," I start. "Well, I think I like you."

Austin stares at me, confused at my words, but I see the moment when he remembers me saying almost these exact words.

"Boys," he responds, but then adds with a slight smile, "why do you think you like me?"



“Because.” And I take a step towards him. “You’re tall, lean, and you have this smile that makes me go weak at the knees.” These are words that I’d wanted to say to him when I first came out.

Then, just like all those years ago, and right on cue, Austin locks lips with me. His tongue licks the seam of my lips and I readily open for him. He deepens the kiss, our tongues twisting and dancing around each other.

“That help?” Austin asks, as he breaks the kiss and takes a step back, smiling at me.

“You’re fucking kidding. That was epic. I definitely like you.”

The pair of us burst out laughing. We both remembered that day. Remembered those words.

“Austin, we aren’t boyfriends,” I finally say. “I’m not sure what we are really, but we are something more, something special.”

“I can live with that,” Austin replies, giving me another quick kiss. “Now, let’s clean out the stable.”

“How romantic.” I chuckle, but for us, this is our romance.

During the afternoon, we had cleared the snow around the barn, and on Austin’s instructions, made sure that the Christmas trees and the wreaths were clear of all snow, but Austin vanished just after we had finished the last check of the animals for the night.

I had told Austin to head back to the ranch, and that I would meet him there, after I had checked my house. The pipes were still frozen, which I hadn’t been too disappointed with, but when I got to the ranch house, Austin was nowhere to be seen.

There was a candle burning in the kitchen, so I knew that he had been there.

“Colt.” Austin’s voice sounds behind me, turning around, I see him standing in the kitchen doorway.

“Where have you been?”

“Come with me and I will show you, but first,” Austin walks over, and I see a scarf in his hands. “I need to blindfold you.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a surprise.”

“Austin, I don’t like surprises,” I say over to him, but I still crouch down so that he can cover my eyes.

“Trust me. You will like this.” And I feel him as he places a kiss on my cheek and takes hold of my hand.

Leading me out of the kitchen, I try to figure out where we’re going, and I think he’s leading me in the direction of the barn. Is that why we had to shovel all the snow out of the way this afternoon? For this, whatever this is?

“Wait here,” Austin whispers and lets go of my hand.

I try to listen to what he’s doing. Try and figure out the surprise, but all I can hear is him walking about, until, finally, he’s back beside me.

“Ready?” Austin asks, and as I nod my head, he says, “surprise,” and takes off my blindfold, and I am lost for words.

We are standing in front of the barn, but the Christmas trees and wreath are all lit up. Shining and twinkling against the red of the barn. And they look gorgeous.

“Austin,” I managed to get out, because I’m not sure I can find any other words.

“They’re battery powered,” Austin explains. “I got the idea when you mentioned that the trees were missing something. The wreath came with lights, I just didn’t tell you.”

“How? When?” Not sure how he has been able to do this.

“I ordered the lights online, and I have been fitting them in the evening. When it’s been dark. Needed to make sure that I didn’t have a gap.” He pauses. “Do you like it?”

“Do I like it? Are you crazy?” I look over to the trees before turning back to Austin. “I love it.”

“Good,” Austin replies, and the smile that appears on his face is breathtaking.

“I love you.” The words fall from my lips and hang in the air between us.

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I love you. The words hit me like a freight train and Colt is just standing there. Surprise all over his face. He didn't mean to say that. I could tell, but I can also see that he isn't trying to take them back.

The words are there, on the tip of my tongue to say back to him, and yet, they don't come out. I love Colt more than I thought possible, but I never expected for him to say them first. I thought it would be me. I need to tell him. Need him to know that I feel the same way.

"Colt," I start, but I'm not able to finish my sentence, as Colt's cell starts ringing.

He pulls out his cell and looks at the screen before looking at me. "It's the sheriff."

"You better answer it."

Colt slides his finger across the screen and puts the cell up to his ear, and just as I'm about to walk away, Colt grabs hold of me, pulling me to his side and placing a kiss on the side of my head. Looks like he hasn't minded that I didn't say I love you back.

"You're joking. They can't," Colt states. "No, seriously, they can't."

"Colt, what is it?" Suddenly getting concerned.

"It's the town. They're trying to clear the road," Colt replies, pulling the cell away from his ear.

"Well, I figured they would." I would've thought that this was a normal thing to do.

“No, they’re clearing the road to us. Want to make sure they can get access to the driveway.”

“Why?”

“So, the festival can still take place tomorrow.”

“Holy shit. Can they do that?”

“Sheriff, I’m going to put you on speaker so that Austin can hear you too, if that’s okay.”

I don’t think that the sheriff has time to answer before Colt is holding his hand out flat, the cell on his palm.

“Go ahead, Sheriff,” Colt states.

“So, as I was saying, a meeting has just been held and it has been agreed that we all want the festival to take place. It meant so much to your Gran and Pops, hell, it means so much to this town. So, the plows are going to work in shifts to clear the road, to at least clear the entrance of the ranch, and then we’re going to start on the driveway.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, “That seems like an awful lot to ask people to do.”

“You didn’t ask, they offered,” The sheriff replies.

“There is no way we can change people's minds, is there?” Colt asks.

“Nope,” The sheriff confirms.

“Look Sheriff, we lost power out here. There is no way we’re going to be able to get

that restored in time.”

“That’s good to know. Leave that one with me. I think I have a solution,” Sheriff adds. “But are you two doing okay?”

“We’re good,” I reply, “Colt has been showing me the ropes.”

“I thought he might. Heart of gold, that man. He’s going to make someone a very fine husband one day.”

“Do you two mind? I’m still standing here,” Colt adds, but I can see the smile on his face.

“Right, I will keep you updated on the progress over the next few hours. How’s the battery on your cells?”

“I have some power packs that I keep charged up; I will make sure our cells have a charge,” Colt replies, and I’m not sure I could love him more in that moment.

“Good. See you tomorrow boys.” And the sheriff hangs up.

“I can’t believe that all of the people in town are doing that so the festival can still go on,” Colt finally says, as he slips the cell back into his pocket.

“You just needed to have hope. And realize that the town loves you as much as they loved Gran and Pops.”

“They love you, too,” Colt adds.

“They don’t really know me, which is my fault. Looking back, I should’ve made an effort to come and visit. But they will get to know me,” I state, firmly, because I

know that I'm not going anywhere.

"Fuck, we have some work to do," Colt suddenly replies, looking around. "We need to clear more snow, check on the trees inside the barn, and check on food."

"Colt, calm down. The trees in the barn are all good. I checked them earlier. They also have lights on them, so we will need to turn all the batteries off to conserve power for tomorrow. If the people are coming to clear the drive, then I'm sure that they can help here tomorrow for anything else that needs to be done."

"Okay, but Gran's cookies. It won't be the same without them. And, oh, the presents from Santa."

"Can you make the cookies at the ranch house? The oven is gas too, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you have all the ingredients?"

"Yeah, I got them last week, so I was prepared."

"Great. So, here's the plan. Go back to your place and get everything that you need. I will make my way back over to the house and get the oven warming. We still have some soup from last night. I will get that heated up.

"And the presents?" Colt asks, but I can see the smile on his lips.

"If you would've let me finish." I give him a smile back. "I will work on the presents while you bake. In fairness, I was quicker at wrapping than you."

"That's not fair. I'm not used to it. That was always Gran's job, and she worked on it

for weeks,” Colt replies, trying to defend himself.

“That’s a pathetic excuse and you know it,” I reply, before leaning over and giving him a quick kiss on the lips, before taking hold of his shoulders and turning him around on the spot, and swatting his ass forward. “Now, get going.”

Colt, chuckling, starts to walk towards his house when I realize he hasn’t told me the setting for the oven.

“Colt, what do I need to set the oven to?”

“Three fifty,” Colt shouts over his shoulder, and I keep repeating the number until I’m in the kitchen, looking at the stove that is not giving me temperatures, but numbers instead. A quick internet search tells me I need to put the oven at gas mark four. Operation Christmas festival is now a go.

I actually have no idea how we did it. But Colt managed to get several batches of cookies made, and ready to be iced the following day, and I managed to get all the presents wrapped for Santa. At some point, Colt even managed to light the fire in the living room, and we fell into the makeshift bed exhausted, in each other’s arms.

The sound of my alarm going off wakes me. and I’m surprised to find that Colt is still fast asleep behind me, his slight snoring giving him away. I hadn’t known he snored, and it was kinda cute.

“Colt,” I say his name softly, as I roll around in his arms, and place a gentle kiss on his lips.

“Mmmm,” Colt mumbles.

“Time to get up.”



“Not time yet,” Colt says, keeping his eyes closed.

“No, my alarm has just gone off.” Which causes Colt’s eyes to fly open, and he almost jumps out of bed, like it has caught fire.

“I’m always awake before the alarm, always.” And Colt looks genuinely perplexed by the fact he had to be woken up.

“Baby,” I say softly. “We were up late. Well, for us. Yesterday was busy. You are allowed to sleep.”

“I know, it’s just... It’s never happened before. I think I blame you. Not the fact we were busy.”

“How am I to blame?”

“Well, you are so warm and soft, and inviting. Who wouldn’t want to stay in bed with you?” And Colt pulls me into a kiss, his tongue slipping into my mouth, and I can feel myself melting against him.

“No!” Giving him a gentle push back. “We have chores. You can’t kiss me like that when we need to get up.”

“I think it might persuade you to stay in bed.”

“Okay, who are you, and what have you done with my Colt?” I demand, which causes him to laugh, and let me go.

“You’re right, animals come first,” Colt says with a smile, and I know then, that he had been testing me, or teasing me.

“Yes, they do.” As I lean over and give him another kiss. “You know, I don’t think I’m ever going to get tired of being able to kiss you like that.”

“Yeah, it is nice.” But there is something in his voice that makes me think that he doesn’t quite believe that statement. Colt must think that I’m still planning on leaving. I can only assume that me not telling him I love him too, will have helped with that. That is something that I’m going to have to change.

Colt and I work tirelessly over the next few hours. Checking all the livestock and chickens. Cleaning out the stables and getting the horses ready for the festival. I still couldn’t believe that it was going to take place, but we had received a few phone calls during the morning, and everything seemed to be going to plan, and I couldn’t help feeling excited.

Colt seemed to be excited too, even if he was stressing over Gran’s cookies, to the point that I made him go back to the ranch to finish icing them. He needed the daylight anyway, and there were also some last-minute decorations that I wanted to put up in the barn. Which was mainly some mistletoe I had found growing on a tree not far from the chicken coop.

“Austin.” Hearing Colt shout my name, I check the mistletoe one last time and leave the barn.

“Yeah.”

“The sheriff just called. They made it to the bottom of the drive and have started making their way up,” Colt explains. “Let’s get over there with the shovels and see if we can do anything.”

Taking hold of his hand, we walk over to the top of the drive, but realize our shovels are useless. I have no idea what the machines are, but it’s picking up the snow, and

then shooting it out via a funnel on the side. It actually looks like it's snowing.

"Can you believe this?" I say over to Colt.

"It's why I love this town," Colt replies, giving my hand a squeeze.

I don't know how long we're standing there, but what feels like minutes later, the sheriff is standing in front of us, and I see the second he spots me and Colt holding hands, and the smile that appears on his face.

"There is a string of people behind me. Just point us in the right direction."

A string of people was an understatement. Everyone was there, including Mr. Smith, carrying a rather large bag that I could see hints of red fabric sticking out of.

"Mr. Smith, the ranch house is free when you need to change," I tell him, going over to him, and taking the bag out of his hand. "I'll take this and place it in the kitchen for you."

"You look different, Austin," Mr. Smith states.

"I feel different," I tell him.

"Ranch life suits you," Mr. Smith adds with a glance over to Colt, who is directing someone who is carrying what looks like a generator.

"I couldn't agree more." Giving a smile as I walk away.

The festival was a huge success, well, in my eyes anyway. Mr. Smith had been a wonderful Santa, and the kids had loved all the presents. Colt, of course, had gotten a major kick out of telling one of the teenagers that I was a programmer behind the

Road to Valhalla game. I was seriously followed around by a group for at least an hour, all of them asking questions, till the point I turned around and promised to meet up with them in the new year, where I would answer all their questions, and I would even listen to suggestions for the next game. Which had gained me instant approval as the best adult at the festival.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” Colt states, coming up next to me.

“It was so good. I had so much fun. Oh, and you’ll never guess who won Mr. Smith’s holiday,” I add.

“Who?” Colt asks, like he’s about to reserve the best gossip in town.

“Me.”

“Holy shit. That’s amazing!” Colt enthuses.

“We will have to figure out who we trust to cover the ranch while we’re away, but I have never been to Aspen, so that’s exciting.”

“We?”

“Colt, you are the only person that I’m going to be taking to Aspen,” I tell him, as I turn him to face me, and I wrap my arms around him.

“I haven’t been either,” Colt adds.

“It will be a first for both of us,” I add, but there is still an uncertainty in his eyes, and I need to get him to believe that I’m here to stay, so I add, “you know, next year, we are going to need to start sooner. Make the next festival even better.”

“Next year?” Colt questions.

“Colt, baby, as I keep telling you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know, it’s just...” Colt adds.

“I left once before.” Colt nods his head in agreement. “I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

Pointing up, I watch as Colt’s head moves up, and spots the mistletoe above our heads, it was the reason that I was standing here. Colt looks at me, his eyes light up with love and he leans over and kisses me.

“I love you,” I tell him, as we break apart. “I’m finally home, here at the ranch with you, and I will never leave you again.”

Colt pulls me into his arms, and holds me tight under the mistletoe, before sealing his lips over mine. It might have taken me fifteen years, but finally, I am where I’m supposed to be. I am home.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am*

One Year Later

“Sweetheart, will you please get moving, we’re going to be late,” I shout upstairs.

I love Austin more than anything, but sometimes, I could shake him. Especially when we have to be somewhere, and he’s taking his sweet time.

“I’m coming,” Austin replies, coming down the stairs, and walking into the living room.

“Holy shit,” I mumble.

“What? Is there something wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“No, you’re just fucking sexy as hell, and I do not want to be in a meeting with Mr. Smith with a hard on.”

This past year with Austin has been, frankly, amazing. At the beginning, I still had this fear in the back of my head that he was going to leave. Until the night in the barn after the festival. He had spoken from the heart, and I knew then that he was staying.

“I’m only wearing jeans and a shirt,” Austin starts. “Not sure how that’s sexy.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I start. “I bet when we get into town, all the women will be staring at you.” Austin didn’t see it, but he had morphed into a gorgeous cowboy, and today’s outfit was proof. Blue jeans, white shirt, and he has Pops’ cowboy hat on.

“Baby, everyone knows in town that we’re together. No one is going to be staring at me.”

“I bet you dishes for a week,” I say, smiling at him.

“Done,” Austin replies, returning my smile.

Last year, once all the snow had melted, Austin and I had tried to live separately, but it only lasted a month. If I wasn’t over at the ranch, then Austin was over at my little house, so it just made sense to move in together. We, of course, talked about it first. Both of us worried that we might have been rushing, but we decided to give it a try. And it turned out to be the best decision. And, I have to admit, waking up to Austin in my arms was a perk I wouldn’t give up in a hurry.

“Did Mr. Smith tell you what the appointment was about?” Austin asks, as we leave the house, and make our way over to the truck and start the journey into town.

“No, but I’m guessing that it has to do with the ranch. Today marks one year since you came back. Probably needs us to sign papers.”

I had eventually told Austin that I was the person that would’ve gotten the ranch if he hadn’t been able to make it a year. He had been surprised, and then had apologized, that he had taken the ranch from me. But he hadn’t. He had made it even more my home than Gran and Pops had.

“Is it really a year?” Austin asks, sounding surprised.

“To the day. A lot has changed in a year.”

“It has, and you know, there is not a single thing I would change,” Austin adds.

“Not even the Saturdays with the teenagers?” I chuckle.

“They have actually come up with some great suggestions that have gone down really well, I actually have a little surprise for them,” Austin adds, and I can hear the pride in his voice talking about those kids. He had been as good as his word, and met with them every week, and they talked about games and art. Austin might complain, but I know he loved it too.

“Oh, care to tell?”

“Well, I spoke to someone, telling them about the kids, and they’re going to be beta testers.”

“Holy shit. Please let me be there when you tell them. You know they’re going to love you more than they do already.”

“They’re good kids.”

Pulling up outside Mr. Smith’s office, I kill the engine and look over to Austin. “Ready to become a ranch owner?”

“No, but thankfully I have you.” And he leans over and gives me a kiss.

Austin opens the door to the office, and we see Mrs. Smith behind the desk, and I also catch the moment she looks Austin up and down, and the smile that touches her lips.

“Dishes are yours,” I whisper over to him.

“Fine.” But I can see the smirk on Austin's face.

“Hi Mrs. Smith. I have an appointment,” I say over to her.

“Oh, Colt. Right on time, and Austin is with you. Perfect,” Mr. Smith’s voice sounds from the doorway. “Can you both come with me?”



“Both?” Austin questions.

“Yes. I thought I just needed to talk to Colt, but it’s actually the pair of you,” Mr. Smith adds.

Looking over to Austin to see if he magically has some answers, he just shrugs his shoulders, and we follow Mr. Smith into his office.

When we are settled, Mr. Smith hands Austin an envelope, and I recognize Gran’s handwriting on the front. Taking a deep breath, he opens it and pulls out a piece of paper.

Austin slowly opens the letter, and begins to read, and suddenly there are tears streaming down his face.

“Sweetheart,” I say over to him, suddenly concerned. What the hell is in that letter from Gran to cause this reaction.

“They knew,” Austin sobs out.

“Knew what?”

“Knew about us, or at least how we felt about each other. It’s why they made me come back, and I had to stay the year,” Austin says.

“Sweetheart, you’re not making any sense.” Because he isn’t.

“Colt. This might help,” Mr. Smith says, and he hands over a letter to me. Pulling out the piece of paper and reading over the words, I feel my own tears start to form.

“This can’t be right,” Austin mumbles.

“I can promise you it is. Gran and Pops loved you both very much. They knew there was something special between you,” Mr. Smith adds.

“But how? We were...” I start but can’t finish. I wanted to say fifteen, and careful, but we obviously weren’t.

“So, what happens now?” Austin asks.

“I have the papers here. Once signed, the ranch is yours,” Mr. Smith adds.

“Ours,” Austin says, looking over to me, giving me a smile.

“They gave us the ranch,” I mutter, and Austin smiles.

“They gave me my cowboy, just in time for Christmas,” Austin adds. “And I couldn’t be happier.”

The End