



# Baker (Bastian Brothers #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** While battling to save his family's ranch, Baker finds himself falling for a man as unrestrained as the Oklahoma winds.

For as long as he can recall, Baker Bastian has been the backbone of Bastian Acres Ranch.

He's carried a heavy load, trying his best to keep his family legacy from being swallowed up by corporate farming while battling a fondness for the bottle, a messy divorce, and a grandmother who's set on becoming the next Annie Oakley if she could just get a gun that shoots straight.

It's not been an easy road.

Now, with his worthless philandering father's death, the deed to the ranch is to be split four ways with three half-brothers he never wanted to get to know better.

As the ranch is tossed into chaos, Baker is driven to open the gates to strangers, and not just his brothers and their traveling companions.

In order to turn a buck, the once proud owner of prime cattle is reduced to calling his farming legacy a guest ranch.

The first client to show up is Hanley Welsh, a world-renowned wildlife photographer.

Baker should be too busy to notice how rugged Hanley is, or how his eyes crinkle with his easy smile, or how well his jeans fit, but notice he does.

Will Baker's lonely existence end with the arrival of a man who carries the song of the indigo bunting in his heart?

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Back in high school, I was somehow drafted into participating in a musical.

The same musical that was performed at least yearly in probably every damn school throughout the state of Oklahoma.

My role was not that of the handsome leading man Curly or the leading lady Laurey.

Hell, I wasn't even Aunt Eller. I was one of about fifteen guys who had been roped into being extras for the train station scene by girls with dreams of Hollywood glamor.

Somehow, I managed to stumble through the dancing as Rip Leary, captain of the Bastian Grange Bisons football team, sang about Kansas City.

He was not a great singer, but he did look the part.

Back then I found the whole thing cheesy as hell and only went along with it because Kimmy, my girlfriend at the time, said if I helped out the drama club she would let me touch her boobs.

Yeah, I was that kind of petty at seventeen. Turned out her boobs were mostly tissue paper so that was a big letdown. My participation did not get me better grades as Kimmy had claimed, nor did my fumbling about on stage aid me in becoming a better dancer at the prom, also as Kimmy had promised.

Nothing about that play had been the least bit true other than the fact that nothing in this vast country could compare to a sunrise touching down on thousands of acres of fields thawing up for spring planting.

That Sooner wind was sweet and warm today, but it could turn on a dime, though.

Snow wasn't uncommon in late March. Sitting atop Prissy, one of only a dozen horses left on the ranch, her hooves rested in a blanket of light snow that had fallen just yesterday.

Funny that the news of my father's death had blown in a week ago with a snowstorm.

Prissy shifted slightly under me as memories of Cashman Brighton flickered through my mind.

I'd not known Cash for long. He'd been about done with my mother, the ranch, and son number one when I was four.

He'd gone out to buy a bull one day and never came back.

The subtle pain of that abandonment still stung when I let it.

So I tried not to let it. Days like today, though, when we were about to bury the philandering bastard, stirred them up.

Like sticking a branch into a slurry pond.

Which was a good descriptor for Cashman Brighton.

Prissy tossed her head, the sun warming her dark brown hair.

I ran a hand down her neck, sensing she was eager to get moving.

She'd not had her breakfast yet. I'd snuck out before Granny was awake.

I'd needed some me time to fortify myself for the influx of three men who I disliked simply for being created.

Unfair? Yeah, it was. I knew it. Still didn't change how I felt about them.

Granny kept reminding me that those three boys—men now, but to her anyone under fifty was a boy—had no choice in who their father was.

Just like me. She also liked to point out that Cash, her only son, had not only lied to my mother but to the other three women he had left in the lurch.

True, but his deception hadn't pushed those women into an early grave.

So I won the worst off kid sired by Cash Brighton award by virtue of that horrid fact.

Pity the only prize one got for winning was to be raised by your grandma while trying to keep your home from being gobbled up in farm loans as well as the greedy hands of agriculture corporation.

I drew in a long breath of spring air as my sight touched on the land that I had once owned but now was the property of Hillman Banks Agriscience.

My great-great-grandfather was probably rolling over in his grave.

Thank God the family cemetery was still on land that I owned.

Which was why Cash was being hauled in from the funeral home in Bastian Grange

to be buried here instead of out of town in the larger cemetery.

I'd fought that request hard, but Granny, as always, talked me into doing the Christian thing.

Not that I was big on religion. I figured God was not the kindest entity, so why should I bend a knee to him?

Granny had other ideas. Given how she had raised me from nine years old up, I owed her more than I could repay.

So if tossing Cash into the plot in the far corner by Great-Grandma Ethel made Granny and her God happy, then I'd do it. I'd bitch about it, but I'd do it.

My horse blew out a breath. A floppy, loose exhalation that a teenager would be envious of.

"Okay, I know. You're bored and hungry." I gave one last look at the lands I had sold off a few years ago to pay back taxes.

Turning the horse with some gentle pressure, I rode down a rolling hill into grasslands that were muddy underfoot.

In a few weeks, this would be alive with birds returning from down south.

In a couple of months, this land would be covered in tall grasses that tickled a horse's belly and the low of cattle grazing.

Sadly, my cattle had all been sold off last month to give me some cash in hand to buy out my half-brothers.

Call it a hunch, but I suspected that after we buried Cash and returned to the main house to meet the lawyer, the reading of the will would have the ranch split between the four Bastian boys.

That was something that was not going to happen.

All three were from big cities. Dodge was a children's dentist in Sacramento.

Another, Linc, lived on a houseboat in Chicago and ran a bar.

And the youngest, Ford, was from New York City.

New. Fucking. York. City. I was pretty sure none of them had any interest in working on a ranch.

So, I would buy them out, send them back to their lives, and start hitting livestock shows to rebuild the herd I had sold off.

No one said it was a pretty way to survive, but it was the only plan I had, so I was running with it.

Maybe I was putting the cart in front of the horse, but I didn't think so.

I had a sense about impending doom. Like when my mother had ended her life, and when my first horse Tank had died, and when my ex-wife had found me passed out on a park bench with a rodeo cowboy.

She'd not been impressed. Nor had the local sheriff as we had been naked as jaybirds and snoozing in the gazebo on the Bastian Grange town square.

That had been the end of my five-year marriage.

Never saw that bull rider again either. I did get a nice fine and a firm nudge from the sheriff to get into a program for my drinking.

Ollie Ahoka was a good guy and a really good lawman.

Pity he was not my type. He preferred his men sober.

Couldn't fault him there. Most people did.

Ollie might be the only one in town who still wasn't mad at me about the Fourth of July parade incident of six years ago...

So I did just that right after Tanya left me the following week. Four years later, at the grand old age of forty-two, I was sober. Still losing the family ranch in dribs and drabs, but I was losing it while clear-headed. Go me.

Prissy was not to be slowed, so I gave her some head, letting her gallop along the fencing that held no cattle, only pronghorns, some bison, and the ever-present prairie dogs. I slowed when the first crack of a gunshot rolled over the swells of mud and ice.

Granny was up and practicing. I couldn't help but smile as we trotted along, my horse feeling her oats as she pranced merrily, the shouts of my grandmother startling a small covey of bobwhite quail as we climbed a small knoll that overlooked Bastian Acres Ranch.

The homestead still riled up a plethora of emotions when I viewed it from afar.

When the first stakes had been driven to mark off Bastian Acres back in the late 1800s, there had been roughly twelve thousand acres deeded to our kin.

Six generations later, we were down to nine hundred forty.

Still, even with such a small amount of land left to our name, the sprawling sight below always hit me hard.

The farmhouse was old, built in the early 1930s, four years before the great depression hit.

The white paint was peeling and a few of the blue shutters on the second floor were hanging cockeyed.

The back porch needed to be made into a new one. So many jobs, so little money.

We'd had some dire straits for many years but managed to hold on. Granny liked to remind me when I got too down on myself.

Three bedrooms and two full baths, a wraparound porch, a huge kitchen, and a massive dining room.

Families were big back then. Now it was me and a little old lady rattling around the place.

No kids. I'd never been sober enough to make one with my ex-wife.

Hard to make a baby when you were too soused to get it up.

No wonder the woman left me. I'd have left me too, if that were possible.

Better off not having had a kid. Raising a child in a dysfunctional home was not good. That is spoken from experience.



A thin line of smoke rose from the chimney as the sun touched on the new steel roofing.

We'd replaced the worn shingles five years ago when an F5 blew through, taking our hay storage barn and a silo.

The house had lost its roof but had weathered that storm.

She was just as tough as the people who lived in her Granny had crowed when we'd emerged from the storm cellar.

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That twister had been one of many we'd lived through.

We'd moved the round bales into a different shed, one that used to house steer calves being held for market.

Feed and equipment storage sheds sat next to muddy ponds dug just for watering cattle.

The pastures were now empty of beefers. A few horses were out in the nearest fields, moseying about as a herd of Whitetail joined them.

We had lots of wildlife here and big fish in the ponds.

A few of my fellow ranchers who were still hanging on by their teeth were now talking about allowing hunters to use their lands.

There was big money to be made opening up your land to out-of-staters with shiny new rifles and expensive camo.

I'd declined. So far. Seeing the deer, pronghorn, Rio Grande turkeys, and loping black bears was one of the few joys I had left.

Witnessing a big buck tied to the roof of some outsider's car wasn't on my agenda.

Not unless we were starving or the taxman was knocking on the door.

So far, we'd kept the tax collector from our front step.

Just by the skin of our teeth some years.

The sound of another round being fired rolled over the fields, startling the deer into bolting.

The horses were used to it, more or less.

Even Prissy, who could be scared into a meltdown by a jackrabbit in her path, never flinched at the pop of Granny's 22 long rifle.

A shrill shout of frustration floated by.

She'd missed again. I enjoyed the view of the old gal kicking over the stack of empty soda cans she had beside her shooting station.

A line of cars rolling to the ranch caught my attention, yanking my focus from an irate eighty-year-old in robe and curlers to a convoy of vehicles led by a black hearse.

"The prodigal father returns," I muttered to Prissy, who, clever mare that she was, tried to swing back to the wide open fields. "Sorry, girl, this is something we gotta do."

Turning her back to face the ranch, the hearse slowed as it neared the house, as did the two SUVs in its wake.

Granny stood by the old well, arms folded over her rifle, in her best spring yellow robe.

I couldn't see her expression, but anytime I was met with someone cradling a gun, I tended to proceed with caution.

The cars parked behind the hearse. Rentals by the look.

New and shiny. Well, not so shiny now. The drive into the ranch was long and wet.

Mud was thick on the sides of every car parked in front of my house.

Prissy raised her nose into the wind, scenting something, perhaps the other horses or a coyote skipping around downwind to try to grab one of Granny's chickens.

Four people exited the SUVs, all men by the looks, although from this distance, they could have been women in suits and...

a hat? Guess I had some gender norm work to do.

Given what I knew of the crew that was arriving, I felt it safe to say my brothers, and a plus one, had arrived.

Half -brothers. It was important to make that distinction.

The leather saddle under me creaked as I leaned forward to try to see better.

Granny was not aiming the gun at them, not that I thought she would.

She was actually pattering to them to hug each man, even the slim fourth, as well as Mike McMillan, the owner of the funeral parlor in town, who was driving the hearse.

Four were dressed for a burial in dark suits.

The fifth was in a jewel-toned suit, bright blue like the feathers of a peacock, and wore a sapphire hat with netting just like the ladies over in England wear to fancy horse races and teas.

Maybe I'd misgendered that one after all.

Damn. I really needed to do better. So, four men and a petite woman in a gaudy hat.

Great. Next, she would invite them in to have coffee and a hot breakfast.

"Yep, there they go." I blew out a breath filled with disgust. Sometimes my grandmother was too damn charitable for her— and my—own good. Knowing I couldn't put it off much longer—Granny would be inviting them to stay for a while—I clicked to Prissy and rode down to face my brothers.

Half -brothers. Plus one hat-accessorized person, a funeral director, and a dead skirt-chaser.

Bet old Curly wouldn't have been singing about this winsome morn...

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I tended to Prissy first because a good horseman always took care of his horse before anything else, and if the people gathered inside didn't know that, then they could jet on back to their big cities.

Hopefully, they'd be doing so as soon as the old bastard was in the ground and the will read.

After I had dawdled in the stable as long as I possibly could—every horse required a splash of fresh water and a pat or two—I ambled to the front porch, reeking of barn.

Not an unpleasant smell as far as I was concerned. My guests may think differently.

Granny's rooster, a big red fellow with black tail feathers, was off to the left with his

hens digging about under a weeping willow.

The screen door creaked. I took a moment to toe off my shitty boots in what we called the mudroom but city folks would call it a foyer.

I did note a line of newish-looking shoes lined up neat as pins.

Granny was a stickler for clean floors. Not an easy task on a working ranch, but I'd learned young not to track cow shit through the first floor.

She may be small, but she is mighty. I checked out the tiny blue flats among the other more traditionally manly footwear.

The lady in the blue suit with the fancy hat had tiny feet. Her shoes had sequins. Huh.

The soft rumble of conversation stalled as Granny shouted my name.

"Yep," I replied, threw my shoulders back, and made my way down a slim hallway past the living room and pantry to the kitchen.

All eyes touched on me as I entered. I was ridiculously underdressed.

Well, aside from Granny, who was in her robe yet.

"Was out checking fence," I lied as I took in the room.

Mike McMillan sat beside my grandmother, duded out in the standard black suit all funeral directors wore.

He was an older man, probably early sixties, with a soft manner that worked well for his line of work.

Thinning hair, dark eyes, he stood to offer me his hand and his condolences.

“Nice to finally meet you,” the youngest looking of my three half-siblings said as he stood.

“Ford.” He had a firm handshake for a city boy.

Thick New York accent. Blond hair that tickled the collar of his shirt, blue eyes that skipped from one person to the other like he was waiting for someone to pounce.

Big city living did that, no doubt. No one had ever been mugged in Bastian Grange unless you counted the time Potter Hennessee got drunk and fell into the duck pond on the green.

A pair of Canada geese had taken over the pond that year.

The mugging made the front page of the Bastian Grange Bugler that week. “This is my friend Bella Dee Britta.”

I gazed down at the platinum blond seated beside Ford. The blond gave me a long, coy look with precisely made-up eyes and offered me a hand with a grip like a lumberjack’s.

“Pleased to meet you, cowboy.” Their voice dipped low enough that I realized this person was not a woman at all, even though he was trying to speak as one.

I thought to ask but bit it back. Bella smiled a knowing smile as I tried to parse things out.

Nothing more was said about Bella Dee, so I shifted my attention to the burly bearded bear of a man with the earring and take no shit aura.

He wore his handlebar mustache and the small hoop in his left ear well.

“I’m Linc,” he said, pushing to his feet to shake my hand.

Big hand, rough, the hand of a working man.

This was the one who owned a bar. His eyes were deep brown, his hair and beard brunette.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties. He jerked his hairy chin at the ginger coming to his feet on his left.

“This is Dodge.” Dodge was the tidiest of us all with his grooming.

Short red hair with neatly trimmed cinnamon scruff.

Hazel eyes. Freshly pressed suit and tie.

He looked the part of a dental worker well.

Put him in scrubs and hand him one of those spit suckers that dentists use and there you go.

Which reminded me that I was overdue for a cleaning.

“Pleasure.” Dodge took my hand and pumped it just once. “Funny how it took his dying to bring us all together.”

“Yep, it’s funny all right,” I muttered.

Mike chuckled softly. We all glanced at him. “Sorry, I just realized that each of you



is named after a make of car aside from you, Baker.”

I hated having to explain this the most out of just about everything. “No, he stuck me with a car name too. Baker. Short for Studebaker.”

“Studebaker Bastian,” Granny crowed as her coffee pot gurgled. “Ain’t that one hell of a snazzy name?”

Snazzy was not the word I would have used for my name.

My brothers all muttered in polite agreement to the old woman. Half -brothers.

“What was his car thing?” Ford asked as he sat back down beside Bella Dee.

Bella and Granny were the only two who were not clearly uncomfortable.

Granny was in her glory. Coffee was perking and she would soon pull out some eggs and scramble up a panful for the boys.

Sitting down to eat with this hodgepodge of men was not top of my agenda, but I was starving, and it was going to be a long day.

“Did he leave you all the car that you’re named after?” Mike enquired as he placed his forearms on the table. “Like Ford got an old T-Bird, or Linc got a Lincoln?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to point out that Cash would have had to care about his sons to leave them cars. Cash cared for no one but Cash.

All four of us shook our heads. “He just thought it was cool,” Ford interjected. By the looks on our faces—faces that did not resemble each other at all so old Cash must have had some weak ass genes to go along with his weak ass personality—not one of

us found it cool at all.

“Why don’t I get some breakfast going?” Granny said as I knew she would. “Baker, get washed up. You smell like the barn.”

“I’ll help. I love to dabble in the kitchen,” Bella brightly announced, springing to his feet.

“Excuse me.” I dipped my head, then beat a hasty retreat.

We could not get my old man in the cold, wet ground soon enough.

These guys were throwing out anxious vibes by the bucket load.

Maybe we could get this whole nasty situation wrapped up and have them on planes back to their urban lives by nightfall.

Sometimes God did smile on kids, drunks, and dogs as our personable sheriff was known to say. Perhaps this was one of those times.

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### Chapter Two

N ope. God was not smiling down on me.

Maybe he was tired of drunks and was focusing on kids and dogs. Probably a much better group to bestow answered prayers to than some washed-up, divorced cowpoke with no cows but held a pocketful of sobriety chips.

Breakfast was a chore. The food was good, as always.

Granny knew how to feed hungry men, and Bella...

well, he was something else. I suspected he was possibly a highly femme man who enjoyed flashy clothes and makeup, which was fine with me.

My bisexuality opened me up to appreciating both his masculine and feminine qualities.

So Bella and Granny were pleasant, but the rest were not.

No one was hostile. There was just so much fucking luggage sitting in that sunny kitchen with the avocado green appliances that it could pass for the baggage claim area at Tulsa International.

My half -brothers and Mike ate in silence.

I was pretty sure Mike had not planned to be fed when he set out for the ranch this

morning, but here he was, chatting with Granny and Bella about bluebird migration patterns while Ford, Linc, Dodge, and I were sullenly chewing toast. What did I possibly have to say to them?

“So,” Bella interjected with a flashy smile that didn’t quite reach his lined green eyes. “Where is the little girls’ room?”

“Up the stairs to the left,” I said and rose when he did. The others followed suit aside from Ford, who looked incredibly entertained. Linc hurried to dab at his bushy beard to free it from toast crumbs as Bella placed his napkin on the table.

“Thank you. Some of us are true gentlemen,” Bella announced as he playfully cuffed Ford upside the head and sashayed out of the kitchen.

Linc glanced at Ford. “What’s his story?” he whispered. “He a drag queen?”

“No. Bella just loves to embrace the feminine side of her personality. They use she or her or fae as pronouns,” Ford hurried to explain.

Linc’s brown eyes flared at that news. He continued to stare at Bella’s backside until she turned to climb the back stairs.

“Just so you all know,” Ford glanced around the table, getting nods from my two other half -brothers before his sight landed on me, “she embraces a feminine mystique. Not sure Bella needs a title. Guess you can use transfemme. Transfemme means—”

“I’m fully aware of what it means,” I snapped back, instantly irritated by his big city assumption that I was some ill-bred hick. JFC. We have the internet out here. Granted, the Wi-Fi was iffy at times but fuck him and the attitude he rode in on.

“Oh,” Mike said, blinking like a drunk duck, trying to suss all of that out.

Femme, pronouns, and people who were obviously male but wore bright pink lipstick were not common out here.

Oklahoma was quite conservative overall.

Oklahoma City was known to be liberal, as was Tulsa, but there was a lot of land betwixt those two big cities that was as red as a cherry.

I’d lived forty years here and never once encountered anyone who dared to venture out of the norms, but I did know what femme meant.

“Right, well, if anyone has any issues with Bella, they can discuss them with me,” Ford added, then shoved to his feet. Wow, someone was overprotective. Everyone did the same. Granny pattered off to get her lone black dress on as we filed outside to wait for Granny and Bella.

We all stood around with our thumbs up our asses, watching the horses out in their paddock or following the V of a group of Canada geese making the trek back to their summer homes.

“We sit in the Central Flyway,” I said when the silence was crippling. The three out-of-staters gawked at me. “It’s a major bird migration route for millions of migratory birds.”

“Oh cool.” Dodge seemed moderately interested.

The other two were more engrossed with the horses.

Probably didn’t see too many horses without cops on their backs where they’re from.

“We have the Pacific Flyway in California. My ex-husband and I used to drive up to Point Reyes to birdwatch in the spring and fall.”

“You’re gay?” I asked the ginger and got a short, crisp nod. The man was ready for trouble, I could see that. “Okay, good to know. I’m bisexual.” I shot Ford a meaningful look that he had the good grace to awkwardly look away from.

The tension leeches from Dodge’s face. A weary sort of smile tugged at his lips. “Gay and divorced and looking for a new life,” Dodge announced.

“I’m queer too,” Linc offered. My attention turned to the big man in the dark gray suit.

“Noted,” I said and turned to Ford. “You the sole straight man Cash managed to create?”

“Nope, I’m pretty gay.”

“You and Bella a thing?” Linc asked while chewing on a toothpick.

“Oh hell no. She’s too high-maintenance for me. We’re just good friends.” Ford glanced around at us as a smirk broke free. “Looks like Cash, the ultimate homophobe, sired four queer as shit men.”

“Uhm, I’m straight,” Mike slipped in, cheeks as red as a tomato. We’d probably filled his ears with more LGBTQ talk than he had ever heard in one sitting before. “Married to a woman.”

“I know. We won’t hold that against you,” I said to Mike just as Granny and Bella arrived outside. My brothers chortled. Half -brothers. I might not be crazy about them, but at least there would be no outrage over sexuality while we worked things

out.

Granny was holding onto Bella's arm. Her cane was nowhere to be seen. With a huff, I went back inside to find it. She had a tendency to accidentally-on-purpose leave her cane behind. I found it tucked behind the sofa. She was not happy when I emerged from the house with it in hand.

"Oops," she said as I handed it off to her. "Oh there's Milton."

The lawyer pulled up and parked beside the hearse.

Milt was as old as the hills, retired now for fifteen years, but Cash had left his will in Milt's safe the day before he had hightailed it out of Oklahoma to head to the Sunshine State.

Since I had three younger brothers Cash had obviously revamped or added to his will a few times while spreading his seed around the country just like Johnny Appleseed, only Cash left kids in his wake instead of apple seedlings.

We could not get him planted soon enough.

Milt seemed taken aback at first but recovered quickly enough to shake every hand offered to him. He seemed quite confused by Bella. He ended up patting her hand and smiling kindly. See, it wasn't so hard to be decent. If this backwoods lawyer could be accepting, why the hell couldn't other people?

"We should get moving," Mike called out as a fat robin landed nearby. Some days being a bird whose biggest worry was finding a fat worm would be grand.

We climbed into my truck to follow the hearse to the old family cemetery out in the wild apple orchard pasture. The ride was quiet, each of us in our own headspace as

we rumbled over rough roads that sorely needed work after a rough winter. Just another job to add to the list.

The drive out to the century-old family cemetery took about ten minutes when the ground was dry, fifteen to twenty when everything was muck.

The hearse had some trouble on one of the lanes—a pretty name for a tractor path—and had to be pulled from the muddy gulley with my truck.

Veering off the overgrown paths was easy to do.

I'd torn up the lane pretty badly bringing my tractor out the other day with Granny following with my truck to dig the hole for Cash's casket to be placed in, so following the ruts would lead a less skilled cattle trail driver off with ease.

Thankfully, nothing stops a tractor with new tires.

After we got the long black Caddy freed, we took a group vote and Cash was removed from the hearse and placed in the back of my '87 Ford F-250 four-wheel-drive pickup.

She was so rusty I'd reached the point where I worried parts might fall off when I drove her to town, but I'd not give up on her.

She ran like a champ but did tend to burn a little oil.

Farm trucks weren't supposed to be pretty.

It was hard to keep a fancy truck fancy when you worked it hard.

Ten years ago, I was tossing split firewood into the bed when I miscalculated the



throw.

Busted the shit out of the back window. So now it had the backrest from an old lawn bench that Granny had owned as a firewood deflector to shield the plastic taped over the busted window.

I liked to say the rusted floral garden bench back and the shuddering clear plastic gave her personality.

Like the ranch or Prissy, some things you held onto for as long as you could.

Bella and Granny rode in front with me. The others and Cash in his casket were in the bed.

Poor old Milt had taken quite the jouncing.

Thankfully, there was loose clean hay in there as I'd just hauled hay bales to the stables last night, so their fancy clothes would be moderately clean.

"So, honey, what do you do for a living?" Granny asked as we bounced and trundled over the roughest path I was sure any of my passengers had ever traveled. I kept checking my rearview and counting heads in case someone flew out. "Are you one of those drag queens?"

I almost swallowed my tongue.

Bella smiled a charming little smile before patting my grandmother's liver-spotted hand.

"Granny," I whispered in a soft, chastising way.

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Bella spoke right up as she looked around at me.

“No, it’s fine. Honestly, I would rather someone who doesn’t know me ask.

” She turned her attention back to my grandmother.

“Thank you for asking. I am not a drag queen. I’m just a gay man who loves pretty things on his body.

If someone requires terminology, I always liked the South Korean aesthetic of a flower man, although not all flower men are gay.

I am also happy with transfemme.” She gave a tiny shrug.

“As long as people are respectful, I don’t get too flustered.

As for my work, I’m looking to diversify from my previous employment and open up a small boutique for women with refined tastes but who live within moderate means.  
”

“Oh so you’re a fashion consultant?” Granny asked as we jounced merrily—or not so merrily for those in the back—along.

“Yes, a fashion consultant,” Bella quickly agreed.

“I could use some consulting on my fashion. Baker, imagine me showing up to Sunday services looking as elite as Miss Bella here!”

“You’d cause quite a stir,” I replied, keeping my eyes on the so-called road.

“When you open your shop, let us know. Baker is good at the computer and can order me a fancy New York City dress from my dear friend Miss Bella Buttercup, the transfemme flower man.”

“I will make sure you are my first customer. I’m not sure I’ll do much western wear, though. I doubt I could make a Stetson look as good as he does.”

I blushed to the tips of my ears. Stetson was a little out of my price range. I got my hats online or at the local feed store.

Bella flashed me a brilliant smile.

“Miss Bella Buttercup. Your smile is as bright as a wildflower. What a pity your last name is so opposite of your personality. I see nothing bitter about you.”

Bella blushed. Granny was right. She was as bright as a buttercup.

“That’s delightful. Thank you. I do try to leave the bitter behind.

” Bella gave Granny a tender hug and then grabbed the dash when we rolled over an old woodchuck mound.

Granny sat buckled in, chattering away, as Bella and the guys in the back yelped in fear.

Cash didn’t bounce out, so that was good.

Or not. Personally, I would have been happy to leave him out here for the coyotes to dispense of, but the law frowned upon such things.

We'd had to do a fancy dance to allow Cash to be buried in the old cemetery.

Fencing had to be redone and a ton of papers filled out, but his final wish had been granted.

Why I had gone to so much trouble was beyond me.

If not for Granny...well, we knew what I would have done with the bastard.

We rolled over acres and acres of land, most still showing signs of winter but with a few bursts of spring here and there.

Granny served as tour guide for Bella, pointing out the old line cabins spread out over the land.

There were several, all looking dingy. Since we didn't have big cattle drives anymore, those one-room camps along our grazing lands had turned into homes for raccoons and rodents.

Just another sign of the hard times that had befallen not just Bastian Acres but the whole farming industry.

Bella gasped at the landscape, waving a small hand at a flock of wild turkeys.

The Arbuckle Mountains stood in the distance, coated with what remained of the last snowfall.

"...after General Mathew Arbuckle, who was a commander at Fort Gibson," Granny was saying when we made a sharp left at a wooden post with a splash of yellow paint that marked the end of the Bastian land.

To our right, I saw my tractor parked inside the old cemetery, the bright green paint standing out against the snow, the backhoe bucket resting on the muddy dirt beside a freshly dug hole.

Unsurprisingly, I saw the lone official police vehicle, a well-loved Jeep with a star on the doors, parked on the other side of my tractor.

Ollie had shown up to pay respects to a man he had never met.

Ollie knew my father's not-so-illustrious past. I'd shared that with him over beers more than once, yet he had shown up to offer his condolences.

He was a good friend. "Oh, and this is the family graveyard. Over fifty of our ancestors have been laid to rest here."

"This is quite the spot to spend eternity," Bella whispered, her gaze moving to the snowy mountains in the distance. "It is so beautiful out here. I never imagined I'd see anything like this!"

"We like it here," Granny softly replied. "Never lived anywhere else. Never wanted to. My father used to say that if it's outside Oklahoma, then it ain't worth seeing."

Bella nodded politely. I myself didn't hold to that philosophy too strongly. I knew there was a wide world out there that should be visited. Seeing other cultures expanded the mind and the heart, but until I stumbled into a few million I'd be here, trying to save my family legacy.

The truck slowed, and I cranked her hard to get her in position near the hole in the frosty soil.

The men in the back piled out, each sporting runny noses and red cheeks, as Bella and

I assisted Granny down from the cab.

Ollie appeared, brown cap in hand, with a stranger at his side while I was leading Granny to the lone seat by the grave.

A folding chair that I had nabbed from a hunting blind a few hundred feet south.

Good hunting here when a man could find time to spare to sit with his rifle.

That man wasn't me. I wasn't much into killing something just to kill it and hang its head on the wall.

"Mrs. B," Ollie said, nodding his dark head to Granny. Ollie wore his Cherokee heritage incredibly well. Everyone called her that, or Granny B, as she was the matriarch of this assorted can of nuts that was our family. "Sorry to hear about the loss."

"You're so kind to come out," she said and took her seat.

My brothers gathered around her as Mike began to flip through a small black Bible he'd brought along.

I'd asked for the basics, which meant no pastor who required money.

I'd spent enough on Cash. Granny and Reverend Cox had not been pleased, but God could listen to Mike for free as well as he could listen to the good reverend for a hundred bucks.

Maybe that would send me to Hell, which was fine.

Dad would be there so we could talk about his abandonment of his son.

Sons plural, I amended, as he had ditched us all.

I gave Ollie and the stranger a nod, then jogged back to my truck to fetch an old blanket from behind the seat.

After I had Granny wrapped up, I turned to Ollie and the stranger.

Good-looking man, wavy blond-brown hair that needed a trim, pretty green eyes, whiskery, wearing good stout outdoor clothes.

Solid boots. Probably someone wanting hunting rights to our land.

Maybe been scouting things out some before Ollie rolled up. That happened a lot.

“This is Hanley Welsh,” Ollie explained as Milton, looking quite windblown and disgruntled in a stern, lawyerly way, went to stand with Granny while keeping a cautious eye on Bella.

Sexy outdoorsy man nodded. “He’s out here for a photo shoot.

Wildlife. Making a book. Found him walking along the hedgerow between your land and Hillman Banks’ property, so I stopped to ask him what he was doing. ”

“Which was probably the most polite police request I’ve ever gotten,” Hanley replied in a soft New England accent. “Most of the time I get a little rangy when I’m out camping and end up looking like a mountain man. Law tends to get all Sheriff Teasle on me.”

Ollie snorted softly at the mention of the Brian Dennehy character from Rambo and then ran a hand through his short, black hair.

“I try not to view anyone as an unwanted element ,” Ollie said with a wink at me. “Otherwise Baker would have been run out of town years ago.”

“Ha.” I chuffed like an angry bear. “Nice to meet you. I’m kind of in the middle of burying my father, so we can talk later. Come to the house.”

“Sure, yes, I’m sorry to have intruded on this sad moment,” Hanley whispered as the wind twisted and pulled at his overgrown hair. He did look a bit unkempt but in a way that I found kind of appealing. I rarely looked as spiffy as my half-brothers. Jeans and dirty cowboy boots were my wardrobe.

“Nah, it’s not all that sad,” I replied. Ollie flattened his lips. Hanley’s brows shot up, but he recovered quickly.

“I’ll just go meander around while you tend to your father.

Again, my sympathies,” Hanley said, nodding at me and slipping around the back of the tractor, large backpack complete with a tightly bound pop-up tent resting on his strong back.

I watched him break over the knoll and disappear into a gully that took him out of sight.

“He’s what he claims.” Ollie’s deep voice broke into my vapid moment.

I glanced at our lawman. “I ran a background on him when I found him poking around on private land. Seems he worked for some big wildlife organization before being signed by a publishing house in New York to make photo books. He wanted to do this part of the country. No criminal record other than an arrest about three years ago during a protest at a lab in Georgia that tested on animals.”



“Okay, cool, as long as he’s not a drunken fool like me.”

“There’s only one like you, thank the gods.” He clapped my shoulder, then turned deep brown eyes to the other three chumps in suits. “Or used to be only one Bastian boy to keep an eye on. They staying long?”

“I hope not. I plan to offer them some cash to sign off and get them on planes back to whence they came.”

“Whence? Holy shit, two hours with the big city boys and you’re starting to sound like Jane Austen.” He chuckled before ambling over to rest a hand on Granny’s shoulder as Mike shot me a look that said he was beyond ready.

Squaring my shoulders, I took a deep breath and moved to my truck to grab the straps I had tossed in to lift the casket from the bed and place it in the ground.

It took a while to get things rigged up.

The weight of the coffin made the tractor want to tip more than I liked, but with some patience and help from the other men, we lowered Cash into the cold Oklahoma soil.

Mike led some prayers. We all huddled around Granny, who was the only one who felt compelled to pray along with the funeral director.

None of us guys cared one way or the other if God carried Cash onto his bosom.

I secretly—or not so secretly, I guess—hoped Cash went south for an extended stay at Satan’s Resort & Spa.

A man who abandons numerous women and kids shouldn’t receive any kind of blessings.

Call me vindictive if you wish, but I never felt better than when the short prayers were over and I could scoop up big maws of rocky soil and dump it on my father's coffin.

Not a tear was shed. Not even Granny wept, and she cried at laundry soap commercials.

Guess it says a lot when your own mother doesn't shed a tear at your funeral.

After we properly covered him, we all gathered up and rode back to the house for some coffee, cookies, and the reading of Cash's will.

Hopefully by nightfall, all these men would be a few grand richer and jetting back to their lives, and I could start planning how to turn this ranch back into something that my great-grandfather would be proud of.

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### Chapter Three

As with most important things, the will was read around the kitchen table.

Granny had a chicken roasting in the oven, carrots and potatoes stuffed into the old metal roasting pan with the meat.

Bread had been baked yesterday to sop up the gravy she'd make from the drippings.

We'd hauled a few folding chairs in from the hall closet but left the card table stashed away.

Granny liked to host poker parties once a month with the old gals from the Lilac Hills Home for Independent Living.

Noreen Piller's wheelchair didn't fit through the narrow kitchen doorway, so they played in the living room.

Our old house was built way before people cared about handicapped folk.

Crippling silence hung in the air like fetid smoke as we waited for Milton to find his glasses and then stir some cream into his cup of coffee.

My siblings all looked tense. Bella, seated next to Ford, seemed at ease, but then again, she should be.

Nothing discussed here today would affect her at all.

“I can bring out more cookies,” Granny offered as Milt removed a legal document from inside a leather case that was cracked and faded from age and the sun.

“We’re good.” Linc smiled at my grandmother nervously.

“Well, shout if you want something to snack on,” she tacked on and settled back into her seat.

“Milton, you think we could get to it?” I asked, eager to clear the table—and my house—of these reminders of what a shit my father had been. They, too, seemed ready to get things rolling.

Rheumy blue eyes glanced at me over the top of smudged glasses. “You can’t rush the law.”

Dodge and Ford exchanged looks.

“Right, but maybe we can goose her? It’s going to be dark soon,” I threw out in the hopes that Milt would not want to drive home in the dark.

His eyes rounded. “Oh damn, well, we best get going. I’ve not had my cataract surgery yet, so driving at night makes me squint.” Bella gave me a tiny smile as the ancient lawyer began to read from the paperwork in front of him. The tension in the room was as thick as wood smoke.

“I, Cashman Delaney Bastian, of Rural Route 89 Box 4, Bastian Grange, Oklahoma, am of sound mind and not under duress or undue influence. I fully understand the nature and extent of all my property and its distribution.” Milton took a moment to slurp down some coffee and cough a few times before continuing.

“I am making this my final will and testament. In lieu of leaving the ranch named at

the address above to any one child, I leave it to all four of my sons—Studebaker, Dodge, Lincoln, and Ford Bastian—to oversee its care and steward it into the next generation of Bastians with one proviso: My mother, Eleanor Alice Bastian, wife of William Frank Bastian, is to be allowed to live at the ranch until she passes over or wishes to move to the Lilac Hills Home in Bastian Grange.”

“He wasn’t all bad,” Granny whispered as a few tears ran down her weathered cheek. Linc handed her his hanky as Bella rubbed her bowed back. “Just mostly,” she threw out at the end.

“So there is a small personal note at the end,” Milt uncomfortably said while glancing at the four Bastian brothers sitting at the table. “If you wish to read it yourselves...”

“Nope, read it aloud. Whatever he has to say to us is probably bullshit anyway,” I blurted out, instantly feeling like a jerk as my grandmother, eyes still dewy, morosely nodded along.

The other three with half my blood bobbed their heads.

Whether it was in agreement with Milt reading the final words from Cash or to my saying whatever Cashman had to say was a steaming pile of crap, I didn’t know for sure, but the vibe was strong for the bullshit comment.

“As you wish,” Milt took another sip of coffee.

“To my four sons. I guess if you’re all gathered together with Milt, I’ve died.

Your mothers are probably dancing in the streets as are you boys.

I know I was a shit father, husband, and partner to all of you and your moms, but I hope you can understand that some men just aren’t made to be tied down. ”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Dodge muttered. Yeah, that was my thinking exactly. Linc grumbled something under his breath. Ford sat silently beside Bella, his expression tight and hard to read. “What a load of utter shit.”

“Now, Dodge, let Milt finish so he can get home before it gets dark,” Granny said, and the ginger bowed his head and whispered an apology. “Go on, Milt. I know Edith is keeping your dinner warm for you.”

“Yes, she is. Pork chops and applesauce,” Milt informed us. We all muttered something about yummy food and waited for him to get back to reading. “Right. Yes.” He pushed his glasses up his nose. “Where was I?”

“Men being tied down,” Linc spoke up in that deep bass voice of his.

“Oh yes, tied down. There it is. Ahem, so, men aren’t meant to be tied down.

I did my best to be the father that you all needed, but I failed miserably, just like I failed your mothers.

I know you all couldn’t care less about a final request from me, but if you four could find it in your hearts to mend the family ranch that I left in Baker’s hands, I would appreciate it.

If you can’t bring yourselves to help make the ranch what it used to be for me, do it for my mom.

I did love you all, and I hope you can come to love each other. Goodbye, boys. Dad.”

We sat in stilted silence for a few minutes. The timer went off on the oven, spurring us to all shake off the dump truck of emotion that had been parked on our shoulders. Ford seemed the most upset, his face a mask of sadness that the rest of us seemed to

be lacking.

“That’s the chicken,” Granny said after clearing her throat. “Milton, thank you for handling all of this for us.”

“My pleasure. There are some odds and ends to be attended to by the boys. Bills and such that Cash left behind, that sort of thing. I’ll leave them here in the folder with your copy of the will.” We all stood.

I escorted Milt out the door and to his car after slipping him a check for half of his legal fees.

I hated to even look in that folder to see what kind of bills Cash had left behind for me to take care of.

Just like everything else here on the ranch, he just threw his responsibilities onto me.

Mom, Granny, the ranch, and now whatever asinine bills he had run up since he had run off on Ford’s mother ten years ago.

If it were possible to hate some more, I couldn’t see how.

“Thanks for handling all of that for us, Milt. I’ll have the final half of your fee to you next month,” I said as I opened his car door for him. He sat down with a huff, his tan tie sporting a fresh coffee stain.

“No rush, Baker. I’m sorry there wasn’t more for you boys and your grandmother. Cash wasn’t good for much, but he was good at making others clean up his messes.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I gave him a wan smile, thumped the roof of his car, and then closed the door.

He took off like a bat out of hell. I watched with trepidation as he sped down the driveway, praying he wouldn't take out the paddock fencing.

He'd been known to wipe out mailboxes now and again.

Once he was off my property, I took a moment to tip my head back to stare at the stars just starting to appear in the sky.

The horizon behind the mountains was purple and indigo, tinged with pink, the moon not yet in sight.

It was times like these that I really missed having someone at my side to hold my hand as we worked through the garbage life heaped on you.

A wife, a husband. Hell, just a boyfriend would be nice.

Right about now, I would take a dog to sleep at my feet.

It got damn lonely on this ranch with only a gun-toting octogenarian for company.

"Hey," a man called, startling me out of at least a full year of life.

"Fuck," I gasped as Hanley ambled out of the shadows of the stables into the soft glow of the front porch light.

"Whistle or something." A jaunty smile pulled at his lips before he puckered.

I stood there in shock as he warbled just like an indigo bunting, one of Mom's favorite birds.

"Very good. Maybe make it something that lets a soul know a man is leaping out of



the dark at them.”

“I’m not sure I leaped, but fair enough. Next time you’ll know it’s me coming.”

“Appreciate that.” I leaned on the post, arms folded, and crossed my right foot over my left as the sound of laughter from inside leaked around the screen door. It needed new weather stripping badly. Job ten thousand two on the Baker Bastian To-Do List.

“What can I do you for?”

“Ollie strongly suggested that I come visit you this evening to ensure that permission to range your lands to take pictures was given before I started snapping. To be honest, I was going to do that tomorrow after I scouted a bit, but when a lawman the size of Sheriff Ahoka recommends you do something, I tend to do as proposed. Saves me a lot of time calling my agent to get me out of a local lockup.”

“You get locked up often?” I asked, the tip of my nose and ears growing chilly as we conversed as if I didn’t have something important to do inside.

Something about this wandering wildlife photographer made me feel settled.

Perhaps it was his lazy way of speaking as if he had all the time in the world. Must be nice.

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“Not so much since I hit thirty. I had a few nights in various cells for non-violent civil disobedience. Power to the people.” He placed a dirty hiking boot on the bottom step.

I liked the way the soft white of the bare bulb warmed his face.

Fine lines were starting to branch out from the corners of his evergreen eyes.

Obviously he smiled a lot. “Nowadays I get my message out about conversing wildlife via means that do not require me to piss in a dirty crapper while a dozen other guys watch.”

“Understandable. So you’re here to ask permission to meander my land to take pictures?”

“That I am.” He shifted forward slightly to rest a forearm on his knee, which made the large pack and tightly-wound tent on his back shimmy to the side slightly.

The man must be strong to tote around that much on his back daily.

“If you’re okay with me being here for a few weeks to a month, depending on how agreeable the wildlife is, I’ll forward your information to my publisher and they’ll email you about the property release. ”

“You planning to camp out there?” He nodded, a lock of dirty blond hair falling over one slim eyebrow.

“It gets damn cold here at night yet. We just had snow recently. ?Course, that being

said, it could shoot up to eighty tomorrow. Granny says the only dependable way to prognosticate the weather in Oklahoma is to wake up and look out the window.”

A soft laugh rolled out of him. “I’m prepared for either, but thanks for the warning. I’ve been doing this since I graduated college, and there’s not much in the way of ugly weather I’ve not run into, but I will take Granny’s advice and peek out the tent flap every morning.”

“Okay then go forth and photograph. You got a gun?” I asked and got a short nod.

“Good. We got all kinds of wildlife here that would be happy to have you for lunch. Since it’s chilly yet, you might not need to worry too much about the cottonmouths, western rattlers, or copperheads, but the cougars are a constant threat and the bears are just coming out of hibernation.

Oh, and if you run into a bison, do as the park rangers say and avoid petting the fluffy cows. ”

“Right, they’re mostly on government pastures, right?”

“Yep, that’s right. And while they do have a designated space, if they choose to go walkabout, they go. Most are content to stay on their range, but there have been a few that wanted to see more of the world.”

“Duly noted. Thanks for that info. I had most of it on my phone, but it’s always nice to get the real deal from the locals. So, if it’s okay with you since it’s now dark, I’ll just bunk in your barn.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s fine.” I wasn’t about to send him out into a cold, dark night to try to set up a camp. “Just no fire, obviously.”

“Obviously. Thanks. Oh, your email? For my publisher?”

“Oh right, yeah.” He passed me his phone, a beat-to-hell Android, opened to notes.

I gave him my email, my cell, and the ranch landline since cell service ran from decent to spotty to hell nah out here, depending on which way your horse went.

“If you can’t reach me on my phone, call the house.

Granny is always here and loves to take messages.

Fair warning, though. If you ring and she picks up, be ready for at least a half-hour catch-up call. ”

He chuckled warmly while slipping his phone into his back pocket. “I’ll make sure I have a cup of coffee close at hand.”

“Good. Just so you know, she is not the person to ring if you’ve just been nailed by a rattler.”

He gave me a smile that lit up his eyes. Then he offered me his hand. I slapped mine into his. His grip was strong, but he had pretty soft skin. We held hands for just a microsecond longer than was customary. A masculine laugh from inside slipped into the intimate moment.

“I’ll let you get back to your family. Sorry to interrupt such a sad day.” He pulled his fingers from mine.

“Told you it wasn’t all that sad, but thanks for the kindness.”

His expression was curious, but he merely nodded and then turned on his heel,

headed to the stable.

I watched him go, long legs carrying him with ease to the horse barn before he melted into the darkening night and was gone.

The rattle of the overhead door on the stable opening and closing reached me.

I drew in a long breath, turned, and with shoulders set, made my way back to the kitchen. All eyes rose to me as I walked in.

“I was just telling your brothers they didn’t need to go back into town for beds. We have three bedrooms and two bathrooms upstairs. There’s plenty of room,” Granny was saying as she placed a carrot cake on the table.

“Oh.” I gave them all a fast glance. “Well, sure, that’s fine.

” It really wasn’t but tossing them out would piss off my grandmother.

Sweet as she was, you did not want to be the bee that got in her bonnet.

“Maybe we can get some more coffee ready and have a sit down. I’d like to talk to you all, and there’s no better time than the present.”

Granny was not happy. She knew my plans. Of course she did. I had sold off what remained of our beefers to gather a decent amount of cash to wave under their noses.

“Coffee and carrot cake sounds lovely,” Bella said as she rose.

“I’ll just get that going. I brew a good pot, ask Ford.

” My half-brother nodded. Granny sat down with a sigh.

She and I had gone round and round about my plans.

Bella hurried over to the pot, giving us her slim back as she filled the old Black & Decker drip machine.

I dropped down into the seat Bella had vacated, leaned my arms on the table, and tapped the raised edge of the cake plate.

It was one of Granny's best, a green glass plate that had belonged to a great-aunt.

Usually only brought out for the big holidays, church bake sales, and the Bastian Acres County Fair baking contest each August. She was doing her best to make a good impression, even though I had begged her not to as these boys were not staying.

"Okay, so as I suspected, Dad left us all equal shares," I began as I ran a finger over the scalloped edge of the cake plate.

"Since none of you are farmers, what I have arranged is to offer you each ten thousand dollars to buy your share of the ranch from you." I looked up to see that my half -brothers were all gawking at each other before looking back at me.

"I know it's not much, and if you all want more, then...

well, once I get things back on track, I could send you more.

It might take a while for me to get that kind of cash again, but if I sold off a few more acres to—"

A cellphone rang. We all glanced at Dodge. "Sorry, I...I have to take this. Give me five." He pushed to his feet then disappeared into the mudroom, pulling the door mostly closed behind him. The others at the table were staring at me in varying

degrees of upset, confusion, and worry.

Granny began cutting into the cake as Dodge's voice slid through the cracked door. "Chris, no, I just...can't you just handle it this time? You knew I'd be in Oklahoma for the funeral. Why the hell did you schedule a signing when you knew he had twirling practice?"

I shot my grandmother a look. She pursed her lips as she placed a fat slice of dark orange cake on a small dish for Ford. He nodded silently in thanks.

"No, I can't just come home tonight. Chris, Jesus, just take Dahn to his practice.

No, it's not stupid. He enjoys it. Look, can we not get into how you feel he should be doing something a bit more masculine?

For fuck's sake, how can you be queer enough to suck dick but not willing to have your son twirl a baton?

No, I do not want to hear it. No one will care, Chris.

Honestly, your days in the limelight are over.

Just take Dahn to his lesson and stop being such a fucking twit. "

Silence fell. We all focused on the cake to hide the fact that we had been eavesdropping on a highly personal call. Guess I had a nephew. Who knew? Not me.

"Sorry," Dodge said when he flopped back into his seat. Granny handed him a slice of cake with thick homemade cream cheese frosting. "My ex used to play football. He's got a signing tonight and our son has an extra-curricular to attend."

“What team did he used to play on?” Linc asked as he forked a huge bite into his mouth.

“San Francisco. He’s Chris Martins.” Linc’s eyes flared. “Yeah, that Chris Martins.”

“I’d read he came out about ten years ago, after he retired.”

“Yeah, more like twelve. We got married when I was just out of college, May-December kind of relationship, and adopted our son Dahn within a year of exchanging vows.”

“Oh how amazing! I have a great-grandson!” Granny nearly dropped the wedge of cake she was putting on my plate. “How old is he?”

“He’ll be ten in November.” Dodge beamed when he spoke of his son. I was happy to see that. Fathers should be proud of their sons.

“Wow, so you were married to Chris Martins of the San Francisco Golden Rams.” Linc sat back in his chair, cake gone, and dusted some crumbs from his beard. “That man went through offensive lines like a tank. ?Course that was what? Twenty years ago?”

I knew the name and was equally impressed. Dodge nodded solemnly before taking the slice of cake that had been directed at me that Granny now wanted to give to the man who had made her a great-grandma.

“Yeah, twenty years ago. So, Baker, about your offer...” Dodge steered us back on course.

“Right, so, I have ten grand for each of you in the bank. I can write you all checks now, and tomorrow you can be on planes to return to your kids or whatever it is you



all have going.”

Bella returned to the table with the coffeepot, pouring it as if this was some high tea at Buckingham Palace instead of four strangers pulled together to place a cheating shit-stain of a man in the ground. Granny frowned and gave the next slice to Bella, now sitting in my usual seat.

“Well, about that,” Linc ventured to break the distressingly long silence my last announcement had brought. “While your offer is generous, we all know that this land is worth way more than ten grand.”

“Obviously, but that was all I could get from selling the beefers,” I explained once more.

“Right, and we all get that. Now I can’t speak for the others, but I’m here to stay.”

I blinked at the hairy bear of a man. Granny gave Linc more cake.

“Stay? But you own a bar in Chicago,” I stammered as the others sat with forks in hand, watching the two of us intently.

“Did. I did own a bar. When I heard that Dad had died, I did some soul searching, realized I hated that bar and sold it to an old friend. I want to be a rancher.”

If someone had told me that Santa Claus had just been elected governor of this fine state and was planning on making flying reindeer the state mammal, I would not have been more shocked.

“But...you tend bar.” I stammered and got a funny little smirk from my big, bearded brother. Half- brother.

“Yeah, and I did it well. But I need to get out of the city. My stress levels are astronomical, and my doctors said I needed a change of life or I’d never see forty.

” Dodge nodded his red head strongly and the queasy feeling Linc was stirring up in my gut doubled.

“Also, the closer I get to the big four oh, the more tired I get of pulling beers and breaking up drunken frat boy fights. So, I have my half of the money from the sale. I can invest it in the ranch. Buy back some cows. Maybe spruce up those cabins we saw on the way to the family cemetery and rent them out to city people who want a western vacation.”

My jaw dropped. Literally. I sat there, mouth agape, as the others dove into this moronic discussion as if it were the best thing since sliced bread as Granny would say.

“Those would be adorable little places for people to stay in,” Bella concurred, then gave Ford a not-so-gentle nudge in the side.

“Totally. Bella and I also kind of wanted to stay here for a while. She wants to open a dress shop in Bastian Grange, and I could work on the ranch. We have some money to add to the pot to fix things up and buy more cows.”

Granny’s eyes were as round as her cake plate by now.

“Since we’re all laying our cards on the table,” Dodge said, running a hand through his neatly combed cinnamon hair. “I’m looking to put down roots somewhere my son can grow up with fresh air and an appreciation of where his milk comes from.”

Granny was so close to exploding out of her seat only her bad hip kept her bottom in her chair. She was fairly vibrating with joy. Everyone at the table was now staring at

me with bated breath.

“Beef cattle,” I corrected as Granny sat there with the final slab of cake on a plate pointed in my direction.

“We don’t have dairy cows. We raised beef cattle.

You don’t milk a beeper for God’s sake. Also, none of you know the first thing about ranching or how fucking hard it is on a man’s soul.

This isn’t some Hollywood dude ranch rom-com.

This is real life. My life.” I slapped my chest with my palm.

“While you three were off playing in the big city, I was here working my fucking hands to the bone to keep this ranch and the legacy behind it alive. And now you show up because the asshole who donated his DNA and nothing else to us croaked and told you that you could be ranchers? That you could sashay in here with no experience and just take over because this work is so simple a dentist, a bartender, and a...” I flung a look at Ford, who mumbled something about a fry guy at a fast food place.

“Of course. A dentist, a bartender, and a fry guy walk into a bar.” I snorted in derision as I waved at Ford.

“This really is a joke. My God. So Frank French Fry here thinks he can just drop his apron and become a farmer. Jesus H. Christ. Like, all you had to do was buy a cowboy hat and learn a few lyrics to a Garth Brooks song. No, fuck that. Take your money and shove it up your entitled, urban asses. I’ve done this all by myself for forty years. I’ll keep doing it myself!”

Granny yanked the slice of cake back with a glower that meant my ass was the grass and she was the lawnmower. She would have to catch me first, though.

I left them all gawking at me as I pounded out the back door with no coat, no keys, and a head of steam that might possibly peter out when I hit the Oklahoma/Kansas border.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

### Chapter Four

Anger and something, perhaps even a bit deeper, had my thoughts clouded.

I threw open the big sliding door to the stable, intent on grabbing Prissy and riding to Canada to become a Mountie, and skidded to an abrupt stop.

About twenty feet from me stood Hanley Welsh, stripped down to his jeans, with a wet washcloth in his hand, eyes flaring wide at the intrusion.

His chest was a lovely sight, covered with soft light brown hair, some of the curls reflecting gold in the overhead light.

Firm and fit, he had abs for days and a well-defined treasure trail that led downward into the unzipped top of his battered old Levi's.

"Shit!" he gasped, holding the wet cloth up to cover one nipple. "Fuck. You scared me. Whistle or something." He let the cloth fall from his chest as I stood there like a dipshit, eyes roaming over all that damp manly flesh like a creeper. "Did you need to get a horse?"

"Sorry, no, sorry." I turned my head so fast my neck cracked, my sight flying to Prissy peeking over the stall door after hearing my voice. "I mean..." He stared at me as I bumbled over myself. "I was...no, no, I'm not taking a horse."

I had been strongly considering it, but I wouldn't have really taken my mare out in the dark.

There were too many dangers, such as reduced visibility and wildlife meetups, as well as the higher spook ratio for some horses in the dark.

They are prey animals after all, so no, I would not have put my girl at risk.

“Okay, so you’re out here to visit her then?”

” He chuckled the cloth into an old black rubber feed dish that he had scavenged for a washbasin and shrugged into a soft blue flannel shirt.

The long hair on his neck was wet still as were some wild strands that tickled his brow.

“Or were you hoping to strike up a conversation with me?”

I blinked softly, unsure whether he was flirting or if I was just projecting. The man was pretty, no doubt, and a good hard fuck in the barn would surely purge my head of the family horseshit.

“To be honest, I forgot you were out here.”

He placed a hand on his heart. “Ouch. My poor male pride.”

That made me smile just a little. “No, nothing like that. We had a little family dispute, and I needed air.”

“Ah gotcha. I know how that goes. Well, you’re welcome to stay.

It is your barn after all.” He swept an arm in a grand fashion, then fell into a terrible French accent.

“We serve only ze finest fresh hay and grain. Ze bedding is always fresh and ze guests quiet.” Prissy whinnied.

“Well, some of ze guests,” he amended in that same ghastly accent.

“Come, pull up a haybale, Monsieur! I have some granola bars for ze appetizer followed by canned stew for ze main meal.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as he flitted about and tugged a bale from in front of Pumpernickel’s stall for me to sit on.

“I hope you never use that accent if you go to France,” I said, lingering just inside the open door, hands in my pockets.

“Oh trust me, I didn’t.” He nudged at the bale with his booted foot, then jerked his head at the door. “Think we can close that? My nipples are hard enough to cut glass.”

“Shit, sorry.” I turned to yank the door closed while forcing myself not to think about those dark cherry nipples I had inadvertently seen. “Don’t want the guests to get chilled.”

When I turned back to him, his gaze dropped to the ground. Ah, so he had been checking out my ass. Maybe that hard fuck in the barn would become a reality. God knows it had been ages since I’d gotten off with a partner.

He took a seat on a bale in front of Persimmon. The old gray gelding craned his neck out to snuffle at Hanley’s damp hair. Hanley smiled gently as he broke off a bite of a granola bar to sneak to Persimmon.

“You’re spoiling my horses,” I commented, walking over to join him. The barn was chilly, not cold, though. The horses threw off body heat, and with the doors closed,

no drafts were moving through.

“He’s pushy,” Hanley replied as I sat down with a huff of exhaustion. “Why do all their names start with a P?” He jerked his scruffy chin at the hand-painted name placards on the stalls.

“Oh, that’s my ex-wife’s doing. She likes to name things in lettered groups. Her cats are Yasmine and Yodel.”

“Ah, sorry about the marriage.”

I shrugged. “Not her fault. She tried her best. I wasn’t the easiest man to live with, still ain’t if you ask Granny.

Family trait, I’m ashamed to say. The final straw was when Ollie found me pass out drunk in public with a well-hung bull rider.

” His eyes rounded momentarily. “Yeah, not my finest moment. She filed for divorce. I agreed to it, wholly uncontested, obviously. Then I dried out. A day late and a dollar short as the saying goes. Want to see my shiny tokens?”

“Sure.” I dug out a couple of older ones.

Something about having a chip in my pocket helped me stay sober.

When the urge got strong, like it was building to now with my siblings deciding to chuck it all and play fucking Bonanza IRL, I could finger the chip and remind myself I was stronger than the urge.

So far, so good. “I still go once a month to group in Bastian Grange.”



“Congrats on getting sober. I know it’s hard. My sister is still fighting that fight.”

“Sorry. She drinks?”

He sat back to rest his shoulders on Persimmon’s stall door. The horse would not leave him be, and Hanley seemed okay with horse slobber on his clean cheeks.

“No, she’s been into some pretty hard drugs since she was a teenager. We’ve done all we can as a family unit now, short of locking her in my parents’ basement and that’s against the law so...” He lifted a shoulder, a wave of sadness darkening his green eyes. “So, yeah, I get the struggle. Congrats.”

That ready smile was back. Charming as hell it was, but I rather liked knowing he had some dark stuff hidden behind the devil-may-care exterior. Gave him a little character.

“There’s some cold bottled water in the fridge over there.” I jerked my chin in the direction of a stack of empty feed bags. “You might have to dig for it but help yourself.”

“Thanks.” He rose and walked over to an empty stall that held all manner of tack that should have been stored in the tack room, but I just never got around to it.

Just like cleaning the barn of empty bags of horse feed.

I took the opportunity to eyeball his ass once more, making sure that when he reached the dusty little dorm fridge, my sight was on my horse.

He returned with two bottles. One he passed to me before sitting down again then offered me a granola bar. “Here.”

“I’m good, thanks.” I’d eaten dinner. No dessert because I’d been a bad boy. I did take the water though. “We had a big meal.” I eyed the bar. “Okay, just to be neighborly.”

“You sure?” I nodded, so he handed the granola bar over then bit into what remained of his. “So you’ve lived here all your life?” I cocked an eyebrow while cracking open my water. “Ollie likes to talk.”

That he did. I would have to get in his ear about that the next time I ran into my old friend.

“I have, yeah.” The water was icy cold as it splashed down my throat.

A good thing, probably, as I did have to chill out before returning to the house.

“My father cut and ran when I was about five, leaving me and my mom here with my grandmother. Mom didn’t take the abandonment well.

She was already dealing with a lot of mental health issues, which were pretty much largely chalked up to her being a hysterical woman by the old doctor in town.

” His lips flattened. “Him walking out on her to make her a single parent was too much for her. She uhm...” This was the part that always stuck in my throat despite my being forty years old.

“She overdosed on some cattle tranquilizers. She’s buried where you found us planting my old man, but he’s out in the blazing sun while she’s resting by some purple coneflowers. ”

“Jesus, Baker, I am so sorry.” He wiped his hand on his pant leg to reach over to give my forearm a squeeze. “That’s tough for a kid to go through.”

I shook it off with an awkward grunt. “It was rough. But Granny and I...we made it work, somehow. Over the years, we had to downsize a lot, but we’re still here.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Meh, it’s not all that, to be honest. But we’re still on family land. They’ll have to take us off this old dirt patch in body bags she likes to say.”

“It’s beautiful land, really. I’ve been around the world a couple of times over and have photographed some of the most gorgeous landscapes and animals in existence, but for some reason, I never looked in my own back yard.

Which is odd because I grew up watching Marty Stouffer.

He was the one who made me want to capture wildlife on film at a young age.

My dad bought me a used Nikon for my tenth birthday after I used up every roll of film for his Kodak instant camera, taking shots of a cluster of swallowtails drinking out of a mud puddle. ”

I chuckled softly and quietly sipped. Sitting here with him was relaxing. He had a nice way of spinning a yarn.

“And the rest is history as they say,” I chimed in and he nodded.

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“I suppose. Went to college, got a degree in photography, and set out to make a name for myself. My first stop was in Myanmar. I had nothing but my camera, my bachelor’s degree, and a backpack with my clothes and passport.

I spent three months there sleeping in the jungles and helping locals out with food and medicine.

Man, there are so many ways to get sick in the jungle during the rainy season.

Mosquitoes big as softballs.” I smiled around a bite of oats, honey, and raisins.

“It was worth it, though, because I ended up with some shots of red pandas that sold for some pretty decent money. I even managed to pick up some Burmese along the way. After I sold those images, I moved on to Thailand and stayed there for about a year. Met a glorious man named Kiet, and we had a mad affair.”

Ah okay, so he was into men. Good to know. The mad fuck in the barn still had possibility.

“You’ve seen a lot of the world,” I commented and washed down the sticky oats with some cold water.

“I have, but it’s nice to be back home. I’ve not been in America for close to eight years.”

I wondered what he was hiding from but kept my question to myself.

I wasn't my grandmother. My cell vibrated in my back pocket.

We both fell silent. I debated long and hard about ignoring it, but Granny could need me for something.

It was a reflex to think that way, even though there were four people in the house with her right now. The text was short and concise.

Bella give me her phone. Come back home. We need to talk. Your granny.

"Trouble?" Hanley softly asked as I read what was probably the first text message Eleanor Alice Bastian had ever sent in her life.

"I'm needed at the house." I popped the last bite of granola bar into my mouth as I rose. Prissy tossed her head at me. She would have to wait until tomorrow for a ride. "Thanks for the snack and the ear."

"Anytime. I'll probably see you around here and there. Thanks again for your permission to shoot on your land. You should hear from my publisher in the morning. They're pretty generous about paying a nice fee to landowners when I venture onto private property."

"Oh, well, that's nice."

"Yeah, you have some great land here. I can't wait to explore it more closely."

I nodded since I didn't know what to say in reply.

Requesting a hot screw in the hayloft seemed kind of pushy.

"Night then," I finally settled on before I left the stable and the far-too handsome

photographer.

The house was dark on the second floor, but the kitchen light was on.

I blew out a hearty breath and trudged forward to get what I assumed would be an earful.

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The house was silent when I slipped in the back door.

Toeing off my boots, I heard Granny humming in the kitchen. Rolling my head in a circle like a boxer about to touch gloves with his opponent, I strolled into the kitchen to find Granny making yet another pot of coffee. She looked at me and motioned to the now empty table.

“They’ve all gone to bed upstairs,” she informed me as she made her way from the coffeemaker to the fridge.

I was sorely tempted to make a snide comment about there being a hotel in town but bit it back.

Instead, I waited by the pot until there was enough brown liquid to fill a mug, then turned to see Granny holding a plate with the last slice of cake covered in seal wrap.

“What’s that?” I asked and got a look.

“Why it’s carrot cake, Studebaker.” She placed it on the table, lowered herself to her favorite chair—it had a thick cushion that padded her backside—then tapped at the tabletop with a finger.

“I knew it was cake,” I said as I moved to join her, pushing the pretty cloth placemat aside not to leave a coffee ring on the gingham material. “I was wondering why you didn’t feed it to one of the others.”

“Because I’m not going to punish you by withholding your favorite dessert over a temper tantrum.”

“Never stopped you when I was a kid, and it wasn’t a tantrum.” I removed the cling wrap and used the spoon in my coffee to cut off a moist bite.

“What would you call it, then?” Oh, she was feeling her oats tonight. The stern set of her lips was a dead giveaway that she was put out with me.

“Exiting a tense situation to gather my thoughts.” I shoved the cake into my mouth and nearly fainted at the deliciousness resting on my tongue.

“Back in my day, they called it storming out with a wild hair up your ass.” She stole my coffee to wet her whistle. I rolled my eyes. “So, now that you’ve made your brothers—”

“Half,” I said around the mouthful of homemade cream cheese icing and cake. “Half-brothers. I think that’s a pretty big distinction to make.”

“Why?” She sat back to fold her arms over her yellow robe.

“Why what?” I spooned up more cake even though I’d just had a granola bar. I was an adult. I could have two desserts.

“Why is that such a big distinction to make?” She took another gulp of coffee.

I thought about reaching for it, but given the set of her jaw, I opted to let her have it.

When she was in a contrary mood, trying to take coffee from her was like trying to remove a fish from a hungry bear. You might pull back a bloody stump.

“Because they’re not my brothers.” Her gaze grew stony. “Not my real brothers.” Cold silence fell. The old pipes rattled. Someone on the second floor was using the bathroom. “They’re strangers to us, Granny.” I lowered my voice so as not to be overheard by whoever was tiptoeing around above us.

“Bull dangles.”

“Granny, they are, really.” I wiped at my mouth with the back of my hand as the old fridge kicked on. “Sure, they have half our blood, but—”

“Half is enough to make them family, Baker. You know what the good book says.”

“Don’t covet your neighbor’s ass?”

“Now you’re just being a shit.” Yeah, I was. I hurried to eat more cake. “It says to bear your brother’s burdens.”

“Granny, honestly, I don’t think we can bear any more burdens.” I placed my spoon on my dish. I didn’t want to chance her swiping it back as I was being lippy. “And they are not really my brothers. You know your brothers and sisters. Those three could be mobsters.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, Baker. Mobsters. You watch too many shows on the Netflix,” she huffed. “One is a dentist.”

Oh right. “That could be a front. He could be laundering money for a crime syndicate.”



Her lips puckered. Ruh-roh. “You’re talking nonsense. All three of those men are just lovely. They’re looking for family connections and fresh starts. You, of all people, should be willing to offer someone looking to begin again a chance to do so.”

Damn. She had pulled out the big guns. I lowered my gaze to my plate as she waited for me to say something. The fridge hummed along as a floorboard over our heads creaked. My shoulders sagged in defeat. She was right. Fuck me. I ate the last bite of cake then swallowed before speaking.

“Okay, fine, I’ll talk to them in the morning.” I glanced over the table. She was nodding. “But we’re not just flinging open our doors and asking them to move in. Family, they might be, but we don’t know what kind of luggage they’re bringing with them.”

She gave me a smile. “That’s a gracious first step. We’ll talk more over breakfast.”

With that settled, for now, I rose and carried my plate and empty mug to the sink to rinse them off before putting them in the dishwasher. Then I turned to her. She looked tired. It was way past her usual bedtime of nine p.m. sharp.

“I’m really not trying to be a jerk, Granny. I just wish Cash had left us all alone. He was good at that. Why try to be a decent human being at the end? Why ask four grown men to play at being brothers this late in life?”

“Could be he just only figured it out at the end.” She slowly got to her feet with a soft moan.

“You have a chance to right the wrongs he brought to you and your brothers by being a better man than your father was. Try to look at their arrivals as a blessing instead of a curse. You just might realize that having them around is a good thing. A person can never have too much family.” She gave me a pat on the cheek before heading to the

door.

“Oh, and I gave Dodge your room. There are blankets and a pillow on the sofa.”

Off she went to her bed, leaving me staring at the ceiling where my sibling snoozed away comfortably under my covers. I’d had three younger brothers for a day and they were already taking my shit.

I could barely wait to see what they tried to grab tomorrow.

### Chapter Five

Sleeping on the sofa sucked.

I tossed and turned half the night.

I chalked some of my edginess to pent-up sexual tension made worse by knowing that a good-looking guy who was into other men was snoozing in my stable.

I should have offered to come back to the barn for a good romp.

Maybe Hanley would have been into that. He had looked at my ass.

It had been a long, long time since I'd been in the arms of someone who didn't smell of Ben-Gay.

Not that Granny's hugs weren't the best. They were, along with her cookies and carrot cake, but a hug from your grandma wasn't the same as a hug from a sexy photographer.

The other half of my fractured rest, I had vivid, creepy dreams about my father rising from his fresh grave to complain about his plot.

Exhausted mentally and physically, my eyeballs were open at five in the morning, just like always.

Moving to my side to relieve the ache in my back, I lay there, quiet as a mouse, and

listened to the old ranch house as it slept.

Granny would be up in fifteen minutes, slapping around in her slippers to begin her day.

Breakfast followed by morning chores before the daily work required to keep a place up and running.

Not that I had a lot running at the moment.

But that would change. I hoped. Once the three dudes who shared my surname got it into their heads that farm living was not the life for them, I'd be poorer, yes, but free to begin my ten-year plan.

Soon as I had an idea of what the first step in the ten-year plan was.

Lumbar protesting this position as well, I sat up, rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and picked up my phone.

Nothing much of interest, so I rose, stepped into yesterday's pants, and hobbled to the kitchen.

The coffee was perking when Granny arrived in her flannel PJs, yellow robe, sloppy slippers, and curlers in her silver hair.

"Morning," she said around a yawn.

"Morning." I handed her a cup of coffee, bent to kiss her soft cheek, then made my way to the mudroom. "Going to the barn," I called over my shoulder as I tugged on my weathered brown chore coat.

“Don’t dawdle over them horses too long. We have a family meeting set for seven.”  
She pattered up to the doorway.

“I didn’t see that text,” I replied, then yanked on a pair of work boots as old as Granny, or damn close.

“I don’t know texts good other than that one from before. I slid a note under all the doors. You get told in person.”

“Ah okay. Old-fashioned paper texts.”

She smiled, then returned to the kitchen.

I headed out, eager to possibly get a chance to talk with Hanley again.

Talk meaning flirt. Maybe. If I could work up the nerve.

The sun was still hiding, so I made my way to the stable with dwindling moonlight.

Which was fine. I knew this ranch like I knew my own body.

I could probably make my way to each outbuilding blindfolded without incident.

As I neared the stable, I began whistling an old Porter Wagoner song and then gave a sharp rap on the door.

When only the horses replied, I yanked open the door and stepped inside.

Cool air rushed in with me, sweeping away the smell of barn and horse.

I reached back to close the door and flick on the lights.

The little space that Hanley had set up camp in was empty of all his gear.

“Anyone here?” I shouted, thinking that perhaps he had gone up into the hayloft.

Prissy replied with a whinny as did the other several horses in here.

A few pigeons in the rafters cooed softly.

No sound of a human, though. Damn. Guess he was an early riser as well.

With nothing to be done for my plans of making doe eyes at the man, I grabbed a pitchfork, turned on the beat-up radio sitting by my ATV, and got to work.

The hour went quickly, as it always does.

I had just turned and replaced the wheelbarrow to its spot when the first shot rang out.

Peeking through a fly-speckled window, I saw that the sun was coloring the sky bright pink.

Over by the old oak stood Granny, a rifle in her hand, taking aim at the second of ten empty soda cans lined up on an old wooden fence.

I walked outside, leaned on the barn, and chuckled softly as light after light on the second floor flared to life. Granny fired off another shot. Then another. Then another. Then she cussed. Then she took aim again.

Arms crossed, foot resting on the metal siding, I rather enjoyed seeing my siblings rushing out onto the porch in their jammies and bare tootsies.

“What is it?!” Dodge shouted over the sound of target practice and early morning

robins coming awake. “Is it a bear?”

“Nah,” I yelled from my observation spot. “Just Calamity Jane over there trying to hit a pop can. She has hopes of joining a wild west show.”

They all gaped at me. Bella drew a fancy pink robe tighter around her lean frame, eyes as wide as dinner plates.

“Don’t go telling them that. I know there ain’t no wild west shows.

I just want to shoot good in case that damn fox shows up to steal another chicken.

” With that, Granny fired off another round.

It went wide, hitting an empty wooden barrel that would never hold water again due to all the bullet holes in it.

“I swear this damn sight is off! Baker, sight that in for me, will you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I shouted in reply. The gun was sighted in more than any gun in the county.

She turned to the four rumpled people on the front porch.

“Since you all are up, I’ll start breakfast. Pancakes, eggs, and sausage.

Baker, check the coop for eggs. The girls are known to get up with the chickens.

” Granny tittered at her joke, then clomped back to the house, her oversized rubber boots slopping around on her feet.

She made quite the fashion statement in her pajamas, a blue chore coat, and green rubber boots.

Poor Bella was probably too shaken to even speak as fancy as she was.

I made a quick trip to the chicken coop to fill their waterer and check for eggs.

Most of the hens were still on the roost but leaped down as soon as I opened the door to their pen.

The rooster that Granny called Brewster crowed in my face.

He was a nice rooster, gentle with Granny and the hens, and had once fought off a red-tailed hawk that had tried to grab one of his gals.

Ever since that heroism, he was given lots of praise and extra shell corn and had grown a little chubby. But then again, who hadn't?

Ambling to the house, I could hear the sound of male voices through the cracks around the old window.

Pausing, I peeked inside to see everyone gathered at the table, talking pleasantly while Bella filled glasses with orange juice as Granny made flapjacks.

They all seemed so at home. Why the hell was I having such trouble with them being here?

Maybe it was just the newness of it all for them.

Like when you go on vacation and everything is hot off the fire and exciting.



Then, after a week, the novelty has worn off, and it's just another hotel room with an overused pool and crummy breakfast buffet.

I would bet cash money that within a week, they all would be seriously rethinking this crazy idea to become cowboys.

Then I could shoo them back to New York, Illinois, and California and get on with ranching.

Hands in my coat pockets, I entered my house, toed off my boots, hung up my coat and hat, and took a second to wash my hands in the big double sink beside the washing machine.

Back when I was a toddler, Granny had a wringer washer, and it drained into the sink.

Man, I used to love helping her on laundry day.

Even if my fingers got pinched weekly, there was nothing more fun than feeding wet clothes into those wringers.

Granny had loved that old machine. I'd had to argue and plead with her to get an automatic when her beloved Maytag had finally given up the ghost. To this day, she complains that the new washers don't get clothes as clean as her old wringer washer had, and perhaps that was true.

I didn't spend time examining my drawers for degrees of cleanliness.

I just stepped into them and pulled them over my ass.

My brothers— half- brothers—all turned to look at me when I entered the room. The aroma of maple syrup was thick on the air.

“Morning,” I grunted and grabbed a mug from the cupboard. Bella made her way over with the pot, smiled up at me, and filled my cup.

“I’m playing the role of Carla Tortelli this morning,” she said with soft humor.

“You look nothing like Rhea Perlman,” Linc tossed out and turned a soft shade of pink. A look that warred with his big, bad bear appearance. “Not that Rhea was ugly or anything. I think she was my fave on Cheers , but...yeah.”

“Thank you, Lincoln,” Bella replied as we all watched this little awkward exchange take place. When Bella sashayed back to the coffeemaker, Linc stared at his coffee mug as if it held the secrets of the ancients. Even his ears were red.

I took my seat, sipped, and placed my arms on the table, mug resting in my hands. “Okay, so I’m assuming we’ve all gotten some rest and are ready to rehash Cash’s final request.”

Dodge sighed wearily. “You know, on the one hand, I would love to tell that fucker—shit, sorry, Mrs. Bastian.”

Granny waved her spatula in the air. “Don’t think twice about it. I used worse when a weasel killed my ducks.” Everyone laughed softly. “You all just talk it out in whatever words feel best.”

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“Well, I guess I’m just feeling torn. On this hand, I would like to tell Cash to go fiddle himself because why should I do a damn thing he asks when he left me and my mother to struggle.

” We all hummed in agreement, save for Ford, who was sipping coffee and watching us warily.

“But then I do wish to get my boy away from the dirt and grime and crime. I think he’d do well here on the ranch.

I’ve checked into the local schools, and while they seem to be less than what I’d like to see in terms of educational rankings, I feel that Dahn is intelligent enough to be able to help boost those low test scores. ”

“I always maintained that there was no better life for a child than one that includes farming and ranching,” Granny said as she deposited a platter of pancakes onto the center of the table. “Dig in, there’s eggs coming right up.”

We all forked some flapjacks onto our plates, then passed around the butter dish and syrup dispenser.

“There’s a school on the Cherokee reservation as well.

Ollie went there for his high school years.

I’m not sure if non-Indigenous students can attend or not, but from what I read, it ranks well above the public schools in lots of areas.

I know they have a great baseball and debate team.

You could talk to Ollie about it as his father is somehow connected with the Bureau of Indian Education in some capacity,” Granny offered as the sizzle of eggs hitting a hot skillet filled the room.

“Thank you, I’ll certainly look into it,” Dodge replied while I cut my pancakes into bites just small enough to fit into my mouth.

All this talk about schools was putting the horse way in front of the cart, if you asked me.

“I’m really hoping we can make this work.

I have a rather substantial amount of cash to invest in Bastian Acres to help return it to its former glory.

My partner bought out my half of the practice for a little over five million so I’m willing to help out with whatever needs to be done. ”

“I also have some money to invest. About a hundred thousand from selling the sports bar,” Linc added.

“I was thinking more on those line shacks. I really think we should renovate them into little cabins with all the amenities, then rent them out to people from big cities, like us, who would fall over themselves to spend a week petting cows and riding horses on the open ranges.”

“There are no cows,” I reminded them between bites.

“Well, no, not now, but we could buy more,” Linc stated as he coated his flapjacks

with syrup.

As much as I wanted to pooh-pooh the suggestions, and I sorely did, it was damn hard to turn down that kind of investment cash.

There was a lot I could do around here with a big influx of money.

First thing was adding some cattle back on the pastures.

Granny was humming merrily as she flipped eggs.

I turned my attention to the New York City duo. “And what are you bringing to the table?”

Ford and Bella exchanged looks. Bella spoke for them. She still looked movie star fabulous. I’d not even combed my hair yet.

“Well, we don’t come with bags filled with money, but we do have marketable skills and are willing to learn.

” As kind as Bella seemed to be, I was having real difficulty envisioning her riding out to check on beefers that dropped calves in the snow or shoveling horse shit.

Ford maybe, but Bella seemed too refined for farm work.

“I would like to propose something for you to think about.” I nodded for her to continue.

“Well, when we arrived, I took note of a charming little place on the left of the drive, just the other side of the horse barn.”

“That’s the old springhouse,” I informed them. “Back in the day, my great-great-granny would store perishable things like milk, butter, eggs, and meat. Before they had refrigerators.”

“Oh, that’s really interesting. Is there water still flowing into it?” Bella enquired.

“Some. We split a line from the spring and had half the flow piped into the horse barn in the fifties. Why are you asking about that old springhouse? It’s about to fall down.”

“Well, I was thinking. If we put some money into it, just a little, mind you, as I only have my savings from my previous employer and may need to borrow some from somewhere, we could fix it up, and I could use it as a dress shop. I’m very good with a sewing machine and fabric is cheap.

Ford is handy with a hammer. He worked for his stepfather for several years.

” We glanced at Ford and got a short nod.

“I’d be willing to pay anyone back, with interest, until the loans were paid off. ”

Granny arrived with a platter of over-easy eggs and a sparkle in her eye.

“I think I can help you out, darling,” Granny said as she handed Linc the eggs, then sat down next to Bella.

I could see the wheels turning in her head.

“I have an old Singer in the junk room, tons of fabric, and even a dress dummy. There was a time that I made all my own clothes, and most of Baker’s, before my eyesight got bad.

You're more than welcome to use that to create your big city fashions.

I also have some pin money that I would like to invest in Bella Dee's Boutique. "

"Granny..." I sighed, but she had that stubborn set to her jaw, so I just forked an egg off the dish and slapped it down beside my pancakes.

Bella hugged Granny tightly. Thick as thieves they were, and they'd just met yesterday. This did not bode well at all.

"I adore you. Thank you, Mrs. Bastian," Bella whispered and dabbed her eyes with the corner of a paper napkin. "So, yes, that is my proposal." She looked around the table and got smiles of encouragement from everyone, save me. I was chewing an egg as everyone stared openly.

"While I appreciate your dream of a dress shop, way out here seems a little removed from where the ladies of Bastian Grange shop," I commented as gently as I could.

"Bull dangles. Mary Pauline has that basket shop over near Kingsley Road and there ain't nothing out there but jack rabbits and an old poultry farm, and she does quite good.

I'm sure once the ladies in town hear about a fancy seamstress from Manhattan opening up a shop, they'll flock out here like blackbirds in the spring," Granny announced to the room.

"Okay, well, sure. A dress shop in the old springhouse. Flatlanders in the line cabins. Are there any other citified ideas that everyone wants to bring forth?"

Bella gave Ford a pointed look.

“Actually, I was thinking that maybe it would be less costly to invest in goats,” Ford piped up for the first time.

My jaw fell open. I snapped it shut with an audible click.

“I did some reading on the bus out here and lots of ranchers are switching from cattle to goats. They’re less expensive for starters, are easier to handle, and they graze on a wider variety of vegetation than cows do.

Also, you get meat and milk from goats just like beef. ”

“Goats.” I poked at my second egg with the tines of my fork, opening it up so that the yolk could flow over my pancakes.

“Right. Well, I think all of those are interesting suggestions. And I appreciate your input, but this ranch has been a cattle ranch for six generations, and we’ve managed just fine without goats, city slickers in trendy cabins, or dress boutiques. No offense, Bella.”

“To be honest, from what I’m hearing, you’re not doing all that well.

” My gaze flew from my rapidly cooling breakfast to Dodge.

Seemed the ginger pedodontist had some fire in him.

“Not to be blunt, but this ranch is one season away from being put up for back taxes.” My sight flew to my grandmother.

She merely shrugged as she rolled up a pancake with an egg inside it, then carried it to her mouth, yolk dripping as she did.



“They have a right to know. Cash left them quarter shares,” Granny said, then took a fierce bite of egg and pancake.

Those new dentures sure did work well. I was still paying the dentist off in tiny dribbles.

He was accommodating about it. As they say, you can’t get blood from a stone.

“I know you got a heap of pride...you get that from your father.” My eyes rolled so hard it was a wonder I didn’t sprain the stalks holding them in my head.

“This is a good chance for this family to reconcile, come together, and keep this ranch alive. Lord knows Cash never did right by any of you boys. Maybe you four can do right by each other.”

She dabbed at her chin with a napkin as her sight bored into me.

The others sat in various stages of silent apprehension as I tried to sort through it all in my head.

“I’m sorry if I stepped on your toes, either here or in general, but I would really like a chance.

Just a chance. One chance to change our lives for the better.

How about we do a year probationary period?

I used to do that with my dental assistants.

” Dodge glanced at the others and got hearty nods from them.

Then he turned his sight back to me. “Give us a year to see if we can jibe. If things work out, great, we’ll carry on as we’d been doing, and yay to us.

If not, you can repay us for the investments in the ranch, and we’ll be on our merry ways. ”

“Sounds good to me,” Linc said before swiping one more egg. The man could eat. If they stayed, we’d have to give the chickens pep talks to up their production.

Wait. If. If. When did a firm hell no become a damn if?

When they started waving dollar amounts in my face.

Oh. Well, still...

Two younger siblings looked at the youngest. Ford nodded. “Yeah, okay, we can do a year, right, Bella?”

Bella seemed a little disappointed but covered it quickly. “That sounds wonderful. A year. Yes, a year here making dresses sounds just amazing.”

Granny took Bella’s hand and gave it a squeeze. Then she leveled her sight on me. “Well, Baker, what do you say? That seems like a fair deal all around.”

I sat back to assess them all. Personally, I was happiest when it was just me and my horse.

I’d always been like my mother in that regard.

Withdrawn, prone to solo jobs, which was why ranching suited me.

Most times, it was just me and the cattle.

Beefers didn't say much or ask where you were going or how come you drink so damn much.

I had not been a social drunk. That old George Thorogood song about drinking alone could have been written about me.

"You all plan on staying here while during this year of probation?" I asked and got nods around the table. Great. Just great.

"?Course they are! We're not going to make your brothers and their family take rooms at the Bastian Grange Motel.

This house was built for lots of cowboys and kids!

"Granny told me. And when I say told, I do mean told.

Oh sure, I could argue and spit and kick rocks, but in the end, she was the matriarch.

And while the ranch was now legally mine—well, a quarter of it was—Granny ruled the roost, especially when it came to household shit.

And this here was big household shit. "Maybe you all should draw up some sort of agreement, just between yourselves, about this here probation period. Guess you could even get it read over by Milton if you wanted, but I think a paper signed by all four of you is legal enough."

"That's not a bad idea," Dodge said and got agreements from Ford and Linc.

"I'm happy to sign a rental agreement for the springhouse boutique. Oh!" Bella said

as her eyes went round. “That is a darling name, don’t you all think?”

Chatter filled the kitchen. I folded my arms over my chest and listened to the noise. Then, because Granny was already discussing dress patterns with Bella while Linc and Ford talked goats—goats for the love of God—Dodge gave me a questioning look.

It all seemed to be a lot. Did I want four strangers in the only home I had ever known?

Nope. All my solitary instincts were on high alert.

Nothing would have made me happier than waving goodbye to all of them.

Well, maybe not Bella. She was nice and seemed kind in a way that you rarely saw anymore.

But the others? Yep, later, dudes. But—and this was a huge but—they had money to invest. And this ranch was cash poor.

Hell, it was poor in almost every way a property could be poor.

Did they all have silly ideas about boutiques, goats, and hot tubs in line cabins?

Yes. Yes, they did. Yet, and here came another but, could those ideas bring back Bastian Acres Ranch?

Maybe? I didn’t know. Was I willing to chance it and them for a year?

What did I actually have to lose other than fried eggs, my bed, and all that coveted alone time?

With a sigh, I nodded, just once, and took the last egg before Lincoln could pounce on it like a hungry weasel.

“None of you are taking my bedroom,” I announced and shoved the whole egg into my mouth to emphasize my point. They might be taking over my ranch and my house, but they were not taking the last fried egg or my damn bed.

A man had to have some limits.

### Chapter Six

Seven days later, my limits had been reached.

Which was why I was out on Prissy, alone, checking the fencing.

Was it a job that needed to be done today?

Probably not. The new cattle wouldn't be arriving for some time, but if I didn't get out of the house and away from my half- brothers, I was going to start saying things that I couldn't take back.

One of the lessons I have learned at meetings as well as in life was that things said in anger, or when shitfaced, had a tendency to never really die.

Heated words kind of lingered in the heart or house like a ghost, showing up out of nowhere to make your life less than pleasant.

My ex-wife could attest to my rambling mouth when I was hammered.

Just another reason among many—gay sex with a rodeo cowboy was probably the largest nail in that marital coffin—but nasty words hurt.

And while I wasn't head over heels for my siblings yet, they were now legally co-owners of the ranch.

Also, they were sinking cash into Bastian Acres at an alarming rate.

New beefers? Yep, in a few weeks, courtesy of that moolah from my half-brothers.

Big red and black Herefords were due to be delivered.

Twenty. Nineteen heifers and a proven bull.

Oh, and goats.

“Goats,” I mumbled to Prissy as we rode along the fencing that ran west, then cut over to touch the corner of a swollen creek.

Prissy flicked an ear and stopped atop a knoll to watch a ring-necked pheasant take to wing.

“It’s a bird. They don’t eat horses.” She snorted a few times.

Once she was sure the bird was not coming back to attack her, she began walking again.

“So goats. They said we should diversify. Goats are hot and cool. Less methane in the air. You ever round up goats?”

The horse was not commenting. She didn’t need to.

I knew she had never seen a goat in her life.

I’d not had much interaction with them, to be honest. There was a goat barn on the fairgrounds filled with kids and caprines with them funny eyes.

Ford had been put in charge of the goats when they arrived since it was his idea to bring them in.

Not that he knew the front end of a goat from the back, obviously, but he seemed okay with the idea.

He and Linc were clearing out an old storage barn for the big boar goats we'd located not all that far from here.

Granny had taken Bella under her wing and into her junk room.

The hum of that old Singer could be heard way into the night as dresses and pants and frilly tops were created.

Bella was helping Granny with the household chores.

They got on well and Bella seemed content to help cook and sew and chatter with us when we all returned to the homestead for meals.

Dodge seemed to be the organized one, so he stepped in to create a paper for us to sign, a probationary outline, that said one year from now we would reconvene to discuss whether they wished to stay or leave.

He also was really good at bookkeeping, so I begrudgingly handed him the password to my bookkeeping program.

His exhalation upon opening it was huge.

I tried, I truly did, but I was more a shove the receipts into a folder and forget about them for a year kind of man.

He got things sorted over a few days with a lot of muttering.

I could do it, but I was shit with numbers in rows and he seemed pretty sharp.



Guess you had to be to run a successful dental practice.

His son had a month of school yet, private school if you could imagine, and then he would be coming to the ranch.

Granny, of course, was beside herself with all the hubbub.

I tended to drift off when it got too loud.

Cards at night were a thing now. With dismal internet, streaming movies was touchy so cards seemed to be the game of choice to while away the time before bed.

This morning over breakfast, after Bella had done Granny's hair, a rather heated discussion broke out about which breakfast sausage was superior.

Seriously, the three of them went back and forth about pork meat while I was trying to eat my damn oatmeal in peace.

When I left, they were still bickering about the amount of sage in one brand. Granny gave me a smile as I exited stage left, eager to be out of the din and on the back of a horse.

Only fifty-one weeks to go. I could do this.

They'd settle in soon, I hoped. Shaking off the buzz of lingering annoyance, we headed to the left, riding along the barbed wire fence line until it hit a small stand of ancient eastern redbuds.

Prissy began to curl her upper lip. I leaned up a bit to see if I could see what she was smelling.

Tucked in among the short trees was a small pop-up tent.

I caught sight of a huge lens glinting in the morning sun and felt a small spark of anticipation, knowing that Hanley was close.

“We know him,” I whispered, patting the horse before giving her a tap on the sides. She went forward but wasn’t keen about it. “Just a smelly dude with a camera.”

“I heard that,” Hanley called, easing out from behind the 35mm set up on a tripod.

He looked good. Whiskery with overgrown hair, but man, did it look fine on him.

I slid from the saddle, letting the reins fall.

Prissy lowered her head to munch on the short green grass.

“I’ll have you know I washed up in that creek back there last night. ”

I ambled closer, refusing to dwell on the mental image of a naked Hanley in a wild creek. My dick twitched.

“Thought you were out here to take pictures of animals, not lonely cowpokes.” I walked up and offered him my hand.

He shook firmly and waved at his little camping area tucked under the redbuds.

The trill of a male bluebird floated over us as his fingers held mine.

I was reluctant to let go, but someone had to make the call.

“I’m here to take pictures of nature’s glory and a man as handsome as you surely

qualifies.”

I had to smile. There was something about that soft Yankee accent wrapped around such a blatant come-on that made me feel lighter.

“Not sure I’m all that glorious,” I replied as I gently slid my hand from his. “Damn fine horse, though.”

“That she is. I’d offer you some coffee, but I’m hesitant to build a fire so close to the trees. I do have some juice boxes if you’d like to crack one open and visit for a while?”

“Sure, just for a spell. Prissy could use a rest.” That was a lie. We’d not ridden hard at all. It was a poke-along ride just to clear my head of the family nonsense.

“Then pull up a stump.” We ducked down to enter his little nook.

“I’ve been here a few days. There’s a herd of whitetails that visit the creek every morning at dawn, and today I finally captured them.

Sit.” He motioned to a dark old round chunk of wood, probably left here years ago when someone had been cutting firewood.

I sat, and he lowered himself on a similar knotted castoff.

“Did I scare them off?” I asked, glancing out at the pasturelands.

“No, they’d left. Something spooked them. Last night, I heard a mountain lion calling for a mate.”

“Could be,” I answered as I sat with a grunt.

My knees were just about tucked under my chin.

Hanley chuckled. "Hobbit seats," I tossed out as he rummaged in his rucksack.

"Hopefully it was a male and he'll move on.

We're bringing in some new cattle and goats soon.

I'm not overly worried about the cattle, but if we let the goats graze with the beefers, then that could be problematic. "

"Would you shoot it?" he asked. I nodded.

"Pity. I fully understand if it preys on your livestock, but they are such gorgeous animals. Perhaps it could be trapped and relocated if it were to become a problem?"  
He passed me a box of grape juice.

"They're protected in this state, right?

So if he would become a problem, he could be moved. "

"Maybe. ?Course then he possibly becomes a problem to some other rancher, so hopefully he was just cruising."

"Here's hoping that big cat moves on."

We tapped boxes. I felt a fool sitting on a damp chunk of wood in a copse of redbuds sipping juice out of a bright purple box.

The little straw did nothing to make me feel more manly.

We drank in a chilly and cumbersome silence.

I'd never really been good at small talk.

Right now, that lack of social skills was painfully obvious.

“So, did you ride out here on cowboy business or to visit with me? Both are acceptable answers and are not mutually exclusive.” His jade eyes twinkled. This man did not have any problem with small talk or flirting.

“I was checking fences.”

“Damn, I'm crestfallen. Here I was hoping that you'd come out to check on me. Gets lonely out here on the range with only the dogies for company.”

Yeah, I knew all about lonely. “There are no dogies on this property right now.”

“Okay then it's lonely out here with only the deer and the antelope for company. Better?” I bobbed my head. He chuckled. “Stickler for details, I see.”

“Sometimes,” I replied as I pulled my sight from his scraggly brown-blond beard. The hair on his face was a touch darker than the thick locks on his head.

“And a man of few words. I like that. Adds to the mystery.” He gave me a tilted smile that sent a rush of heat to my midsection. “Want to see some of the images I've captured so far?”

“Yeah, I would like that.” I just then thought to remove my hat. Granny would have given my ear a tug for not doing so when I had sat down. Not that this little hideaway under the redbuds was a sitting room or anything...

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“I’ve not sorted through the ones I took today.

” He wiggled past me, his ass brushing my shoulder, to grab his camera off the tripod.

I could have turned my head and nipped his backside, but I bit down on the inside of my cheek instead.

Maybe he would have been okay with a playful soft bite on his derriere, seeing how frisky he seemed to be.

Then again, maybe he was just one of those outgoing sorts.

When he returned, he dragged his chunk of wood closer.

So close his thigh and arm were pressed to mine.

I could smell the lingering scent of his soap—something with some cedarwood and citrus—mixed in with the smell of man.

That second aroma was not anything unpleasant at all.

Earthy and masculine with a uniqueness that was all Hanley.

It was inviting and provocative. “There will be a lot of crap shots,” he mumbled as the LCD screen lit up and he started sifting through the images.

To be honest, not a one looked to be crap to my eyes. Not that I was a professor of

photography or anything, but I did know a nice wildlife shot when I saw it.

“That one there is really nice,” I spoke up when an image of two does on alert came up.

The sun was just rising, which made their dull gray-brown winter coats glisten with specks of gold as the fresh daylight picked up their hairs of new reddish-brown that were growing in.

Their summer coats would be thinner to allow for maximum heat loss.

It gets damn hot in Oklahoma during picnic season.

“I like how you can see the mist of their breath. And their eyes are so big and pretty.”

“Much like yours.”

I felt my cheeks warm as I turned to look at him.

What I planned to say was a mystery. Baker Bastian was not the king of witty comebacks.

Didn't matter what words did or did not blunder their way out of my mouth because when my sight touched his, talking seemed irrelevant.

His eyes were glorious. Like some smooth jade stones I'd once seen in a necklace at a tribal celebration at the reservation a few years ago.

I could see flecks of gold in the dark green irises.

The bluebird continued to sing out for a mate.

I wet my lips. His gaze fell to my mouth, then rose back to grab mine once more.

“You know I would be fully down to crawling into my tent with you to while away an hour or so,” he offered, his voice smoky as a winter chimney and just as warm.

“Not that I’m trying to seduce you into letting me prowl your lands with my camera.

My agent said all the rights have been secured with you.

” I nodded. And sat there like a cold toad blinking as my head and body had this massive wrestling match.

Go into the tent. Ride away. Go into the tent.

Ride away. Deep down, in the logical part of my gray matter, I knew riding off would probably be the correct thing to do.

I was not in a good place mentally for a new relationship.

Yes, I was working the program well and felt strong in my sobriety so the standard advice to avoid romantic entanglements was a moot point, I felt.

I was not swapping one addiction for another or anything like that.

I was just in a chaotic situation with every other damn aspect of my life.

So yeah, starting a thing with someone was ill-advised for many reasons.

Knowing all of that, I still leaned over to place my mouth to his and was rewarded with a low hum of pleasure.



“Is that a yes?” he asked, his lips brushing over mine with each soft word.

“Yes,” I whispered. His hands flew to my hair.

Where the camera went, I didn’t know, nor did I care at that moment.

Sitting on stumps while trying to make out was not cutting it so in sync we dropped from the stumps to the ground, kneeling in the soft loam, as our mouths slanted this way and that, seeking depth and fire.

My cock was harder than locust and leaking in my shorts already.

Hanley wasted no time. Mouth still locked to mine, he leaned into me, putting all his weight behind a gentle nudge that sent us both tumbling through the open door of the tent. We fell onto a thick sleeping bag.

“Shit, sorry,” he panted, but I had no clue or care what he was sorry about.

Not one damn thing that he was doing required an apology.

I went to my back, arms tight around his middle, and let him fall between my legs.

I grabbed his head and led his mouth back to mine.

He tasted of grape juice and lust. Something poked me in the lower back as he sprawled over me, his hands bracing his arms, palms on either side of my head.

I licked into his mouth with wild desperation.

I needed this. Badly. Insanely. Whatever happened here was a breath of life into an existence that had been sad and bitter for too long.

I would take what he was willing to give me and run with it after we were done. “God you are a wiry thing.”

He gave my lower lip a tug with white teeth, then sat back, his lips puffy and red, to run his hands over my chest.

“You want to fuck?” he asked as his fingers found the snaps on my coat. One, two, three, and four. He pushed open the coat as I wriggled under him, desperate for months of pent-up release.

“Yeah, yeah, I want you to fuck me,” I huffed while he slipped cold fingers under my flannel shirt.

He leaned up, just a bit, enough to press his erection into me.

My eyes rolled back in my head as he began to grind against me like the most talented of strippers.

He skimmed his fingers up over my chest to find and then pinch my nipples.

My spine arched as he rolled the sensitive nubs roughly, his eyes on me the whole time.

“You are so damn rugged,” he growled, levering himself up to get more weight into the pressure on my groin. My balls drew up.

“Slow...I’m...shit...I’m too close.” He eased back but continued to pluck my nipples. Then he bared them with a rough shove of my shirt and took one between his lips. “Fuck, fuck, stop...”

He gave the nub one hard suck, then rolled off, leaving me winded, splayed out, and

unable to think clearly. I rolled my head to look at him pawing madly in his big backpack. He gave me a sultry look over one shoulder.

“Get naked, then get on your hands and knees,” he ordered, and I couldn’t get my clothes off fast enough.

My boots gave me some trouble, but I yanked one off, then the other, whipping them aside in a frenzy, uncaring where they went.

When the cool air hit my overheated skin, I felt a wave of uncertainty.

My gaze traveled to Hanley who was kneeling on a small knit blanket of darkest blue, his gaze locked on my straining cock.

One hand held a condom and the other a packet of lube.

“You are so fucking hot. Now, get on your knees and get that little ass into the air. I haven’t had breakfast yet and I am fucking starving . ”

Holy hell. I’d never been a buffet before.

I rolled around, hands pressing into the sleeping bag, knees spread, ass in the air, and held my breath.

It had been years since I’d been with a man.

Hell, with anyone, but yeah, bottoming had not taken place since The White Stripes were popular.

This was going to sting. Bring it on. I’d ride home with my ass on fire and that was just fine.

I felt him shuffling around behind me, the brush of hairy leg on hairy leg, the tickle of a lone finger moving ever-so-gently over my lower back.

When that finger slid between my ass cheeks, I sucked in a shaky breath, exhaling loudly when it found my pucker.

“Oh shit,” I ground out as he played with the edges of my hole. “Shit...fuck.”

“Not yet,” he replied, his breath hot and moist on my hole before he licked a wet stripe from my balls over my taint to my asshole.

My muscles contracted. My toes and fingers curled as he poked at my opening with the tip of his tongue while capturing my balls.

I leaned back. A low grumble of appreciation met that move, so I began rocking up and back, touching my head to the tiny green pillow resting next to a worn paperback.

“Stop.” He grabbed my hips. I whined. He buried his face between my cheeks and feasted like the hungry man he had just claimed to be.

He ate me so long and so well, I was reduced to a blathering fool.

His teeth nibbled at my left cheek as he fondled my balls.

My cock was so hard it ached, but he had not touched it once. “You are delicious.”

Words fell out of me. Not sure what. Penguins? Taco Tuesday? Who the fuck knows or cares. All I cared about was his dick sinking into my ass. “Such a pretty ass.”

“Stop admiring it and fuck it!” I barked. He chuckled softly before kissing his way from my balls to the nape of my neck, dropping little pecks to each knob of my spine.

“Pushy cowpokes turn me on,” he said, his voice thick and raspy as he placed the fat head of his prick at my hole and began to work himself in one agonizing inch at a time. The burn was intense despite his amazing rimming skills. “Breathe, Baker. That’s it. Perfect. God damn you are so tight.”

Christ he was thick. It took me a few tries to get him seated, but once he was in, he was all in, and it was glorious.

It felt like his cock was taking up all the room inside me, pushing my lungs aside to make breathing difficult.

Maybe that was just my imagination, though.

For when he eased out and slipped back in, I took him all and demanded more.

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“Greedy bossy bottoms...are...my...kryptonite,” he panted as he picked up the pace.

I threw my head back as he pounded me, watching a chipmunk scurry around the little clearing picking up bits of granola bar.

I could just see Prissy’s fetlocks as she waited for me to finish getting fucked into next year.

To hell with next week or next month. Hanley was dicking me into a new calendar year.

My fingers dug into his sleeping bag as he slipped an arm around me, placing a palm on my right pec, and then jerking me up to kneel.

His cock never stopped pumping. His fingers curled around my dick as his teeth bit down gently on my shoulder.

He sucked hard as he jerked me off. There was no time to yell out a warning or move off his sleeping bag.

Ropes of cum flew out of me as my head fell back to rest on his shoulder.

His hips pistoned me through wave after wave of bliss, spunk coating his hand now.

He drove in hard one final time, stealing my breath, before his cock pulsed and filled the condom.

My knees went out from under me, dropping me to the sleeping bag and the hard ground under it, with a grunt.

Hanley rode me down, his prick nestled nice and hot inside me.

My nose met the soft flannel of his bedroll, filling my head with his smell.

I took it deep into my lungs as he rocked forward, grabbing an extra inch of depth that made me moan.

“Jesus is a biscuit,” he breathed into the nape of my neck, then gave me a soft bite like a tomcat mating a queen and held it as his balls emptied. My ass clenched around him. The sting of his teeth on my skin made me shudder.

“Good lord,” I groaned as he suckled what was surely going to be a mark on the back of my neck. To be honest with his dick filling me so perfectly, I didn’t give two shits about a bruise. He could mark me all over if he took me to heaven again.

“Mm, we’re both feeling the glory,” he said after giving the wet spot on my neck a soft kiss. “Oh hey, uhm. We’re being watched.”

My nose left the sleeping bag in a hurry. My sight touched on Prissy’s. Big brown eyes stared hard at me, her ears twitching in mild concern. “She probably thought that mountain lion was back and eating you by the sounds you were making.”

I couldn’t really counter with something acerbic. I did tend to get loud when being plowed like a spring clover field.

“I’m fine, girl. Stop staring at us,” I said, my throat a touch strained. Guess I had been caterwauling after all. She snorted, probably to clear her nose of the smell of sex, and lifted her head to paw at the ground. Such an impatient beast.

“You okay?” He eased out of me, gently, and collapsed down on the bedroll, his softening cock still wrapped in latex, and glanced over at me. My brow fell back to his sleeping bag as I eased to the side, my ass twinging at each move. The ride home was going to be pleasant. Not.

“Yeah, good. I’m really good.” No point in lying. “That was one hell of a fuck.”

He grinned. “Thank you. I do my best for my bottoms.” He gave me a cheeky wink. “This was fun. Want to do it again?”

I eased up to rest on my elbow. His hair was damp with sweat. His chest still rising and falling rapidly. He was sinfully gorgeous.

“Yeah, I think I might.”

“Nice.” He flashed me a toothy smile, then reached up, fingers cupping the back of my neck right where he had left a tender mark.

He pulled my lips to his and delved as deeply into my mouth as he had my ass.

I licked and sucked on his tongue for ages.

When the kiss ended, his gaze held mine for a long, sweet moment.

“I’ll probably be here for a few more days.

Feel free to ride on up anytime, cowboy. ”

He gave my neck a squeeze and moved to his side.

Sensing this unexpected rendezvous was now over, I lay there for a moment longer to



enjoy the sight of his bare back and ass before rolling to my other side to find my clothes.

Dressing was tricky. Arms and elbows kept knocking, but we eventually emerged from his tent looking like we had before we'd gotten our rocks off.

Prissy gave me the biggest side-eye ever when I ran a hand down her neck.

"That woman is jealous," Hanley joked as he walked up beside me, his hand coming to rest on my lower back. It was a possessive gesture, and I liked it. A lot. Prissy then tried to nip Hanley. He jumped back a few inches to avoid those big teeth.

"Hey, stop," I sharply said as I placed myself between Hanley and my horse.

Her lowered ears rose back up, but I could see the plotting going on behind those cocoa eyes.

"Do not do it," I added just to drive the command home.

I loved this girl, but she could be a little...

well, prissy, at times. I turned to Hanley, who was smiling softly. "Sorry, she's not usually that snippy."

"Hey, I get it. I just fucked the man she loves. I'd try to bite someone who did that to my bae too." He gave me a quick kiss as my horse continued to wrinkle her lips and snort loudly.

"We'll work on her manners," I said as the hum of honey bees, warmed by the sun rising higher in the bright blue sky, filled the meadow.

They were probably coming in to visit the buds on the redbuds as well as the dandelions and smartweed opening for the warm sunny rays.

“So, uhm, I think I will be out here tomorrow to tighten up the fences. Maybe I’ll drop by? ”

“Sounds good. If I’m not here, I’ll be out there.

” He waved a hand at the vast ranges. I inclined my head.

He looked so damn good standing here with only some low-slung jeans hugging his lean hips.

Bare feet and chest, whiskery face, and the glow of a man who had been recently sated.

I’d done that. My ass had brought him pleasure.

And it wanted to do it again. I wanted to do it again.

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

With that, I threw a leg over Prissy’s back with practiced ease.

With the sun on my face, I was hoping to look like a cowboy from an old western movie, tall in the saddle and riding off into the sunrise after kissing the schoolmarm.

It all fell into place until my ass hit leather.

I winced internally but gave Hanley a small wave as I tapped Prissy’s side.

She threw her head a time or two before carting me from the redbud grove.

I was halfway home, squinting into the sun as my asshole screamed in protest when I remembered that my hat was not on my head as it should be but lying on the floor of Hanley's tent. Huh. Guess I'd have to visit him tomorrow to get my hat back. That is, if the ride home didn't destroy me.

Somehow, I did get home without too many tears.

There was the normal gathering at the kitchen table when I limped in.

Seeing all my half-brothers gawking at me, I was instantly feeling like a bantam rooster.

Feathers rustled and ready to fight. A man could only be so cordial after riding for miles with a sore anus.

My courtesy had withered about a mile from the redbud copse.

"Good lord you look like a few miles of bad road," Granny said from her seat at the table.

She was wearing a plastic cape of some kind over her clothes.

Bella was behind her, adding some sort of bottled color to her hair.

Aquamarine, by the looks. What the actual hell?

Who had talked my grandmother into coloring her pretty silver hair so that she looked like a mermaid?

All money was on Bella who was staring at me as if Bigfoot had gimped into the room.

“You have bruises all over your neck,” Dodge pointed out.

Linc leaned left, right, and then nodded in agreement.

Ford glanced up from a sketch of the new boutique-slash-springhouse he was finalizing.

The kid had some talent for drawing. Not that he was architect material, but his preliminary drawings were good. “Did you ride into a hornet’s nest?”

“No, I didn’t ride into a hornet’s nest,” I snapped while yanking open the freezer to find an ice pack amid the containers of frozen peaches and chicken broth. “Prissy sighted a coyote and rode me into a redbud clump.”

Well, someone rode someone in a redbud clump, that’s for sure.

I ignored my inner jokester. My ass was too tender for chuckles.

“That horse is the jumpiest thing.” Granny sighed.

Bella resumed humming as the others sipped coffee while staring at me like I was a museum display.

I shoved a bag of peas aside to locate the ice pack under some frozen diet meals.

Granny loved her little low-calorie pizzas.

“Remember a few years ago when she nearly dumped you on your ass when she seen

a traffic cone out on the main road?”

I did remember that. Clearly. “That cone didn’t belong there,” I tossed out as I shut the freezer door. Everyone stared at the ice pack. “I wrenched my back trying to avoid being pricked by the redbuds.”

Well, someone got pricked in the redbud clump, that’s for sure.

Ha. So funny me. This was why I never aspired to be a stand-up comedian. I had no sense of timing for jokes or dancing.

“Shit, maybe one of us should ride out with you from now on,” Dodge offered.

I snorted. None of them were great shakes on horseback.

We’d been having lessons, but they had a long way to go to be able to handle their own spooked horse, let alone someone else’s.

Also, fuck that. I had a hat to fetch, and that required privacy.

“Nope, I’m good.”

I walked out of the kitchen as normally as possible. Granny would birth a bison if she knew the ice pack she used for her arthritic knee was going to be applied to my asshole. Maybe I would just buy her a new one next time I was in town. I might need this one again if I was lucky...

### Chapter Seven

The next morning, I slept in.

Well, slept in like a baby until Granny had her morning shooting session and the house bolted awake at the sound of gunfire at dawn.

I guess being fucked quite magnificently had made me more tired than usual.

You'd think the city boys would be growing used to the plink-the-can reveille every morning, but so far that would be a nope.

Yawning then smiling at the sounds of three men and Bella dragging themselves out of bed to check, I took stock of myself.

Other than a tender ass, I felt good. Great actually.

As the others muttered and cussed softly while tramping past my bedroom door to line up for the bathrooms, I lay in bed, calm as a cuke, thinking about how nice it was to have a fuck buddy.

He also was nice. I enjoyed talking to him.

Plus, Hanley was great in the sack—or on top of the sleeping bag, I should say—and seemed more than into having sex whenever we could.

I really enjoyed our hookup yesterday. Nothing made me feel more mellow than

being pounded thoroughly.

Maybe it was because I could, for a little while, let someone else be in charge.

God knows I'd carried the weight of this ranch since I was old enough to understand what being the man of the house meant.

Today if all went as planned, I hoped to ride out to the redbuds, visit Hanley, get fucked, and fetch my hat.

Then work on fencing. A feeling of contentment washed over me, and I basked in it.

The basking lasted exactly seventeen seconds.

A hearty rap on my bedroom door yanked me from that mellow state like a hammer to the forehead.

"Fucking hell," I mumbled before shouting at whoever was at the door to come in.

Ford, he of the shaggy gold hair and hound dog eyes, stuck his head in.

I scrubbed at my eyes as he entered a few steps, the floorboards creaking, and glanced his way.

"No, she isn't going to stop target practice until she hits all the targets.

Seeing as her cataract surgery is scheduled for July, I'm figuring she won't hit the broad side of a barn until after that. "

"Oh, uhm, no, I'm not here for that." He shuffled in a bit more as the dulcet tones of Lincoln singing "Love Train" by the O'Jays at the top of his substantial lungs

exploded through the thin walls.

We both winced. The man might be able to carry kegs of beer on his meaty shoulders, but he could not carry a tune to save his life.

“I meant to tell you this last night, but I was working on the boutique’s indoor fountain and lost track of time.

Then when I remembered you were already in your room and Dodge said not to disturb you once you were in your den of solitude.

” Ha. That Dodge was a real riot. I gave him a raised brow to indicate he needed to get to the point.

“The guy who owns the goats says he needs to bring them today instead of later in the month.”

“ Today? ” I sat up straight, the sheet and blanket pooling in my lap. Ford nodded, then bit down on his lower lip. The kid was so nervous all the time. Jumpy as a cat on hot bricks as Granny would say. “Jesus. Are we ready for them to come today?”

“Mostly yeah.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, shoulders slumped, eyes darting around as if he expected Freddy Krueger to leap out of my closet. “Just need the feed.”

“Feed. Right. Okay, I’ll call Paul at the mill when I get around and get them to make the order today. I’ll have to go to town to pick it up.”

“I’ll go with you. I messed up relaying the message, so I can help load and unload.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. Would have been too late last night to do much about



it, anyway. Just make sure the barn and fencing around the pen are good and tight. I do not want to spend my days chasing goats.”

“Got it.” He gave me a weak smile that lit up his whole face before he ducked out of the door and disappeared.

Exhaling deeply, I kicked off the covers, padded over to the far wall, and pounded on it until Linc stopped singing.

Once he quieted, I dug around in my clean clothes basket, pulled out jeans, a tee, and a flannel, socks, boxers, and then dressed as the sound of Granny insulting her gun floated up to my bedroom window.

Another day at Bastian Acres begins. Maybe if I hurried, I could get to town, pick up the goat chow, and hurry back so I could ride out to see Hanley again.

With that scenario in mind, I made a mental note to pick up an ice pack, some anal cream, and some juice boxes to stick into my saddlebags.

Hydration after strenuous exercise is important.

I ambled down the hall, slid into the bathroom as Linc was drying off, and nudged him out of the steamy room so I could piss. He seemed a pretty amiable guy for the most part. Guess he was working hard to be chill about life in order to lower stress levels.

“Sorry to be so long. The beard wash and conditioning takes time.”

I glanced at his facial hair. It was nice, not going to lie, and fit him. I’d never tried a beard. My ex hated them, so I just got into the routine of shaving frequently.

“No problem.” I shook, flushed, and washed my hands as he moved around me to slide out into the hall wearing a towel around his waist. When he exited, Dodge appeared. “All yours.” I dried my hands and stepped around the ginger.

“Thanks. Hey, Ford said you’re going into town. I’d like to ride along. Get to know the feed mill workers and maybe visit the bank?”

“Sure, yeah, okay.” The front seat of my old truck would be full of Bastian backsides.

It all seemed so damn weird yet. All these people in the house, riding along to town, taking up all the air in every room I walked into.

Granny was as happy as a clam about the full house.

She and Bella seemed to enjoy all the extra work involved in feeding four men.

I was still hoping they’d all move to town, but since my grandmother would sooner see Satan sitting at her dinner table than ask her grandsons to vacate, I was stuck passing the potatoes to Beelzebub for the foreseeable future.

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Bastian Grange was the type of small town you could find in any state in the USA.

Main Street was short, just a couple of blocks, with small businesses all flying the stars and stripes.

We had a bank, a bar, a library, and two eateries.

One at each end of Main Street. Peppered among the shops, you could find a hardware store, a bookshop, a store that sold sewing supplies, and an outdoor store.

Right smack dab in the middle of all that commerce was the Bastian Grange Sheriff's Office, where Ollie and his deputy sheriff, Easton Reese, could be found.

Unless they were out on a call, then Monica Purcell, who handled the calls coming in as well as other paperwork, would greet you with coffee and gossip.

Ollie liked to joke that he and Easton wore the badges, but Monica was the real law in town.

My brothers— half -brothers—seemed enthralled with the place. They chatted and pointed out the local grange, the volunteer fire hall, and the town green as if they had never seen such things.

Probably they never had. New York and Sacramento were huge cities with tons of people.

Bastian Grange? Not so much. We boasted about two thousand souls.

Could be more by a few now, depending on if Clarence and Holly Bernard had added another kid to their passel of eight.

I'd not heard if they had, but then again, after kid number four, you kind of zoned out on the tittle-tattle of old women.

"Why is the town named after our family?" Dodge asked as we cruised to the only red light on Main Street.

Rumor was the mayor was angling for another one at the other end of town but was running into trouble setting up the traffic study required for the red light.

Maybe if he hired someone other than his second nephew to engineer the study that

might speed up things.

Everyone knew Willis Peete was as lazy as a toad at the bottom of a well.

“Our family was the first to settle here after the expansion west back in the early to mid-1800s. Isaiah Bastian and his wife staked out a claim where the house sits now. There was safety in numbers, and they welcomed settlers to come join them. Soon there were little farms all over, ours being the largest, and they all come together to charter a town. Named it after Isaiah since he owned the largest parcel of land,” I said as we crept through the green light and made a left to head to the feed mill.

The tall grain silos used for storing grain for the mill, painted yellow and black like big bumblebees could be seen from Main Street.

I cranked the wheel to park in a wide slot facing the mill itself.

We piled out of the truck to stare at the sky for a moment and work out the kinks.

Ford was impressed with the history lesson. “That’s really cool about our ancestors. And brave! Imagine coming out here with just a wagon filled with kids and women, leaving everything you know behind, and facing down all kinds of wild shit so you could claim a chunk of land for yourself.”

“Yeah, that was so damn cool. Nothing like driving all those wild things off their land,” a voice that I knew well said from behind us.

We all turned to see Ollie Ahoka standing in the parking lot with a fifty-pound bag of chicken feed on his shoulder.

I peeked at my siblings. They both looked like they had plunked their naked asses down on top of a nest of red ants.

“Oh, well, hey no, I didn’t mean...” Ford then fell over himself while Ollie stood there holding his bag of laying mash with a flat expression. Dodge was unable to speak, it seemed, his gaze locked on the tall lawman. “I meant that I think that...shit.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

Ollie sighed. “I’m just giving you a hard time.” Dodge blinked a few times before falling into the same bumbling morass that Ford was still floundering around in. “Mostly.”

“We’re sorry,” Dodge finally said.

“For what?” Ollie asked, the bright sun making me squint. Sure wish I had my hat.

“Everything that ever happened to the indigenous peoples of this country,” Dodge replied to which Ford nodded so hard I feared he might tip forward. Or backward. Or just plain pass out from his brain sloshing around in his head.

“Oh, well, thanks,” Ollie replied as he gave the parking lot a long once-over. “I thought maybe you had parked illegally or something.”

“In the feed mill parking lot?” I asked and got a quick wink from the sheriff.

“You showing your brothers the sights?” Ollie enquired nonchalantly.

That was life in Bastian Grange. People had meetups anywhere they met.

Parking lots, sidewalks, or in the middle of the road.

Rural folk loved to shoot the shit. There wasn’t really much else to do to be honest other than spend time bullshitting.

Ollie gave Dodge a look that I knew well.

I'd seen it more than once in our long friendship.

He thought my half-brother was tasty. I'd never been big into gingers, and Dodge's blood was the same as mine.

Okay, well, not exactly the same. Fifty percent the same, but even so, I'd have to be more than a little soused to give him the look that our sheriff was flashing at him.

Dodge, to his credit, seemed to be picking up the vibe but was unsure of how to handle the obvious appreciation of his finer qualities.

Spoken as his half-brother, I could say Dodge did have great teeth.

"Yeah, the tour bus is leaving the feed mill after we get some goat chow, and then we're heading to the bank.

Maybe we'll visit the hardware store for some fencing staples.

You know, the real highbrow spots of our illustrious town," I said and got a soft snort from Ollie.

"Where's your uniform? Is it casual Thursday?

" I waved at his jeans and denim jacket outfit.

"I have the morning off to take my dad to the doctor. Where's your hat?"

My brothers— half -brothers—smiled awkwardly. Both still looked a touch green around the gills for their social faux pas.

"Lost it checking fence," I lied, which Ollie picked up instantly. He was too good at

reading people not to know I was hiding something. The man was stupidly perceptive, which was why he was such a good lawman.

“You run into a row of hot mufflers out there on the back forty as well?” He jerked his chin at my neck, which brought my silent siblings’ attention to the marks left by a passionate photographer.

I would have to make sure Hanley only sucked on places that no one could see while having casual conversation.

“Bees.” That one was a doozy of a lie, and Ollie was already giving me a dark arched brow.

“Thought you said you ran into a redbud clump after your horse saw a coyote?” Dodge tossed out to be a dick. Ford bobbed his head. Ollie smirked.

“There were bees in the redbud clump. We better get inside and get our order placed. Tell Hank I said hello.”

“Yep, will do. See you around town,” Ollie said to Dodge and looked at the other two men standing there. I rolled my eyes as I shunted my feed hauling help into the whitewashed brick office. Penny Long, the pleasant and plump wife of Bill Long, the mill manager, was working the desk.

“Morning, Baker, you showing your brothers around?” she asked while bringing up my account on her desktop.

Dodge stood by the glass door, his attention on something—Ollie Ahoka probably—while Ford went to his knee to call over Daisy, a red merle Hanging Tree Cowdog that liked to visit the mill when she wasn’t herding cattle.



She was now sidelined due to how pregnant she was.

Rumor was Daisy had gotten knocked up by some passing gigolo and not by a purebred Hanging Tree stud, much to her owner's chagrin.

Amazing how fast a dog can dig a hole under a fence...

the dog shuffled over to Ford, and the two of them shared all kinds of scratches and kisses. It was obvious that Ford liked dogs.

"Sure am, Penny. We need a few dozen bags of goat feed." I leaned on the counter to smile around the door at Bill as he sipped his coffee in the back office.

He raised a hand. I nodded hello, then brought my sight back to Penny and my feed bill that was printing out. "Can you put that on my account?"

"I have it," Dodge said, yanking his attention from outside to step up bold as a bull to slap cash on the counter. "We're partners now," he reminded me softly as he pocketed the invoice.

I wanted to say something snide but bit it back. Much as it ate at me to say it, Dodge was right. We were partners now. With a shrug, I said goodbye and went back outside.

"That was a nice dog," Ford said as we piled in and pulled to the loading dock where Penny and Bill's son John would toss the bags of feed into the back of the truck.

He was already back in the massive storage area gathering our order, the sound of the small handheld walkie-talkie on his hip carrying out on the soft dusty wind.

"She's going to whelp in a few weeks," I mentioned offhandedly, although it was

quite obvious the dog was due soon, as we waited for John to arrive on the skid steer with a pallet of goat grain.

Goats. How the hell had I let them talk me into goats?

Guess some of the other shit going on at home wasn't any odder than goats.

Cabins being made into posh little getaway spots, and a dress shop in the springhouse.

I shuddered to think what else this band of big city dreamers would come up with next. "Pretty costly, though."

Ford sighed. Out of all of us, he and Bella had the least ready cash.

I'd wanted to ask why they'd left New York on a bus with only the clothes on their backs, but neither of them seemed inclined to talk about their pasts much.

Unlike the other two who jabbered nonstop about Chicago and Sacramento and the people they knew back there.

Bella and Ford were closed-mouthed, and that made me a little suspect.

I'd run the idea of having background checks done on them with Granny the other night.

She nearly tore me in two. Still, I could talk to Ollie. On the sly, of course.

"I wonder if Dahn would like a puppy?" Dodge asked no one in particular.

The roar of the skid steer starting filled the loading dock.

“I got nothing against dogs, but they got to earn their keep. So if you bring in some poofy poodle dog...” I left it hanging as John rounded a corner with a pallet of yellow bags with goats on the front.

Dodge nodded in understanding. We climbed up to help John load our order into the back, then set out for town, where Dodge did some banking while Ford and I bought fencing supplies and three cold cans of pop for the ride home.

A text reminder buzzed in as we waited for Dodge to exit the Bastian Grange Savings & Loan.

Dodge was beaming when he climbed into the truck ten minutes later.

“So, all of my money is now in this bank, and I can write checks to workmen.” He waved his little booklet of starter checks in the air.

“Also, I had a text from Dahn, and he’s going to come visit over the Easter holiday.

Chris is okay with it because he was signed up to do a cruise with other college alumni, which he failed to mention.

” The fine lines around his mouth tightened.

“But, whatever. So Dahn will be flying out in a week. I’ll let him bunk with me. ”

I nodded. Whatever. What was one more person when the house was already packed to the rim?

Granny would be in seventh heaven when she heard that news.

I made a mental note to lock up her ammo and gun before Dahn arrived.

We pulled away from the curb and headed home, Dodge chatting excitedly about the day they found out that the tiny baby they'd been trying to adopt from South Korea had finally arrived.

The love and joy when he spoke of his son radiated out of him.

For a second, I was a bit envious, but I shoved that down to replace it with happiness for my brother.

Half-brother. And it gave me a little hope.

Dodge was proof that even if your father was a rotten bastard who skipped out on all his responsibilities, it did not mean you would be the same kind of shithead.

Dodge was the opposite of Cash, and that was a really good thing.

The chit-chat on the long ride home bounced around just like we did in the cab.

The dirt roads were rough after a hard winter and the spring thaws.

Also, the old truck needed new shocks and struts, but they cost money we didn't have.

Still didn't, to be honest. All the cash pouring into the ranch was from Linc and Dodge.

Ford and I were just the grunts, but hey, if being the strong backs saved my home and legacy, then I'd tote feed and dig ditches for eternity.

We pulled into the drive to find that our one and only large animal vet, Aiden Hennessee, was waiting for us inside his big white pickup.

I'd been lucky to catch him before he left on his rounds of local farms this morning.

I'd wanted him here when the goats arrived to give them a good look over.

Cattle I knew. Goats? Not a fucking clue.

Which was why Aiden was here in his standard overalls and waterproof boots.

Aiden was a tall drink of water with dark hair and even darker brown eyes. He reminded me of Colin Farrell a good deal with those broody good looks.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“Morning,” the vet called between sips from a thermos that had funny little vet stickers plastered over the sides. He eyed my siblings with obvious curiosity. “Must be some of the new Bastian boys I’ve heard about. Aiden, local vet and poker hotshot.” He shook Dodge and Ford’s hands, then mine.

“If hotshot means losing every time we play, then sure, you’re a hotshot.

Thanks for stopping by on such short notice.

Like I said on the phone, I don’t know a damn thing about goat conformity and all that.

I did contact other folks who have bought goats from this breeder, and they all speak well of him and his animals. ”

“Happy to swing by,” Aiden replied as he settled his backside against the fender of his truck. “I know the breeder well. Kids have won lots of blue ribbons on those meat goats. You should do well if you read up on how to tend to goats.”

“I read a lot online,” Ford piped up as a soft blush pinked his cheeks. “I mean, not as much as you know, being a vet and all, but I did read a lot.”

“Good. That’ll be one person here who knows about the new goats,” Aiden replied with a soft smile for my incredibly shy half-brother. Ford nodded, pulled his borrowed cowboy hat down to shield his eyes, and made a beeline to the springhouse.

“He’s a little awkward,” Dodge explained before heading inside to try to make some

sense of the bookkeeping mess he had inherited.

I was happy to pass that off to him. Hell, I'd have handed that clutter to anyone who could add and subtract better than me, which was...

well, probably any ten-year-old. Dahn was probably better at math than me.

My skills were more agriculturally based.

Not that one didn't need mathematical knowledge for farming because one certainly did.

I guess it wasn't that I sucked at numbers.

I could calculate how much seed would be needed for this acreage or that plot, application rates of fertilizer, when to breed cows and when they were due to calf.

Lots of things required mathematics. I just hated sitting at a desk pouring over receipts.

Maybe what I loathed the most was watching our ranch lose money every quarter. Probably so.

"He's cute," Aiden commented into his thermos.

"You think?" I glanced at Dodge climbing the front steps. "Never been into redheads much."

"No, not him, the other one. The shy one," he clarified as he took another sip.

I sighed. "What the hell is it with you and Ollie today? You two get a whiff of a new

man in town and you're panting like horn dogs."

"Okay, first off, I am not panting. I merely mentioned that he was cute. Secondly, and this is crucial, there are exactly three queer men in this town. Me, you, and Ollie. So when a few handsome men arrive, we're going to be interested. Is he gay?"

I assumed he was asking about Ford. I didn't have time to reply because as I opened my mouth, Bella led Ford out of her soon-to-be boutique by the hand and into the house, pausing just long enough to wiggle their fingers at Aiden and me before leading Ford inside.

Bella was not having a high femme day—her explanation for when she was knocking around with no makeup or wig but with last night's whiskers—but she was in a plain checkered dress.

Despite how delicate Bella's features were, the dark whiskers and short hair gave her away as male.

She had been in a big hurry to tend to some new patterns so perhaps that was why she was presenting so manly today.

I didn't know her or Ford well enough to ask or presume anything.

Heck, maybe she had just overslept and didn't have time to get gussied up as Granny would say.

"That's the first time I have ever seen a man in a dress leading another man in a dress into this house," Aiden commented.

"Bella is a dressmaker. She likes the term flower man or transfemme." Aiden stared at me in confusion.



“Flower man. It’s an Asian term for men who like to wear pretty things as I understand it.

They’re good friends. Come out from New York City together and are always side-by-side.

” I clarified as best as I could. “She’s obviously using him as a living dress form.

As to your other question, yeah, Ford is gay, as are Bella and Dodge.

Linc, who is somewhere doing something with his beard, probably is queer but hasn’t gone into detail.

I think Granny is straight, but hey, who knows?

You know how she is when it comes to Lynda Carter in her Wonder Woman outfit. ”

“Yeah, she does love Lynda. So, this here ranch is now a rainbow ranch four times over. Very cool.”

Linc emerged from the house, gave us a wave, and ran off in nothing but jogging pants, a DePaul University royal blue and scarlet hoodie, and bright red sneakers. Guess he was taking up jogging for his stress.

“That’s Linc. Short for Lincoln. From Chicago,” I said and got a nod. “He’s the queer one. I’m thinking he’s a daddy bear looking for a cub to cuddle.”

“Ah, got it. Well, things around here sure have changed since our last poker game.”

“You could say that.”

I didn't plan on going into it all now. Maybe next week at our monthly QAF poker game on Friday night, but not when the rattle of a big pickup truck hauling a livestock trailer was creeping up the driveway.

If I got started talking about the siblings, I might not stop.

And there were goats to unload. Ford emerged from the house, sans the bright green dress, and jumped into helping wherever he could.

The kid was no slouch when it came to hard work.

I had to give him that. Within the hour, we had all ten does and the big white buck with a red head and neck off the trailer, vet inspected and moved into their barn.

According to Aiden, the does were incredibly pregnant and should kid within a month.

Most mature does have twins, some triplets, and quads even happened at times.

So in a month we could have thirty or more goats, which we could then sell to local kids for their fair projects or to buyers of chevon—meat from a mature goat if we raised them up—and cabrito, which was meat from a young, milk-fed goat.

Which was akin to veal in cattle. Ford followed Aiden around the entire time, asking a thousand questions to which Aiden, the randy bugger, was happy to answer.

Our rooster had nothing on my two friends when it came to strutting around to impress handsome men.

I stood at the fence of the goat pasture to watch the chubby does getting to know their new lot and shelter as the buck took a nap in the sun.

He seemed a chill guy, which was good because he could knock a person ass over tin cups if he had a hankering to.

I'd guesstimate him to be two hundred fifty pounds or thereabout.

Not a Hereford bull by any stretch but enough to roll your ass if he got the notion.

And they all had horns, so that would add a certain thrill to a rear attack.

The previous owner, a nice guy from a few counties over named Billings, had assured us that Willy, the buck, was the gentlest buck he had ever owned.

He'd hated to sell him, but they needed a new sire. Something that I understood well.

Dodge, Linc, Granny with her damn blue-green hair, and Bella stood with me.

Ford was in the barn with Aiden, filling out forms and papers that we'd need for future use.

Bloodlines, Boar goat registry information, and medical papers.

Ford even had a little folder with a goat that Bella had sketched on the front of it to keep all the paperwork tidy.

He was quite into his goats. Made me wonder if the guy had ever had any pets in his life the way he fawned over dogs and goats.

"They got funny eyes," Granny commented as one of the does meandered over to blat in our faces.

Bella reached down to tickle its chin, which the doe seemed to enjoy.

“Ford says they like animal crackers.” She dug into the pocket of her sweater and handed us each one animal cracker.

The does stampeded over to us, the buck watched from his napping spot on top of a hay pile and then went back to sleep.

Yeah, I felt that. It would take more than one tiny treat to get me up from a nap in the sun as well.

I’d need at least a few dozen of Granny’s peanut butter no bakes to rouse my ass from a sunny slumber.

“They are so cute.” Bella sighed, patting each doe that came begging. “We should get collars with their names on them so we know who we’re talking to.”

“Good idea. That’ll help with the papers when the kids start coming,” Linc said as he passed his giraffe cookie over to Bella.

She gave him a soft smile, which made the big man tug on his beard nervously.

Was everyone on this ranch twitterpated?

I mean, sure, spring was here, and that made a young man’s fancy turn to love, but every damn man in a hundred-mile radius had heart emoji eyes of late.

Thankfully, I was not in such a dorky state.

I was perfectly in control of myself and knew that what Hanley and I had was purely physical.

Which reminded me. I had a hat to fetch.

“Looks like you all have things under control here. I’m going to head out and find my hat, then finish the fence ride,” I casually mentioned.

Everyone was too enamored of Willy and his wonderful women to care what I was doing.

So I set off after I pulled Aiden aside to thank him and ask if he could bill us for this visit, then keep us on speed dial for kidding season.

He seemed quite agreeable to coming back out whenever we needed him, his dark cocoa eyes darting to Ford forking fresh hay about the inside lounging area.

I had a thought to make a comment, but why bother?

If he wanted to make a pass at Ford, that was between him and Ford.

They seemed an odd match to me, but then again, they weren’t looking to get married.

Hooking up required no similar likes or aligning zodiac signs.

A stiff penis cares nothing about romance or nuptials.

Leaving them to it, I snuck off to the stable, called Prissy in from pasture, and saddled her in record time.

Speaking of stiff penises, I was possessed of one that was ready for more tent fun.

### Chapter Eight

The day was warming up nicely.

Prissy was feeling her oats, so we had a hard run across the pasturelands, slowing only when we reached one of the old line cabins.

Someone had been working on this one that faced west. Windows had been removed.

Probably Linc, or possibly Dodge, both were eager to get the cabins renovated and serve all them city slickers looking for a week out west. Yee and fucking haw.

It still didn't sit right with me to have strangers meandering around our land.

You don't seem to mind Hanley strolling around.

Why did my internal voice have to be such a sarcastic jerk?

Why could I not just agree with myself? I never had this problem with a conscience when I was drunk.

If this was what Pinocchio went through with his stupid cricket, it was no wonder he ran off to that island full of donkeys.

Or was there a whale? I couldn't remember.

I'd only seen it once when I was married—my ex had a niece who we babysat on rare

occasions who loved old Disney movies—and I had been mildly plastered.

Terrible. Yes, I know. I never claimed to be a good man back then.

I wasn't even sure if I was a decent man now...

Shaking off the dark times, I focused on the present.

Taking positive actions now would lead me to a brighter future.

That was the doctrine in our meetings. Progress, not perfection.

Which was good because this old cowboy was never going to be perfect, no matter how many dry years I clocked.

If I made it through a day not taking a drink and not pissing off the few people left on this planet that cared for me, that was a good day.

Prissy hit the brakes, sending me lurching forward as my head had been in the clouds.

She gave the air a sniff, blew the smell out, and curled her top lip.

I sat up straighter in the saddle, looking out over the vast meadows that were just now starting to green up slightly.

Birds flitted about as we stood atop a knoll, looking down into a shallow divot in the land where old dead grasses blew in the soft wind.

Far off, I spied the white butts of several pronghorns bounding away at top speed.

It never ceased to amaze me how fast they were.

Second fastest land animals in the world.

Cheetahs were a bit faster, but pronghorns could run further.

Not that we had cheetahs here in Oklahoma, obviously, but we did have—

Prissy reared up without warning. If not for my many years in the saddle, I would have been thrown.

Instinct took over. I loosened my grip on the reins as I leaned forward to link an arm around her neck to talk to her.

Yelling would only add to her anxiety, so I spoke softly until her front feet reconnected with the ground.

“Jesus H. Christ,” I said after my horse settled.

That was when I saw it. A huge clump of brown and green weeds rising out of the shifting dead grasses.

“Easy, easy,” I cooed to the restless beast under me.

Prissy was this close to trying to ditch me again when Hanley tugged the mask off his ghillie suit to stare at us.

Even from this distance, I could see the look of deep regret as I battled with Prissy.

“Easy, easy. It’s not a monster. Just some fool in a suit. ”

He quickly stripped off the camouflage outfit, keeping his feet planted in the small runoff where he’d been hidden.



And hidden damn well too. When Prissy finally danced herself in a few circles, eyes wide and nostrils flared, she sighted a human and not a weed creature, then, finally, began to settle.

“Sorry. Sorry. Shit, that was bad,” he shouted from the gulley where a few scrubby redberry junipers had taken root. “I didn’t know you were there until you started shouting at your horse.”

Prissy was not happy about this man standing downwind, but I convinced her to approach him, the lure of a tiny drinking hole and the promise of some treats when we got back to the ranch enough to counter her unease.

We climbed down into the runoff, her hooves splashing in a tiny temporary creek filled with melted snow.

I looked down at Hanley and felt a rush of want searing a path to my balls. God he was pretty.

“She winded you but couldn’t see you.” I slipped off my mare’s back, gave her a few soft pats on her neck, and then dropped her reins.

She gave Hanley the darkest look I had ever seen a horse give anyone before she lowered her head to drink at the tiny stream.

“She and I would appreciate it if you never did that again.”

He rubbed the back of his sweaty neck. “Sorry, yeah, that was not my finest moment. I stood up to see if I could get a few action shots of the pronghorns as they ran. Guess she thought I was some sort of meadow ogre or something.”

I gave him a long, slow look. Sweaty head to clay-coated boots. “You’re the finest-

looking ogre I've ever seen."

"That a fact?"

And just like that we were in each other's arms, mouths sealed, grappling and tugging at our clothes while my horse swatted the air with her tail, uncaring if my ass was hanging out. As long as she didn't nip my bare cheek, she could watch all she wanted.

Hanley was an aggressive kisser, delving into my mouth as he fondled my aching balls, his tongue tangling with mine.

A whimper flowed out of me before the kiss ended, and he went to his knees, right there on his ghillie suit, his tripod still set up on where several pronghorns had been grazing a few minutes ago.

He kneeled before me, pupils blown, and sucked on his finger wantonly.

"Fuck," I gasped, knowing that he was slicking the digit up for my ass.

I wanted a finger in me, but I wanted his cock in me more.

With my pants around my ankles, I couldn't spread my legs any wider.

Hobbled as I was, he still managed to slip his hand under my balls to find my hole as he licked the weeping head of my cock.

"Damn, you taste so good," he growled, then swallowed me down as he pressed the tip of his index finger inside me.

I groaned, grabbed his head, and began working my cock in and out of his pretty pink

lips as he put more of that finger inside me.

Soon, he was tapping my prostate like it was a telegraph key.

My hips were punching now, and he moaned around each thrust deep into his throat.

With a shout that made Prissy startle, I blew apart, cum coating his lips and chin as he did his best to swallow my load.

His finger continued to tap-tap-tap away, tripling the intensity of my orgasm until my knees buckled.

My half-soft cock slid from his lips, leaving a trail of cum and spittle on his chin as I dropped to the ground with a grunt and a shudder.

Then he stood, easing to his dirty boots.

His cock was stiff, the head swollen and slick.

I opened my mouth without a word, and he fed me his dick, inch by inch, until his balls rested on my chin.

With a sign that I hoped told him to use my mouth as he wished, he then eased out.

“Tell me what you want me to do,” he said, voice rough as a pineapple but far tastier.

“Come down my throat,” I breathlessly replied.

He ran his thumb over my lips as his dick nestled against my cheek.

I wet my lips and turned my head. His soft exhalation was carried off on the cool

winds as I lapped at his cock.

With a gentle touch, he turned my head forward, took his prick in hand, and fed me his dick.

Eyes watering when he was done, he looked down at me for a moment, then eased out.

I sucked in air, leaning in, eager for that shank of meat to fill my mouth.

His smile was wicked then. Message received.

He set a pace that was at once rough, but not rough enough.

I grabbed his ass through thin denim to press him deeper.

He eased out, gave my hair a tug, and then went back to his own pace.

Slow at first, then faster, this dick stretching my jaw wide as he rocked in and out.

With one hand fisted in my hair and the other resting on my cheek, he went to his toes as his cock swelled.

Hot spunk coated my throat. He pulled out, cock still spitting, and smeared his spend over my tender lips.

“That’s the hottest thing ever,” he snarled, his chest heaving while he rubbed his cum into my skin with his dick.

I knelt there, eager for his jizz to coat me wholly, but the facial would have to do.

For now. Eyes closing, I worked to catch my breath as the breeze cooled the spunk on my cheeks and chin. “Stand up for me.”

He released my hair and offered his hand to me.

I pushed up, dick out, and moved into his arms to kiss him.

I could taste both of us. He lapped at my mouth, mixing our essences together like eggs into cake batter.

I clutched at his sides, hungry for everything he could give me.

Another pounding would be phenomenal. Right here.

Hands and knees in the gulley, stones digging into my kneecaps and palms, his cock wrecking me.

“I want to fuck,” I huffed into his mouth. He drew back just enough to find my gaze. What he saw there made one side of his lips quirk up.

“Right here in front of God and that prairie dog colony over there?” He sounded all innocent, but the lingering fire in his pine-colored eyes showed some raunchiness that made my toes curl.

My sight flickered to where a quartet of black-tailed prairie dogs were sitting on their haunches, watching us intently.

They seemed taken aback by the naughtiness they had just witnessed.

I’d not even seen the burrow mound. I’d been so intent on getting my hands on Hanley.

Good thing it wasn't a nest of timber rattlers.

"They have the door cover charge and ID? If so, then sure, let them watch. They might learn a few things," I replied.

Hanley chuckled. We kissed.

And then we heard the roar of ATVs coming up on us fast. Shouts.

I knew those voices. Ford, Linc, and Dodge.

JFC. Could a man not get any rest from his fucking family?

! "It's my damn half-brothers," I grumbled before grabbing at my pants around my ankles.

Hanley did a little dance, cussing vividly when he caught his dick in his zipper while I jerked my jeans up over my bare ass.

We were just presentable when the trio crested the knoll, the putt-putt-putt of my old Honda four-wheelers with rattling trailers filled with building supplies killing the serenity of the plains.

Which is why I hated riding the damn things when a horse was available.

Sadly, there were many times the ATVs were just more practical, so I'd accumulated a few over the years.

Beat to shit they were, but they ran like champs even when I wished they didn't.

Maybe I should stop tinkering with them so they won't start. I'd store that thought

away for later.

“Hey, there you are,” Dodge called down to me, his cheeks pink from the ride.

“Here I are.” I gave Hanley a sorrowful look before making my way up the soft hill to stand in front of my half-brothers. “What are you three doing so far out?”

“We’re hauling building stuff to the Lonesome Dove cabin,” Linc said, his large hands wrapped in leather gloves as they rested on the handlebars. His beard had bits of old dead grass and seeds caught in it.

“The what now?” I asked because I’d never heard the cabins called anything but cabins.

“It’s that one way out on the furthest western pasture,” Linc explained as if I didn’t know my own fucking land. I did. And quite well, thank you. I just had no clue we were now naming line cabins after old westerns. Could we even do that?

“I think that name may be copyrighted or something,” I said as Hanley joined us, looking far too damn good. My fingers itched to get at him again, even though we’d just gotten at each other. The man was like fine aged whiskey. And we all knew how much I liked whiskey.

“Well, probably. We’ll make something up that’s similar. Horny Hoot Owl,” Linc tossed out and got a snicker from all of us. “You want to come along? We can get some final plans in our heads as to what we’d like to do with it.”

No. I did not want to go. I wanted to stay here and get fucked by Hanley.

But that would be lazy and irresponsible.

Baker Bastian may be many things, most crummy, but he was not lazy.

Heaving a mighty sigh internally, I gave my stupid brothers a nod, then went to find my horse who had wandered a bit.

Not far, but enough that I had to call her back.

When I was in the saddle, I rode back to the gathering atop the knoll.

“Thanks for stopping by,” Hanley said as he petted Prissy’s soft muzzle. “I’ll bring your hat to the house later.”

“I thought you lost your hat while out riding when your horse saw a coyote?” Dodge asked before tipping his spiffy new hat back just a scootch.

“Right, he did. I found it while I was out scouting a shoot site and took it back to my camp,” Hanley quickly interjected, saving my ass. Pity he had to save it when I really wanted him to wreck it. Stupid siblings.

“Why not come up for dinner tonight?” Ford chimed in. “Bella is making her special vegan lasagna, and she always makes too much.”

Hanley looked up at me questioningly. Did we want that kind of chumminess or would it be better to keep our thing strictly sex and no homey family shit?

“Sure, yeah, I’ll come get you at your camp at sunset,” I replied before I could think too much about it. What was one damn meal?

“Great. That sounds really good. Canned stew and talking to myself gets boring after a few days.” Hanley gave me a big smile before nodding at my kin and ambling back to his gear.



I turned my horse so as not to allow the three apes on ATVs to see me smiling like a giddy teen despite some deep reservations.

Prissy led the way to the Horny Hoot Owl cabin while I fought off daydreams of sharing coffee and cake with Hanley.

### Chapter Nine

I made it a point not to get gussied up.

Same old clothes, just freshly washed, same boots, same belt.

No new socks or underwear. And just a dab of Old Spice on my cheek.

Whiskery cheeks at that because I'd not shaved since this was only dinner with the family—I'd have to examine when this motley group had shifted from pushy strangers to family later—and therefore warranted no date-like sprucing up.

Still, even though I had told myself a hundred times, it was nothing at all like a date, when I pulled up at Hanley's redbud camp at dusk, my stomach did this little flipsy-doo when he walked up to me wearing my hat.

"Evening, cowboy," he drawled and plunked my hat back onto my head.

I opened my mouth to tell him to keep the damn hat since it looked better on him, but my words were cut short when his mouth covered mine.

His fingers came to the back of my neck.

I leaned into the kiss, eager, hungry, and met each stroke of his tongue over mine.

"Mm, I bet that lasagna isn't close to being as tasty as you are."

He gave the nape of my neck a squeeze before climbing behind me and settling in for the ride. His arms looped around my middle. Pity we both had coats on. I'd much rather feel him tight to my back, naked, his prick buried deep inside me.

"We going soon?" he asked beside my ear, making a shudder dance down my spine.

"I'm contemplating skipping dinner and having you fuck me senseless instead," I confessed and got a soft grunt from him.

"Let's eat first. I am starved . When you bring me back, I'll fuck you into Kansas.

" He bit down on my earlobe, softly, but enough that I felt it.

Yeah, that sounded good. I gave the Honda some gas, and we sped off, startling a covey of scaled quail settling down in the dead grasses to sleep skyward.

Hanley was very handsy. Handsy Hanley. His fingers crept downward to my crotch several times as we bounded along.

"I should have had you put a plug in before we left my camp," he whispered into my ear just as we pulled up in front of the house.

My dick, already stiff as a pencil, throbbed at the mention. Fuck and yes.

"Next time," I ground out before nudging him with my elbow.

"That's a promise I plan to see you keep," he replied, kissed the fine hairs on the back of my neck, and then wiggled off the ATV. I glanced back to see that his jeans were as tented as mine, so we stood there gawking at the stars until our erections went down.

“You good?” I enquired. He nodded, smirked, and held out his hand to mine. Unsure of what he was doing, I carefully placed my palm over his and gawked when he lifted my hand to his lips for a gentle kiss to my knuckles.

“I’m good. Let’s eat.” He released my hand. I felt a little giddy and a whole lot confused.

As soon as we opened the front door, the aroma of garlic and the din of lots of people talking greeted us.

We shrugged out of our coats, toed off our boots, and I led him into the spacious farmhouse kitchen.

It was packed. Granny was directing the table settings as Bella removed two large pans of lasagna from the old oven.

“Just in time!” Granny said with a smile.

The woman was the happiest I had seen her in years.

My half-brothers all called a greeting to Hanley as they moved around the table in a circle, putting out plates, glasses, and flatware.

“Here, you sit next to me tonight. I want to hear all about your picture taking in Australia.”

She pulled Hanley to the special chair—the one brought in from the dining room—and then proceeded to hog him all through the meal.

Truly, I didn’t mind. He seemed so relaxed, even among people he didn’t know well.

I envied that. I'd always been aloof, it seemed.

Reserved was what Granny liked to call it.

Sitting here stuffing my face with some damn good lasagna even if it was meatless and listening to Hanley entertain Granny and the rest packed in tight at the table made me feel content.

The pineapple cake for dessert was one of my favorites.

I had two slabs and a large cup of dark coffee.

Dodge seemed distracted, though. When the others dispersed to the living room to chat while a few of "the boys" as Granny now called us cleaned up, I volunteered as did Dodge.

The dishwashing would take some time. There were a lot of dirty plates and pans, but I rolled up my sleeves and we dove in.

It didn't take him long to start talking.

"So, my ex is being a dickhead about Dahn coming out for Easter," he admitted while toweling dry a spatula.

Laughter flowed into the warm room. Something about a crocodile with a peg leg, but I didn't quite catch all of Hanley's story.

"He's concerned about who is living in this commune in the wilds where his son is going to be sleeping. "

I cocked an eyebrow. "We're a commune in the wild now?"

“So it seems. He’s just being a shithead.

Anything to make life more miserable for me.

” Dodge sighed as he continued to dry that spatula.

The dish drainer was close to overflowing.

I shook off a cake plate and held it over the rinse sink to drip dry.

“So I’m going to ask Ollie if he can contact Chris to assure him that the ranch is not a commune, nor are we in the wilds.

Maybe see about getting a background check on everyone here... ”

“Well, we kind of are, especially to someone from Sacramento. No offense, but just yesterday you nearly shit yourself when you saw a snapping turtle sunning over at the watering pond in the south pasture.”

He did have the grace to look slightly embarrassed.

“True. That was a big turtle. Anyway, yeah, I get it. We’re all slightly out of our elements here.

” I nodded. No point in trying to sprinkle perfume on a sow.

They were all lost here, and it was obvious.

But we weren’t some hippie commune. Just a ranch filled with queers.

Which, given that his ex-husband was also a queer man, shouldn’t be an issue.

But who knows? I guess the men here were strangers to Chris just as they had been to me.

I couldn't fault him for being protective.

"So, yeah, that's where I'm at tonight. Would you be pissed if I got a background check run on you? "

"Nope. I've not done anything too bad other than a few drunken episodes in town when I was drinking. I'm sober now. Have been for a few years. Guess that's the baddest thing they might dig up. Divorced too, but that's not a crime. At least that I know of."

"No, it's not a crime. If it was, Chris would be in prison a few times over. I'm his third husband, and rumor has it, he's got number four in his sights." He tossed the spatula into the utensil drawer, shoved it shut, and then had to fight with a ladle to get it closed properly.

"Damn, what is his rush to put a ring on it?" I handed him the cake plate.

"I don't know. Low self-esteem or something.

" He plucked a pot from the drainer and glanced at me.

"And about the past drinking issues, I have no worries. Congrats on getting sober. I'll talk to the others about it before I go to bed.

Thanks for being so understanding and honest. I know I came here with a ton of baggage, and you've been nothing but warm and welcoming. "

That made me snigger. "Not sure I was ever warm."

He chuckled. “Well, okay, lukewarm.” He shot me a look with a quirky half smile. “Granny was welcoming.”

Yeah, that she was. Maybe I should have been a bit more sociable. Guess having some family around wasn’t all bad all the time.

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After cleanup was done, we rejoined the family in the living room where a rousing game of “Guess who sang this one” was now in progress.

Granny loved this game. She listened to a classic country station religiously, and being a person of a certain age, knew all the old-time singers well.

Growing up with the radio tuned to WRKC—Working Country was their tagline—I did pretty well with my guesses.

I took note of the rather large pile of quarters resting in Granny’s lap.

Oh yes, this game was played with money on the line.

Ford, Linc, and Bella had not done well.

Hanley, smiling up at me as I entered and announced that there was a fresh pot of coffee, seemed to be cradling a mere dollar in coins in his hand.

Bella scooted over on the old sofa to make room, slight as it was, for me to sit beside Hanley.

I caught the tiny little wink Bella gave me as I took my seat.



Great. Someone seemed to be playing matchmaker.

I'd have to pull her aside and explain that there was no match to make as I was a lone wolf and Hanley was a wandering soul.

The DJ was talking about the upcoming Easter parade in Bastian Grange.

Linc rose to go fetch coffee as I leaned back and draped my arm casually over the back of the couch, not touching Hanley in the least. Bella leaned back, smiled knowingly at me, and then shouted out an answer to who was currently singing.

"Johnny Cash!" she yelled and got a soft chuckle from Granny.

"You say Johnny Cash for every song that plays," Granny replied with a giggle.

A gust of wind blew over the front porch, sending the chimes into motion.

Rain began to fall. Softly, and so we continued playing while the weather outside grew uglier.

Thunder could be heard rolling in, and the gusts of wind grew stronger.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“Maybe you should plan on sleeping here tonight,” I said to Hanley and got a nod in agreement.

The rain was pelting the house now, sheets of it, as lightning flashed brightly.

The lights flickered. We all looked at the lamps as if by staring at them we could use our willpower on them to stay lit.

Waylon Jennings was interrupted by a series of short, sharp blasts that sent Granny and me to our feet.

The wind outside was howling now. Everyone looked up at us, coffee or sodas in hand, questioningly.

The tornado warning alarm grew faster. Sharper.

And then the announcement of a tornado on the ground moving southwest of Bastian Grange got us moving.

“Everyone down into the cellar,” Granny barked as she waved her arms for the stunned folks to get moving. “Get on now! Move it.”

I took Granny by the arm and led her through the kitchen, grabbing a flashlight from atop the fridge as I moved her along.

I pulled with all my might to get the back door open, but the wind ripped it from my hand, sending it crashing into the side of the house.

Once outside, I looked in the direction of the twister but could only see small white and blue-green flashes.

“Shit,” I muttered and hustled my grandmother along as fast as we could hustle. We’d just cleared the corner when the roar hit my ears. I’d grown up in this part of the country, and I knew all too well what the tumble of a tornado sounded like. “Move! Move!”

The storm cellar doors were closed. Linc and Dodge yanked them open as small bits of debris accosted us, twigs and dirt hitting our faces felt like sandpaper.

I passed my grandmother off to Linc, as he was the biggest, and yelled at him to get her and the others inside.

He shouted something that was lost in the wind as I broke away to dash to the stables.

“Baker!” I thought I heard Hanley bellowing as I raced to the barn.

The horses were nervous as I rushed in and started throwing open stall doors.

Prissy ran past, knowing instinctively somehow to seek shelter, which is why we generally turned them out when a twister was rolling at us.

While the barn might offer some shelter, it could also collapse on them, trapping the horses inside.

The last one out sped past me. I turned and ran into Hanley as he came around the corner.

A flash of lightning lit up the sky behind him. I wanted to yell at him for risking himself like this, but I didn’t have time to scold him.

“Goats!” I shouted. He ran along with me to the goat barn.

Thankfully, we had put collars on the goats so that if they did wander off, people would know they belonged to us.

That was a good call on Ford’s part. We had to nudge a few of the big white and red caprines along.

The pregnant ones did not want to venture out into the rain.

That was one big difference between goats and cattle that I was learning.

Cows will stand out in the hardest, harshest weather and contentedly chew their cuds.

Goats, as I now understood, hated the rain.

So instead of them darting out like the horses had, we had to herd them along.

The buck was the worst, but once we got him and the herd matriarch moving, we managed to drive them out into the pasture.

A branch the size of a bat snapped off the oak beside Granny’s shooting range. I threw up an arm to keep it from hitting my head. The impact nearly sent me to my knees, the pain white hot. I pressed my right arm to my side and moved on. I’d deal with it later.

The howling winds were so loud I couldn’t hear the goats’ blats or the shouts of my half-brothers.

The goats heard them, though, and they galloped—do goats gallop?

—at full goat speed toward the moving lights.

Two of them. Two of my dumb brothers risking themselves when I told them to stay safe. Did no one ever listen?

Hanley gave me a push. My forearm was throbbing.

The shutters on the house were shaking as the wind started pushing us around like tin soldiers.

We followed the goats. Hanley tripped over something as we neared the storm cellar.

The roar of the twister was deafening now.

I righted him, gave him a shove forward, and then ran behind him.

Dodge and Linc reached out for us, their eyes round as dinner plates.

A crash nearby gave us the extra energy we needed to lunge at the men waving their cellphones around as if they were trying to land a plane.

We ducked into the cellar. I spun around to see Linc battling valiantly with the storm doors to get them shut.

They closed with a clatter. Soaked to the skin, breathless, heart pounding, I turned to look at the crowd packed into the small space.

“Blah!” Willy said as the foundation of the house shuddered. Bella was seated on a cot with Granny, her arm around my grandmother’s shoulders, her eyes big and filled with frightened tears.

I stepped around a goat, kneeled by Granny, and took her hands in mine.

Goats and people all seemed to be stuck in a time hole.

The dust from the rafters holding the house drifted down on us as we all sat, or kneeled, surrounded by goats.

Then, the noise began to lessen, that terrifying roar of a twister moving off.

We all stayed put, quietly listening as the rain continued to pound down and the thunder rolled.

Clasping Granny's small hands, I gave her knuckles a peck, then turned to come face to face with Willy.

He made this odd blubbery lip sound in my face and pooped.

"I think I just did the same thing," Hanley commented from the other side of the goat buck.

Everyone laughed nervously.

"So yeah, welcome to Tornado Alley," I called out. As much as I wanted this bunch of city boys to learn about life in Oklahoma, we could have done without that life lesson.

"Does that happen a lot?" Bella shakily asked.

"More than I wished," I replied, patting Granny's hands before standing.

She was fine. Lord only knows how many twisters the old gal had lived through on

this patch of land.

More than I was old, I would wager. I glanced around at the scared faces illuminated with cellphone flashlights. “Everyone okay?”

A mumble of shaky yeahs and two goat blats. Cool.

“What about your arm?” Hanley asked, wiggling around goats to touch my shoulder gently.

“It’s fine.” The rain still pounded down on the metal doors.

I looked at Hanley eyeing me with a touch of disbelief.

“Really. It’s fine. Hairline at worst. I’ve had worse.

” Granny began clucking about getting my arm into a splint.

“See what you did?” I whispered to him before assuring my grandmother that no splint was required.

“We’ll just sit here a bit longer, catch our breaths, and then poke our heads out to see how things are. ”

Conversation was light for the most part.

I hunkered down beside Willy. Hanley sat on my right.

The others were whispering about how scared they had been and how they never seen anything like that back home.

I bet they didn't. I wouldn't wish a damn twister on my worst enemy.

My thoughts went to my horses. I hoped they had done what their instincts had told them to do and race away from the storm.

"You were pretty ballsy to come out in that to find me," I said to Hanley as I petted Willy. The goat seemed happy enough and just stood there after burping up a cud to chew.

"I thought you might need help. I've been through some damn nasty storms in my time."

"Tell us about them," Bella called from the cot.

Hanley crossed his long legs as thunder boomed overhead. Loud yes, but slightly further away, thank God.

"Well, about five years ago, I was down in the bayou of Louisiana doing a photo essay for a magazine about the Louisiana black bears and their shrinking habitat when a hurricane blew in..."

I sat back a bit, resting my spine on the edge of the cot, holding my arm to my middle, as Hanley began his tale.

If he had lived in medieval times, he would have made a fine bard.

He could spin a yarn with the best of them.

The steady throb in my forearm was unpleasant and a little worrisome, but there was little to do for it now.



If it was fractured, all they would do for it was tell me to rest, ice, compress, and elevate.

I'd been through that routine a few times, most from having cows or horses step on a foot.

When he concluded his tale of wind, rain, and flooded swamps, the rain outside had lessened into a pleasant little shower tempo. I pushed to my feet, using my left arm, and made the announcement.

"Okay, let's see what we have to deal with," I said, nodding at Linc to open the doors.

He did and exited first, with Dodge on his heels.

Bella and Granny went next, and Hanley and I followed behind them in case Granny tumbled backward on the old stone stairs.

They needed to be made into new ones. Another job for the never-ending list.

Prissy stood at the cellar doors, throwing her head up and down, soaking wet but hale and hearty.

A few other horses were milling about. The yard, from what we could see with only the light from our phones, was littered with limbs.

I turned to gaze at the house. Using the flashlight, I could see that a few shutters were hanging loose and some shingles littered the ground, but the oak tree was a goner.

It lay on its side, thankfully falling away from the house, the root ball as big as a pachyderm and showing thick, rich dirt and rocks that the roots had been clinging to.

The hole it left in the yard could be filled in with cement and made into a swimming pool.

I sighed at the thought of all that extra work.

Still, it could have been much worse. Prissy came over to me, poked me with her wet nose, and got some praise and a pat or ten.

The air was cool, moist, and calm. Raindrops sprinkled down on us as we all encircled the goats and led them back to their barn.

A barn that stood untouched as did the horse barn.

Scanning the roofs with my flashlight, I saw a few strips of steel roofing that looked to be loose, but overall things had fared well.

I moved the beam of light to the springhouse.

That, too, seemed to be fine. Bella sighed in relief.

“Well, no point standing out here in the rain gawking. Whoever wants to lend a hand, let’s get them goats and horses inside.

We’ll start looking for any horses that haven’t come back tomorrow morning,” I said and got some nods from the others.

We’d probably be in the dark for the rest of the night, perhaps even days, depending on how many lines the twister had snapped.

We had kerosene lamps in the house. We’d manage.

This wasn't the first time Mother Nature had dropped by for a rowdy visit. Wouldn't be the last either.

"You good?" Dodge asked, jerking his head at my arm nestled into my side.

"Yep." I ambled off over the muddy ground behind a pregnant goat that seemed to think being free meant she could nibble Granny's rhododendron bush.

I'd be fine. Sometimes a man had no other option.

### Chapter Ten

Sleep was hard to come by.

I was once again back on the sofa after generously giving my bed to Hanley since there was no way he was going back to sleep in a tent with a warm front filled with line after line of storms blowing through.

Fortunately, no other twisters dropped in our vicinity but the radio, once it came back on, was busy as was the police scanner.

Ollie was probably running around like a chicken, minus its head.

I should check in to see if he needed any help, but I had a ton of shit to do around here today, so maybe I could help out any neighbors who needed it tomorrow.

Come dawn I was up, dressed in yesterday's clothes, and nursing not only a cup of coffee but a miserably painful arm.

OTC meds had not done much to dull the pain, which pretty much assured me there was a hairline fracture.

Something that I did not need right now as we had cattle coming tomorrow, which meant that fencing needed to be done today.

That was on top of the damage control that we'd need to do as well as the search for any missing horses.

It was shaping up to be one damn long day.

Granny slipped into the kitchen, bleary-eyed, her wild-colored hair on end. She'd been up late as well. We all had. Falling asleep after nearly being sucked into Oz was damn tough.

"You should get that arm looked at," she said as she made her way to the coffeepot, her slippers flapping softly in the early morning quiet. I frowned at her insight before trying to let my arm fall only to bring it back up in a hurry.

"No point. They won't do nothing for it."

"Oh bullshit they won't," she snapped before turning her full attention to me. "They'll at least splint or cast it. Maybe give you some meds for the pain."

"I got a sling in the upstairs bathroom. I'll use that.

"The look she gave me could have melted cement.

"Granny, I do not have the time or the money to go to the ER right now." With that admission, her stern look softened.

I didn't have health insurance. Granny had her Medicaid, thank God, but I'd had to drop ACA when the premiums jumped on my fortieth birthday.

I had no off-the-farm job to provide insurance, so I was sailing on spit and a whistle, hoping for good luck and no major health issues.

So far so good. "I'll be fine. I'll take it easy, wrap it tight, and keep ice on it.

Not much more a doctor could do, and it'll save us a few thousand bucks. "

“Maybe you could ask Dodge or—”

“No. I am not asking them for a damn thing. They’re already sinking far too much cash into this land for my comfort. What happens when they get tired of playing Roy Rogers and decide to go back to the city?”

“Baker, they ain’t going nowhere,” she stated assuredly, but I saw the slight doubt in her eyes. Eyes that would need surgery soon, and Lord only knows what will and won’t be covered by the government for that. Nope. I was not running to the next county for a little crack in my bone.

“Shame that limb didn’t hit my head. My skull is hard as hickory.”

The joke fell flatter than a flapjack. “You let me wrap that good and tight.” Granny gave in finally. “And don’t be a bullhead about letting some of the others pick up some work. When it was just you and me, you had to do most all the heavy lifting, but we have family now. You have brothers—”

“Half -brothers,” I corrected, and once more, the sadness in her gaze shifted to irritation.

“You know, the longer you cling to keeping yourself segregated from accepting them as kin, the longer and harder your life will be. I thought meetings told you that isolating yourself is bad.”

“That’s for the road to staying sober,” I slipped in as a floorboard over us creaked. Granny frowned up at me. I blew out a breath that made waves in my coffee cup. “Fine. I’ll let the others do more. That make you happy?”

“Honey, what would make me the happiest would be to know that when I go to my maker, you won’t be rattling around in this old farmhouse alone.” With that, she

turned, pulled the sash of her robe tighter around her waist, and snagged her cup of coffee and her gun on the way out the back door.

My eyes closed for a moment as I drew in a breath.

Nothing like starting the day off by disappointing your only living relative.

The snap of the spring on the screen door was the first notice that morning shooting practice was about to commence.

Taking my coffee with me, I slogged upstairs to use the bathroom, only to find Hanley exiting my room. He looked pretty rough.

“Morning,” I said as one door, then another, and then another cracked open. Bella stepped into the hall, yawning mightily, then leveling a look at me with my arm tight to my ribs.

“I’ll drive you to the doctor if I can use the truck,” she offered, and I instantly began to shut that shit down. Linc stepped up behind Bella, his usually placid bubba bear demeanor slipping into a growly grizzly look as Bella and I started bickering.

“Hey, let the lady take you to the fucking doctor, big brother ,” Linc grumbled, placing one giant hand on Bella’s slim shoulder. “She’s only trying to be nice. No need to raise a voice.”

“I didn’t raise my voice at anyone.” They all cocked eyebrows in unison. Oh cute, they were coordinated in their snark. Super. “Okay, look, it’s just a deep bruise. We have too much work to do today for me to lark off to Monroe Falls to see a—”

“I’ll drive you,” Hanley interjected. I bristled.

“This way, the others can be here for whatever needs to be done. I need to do some shopping anyway, canned goods and some bottled water. Also, my publisher is pestering me hard for my most recent shots. I’ll do that in town where the internet is better. A win/win, right?”

As I looked around, I saw that there was no way I was leaving this damn hallway without agreeing to seeing a fucking doctor.

I wanted to say that I was too poor for this, but my pride wouldn’t let me, so I snarled but nodded and stalked into the bathroom.

I slammed the door in their faces just because I could, and it felt good to do so.

I heard them whispering on the other side as I rummaged around under the sink for the old sling I’d had when I was a teenager and fell off the hay wagon and broke my wrist. It was a little dingy, but it would work.

Now I just had to shower with my left hand. Fun times. Damn pushy people.

Things went a lot smoother around here when it was just me in charge.

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Dodge reached for me. I shot him a look. He backed off, hands in the air.

“I can get into a damn truck,” I growled, giving my half-sibling a dark glower before hoisting my ass up into the farm truck.

The sound of my old Jonsered chainsaw cutting through the fallen oak tree filled the morning air.



The other guys had leaped right into working on the oak that lay on its side beside the house with gusto.

Somehow Linc was aces at using chainsaws—some sort of metrosexual lumberjack shit, I guess, but I didn't ask after he showed me he knew his shit—and so he was cutting the tree into rounds that would then have to be split.

That was another day's work. Hell, cutting the tree into chunks small enough to handle and then heft up onto the splitter would be a couple weeks' worth of work, but our wood shed would be filling back up, so that was a boon.

Sure would miss that tree, though. It held a lot of great memories.

Hanley climbed in behind the steering wheel as I maneuvered my sling up and out of the way so I could buckle my seat belt. I glanced up to find his pretty green eyes on me.

"If you ask me if I need help, I will bite your dick the next time it's in my mouth," I warned him in a low grumble meant for his ears only and got a gruff chuckle.

"You are not a good patient," he said while I struggled. Finally, the buckle snapped into place. I shot him a triumphant look. "Nicely done."

"Make sure he goes into the ER," Dodge said after closing the passenger side door. "Granny says he'll sneak off if you just drop him off."

Jesus H. Christ riding a buffalo. I did that once when I was sixteen and had been drinking a little bit before trying to ride my dirt bike.

I crashed out by the line cabin facing the mountains, rode home with a dislocated shoulder, and then skipped out of going into the ER when Ollie, who had also been

drinking more than a little, dropped me off at the door to find a place to park.

Neither of us wanted to be tagged with underage drinking, so I staggered off to the green.

Ollie had tried to find a place to park, but couldn't, and then forgot why he was cruising the hospital parking lot, so he went home to the rez.

I woke up, took a walk, and ran into old Doc Milkman, the large animal vet who used to work in this area.

He rotated my arm back into place outside the Main Street Market.

Then he gave me a lift home and checked on a cow about to calve.

Paid him ten bucks for the house call and went on with my life.

Ollie never did recall taking me to town that day.

So yeah, the sheriff wasn't always such a stickler for law and order.

He did stupid shit as a teenager just like the rest of us, only difference was I kept on drinking, and he stopped.

"Ah, a sneaker. Got it. Back in an hour or two." Hanley placed his hand on the shifter.

"You know how to drive a stick?" I asked just to be a dick.

"I do, yeah, so sit back and just be your sunny self." Dodge laughed. If my right arm wasn't resting in a sling, I would have slapped his dumb face. We eased away from

the farm, Hanley handling the manual with practiced ease.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“Where’d you learn to drive a stick? In the Congo or something?

” I asked as we rumbled along, bits of chaff flying out of the bed as we picked up speed.

The morning was a beauty. Clear skies, soft pink clouds, and a gentle wind.

Perfect day to get work done, but here I was riding to the hospital like a damn fool.

“Exactly. I learned to drive a stick from the shaman of an uncontacted tribe deep in the dark recesses of the Congolian rainforests.”

It took me a few seconds. “You’re being an asshole.” That made him laugh. I did enjoy the sound of his merriment, even when I was pissy. “Where did you really learn?”

“My father taught me. He refused to be a shiftless driver.”

“Granny taught me on this truck.” I patted the torn dash with a loving hand.

“She could shift gears like Mario Andretti. Still can, if I’m being honest, but her sight isn’t good, and the last time she took the truck, she backed into Winnie Cartwright’s red cedar decorative lawn well and tipped it over. ”

“Damn, I bet that upset her.” We slowed to a four-way and then pulled a sharp left to head into Bastian Grange. The heater was on low, but Hanley had his window cracked, the wind tugging at his dark blond hair. “I remember when my grandfather

got too old to drive. He was heartbroken.”

“I think once she gets her cataract surgery, her vision will improve,” I replied while enjoying the play of wind in his hair.

God he was handsome. Rugged. Super toppy.

Everything that I really liked in a man.

“Just a few more months. There are so few specialists out here that we always need to travel to Oklahoma City for her eye appointments, which is a three-hour drive each way.”

“Yeah, rural healthcare is suffering badly and only getting worse,” he sympathized.

Something about his laidback ways helped put me at ease.

“I’m sure once she gets that surgery, she’ll have eyes like a hawk again.

” I nodded, unsure of why I was feeling so oddly close to this man. “So, where is the hospital?”

As we rode along, the signs of the storm last night were evident.

Trees lying on their sides, power lines trapped under limbs, and scattered bits of debris everywhere.

The swath of the twister was choppy, but we could see where it had touched down, skipped over the road and a small trailer park—miraculous in its own right since twisters loved trailer parks—and resumed rolling toward our place.

Later, when I ride out to find the few horses still on walkabout, I'll be able to follow the tornado's path, I'm sure.

They usually left a pretty clear trail of destruction in their wake.

It hit me then that Hanley was probably concerned about his camp.

"Soon as we get back, we'll get you out to the redbud camp to check on your shit," I said and got a soft shrug.

"Thanks. I'm pretty sure that if it hit my camp, things are destroyed. If it missed it, things will be fine. Getting you looked at seemed the number one priority."

"That's kind of you." I felt awkward again. Like a teen trying to speak to a girl or guy he's been crushing on for a long time. "We'll ride out to check, though."

"And that's kind of you when you have so much to attend to." I longed to plaster my mouth to his, but this was hardly the time. Also, my damn arm hurt like a bitch. Later.

We'd kiss later.

I fed him directions until we pulled up at the ER entrance at the Pellman Memorial Hospital just over the county border in Monroe Falls.

"You need me to come in with you?" he asked as I unbuckled. I threw him a look.

"Do I look ten years old? No, I don't need you to come in.

And no, I won't skip out. Just go get your shit.

" I slid to the ground, shut the door, and refused to look back.

My gut was ticklish enough being with him for a long time.

Probably just the overuse of aspirin all night.

Stuff always ate my stomach. The ER was hopping.

I spied Ollie hovering in the corner by the snack station, nursing a cup of coffee.

His dark eyes met mine as I registered, so I ambled over to him instead of taking up a seat.

We looked like warmed up dog shit. “What are you doing here?”

“Had to escort a prisoner from the city jail here for an X-ray. When the power went out last night, Lappy Jones kind of lost his shit.”

“Ah.” Lappy was an old Vietnam veteran who drank way too much.

Most times, Ollie just let him sleep it off in one of the twin cells at the sheriff’s office, a routine I was sadly knowledgeable about, and obviously had given him room and board for the night.

Lappy’s PTSD was incredibly bad, we all knew that, so a storm like we had last night was not a fun time for the poor guy.

He tried, bless him, coming in and out of meetings sporadically but never quite getting totally on the wagon.

I didn’t judge. I’d tumbled off that conveyance a few times myself before the program stuck.

“He took a tumble from the cot. ?Course I didn’t know about this until this morning when I was over at the Maynard farm calling in about downed lines on their back forty. Damn county is a fucking mess. What are you doing here?”

“My family insisted I come get a bruise examined.” I jerked my chin at my arm.

“Broken?”

“Doubtful. Just a hairline, if anything. The oak in the front yard came down last night. Some of that old elm that Granny uses for shade while shooting came down too. I had to bat a limb aside to keep it from hitting my head.” A call for a doctor floated around us as a baby in the back began to wail.

“Anyone out there hurt?”

“Anyone or just Dodge?”

“Well, since you brought him up...”

I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt. “Everyone is fine aside from me.”

He took a sip, grimaced, and then looked around me. I glanced back to see Lappy being wheeled out with his arm in a cast. Poor man looked beat to hell. Guess we all did. It had been a night for sure.

Ollie handed me his coffee as he took the wheelchair from a young nurse with purple bags under her eyes. Long night for all, by the looks. Ollie thanked the pretty miss in the green scrubs.

“I’m taking Lappy home. You need me out at your place for anything?” Ollie asked. I smiled down at Lappy and got a weak little bob of his balding head.



“No, we’re good. Call and let us know where we’re needed to help, and we’ll be there.

We can split up to get our shit done as well as help out.

Show the city boys how us country folk pull together.

” Lappy grinned up at me. Ollie gave me a slap on the left shoulder and wheeled Lappy out the doors.

I glanced around, sighed, and carried my cup of cold, rancid coffee to the lone empty seat to wait my turn. Looked like it might be a while.

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Five hours later, I exited the ER with a cumbersome cast, a prescription for pain meds, and a headache the size of the Ferris wheel at the Oklahoma State Fair.

Hanley glanced up from his phone when I was escorted out by a lovely nurse, Patty McNair, who had graduated high school with me and was just doing her job on a particularly busy morning.

She’d been quite kind considering I’d been like a grizzly with a thorn in its paw all morning.

“Hey.” Hanley pocketed his phone as he rose. “Looks like you broke it,” he added with a nod at the cast sitting in my old sling. Patty gave Hanley a look and glanced at me.

“He’s a friend,” I explained. “And my ride.” She nodded at Hanley. “It’s just a crack,” I mumbled, then stopped at the admissions desk to see about talking to

someone to set up a payment plan. “A few aspirin and an ice bag, and it will be fine.”

“He has discharge papers with aftercare. Knowing Baker like I do, the hardest part will be keeping him from overdoing it. Remember to elevate and use ice. Wiggle those fingers and roll the wrist. Keep the cast dry. And do not put any weight on it, which would also include tossing feed bags or hay bales around. Follow up with a set of X-rays in two to three weeks to make sure the bone is healing properly.”

“His brothers will take good care of him,” Hanley said with a charming smile that seemed to work on nurses as well as it did on cow pokes.

“I need to go to billing,” I grumped and walked off. My whole morning had been wasted with this silliness. Texts had rolled in from home. I should have been on the ranch helping clean up and getting ready for the cattle, not sitting here on my ass being covered in plaster of Paris.

“Oh hey. No you don’t. The bill is taken care of already,” Hanley called as he and Patty easily caught up with me. I hit the brakes, spun, and gave him my best glower. “Dodge has it covered.”

“Like fuck he does.” I stormed around them, heading to the exit with a full head of steam.

Patty and my lover raced up to me. Patty was doing her best to escort me outside, which was probably part of her job, and Hanley was trying to be a decent dude.

Both could have saved it. I could walk perfectly fine without assistance.

Did I look like my grandmother? Not that Granny needed help to get around...

“Where are we parked?” I asked as I scanned the full lot before spying my truck.

“Never mind.” I stomped across the lot, each thundering step making my arm bounce just a bit, making it ache.

Stupid trees. Stupid wind. Stupid half -brothers waving their big city cash around like it was...

well, cash. I climbed into the cab, full of piss and vinegar, and then watched as Hanley settled behind the wheel and turned slightly to shoot me a rather stiff look.

“Okay, so here it is,” he said and sighed, placing his left arm atop the steering wheel as his attention fell solely on me. “I know I’m a stranger here, and your family business is private. I also know I’ve kind of been thrown into some personal drama that centers on your brothers—”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“Half -brothers,” I snarled while trying to buckle my safety belt.

“Right. Half-brothers, and probably your recently deceased father.” My gaze dropped to the belt and then back to him.

I was not in the mood for a lecture. “That being said, I realize I don’t know your history with your dad or your siblings, but right now, you’re acting like a real dick.

Not only to that nurse, but to me as well, two people who have just been trying to help you out. ”

Shit. Shit. Shit. He was right. I was being a dick.

“I’m sorry.” I exhaled the words as I let the belt retract. “I’m just...”

He reached around me to pull the belt out and buckle it at my hip. I watched him being so kind, so gentle, and felt even worse about my behavior.

“I know you’re in pain. And I know that you’re feeling all the feels. I honestly think that your brother is just doing the best he knows how to do. Some people solve things with money. And he seems to ooze money.”

“Yeah, he had this big pediatric dental practice in Sacramento that he sold to come out west to pretend to be fucking Gene Autry for his kid.” I found myself lost in his jade eyes as words kept flowing out of me.

So many words. They just gushed out of me like a levee breaking.

He nodded along, patiently, as I vented about my brothers showing up out of the blue and taking the hell over.

He knew all the dirty parts already. About my dad, my mom, and my childhood.

I'd vomited dialogue all over him previously when he'd spent that night in the barn.

But here I was doing it all over again. What the hell was it about this man that made me want to lay every burden I had in his hands?

"Fuck. I'm sorry. This isn't your worry.

Not your fault I have such a delicate ego that I can't stand the thought of anyone helping me out. "

"I'd call that an overabundance of pride," he answered in a soothing voice.

"You've carried that ranch and its problems alone for a long time.

Alone, save for an elderly woman. Anyone would be resentful of virtual strangers moving in and tossing cash at everything while you worked your ass off to make ends meet. "

"He means well," I muttered as my sight flicked to the right as an ambulance rolled up to the hospital doors. Another person hurt or suffering from the storms last night, I assumed.

"I think so, yeah. They all seem like okay guys. Maybe it's not such a bad thing to let someone else shoulder your burdens now and again?"

I knew all of that. Deep way down in my gullet, I knew it. But knowing something

and accepting it were two very different things.

“I’ve never been good at handing control over to other people,” I confessed, even though it hurt my pride to do so.

“I see that. And I am more than willing to do what I can to help. I like you. I like what we have going here. And I like what we do atop my sleeping bag—a lot.”

“Me too.” I wish we were there now, him deep inside me, leading me with gentle but sure control so that I could just for a little while be lighter.

It was a magical thing to be given that freedom.

I’d not really understood it until now. I longed for a man who would run things in the bedroom.

Or tent. Wherever the place may be. I’d not really made that connection before.

I’d just shirked it off as wanting a dude to rough me up, bark a little, and tell me what to do.

And while I did enjoy being with a woman, most women were meek when it came to sex.

Not all, obviously, but most were waiting for the man to lead.

“I love how you free me from my fetters.”

“The magical power of a magnificent peen,” he teased, leaning over to press a kiss to my cheek. I folded into him as much as I could, despite having a seat belt around me and an arm in a sling.

“You do possess a glorious peen,” I mumbled into his collarbone.

“I know. It’s a hog.” He kissed my hair.

“All peen bragging aside, I see what you are struggling with and am touched that you feel safe enough with me to let go. It’s hard as hell for someone who had to assume the mantle of an adult as a child to let go.

Above all else, we yearn for what was taken from us at far too tender an age. ”

I let my eyelids close. I breathed him in, hearing his words as if they were being handed down to me atop Mount Sinai.

Of course there were no stone tablets. Only a parking lot filled with older cars and scattered bits of trash and tree debris.

Yet, it did feel like a bit of a revelation.

Something that I would need to accept and then absorb, not unlike the tenets of the program I was trying my best to work on the daily.

“You’re speaking from experience, it sounds like,” I replied, unwilling to poke at the open wound this little talk had carved in my chest.

“Very few of us have ideal childhoods. There’s a reason that I roam and rarely go home.”

I gathered myself. Sat back, rubbed at my weary eyes with my left hand, and then searched his face. “And that is not the talk we’re having now. We need to get your meds, get you home, and I have to head to my camp to see if all my gear was carried to Missouri.”

“Shit, yes, I’ve been keeping you from your stuff with all my stuff. Sorry.” He waved it off. “Sometime I’d like to hear tales of your youth. If you’re willing to share them with me.”

He smiled wanly. “I can’t think of anyone I’d rather share them with.” He stole a kiss and then cranked the truck over. “Now, where is the pharmacy?”

After we got the prescription filled at the lone drug store on the outskirts of Bastian Grange, we rolled on home, my arm aching like a kick to the balls.

My eyes saw little of the vast countryside we drove through as I let my mind drift back in time.

To when Mom was alive and all of that emotional upheaval.

Reflecting back, even though she was the parent, it was me who took care of her.

Granny, too, but back then Granny was trying to keep the ranch from sinking, so it fell to me to care for my mother on her bad days.

As time went on, the bad days outnumbered the good, and the ranch was losing ground as beef prices fell while feed costs soared.

I began to do more at the ranch to help my grandmother after school, which left Mom alone more in that old house filled with memories of fucking Cash.

If only Cash had stuck it out. Been a fucking husband, son, and father like he had promised he would be, but no...

“They’ve been busy,” Hanley said as the truck slowed. Shaking out of my trip into a not-so-pleasant past, I realized we were home. Christ. I’d not even seen or spoken to



Hanley during the last twenty miles or so.

“Yeah,” I whispered as my gaze moved to the oak lying in the yard. Half the tree had been dealt with, big chunks piled up for splitting, while the brushy top had been trimmed and hauled off. “Shit, they’ve gotten a lot done.”

The relief washed over me. I’d have been at that job a damn week or more alone. The guys all paused, chainsaws quieting, and lifted gloved hands in greeting.

“Nice to have help, huh?”

I smiled feebly at Hanley. “It’s nice.”

Really nice. Just like the man sitting beside me. Hell, maybe the man in the seat next to me was too damn nice for a surly cowpoke like me.

### Chapter Eleven

I meandered over to the guys sweating it out under a warm spring sun, feeling like a turd on the bottom of a boot about how I'd been ragging on my siblings. They had really put their backs into this mess, and I was grateful beyond words.

“Doing good,” I stated as Granny opened the front door to announce that lunch was ready. “Thanks, guys. Really.”

They all nodded. I grabbed Dodge as he was removing his dirty leather work gloves. “Minute?”

“Sure.” The others ambled inside, casting curious looks back at us until the screen door slapped closed and Dodge and I stood alone amid heaps of sawdust and tiny sticks.

Raking for hours was in the near future.

My to-do list runneth over. He sat down on the remaining half of the old oak, removed his hat, and wiped his face with a limp bandana from his back pocket.

I joined him as my mind danced around how to be firm but polite.

“It is broken?” He gestured to my arm with his sodden bandana.

“Hairline.” The goats were out in their pasture, blatting softly as they enjoyed the sun on their backs. “Gotta wear this for a few weeks. Guess you all showed up at the right

time.”

He smiled, and I could see why Ollie had been attracted to him. He was a good-looking man. Smart too. College degree in medicine and all that. I’d barely squeaked through high school, so I was impressed.

“I like to think that fate has plans for all of us if we just open ourselves up to the whimsy of kismet.”

“Right, well, I’m not well-versed in providence and all that, but I do know that I’d be in a fucking mess if you boys weren’t here to help.”

He chuckled. “You can look at it that way or you could say that if not for us being here and buying goats, you’d not have been out herding said goats and gotten struck by that limb.”

I shot him a look. “There is that angle, but I’m trying to be nice here.” That made him laugh harder. “Anyway, the thing is, I appreciate you stepping in to help the ranch. And investing in it as you are. I am capable of paying my own bills, though.”

“I figured you’d be twisted up about that, but you don’t have to be.

You being injured on this property falls under what we should have covered with the homeowners’ insurance if you weren’t part of the household.

” He shot me a glance with keen brown-green eyes.

“Since you don’t have health insurance, you’re not covered, and that expense comes to the ranch.

As part owner, it’s up to me, and the others, to chip in to cover any expense that the

ranch incurs.

Which is why I asked Hanley to inform the billing department to send your bills here so they can be figured into the expenses due. ”

He’d lost me when he’d brought up homeowners, which thankfully we did have, but I wasn’t about to make a claim for tree cleanup when I could do it myself and save a rate increase.

“Still, it feels like charity. Ford and Bella don’t have the kind of cash required to cover my dumb ass anyway, so why not let me pay my own way? I do appreciate the kindness, though.”

He huffed out a sigh. “Okay, if you feel that strongly about it, then I’ll hand the bill to you when it comes. Speaking of Ford and Bella…”

I looked away from my brother to the big goat buck sunning on a mound of fresh hay. Not a care in the world. He’d done his duty last fall, and now all Willy had to do was chill. Must be nice to be a goat.

“What about them?”

Dodge shifted beside me. I moved my attention from the lazy buck to the ginger at my left.

“I did mention asking Ollie to run a background check on everyone so my ex would feel better about letting Dahn come here to live?”

“Yeah, you mentioned it. I reckon I had a few naughty marks on mine.”

He smiled stiffly. “A few, but nothing too detrimental. It was noted by the sheriff on

your report that you had been sober for years now, and he considered you an upstanding resident of Bastian Grange.”

“Guess I owe him a cup of coffee for that praise.”

Dodge began fidgeting with the rim of his cowboy hat. Probably a real Stetson and not a cheap knockoff like the one sitting on my fat head. “What’s wrong? Is Linc a serial killer or something?”

“No, Linc came up clean as a whistle.” His sight darted to the goats, then over to me. “Ford and Bella have refused to voluntarily agree to a background check.”

“Oh. Huh.” I craned my head around to look at the house as if I could see through walls.

A fly buzzed past on his way to check out the nanny berries—what Bella had coined the goat pellets— piling up in the pasture.

I brought my attention back to Dodge. “They don’t have to if they don’t want to. I mean, it is voluntary.”

“It is, yes, and while I get that and appreciate the legality of it, them refusing makes me edgy. Why? What are they hiding? And will it, when it comes out, reflect badly on my getting sole custody of my son? Will their pasts give Chris a reason to be more of a dick?”

“But your ex doesn’t really want your son, right?”

“He does, and he doesn’t.” Dodge’s jaw tightened.

“He wants him when it’s fun for him to be a father, but when he has other things to

do, things that he deems more important, he chafes at being a parent.

Which is total bullshit. When you bring that infant home, nothing comes before that child. Nothing.”

“And there is the sole legacy of Cashman Bastian talking.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess so. Kids who are abandoned by their dads do carry some baggage.”

“Amen.”

He ran his fingers through his red hair.

“I don’t want to hound them, but I really do need them to agree.

It would make things go so much smoother, and Chris is demanding it.

I don’t want him to go to the judge and make a stink.

If he did, then they would be legally bound to it if the courts required it.

So can you talk to them? I’m too wound up in it all to be cool and rational. ”

“You think I’m rational? Have you met me?”

“I have, and while you’re touchy, you’re not prone to leaping into things based on emotion.” I cocked an eyebrow. “Emotions not dealing with our dickhead dad.”

“That’s fair.” I sighed. “Sure, yeah, I’ll talk to them, but I can’t force them to do it.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Well, I appreciate your hard work and faith in this ranch.”

“We’re family. Hard work and faith are what keep us tight.”

He gave my thigh a tap with the side of his fist, rose, and motioned to the house.

I nodded and got to my feet, taking care to step carefully.

I didn’t want to get tangled up in brush and fall on my fucking arm.

Stupid thing was a nuisance enough without adding a wider crack.

I had no damn clue what I would say to Ford and Bella that wouldn’t sound like me being a prick, but I’d ponder on it and do my best.

Lunch was late. Seemed they were waiting for me to get back home.

It was touching and very much my grandmother.

Once the news about my casted arm was relayed over a meal of cold ham and cheese sandwiches, baked beans, some celery and carrots with dip, chips, and iced tea with lemon, Hanley asked to borrow an ATV to ride out to his camp.

“Sure, you want me to come with you?” I asked and got a funny look from the photographer. “I can ride.”

One side of his mouth twitched. I felt a warm rush color my cheeks. I had a thought to clarify but bit my tongue as that would only draw attention to the questionable comment.

“I’ll be fine. I can check on those line cabins while I’m out.”

Everyone seemed okay with that, so I nodded along, saddened that my arm, which hurt pretty badly now, was hampering me from riding both an ATV and a wildlife photojournalist. Maybe if things around here lightened up work-wise, I’d climb up on Prissy and go visit Hanley.

That was if his camp hadn’t been blown into the reservation.

Giving an ATV gas with my thumb might be bad for my fracture but using my legs to give a horse directions would be just fine.

“If your camp is trashed, come on back here. We’ll find somewhere for you to sleep,” I said and got nods from all.

My gaze touched on Bella and Ford. She was smiling at something Linc was saying about bread crusts.

Ford was shoveling food into his face like he’d not eaten in months.

I had noticed that about him. He seemed perpetually hungry and ate with gusto.

Not unlike most young men. I’d been a bit of a wolf when it came to food at his age.

Now I had to watch what I ate as it tended to settle around my middle.

Manual labor on the ranch helped keep me fit, but I wasn’t quite as energetic as I used to be, and those extra cupcakes showed up to rest on my belt without warning.

“Will do.” Hanley grabbed a quick cup of coffee and then set off for the storage shed.



I sat back in my chair, sipping my coffee, when my grandmother arrived at my side with the bag containing my pain pills.

I made a face. She doled one out and placed it in my hand.

Knowing she would stand there until I swallowed it, I was a good soldier and tossed it in and washed it down with some coffee.

“Good boy. Now go lie down and rest,” Granny said, but I had plans. I needed to help with the clean-up of the oak, make sure the cattle barn was ready for tomorrow and the new arrivals, and then see if I could get Ford and Bella alone to have that talk.

“I’m not taking a nap. I’m fine. I just need to finish this coffee and have another cookie, then I’ll be outside to help,” I announced as the others rose from their seats.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“There’s some mail in the living room that came this morning that you need to sort through,” Dodge informed me.

With a sigh, I pushed to my feet, grabbed my coffee and an oatmeal cookie, and made my way to the sofa.

The mail was mostly bills and junk. Nothing that Dodge couldn’t have handled since he was now doing the books.

I ate my cookie, sipped my coffee, and just caught the sound of a chainsaw revving up when my eyes started to grow heavy.

When I woke up, it was because Bella was sitting beside me, patting my good shoulder gently.

Someone had covered me up with one of Granny’s crocheted blankets.

I blinked hard at her. She was very pretty and feminine in a splashy vest and skirt.

Her hair was nicely done, and her makeup accentuated her bright green eyes.

“Granny says you need to wash up for dinner.”

“Dinner?” My sight flew from Bella to the darkness outside the old bow window.  
“Jesus.”

“You were quite tired.”

“I guess.” I rubbed at my eyes with my good hand, yawned, and took a second to gather my wits. “Where are the others?”

“They rode out to check on the fencing for the cows,” she explained.

“Oh good. I hate meds. They always knock me out.” My arm didn’t ache so badly, though, so I guess that was a good thing.

“I’m that way with antihistamines.” She crossed one leg over the other, then offered me a soft smile. “Would you like me to bring your meal in here so you can rest?”

“No, no, I need to get up and get moving. Thank you, though. You’re very kind. Did you serve food back in New York?”

The tender smile slipped. “No, I’ve never been in food service.”

I was about to ask what she had been into when the back door slammed open and the sound of men’s boots could be heard thundering into the kitchen.

Granny then yelled at them for wearing their boots indoors, which spurred them into the laundry room to remove their boots and hats.

I watched her shoot to her small flats. “I was in fashion, remember?”

“Oh right, sorry. Still groggy from the meds. Think I’ll just go use the bathroom and wash up.”

Ford arrived then, looking windblown and tense. “Hey, you’re up. So the second line cabin is nothing but a memory. Twister tore it to bits.”

“Shit.” I sighed as I got up. Bella gave him an odd look before scurrying off to help in

the kitchen. “That’ll set things back a bit.”

“Yeah, probably. We stopped by Hanley’s camp, and it’s good. Just lost a few bits of clothing, he said, which was lucky as that tornado was real close to that redbud clump.”

“They’re funny things, them twisters. I’m glad to hear his camp is safe.”

Ford nodded and backed out to go wash up. I followed him into the kitchen, nudged Linc aside to get into the sink, and then grumbled at what a pain in the ass it was to wash your hands with an arm in a sling.

“Need help?” Linc asked. I chewed on the inside of my cheek before replying.

“Nope, it’s all good.”

And it was. Mostly. Okay, it was a mess, and I ended up sitting down to supper with a wet sling, a damp cast, and a slew of sympathetic looks. We’d not get into how hard it was to feed myself with my left hand. It was going to be a rough couple of weeks. Mother Nature was a cranky old gal.

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Under the watchful eye of my grandmother, I popped one more pain pill before bed.

I slept like the damn dead coming awake with a jolt at six sharp when Granny fired off a few rounds.

Through the thin walls, I could hear Linc cussing.

I rolled up to sit, bare feet on the floor, smiling at the sounds of men shaking off

slumber to the report of an old woman's gun.

I took a moment to move my right shoulder, a soft roll, and felt the movement down in my forearm.

Nothing that a couple of aspirin wouldn't fix.

I was not going to sleepwalk through the day.

We had cattle coming back to the ranch today.

I stared down at my toes—and that one crooked pinkie toe that I'd broken at fifteen, falling from the back of a bull that me and Ollie had thought we could ride only to find out that nope, we couldn't so that killed our rodeo dreams—as the house came to life.

The slam of the screen door as Granny returned to the house, the low murmur of men's voices, Bella's soft tones as she scurried into the bathroom with her phone playing something from Culture Club, and the squeaking of Linc's window as he opened it to greet the day with some fresh air and meditation.

Over the past few weeks, I'd somehow become accustomed to the sounds of others in my home.

Somehow, and this was the perplexing part, I was growing used to all of them.

Even when we had to wait in the hall for the bathroom or someone ate the last slice of lemon bread.

The whole notion that a loner like me could accept such an unwanted rush of family still confused me.

Granny had always said that I needed more than her in my life.

So I'd gone and got a wife and we all know how well that went.

So I had decided all I required was a hard day's work and a bottle of whatever was on sale at the liquor store.

Much like the Nazi collaborator in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade , I had chosen poorly.

Seemed like poor decisions were as much a part of me as my bent pinkie toe.

A soft rap on my door yanked my thoughts from my long-lost siblings and my crooked toe.

"French toast in fifteen," Bella called through the crack of the door.

"Sounds good," I replied and got my ass moving.

I was dressed, washed up, and slicing up egg-dipped bread soaked in maple syrup in ten minutes.

The rest of the gang arrived in dribs and drabs as Granny fried the bread and Bella served.

Talk was sparse as we ate, mostly about the cattle arriving this morning and the fencing that still needed to be checked.

"I'll ride out after Manfred and his sons leave to make a pass over the lower range," I announced after a swig of coffee.

Everyone looked at me with skepticism. I tapped the cast on my arm.

“I’m good. I can ride a horse.” Granny, still in robe and slippers, whipped me a look over her shoulder.

“I’m fine. I will be careful. If it starts to hurt too badly, I’ll put on the sling.

I can’t sit around with my thumb up my ass when there’s so much to do. ”

“You do have help,” Dodge reminded me while stirring some cream into his coffee.

Bella nodded before setting a platter of French toast in front of Linc even though he had been the last to arrive.

Meditation for anxiety took time, I guess.

Ford looked grief-stricken to have to wait for the next round to come from the large griddle.

Linc gave Bella a subtle thank you. She blushed a soft pink that matched her blouse and springy skirt.

“Kind of hard to forget,” I mumbled while fighting Linc for the sticky canning jar of Frank Otterman’s homemade maple syrup. I won, but just. “I need to be busy. Sitting around feeling sorry for myself is bad for my sobriety.”

Every head bobbed. They understood, it seemed.

Wallowing in the role of a victim did no addict any good we heard over and over in our meetings.

Which reminded me that I had one on Sunday night, so just a few days.

I tried to never miss now that I'd been dry for so long.

Cash dying had been a big jolt, and I had felt angry and hurt enough to need to speak to my sponsor after a few years of walking the walk alone.

It was hard for me to get through my thick head that everyone needed someone now and again.

"Don't overdo," Granny said with a shake of her spatula at me.

"I'll be good."

"First time for everything, I guess," Granny muttered loud enough for the goats to hear.

Breakfast went quickly. Linc and Ford exited to the cattle barn to lay down bedding for the new arrivals.

Bella scampered off to the springhouse toting some flouncy dresses that she had whipped up on Granny's machine.

I'd yet to stick my nose into the soon-to-be boutique, but rumor had it, Ford had made a fountain.

How he'd done that I couldn't begin to grasp, but then again my skills ran to farming and not creative dress boutique fountaining.

Or whatever. I'd go over soon as I got a moment.



“Hey.” Dodge caught up to me in the mudroom, trying to wiggle my foot into my work boots. “Did you manage to talk to Ford and Bella yet?”

“No, kind of broke my arm then slept all day yesterday,” I snapped as my boot refused to come up over my heel. I leaned into the wall more and then bent over to pull with one hand. Talk about a monkey fucking a football. Finally, I managed to get it on, but it wasn’t pretty.

When I righted, I sighed. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap. I’ll talk to them after dinner if not before. Promise.”

“Cool, thanks. I’m sorry to push, but Easter is less than ten days away, and I really want Dahn to fly out for the long weekend.”

“I get it.” And I did. There just weren’t enough hours in the day, especially when you’re stoned off your ass on Percocet.

A drug that could very easily sneak in to replace booze, so that was why I was toughing it out with only some OTC meds and ice.

I’d flushed the damn pills when I’d managed to get some time in the bathroom before breakfast. “I’ll go see her shop after Manfred arrives. ”

“Thanks.” He clapped me on the good shoulder and then offered to help with my boot. My first response was to turn down the offer, but I took him up on it. Took a little bit of finagling but we got it and with far less blue words than when done solo.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

The morning went fast as we rushed to get things ready.

No sooner had we filled the troughs for the Herefords than the rattle of two cattle trailers trundling up my rutted drive filled the air.

The goats were out in their pasture, nibbling grass and watching with big eyes as the trailers rumbled past their pen to park beside the cattle barn.

Manfred Owens exited the first pickup. A huge man with a booming voice who had been in cattle his whole life.

He had thinning brown hair hidden under a red ball cap and five sons who were just as boisterous as he was.

“Baker,” he said as we shook hands. “Glad to see you getting back into the business. Lord knows we need more farms, not less.” Manfred gave my brothers a long look as they ventured over. “Heard old Cash had catted around on your mama but didn’t think he was fool enough to plant his seed so often.”

I thought to comment about him planting his seed at least five times but bit my tongue. I wanted these cattle, and Manfred could be a touchy SOB when he felt his manhood was being called into question.

“Well, he did,” I replied as I introduced Ford, Linc, and Dodge to the Owens men.

The bull in the trailer could be heard lowing for release, even though he was sharing a trailer with nine lovely ladies.

“Thank you again for helping to resupply my stock. I know you have some of the best bloodlines in the state.”

Manfred puffed up like a sage grouse at the compliment. The cattle in those trailers were good beefers, costly, yes, but if we had a good calving season come January, we could recoup the fifty thousand dollars on the hoof to my right.

“My pleasure. Your granny and mine went way back,” he replied as Granny herself emerged from the house in blue jeans, an Oklahoma Sooners sweatshirt, and a wide grin. “Speak of an angel and one appears,” Manfred called out to my grandmother.

“You go on, Manfred, tell me more.” Granny chuckled as she neared and got a gentle hug from the big man. “How’s Winnie?”

Manfred removed his ball cap. “Not so good, ma’am.”

“I’ll stop by the nursing home when I’m in town next with some of my rhubarb sauce.”

“She’ll like that for sure,” Manfred replied with considerable softness. Then he turned to his boys and bellowed like the bull in the trailer. “Let’s get these beefers off them trailers, boys!”

All the visiting came to an abrupt end. The trailers were backed up to the gate just as Aiden rolled up, looking sleepy but happy.

“Morning, gents,” the vet called as he slid from his vehicle with a smile that made his dark eyes dance. “Sounds like we have at least one intact male?”

The bull was making his presence known with a loud bellow.

“Yep, two-year-old out of Goose and nineteen heifers. None have been exposed to the bull until today, and I figure he ain’t got room to mount them in there, so your records should show conception any time after today’s date,” Manfred said to me and Aiden.

“Okay, good enough. Let’s start running them through the chutes so we can start the health assessments,” Aiden said as he zipped up his overalls.

The curved chute had solid sides to reduce any further stress on the cattle, and using calm movements, we began moving the cattle through one at a time.

Aiden and Manfred exchanged medical papers, registration forms, and other documents that would be copied into the vet’s files as well as ours.

We ran each cow into a palpation cage so Aiden could look the animals over, give them shots as required, and then move on to the next one safely.

The bull, a big black and white Hereford, remained relatively chill until they nudged him into the palpation cage and Aiden began fondling his bull bits.

Being a young bull, the vet checked his sheath, prepuce, and testicles for any signs of trauma, infection, or other issues.

When he found none, the bull was then examined for general health and condition, including his eyes and teeth, and then turned out into the holding pen with his new gals.

The bull, who had weighed in at fifteen hundred pounds, was probably at about seventy-five percent of his projected weight.

So he should top out at about two thousand pounds, give or take a few hundred.

All the cattle were prime, and I could not thank Manfred enough for the good deal he had given me and my brothers on this new venture.

As the last heifer thundered out of the gate to join the herd and her new beau, the door to the springhouse flew open and Bella stepped out onto the rickety porch. Every Owens' male head turned as the petite woman caught sight of us and waved.

"Where did that little miss pop up from?" Manfred asked as his sons, three of whom were married, stood up straighter while trying to dust off their dirty jeans.

"She's a friend of mine," Ford chimed in as Bella began picking her way to us, taking care not to tread in mud that would soil her purple flats.

She had drawn her hair into a soft little bun, something that she did when busy sewing so it wouldn't fall into her face.

She'd skipped any makeup or shaving this morning as we had been rushing her along.

As she neared, I could feel the shift in the Owens men as they noted that the woman they had been drooling over was sporting a subtle amount of whiskers.

"Bella, come on over and name this bull!"

She arrived with a smile for all as usual. The Owens men all moved away from her as if she carried the plague as soon as she wiggled in between Ford and Dodge.

"Oh look at how huge he is!" she exclaimed as the bull began doing bully things, such as sniffing the cows when they urinated to check if any were in estrus. "He's so handsome. I'll think hard on a suitable name for such a studly man."

The Bastians all fell into conversation about cows. Manfred steered his sons away

from Bella with dark looks and jerked his chin at me. I followed him from the paddock to his pickup as Granny and Bella were tossing out names for the new bull as the guys voted yay or nay.

“Anything wrong?” I asked when we were on the other side of a cattle trailer, just me and Manfred.

“Did you know that you got a man wearing a dress parading around your property?” Manfred asked, peeking through the slats in the trailer back at the family gathered by the cattle pen.

The moment the words finished falling out of his mouth, my hackles were up.

“I did, yes. Bella is a friend of Ford’s, and by virtue of that, she is also a friend of mine and Granny’s.

She’s going to open a dress shop in the springhouse.

” His jaw literally fell open. “Is there something wrong with having friends?”

“No, course not, but I never thought I would see the day that Cash Bastian’s boys would be associating with one of them kind.”

I tipped my hat back. “And what, pray tell, is one of them kind?”

“You know, them transgenders. Your granny and mine both are God-fearing women. Just saying, Baker. God made the bull and the cow. Simple as that. Cows don’t want to be bulls, and bulls sure as shit don’t want to be cows.

Some things just ain’t according to nature is all.

Your granny knows what I mean. The Bible says—”

“The Bible says to love your fellow man. I don’t recall any distinctions on which of your fellow men to love. And, as you know, I’m not exactly straight.”

“Well, yeah, but you also fuck women so them odd dalliances with men was just drunken shit. I mean, a boozed up dick don’t care what sex’s lips is wrapped around it.”

He chuckled. I did not. “I think you need to head on home before someone says something that can’t be taken back. Thanks for the cattle. Your check is in the mail.”

I turned on my heel without offering him my hand for a shake.

I didn’t stop to look back to gauge what he was feeling.

I didn’t care. I was well aware that this little tête-à-tête would have ramifications for me when Manfred and I next met up somewhere.

No shits were given. He could haul his hateful ass right back to his ranch and stay there.

If I’d have known he was that much of a bigot, I would have found another nearby rancher to buy cattle from.

Stalking back to my family, who were calling out sillier and sillier bovine names, I supposed I should have had a small hint in the way that Manfred always looked down on Ollie, but I’d chalked that up to some grievance that Ollie and the youngest Owens brother had from years back.

Maybe it was more than that. Didn’t matter.

Whatever his bigotry was, it could stay on the other side of the county.

Bastian Acres might not be the biggest spread in the state, but it was going to be the most accepting.

Hell, I might buy the goats rainbow collars and march them down Main Street for the Fourth of July parade. I'd been known to do wilder things.

Just ask Granny.

Speaking of the grand dame of Bastian Acres, she was waiting for me on the front porch while the others were gawking at the bull doing what we paid big money for him to do. Make baby cows. She got my attention with a sharp whistle. I padded over and up the steps to meet her on the porch.

"Looked like you and Manfred were having quite the tea party over there. What did you say to twist his knickers?" She ran a hand over her aquamarine hair to move it from her eyes.

I leaned against a post as shouts of encouragement rang out over at the cattle paddock. "He had some things to say about Bella that I took offense to," I explained, tipping the brim of my hat back some. Her expression shifted from curious to pissed as a rattler in the blink of an eye.

"What did that hemorrhoidal inflammation have to say about sweet lady Bella?!" Granny was usually quite forgiving.

I mean, that was obvious just by the fact that she hadn't kicked my drunken ass to the curb twenty years ago.

But, on the other hand, she did not turn the cheek when someone came after those she



liked. And Granny adored Bella.

“Some stupid shit about bulls not wanting to be cows. It’s all hateful rhetoric.”

“Damn right it is. Ever since I met Miss Bella, I been reading up on things in nature. Lots of critters change sex, and it ain’t no big thing, just like it ain’t no thing if a person does.

I wish I’d known he was spouting that kind of shit on my property.

I’d have booted him in his flabby ass so hard he’d have had to get my boot surgically removed from his rectum.

I could do it too. I still got my high kick from my Vegas showgirl days. ”

I nodded. She could kick pretty high. And she had been a showgirl in Vegas in the 60s for about a year and spent some time strutting her stuff on the strip before coming back to Oklahoma—sowing wild oats and all that.

She’d met Robert Goulet once. She spoke very fondly and dreamily of the man to this day.

“Well, he’s gone and paid. Any shit he stirs up can be ignored. I know you and Winnie are close and all, but that man is a bigot. And I am not going to stand on my own property and allow him to run down my family,” I firmly stated.

The frown she had been wearing morphed into a knowing smile. “So now you accept them as family?”

Shit. “Not really. I mean family in the way that friends are family. Like Ollie and Aiden. Them kind of friends.” She smiled wider. I huffed. Damn woman. “Bella is a

nice person. She only wants to make pretty dresses for ladies and live her life.”

“Oh, honey, I agree. And I’m glad to hear that you’re coming around to liking your brothers. I know it’s tight here right now, but you all will spread out soon and things will quiet down. As for me and Winnie don’t fret over that. She and me go back. I have an idea.”

Oh Lord. Granny with an idea could be trouble.

Her last idea was to learn to be a sharpshooter so she could supplement her social security by plinking prairie dogs for the local ranchers.

The war between prairie dogs and ranchers was a long one.

We disliked the little invasive vermin for many reasons, such as destroying grazing lands and having livestock step into a burrow and break a leg.

“Don’t stir up things at the nursing home,” I warned with a look that she promptly waved off.

“You just worry about yourself, child.”

With that, she went inside and the screen door closed in my face.

Sighing, I turned to find the gang breaking up to get to their chores.

Dodge had put a bee in my bonnet, so I called Ford over to the porch.

He arrived looking so damn young and so damn earnest. Had I ever been this youthful?

If so, the memories were hazy. Too much Jim Beam will do that.

“Listen, we need to finish the riding fence. I’d like you to come along. You can use the time on horseback, and I’d like to talk to you as we ride,” I explained.

He blinked, then silently nodded. “We can take an ATV.”

“Nope, let’s take some horses. We’ll take our time.”

He followed me to the horse barn like a child being led to the principal’s office by his teacher.

I let him saddle Prissy and one of our most gentle geldings, a pretty red appaloosa named Upton.

Upton and Prissy got on well—Prissy could be snotty with the other mares—and he was old enough to have seen it all a dozen times over. Nothing rattled Upton.

It took the boy a bit longer than it should have, but I was patient and did my best to use gentle reminders about things as he went.

Soon enough, we were on our way. Talking always came easier to me when I was on a horse’s back.

Most things seemed to be easier when out on the range with a faithful friend under you and the warm sun on your head. Or maybe that was just me...

### Chapter Twelve

Prissy and Upton stood silently as Ford and I looked down on what remained of the second old line cabin.

“Well, guess we’ll save costs on having to redo the place,” I commented as my gaze roamed over the old stone foundation and half the old chimney. That was all that was left. The walls and roof were probably somewhere in the next county.

“Told you,” Ford replied, his seat on Upton more relaxed now that we’d put some miles between us and the homestead.

The Appy holding him was nibbling on the fresh spring grass shoots as his red tail swayed back and forth.

Prissy was staring off into the distance as she was prone to do at times.

“It’s a total loss. I told Dodge I could do most of the carpentry work and get her ready for finishing. ”

I tossed him a questioning look. “You know that much?”

“Well, I did work for someone back in New York. I was studying and working toward completing my journeyman’s certification when Bella and I came out here.”

A pair of bluebirds flew past, a male and a female, twittering at us as they banked high into the air. Probably they had a nesting site nearby. Most of the trees had been

blown down, but a few remained, scraggly blackjack oaks and such. They were known to use the same nesting sites every year.

“Oh right, I recall someone mentioning something about that.” I glanced down at the mess that used to be a cabin.

Not much of a cabin, mind you. “Funny that you’d give up such a good future to ride a damn bus all the way to Oklahoma to an unsure future on a ranch.

No disrespect, but you and Bella ain’t exactly the sort I’d expected to try to make a go of slinging horseshit on the daily. ”

His lips flattened as he stared down hard at the stone chimney. “Sometimes things happen. Bella and I had to leave the city anyway, so when Mom told me about the ranch, it seemed a good place to start over.”

“Right. And why did you two have to leave New York?” I leaned up just a bit to try to see around the brim of his borrowed hat. His shoulders were stiff. Upton shifted slightly under him, probably sensing his rider’s unease.

“Parking tickets,” he blurted out far too quickly.

“Uh-huh.” I wasn’t buying that for a fucking second. I knew lies. Alcoholics were the champions of deception. No one could lie like an addict. “Is that why you and Bella have refused to let Ollie run a background check on you for Dodge?”

He threw me a look that would have incinerated a rock. “You bring me out here to interrogate me?”

I held up my casted arm. “I brought you out here to help, and to talk, yes. Look,” I leaned back in the saddle, just a bit, and flicked my hat back on my head, “I’m not

trying to dig into your past. Everyone has shit they're not proud of.

I'm a recovering drunk. I've got so many damn skeletons in my closet that on Halloween we just toss my wardrobe and let the kiddies go through for a buck.

Scares most of them shitless. Hell, scares me shitless most nights.

"Ford seemed to unclench a little. "I don't even really care why you two come out here on a bus.

That's your past. What I do care about is if that past is going to bite us on the ass.

Dodge is dealing with an asshole of an ex-husband who is making him dance on fire to see his own kid.

I respect that Dodge is such a good dad.

Fuck knows our old man did us all wrong, so I'd like to see a good father be rewarded. "

He nodded, not saying a word, his gaze and lips tight. I sat there waiting. I'd said my piece. He would either talk or not.

"We came out here to get away from a bad ex," he somehow managed to push through lips so flat it was a wonder he could get anything through them at all. "It's Bella's story to tell. But we didn't come out with the law on us or anything, that I promise you."

He looked right at me then. I met his look and nodded. "Okay, I believe you. I think you could both let Ollie do a fast background check to make things easier for Dodge."

“I don’t know him at all,” he said with a frown. “I know Bella. We’ve been friends since elementary school. I’m not agreeing to anything unless Bella says it’s cool.”

“That’s very decent of you. When we get home, why don’t you talk to her about it?”

I know it would mean a lot to Dodge. And as for not knowing him, I get that.

I don’t know any of you dumbasses, but here we are trying to make something good out of the bad shit Cash did to us.

We’re trying to rebuild family bonds. Jesus, I sound like Granny. ”

Ford chuckled roughly. I could tell that whatever had driven him and his best friend west was something upsetting.

He didn’t hide his emotions all that well.

I felt bad for Bella if her old boyfriend had pushed her into leaving in the middle of the night on an old Greyhound bus.

His loyalty to her was commendable. He may be a city boy, but his heart was pure country when it came to steadfastness for a friend.

“Yeah, you kind of do,” he conceded, and that ended the talk.

There was nothing more I could add. I’d done what I could.

If they agreed to a check, then fine. If not, I felt bad for Dodge, but I wasn’t going to force anyone into doing something they didn’t feel right doing.

That was not the legacy that I wanted for our new and improved ranch.

“So, tell me, Ford, what do you think it would take to get this cabin fixed up for city folks like you to enjoy?”

He squinted down at the rubble. “First thing would be walls.”

That made me laugh so loudly, the bluebirds scolded us twice as strongly.

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I arrived at the redbud camp alone.

Hanley sat on a folding camp chair, a kettle of water on a small campfire. His bright evergreen eyes locked onto me like a guided missile as I slid off Prissy’s back and moseyed over to him.

By the time I stood in front of him, I wasn’t sure which was aching more: my arm or my dick. I’d call it a tie.

His gaze roamed up over me in a slow slide that made my toes curl in my boots. “Shouldn’t you be home resting that arm?” he asked into his mug of instant coffee.

“I’ll rest enough when I’m dead.” I took off my hat and hung it on a branch. He cocked a brow.

“Okay, well, should you be out riding alone when you’re on pain meds?” He lowered his cup as he stood. Nose to nose we were now and my cock was pressing painfully on the zipper of my worn Wranglers.

“Didn’t take any today. Head is clear as a bell, but to alleviate your worry, I had Ford with me until I sent him back for fencing supplies. That twister tore up a couple of miles of fence on the back range that will need to be fixed before the new cattle can



be turned out. We have about an hour.”

“An hour to do what?” His query was all innocence and flutterbys, but his hand was already rubbing at his crotch.

“An hour for you to fuck me,” I answered as I began peeling my shirt over my head.

Not as smooth an endeavor as I would have liked with a clunky cast, but I freed myself of it and made my way back into the redbud nook to duck into his tent.

His lusty chuckle followed me as did the man a moment later after he tossed his coffee into the fire.

The hiss of the flames going out made me twitch with anticipation.

I dropped down to sit on his sleeping bag.

He slipped in, leaving the flaps open, giving Prissy another peepshow opportunity.

“You’re one bossy bottom. Let me get those boots off.

” He kneeled before me, grabbed the heels, and one by one tugged them off my foot.

Then he peeled off my socks and lifted my foot to his mouth.

Eyes wide, cock leaking, I watched him suck on my big toe as if it were the fattest, juiciest cock in the world.

A moan floated out of me and through the open flaps.

He gave me a raunchy wink, then placed my well-sucked feet to the sleeping bag and

stripped me naked in a flash.

Cock straining skyward, he placed a hand on my chest and gently pushed me flat to the bag.

“Keep that arm on the ground. Actually, keep both arms on the ground.”

“Okay, yeah,” I panted as he unzipped his pants. My gaze flew to his prick as it tumbled free. He didn’t remove his pants, just took out his cock, stroked it, and went for his backpack in the corner.

“Since time is of the essence...” He flipped open the lube and coated his fat, latex covered dick.

My ass was clenching in expectation of the reaming it was about to get.

With his sight riveted on me, he hoisted both my legs up and tucked them over his shoulders.

I groaned at the rub of his cockhead on my hole.

God I needed this so fucking bad. “You sure you want this?”

“I’m sure. Wreck my ass.”

“My pleasure, cowboy,” he growled as he pushed in with a slow, deep thrust that didn’t stop until he was fully seated inside me.

My body tensed then opened for him. That glorious burn of being possessed by a man combined with the freedom Hanley was giving me let me soar.

“That what you need? Do you need me to untether you from that ranch for a little bit, Baker?”

I curled my hand around to fist the bag under us. My other casted one lay like a dead fish out to the side as he had instructed.

“Yes, yes, drive the world from my head for a little while,” I breathlessly replied. He moved over me, his cock going even deeper as my thighs came to rest on my chest. “Ah fuck yeah!”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

Head down, he began to fuck me as I craved.

Hard and with a certain frenzy that cleared everything from my weary shoulders and mind with each grinding thrust. His hips punched in and out like a machine.

Sweat beaded on his brow. My legs began to tremble.

I shouted at him to keep it up. I yelled out for more, faster, harder, and Hanley gave me all that I could handle and a little more.

Tucking a leg up closer, he wrestled me into a pretzel and proceeded to peg my prostate over and over until I creamed.

Howls of bliss rolled out of that tent as I came so hard I nearly blacked out.

Hanley followed quickly, filling the condom with sweet, hot spunk.

He rolled off me, easing out tenderly, and gently straightened out my tight legs. I shuddered as he began to massage my thighs while pressing tiny kisses to my chest and belly. Kisses that became a little raunchy as he lapped up my cum with little yummy sounds that made my dick ooze and kick.

“Holy...fuck...” I gasped just as he planted his mouth over mine.

With my good hand, I carded my fingers into that silky, caramel blond hair.

He licked in deep, smearing the taste of myself all over my tongue.

It was magnificent. He kissed me forever it seemed, his fingers skimming over me, rubbing at tight muscles, tickling a nipple, dipping into my navel as I lay there spread eagle with the wind blowing on my tender hole.

I never wanted to move. “That was amazing.”

“Mm, you’re one fabulous fuck,” he mumbled before nipping at my lower lip.

“Bet you say that to all the cowboys,” I sleepily replied.

The soft sound of tack jingling just a few feet away was a not-so-subtle reminder that my siblings would be showing up soon on ATVs with wagons.

I did not want them to find me lying here with my balls on display, and lube dribbling out of me, but for all the money in the world I could not get my well-used ass in gear.

Instead, I let my eyes drift closed as my lover sucked a few dark marks on various parts of my flesh.

Didn’t care one iota. He could leave hickeys on every inch of skin that I owned.

One little nibble on the inside of my thigh made me wince, and my eyes blinked open.

“I want to suck your balls,” he murmured and then took one between his lips.

My dick seemed to think that was a fine idea.

It began to fatten up as Hanley not only sucked my nuts but then took a detour down to my hole where he tongued my ass with such finesse that I was shooting another load all over myself before I knew it.

He then kneeled between my rubbery legs and jacked himself off, his spunk coating my pubes and cock as I twitched and begged him for more.

“I don’t think I have any more. Give me an hour. ”

He flopped down beside me, his arm over my heaving belly.

“I’ll need another day to recover,” I teased, moving my casted arm to my chest.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He kissed my shoulder tenderly.

“Good, it was meant as one.” My sight stayed on the domed roof of the tent.

I was afraid that if I glanced over at Hanley sprawled out next to me, all sweaty and sated, I would begin to feel more things than I already felt for the man.

That would be bad. I’d never had a relationship that I didn’t fuck up.

Also, he was a vagabond. Moving from state to state, country to country, taking photos of whatever pleased him.

Knowing that I craved him badly already, allowing any deeper feelings would be emotional suicide. So I refused to look at him.

Until he pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Can I snap a picture of you?” That tore my eyeballs from the round tent top in a big hurry.

I stared at him with eyes as round as pancakes.

“Nothing too racy, just your face. You look so fucking beautiful right now. So peaceful. Serenity oozing out of you. I’d like a picture to remember you by when I

leave for Canada in a few weeks. ”

Oh. Yep. Canada. There we go. Just as I had touched on not a moment ago.

He would be leaving me to travel the world, and I did not—hell, could not—hold that against him.

I’d dreamed of doing the same. Seeing the sights.

The Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Taj Mahal, and the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Yet, while I dreamed of traveling, I also couldn’t quite bring myself to leave Oklahoma.

Did that make me a coward or just a dreamer?

How could you love your land yet yearn for different landscapes?

“Canada,” I said because I was a dope.

“Yeah, I’m doing a three-week collaboration with Justine Plumley.

She’s one of the most well-respected naturalists in Canada.

She’s going to come with me on shoots and then write up facts that we’ll put together into a coffee table book.

Her network is huge, so my publisher is drooling over this opportunity. ”

“Sounds great. Where do you go after Canada?” I asked nonchalantly, or tried to

sound unconcerned because damn it, I should be composed. His leaving was not a surprise. It was what he did.

“I’m coming back to Oklahoma.” He sat up. I looked at him with pleased surprise. His smile made my stomach knot. “I’m feeling like there are things here that need to be explored more.”

“Lots of animals to take pictures of,” I tossed out and got a nod.

“Lots of animals as well as a certain man who has piqued not only my curiosity but my affections.” He moved over me, careful of my arm, to straddle me and steal a kiss that made me forget everything besides the warmth of his chest resting on mine.

“That is, if you’d like me to come back?

I’m not a fan of lingering where I’m not wanted. ”

I ran my fingers through those thick, overgrown yellowish-tan strands. “I think you can tell that you’re wanted.”

“Well, yeah, by your dick and ass, but what about the rest of you?” He nuzzled a cheek thick with raspy whispers against my nose. I breathed him in and said things that fought against saying something that I wouldn’t utter without a gullet full of neatly served bourbon whiskey.

“The rest of me wants you to do what makes you happy.” I felt horribly exposed emotionally.

I knew it was a cowardly copout, but after watching my marriage detonate like the Hindenburg, I was simply too scared to put myself out there again.



Safer to stay on the earth. Those who venture to the skies always come crashing back down in my experience.

“I’m pretty happy rubbing up to you,” he purred and dropped another scorching kiss to my lips. I slid my leg up over his backside, my dick somehow perking up. Not a full perk, obviously. I was forty-two, after all. But a sleepy kind of ‘Hmm, maybe after a nap’ kind of perk.

Prissy snorted. I rubbed my calf over Hanley’s bare ass.

The sound of engines broke into our sensual little makeout session.

We both must have registered the roar of ATVs at the same time, since we both floundered around trying to find, pull on, and run outside to sit around a wet fire pit just as my brothers rolled up.

All three of the other Bastians sat on their Hondas like they were thoroughbreds, hats cocked and lips twisted into something that was supposed to be some lame attempt to quell smirks.

I gave them all a scalding look as I yanked at the sleeve of my shirt that was caught on a seam in the rock-hard plaster cast. Prissy was nearby, swishing her tail, looking at me as if to say “Busted” while my siblings tried not to snigger.

“Did we interrupt something?” Dodge asked, gloved hands dangling over the handlebars of a dirty Honda ATC200E.

“Baker had a bee in his shirt,” Hanley flung out.

The other three nodded in muted delight.

“He must have run into a nest if all those tiny bruises are bee stings,” Linc tossed out, which made the others lose it.

The fuckers. I tugged my cast free, yanked my shirt down over my chest to hide the damn love bites, and then flung a nasty glare at Hanley as he sipped pretend coffee in his mug. He shrugged.

“Fuck off all of you,” I snapped before bending down to give Hanley a bruising kiss that left him and my stupid half-brothers gawking when it was over.

They all knew now. I was a fucking hickey from top to bottom and all places in-between.

Might just as well come clean and face the music. “Let’s get going. Lots of work to do.”

Dodge, the insufferable damn dentist, called out to Hanley. “If you’re around the house this Sunday, we’d love to have you join us for Easter dinner. My son will be flying out the day before if all goes as I hope.”

I glanced at Ford. He gave me a short nod. Good. I was glad he was going to give his consent. Hopefully, he could talk Bella into it as well. Good fathers needed to be given all the help they could get.

“I’d like that if you think there’s enough room?” Hanley said while staring up at me.

“We’ll use Granny’s sewing chair.”

Hanley gave me a soft smile. I shoved my hat back onto my head before heading to my horse.

Once I was on her back, a feat that was not as easy as I had hoped at the get-go.

I had to climb up on a fallen log as there was no mounting box around, then put my left hand on the back of the saddle before hopping up.

Not very graceful, but my ass was on leather.

When I was situated, I looked out at the smirking faces of my stupid siblings.

“Not a single fucking word or I’ll tell Granny to make liver for dinner,” I warned them before tapping my heels into my horse’s sides. Given the looks of revulsion on my brother’s faces, I’d found a good threat.

Hanley blew me a kiss.

I rolled my eyes and rode off before I died of embarrassment, the roars of three idiots rolling over the plains.

### Chapter Thirteen

There are some moments that carve memories deep into your brain.

Seated on the front porch swing, wearing a thin jacket and holding a cup of coffee in my hand with a full belly, I felt that this time was one of those moments.

Dodge had come back from the airport over by the rez with his son Dahn, a scraggly Asian boy of ten with a mop of black hair, a shy smile, and an instant love of goats and chickens.

He was leery of the cows and horses, but that was understandable.

They were big. We'd introduce him to the horses slowly with treats and pets to fuzzy noses while he was here.

Hopefully, that will help ease him into loving them as much as he did the goats, which were, as much as I hated to admit it, damn cute.

The air was April fresh, and Granny's tulips were up and open, filling the beds with shades of red, yellow, and purple.

Spring had sprung, and I was happy for it.

Winter was tough on a ranch. Snow and ice made chores twice as difficult and the long, cold, lonely nights seemed to drag on forever.

Seeing those bluebirds moving into their boxes always lifted the spirit.

As did watching a father be a good father to his son.

Dahn and Dodge had spent most of this Holy Saturday with the animals and were now in the front yard beside a lone pile of brush—all that remained of the mighty oak—supposedly tossing a football.

What I saw was Dodge trying to get the boy into a game of catch, but Dahn had found an old baton in the junk room/sewing room and was doing his best to twirl said baton.

The door behind me squeaked. I glanced over from the father and son to see Bella emerge.

She, too, had a cup of coffee or tea in her tiny hands.

I gave her a smile and jerked my chin at the empty space beside me.

She patted over, tucked her sweater around her lean body, and sat.

She was in a navy-toned ethereal kind of Stevie Nicks dress and soft blue flats.

Her hair was braided neatly, her face smooth as a baby's backside, and her makeup delicately done.

She was quite pretty tonight. She was pretty every day, to be honest.

“He reminds me of myself at that age,” she said, blowing over her mug. The smell of peppermint wafted under my nose. So tea then. “I used to dream of being a baton twirler in elementary school, but my father beat that notion out of me.”

I felt that confession like a horse kick to the gut. “I’m sorry.” It was all I could think of to say.

Her gaze touched on me before fluttering back to Dodge and Dahn.

“Me too, but we all have daddy issues.” I nodded sadly.

That was no lie. “Well, perhaps not Ford so much as you other Bastians. He was barely out of the womb when Cash exited stage left, but his mother moved on quickly. His stepfather is an amazing man. Took Ford as his own child. He got him that carpentry job with a cousin. Speaking of which, you should come see the fountain he created in the boutique. He has lots of skills. I told him he could be a stone mason as well as a carpenter. The fountain is gorgeous. All natural stones that we picked up on the hedgerows.”

“I’ll drop over real soon,” I vowed.

Shrewd jade eyes slid to me. “Are you upset over having a man who dreams of being a woman selling ladieswear on your property?” Her voice was soft, but her question was sharp.

“No, of course not. Why would that bother me?” The low of a cow rolled over the ranch, a sound that I had missed and was happy to have back.

“I saw that manly chest thumping moment with Mr. Manfred the other day.” A small sigh escaped her. “If I’m going to bring trouble to you or Granny, I can find a place to rent in town, perhaps.”

I turned on the swing to face her as Dahn tossed the baton into the air and caught it. Dodge had by now abandoned the football to cheer on his son. Good parenting 101 there. Encourage the child’s interests and don’t force yours.

“Don’t be silly. Manfred is a dumbass bigot who’s always been flinging his hateful shit around like a monkey in a zoo.

” That made the lines of worry on her smooth brow melt as the corners of her lips tweaked upward.

“He’s been shitty to anyone who isn’t the same as him for as long as I can remember.

You can ask Ollie or any of the Cherokee who has to deal with him.

Also, and this is probably the most important thing, if you left, who would touch up Granny’s gray roots or teach her how to make them cat eyeliner things on her eyelids?

Sure as hell not me or any of the other baboons on this ranch. ”

“I love how you’re like a porcupine on the outside but inside you’re an overripe avocado.”

My eyes flared. “I am not,” I indignantly huffed.

She giggled into her mug. “You so are, and it’s very sweet.

” She reached out to pat my knee before returning her palm to her mug.

She looked chilly, but serene. “You pretend not to care about anything but cows and horses, but I can see through that mask you wear. Little boys who are left behind by those they thought would take care of them build thick walls to protect their tiny hearts.”

“Mpfh.” Since I had nothing to say to counter her rather astute words, I just grunted

and rocked a bit harder.

We watched the boy and his dad in pleasant silence, Bella taking up humming a song that I couldn't place.

Dodge was now trying his hand at the baton and failing miserably.

Guess knowing how to fill a cavity didn't help one whit when trying to do fancy majorette moves.

Not that I could have done better. I'd have had that old baton flung through Granny's beloved bow window.

"This is nice," she said after a few moments had passed. "Thank you for being so understanding about my reluctance to speak to the sheriff."

I shrugged my good shoulder. The one not attached to an arm that ached from overuse today. "You had to do what was right for you. Not like I'm in any place to tell anyone how to handle their shit."

"Well, seeing them now makes me feel better about giving my consent." She curled into her sweater a little deeper.

"I'm glad. If you ever need to talk to anyone about whatever you left behind in the Big Apple, I'm not too bad at listening. We do a lot of that in group. Listening that is." She bobbed her head. "I might not say much, but I listen good."

"I think you say plenty, just not in too wordy of a way." She leaned over to peck my cheek.

I felt my face grow warm. Kisses from pretty women and handsome men did that to



me.

“I asked Ford to build a little room in the boutique for me to sleep in. I know it’s crowded in the house, and I do take a lot of time in the bathroom.

So I’m adding a small bath and bed space.”

Dahn and his dad were twirling the heck out of that baton.

Not well or with any kind of skill, but man, they were having fun.

I felt funny seeing them. Like, on one hand, I was happy for my half-brother, but on the other hand, I was kind of jealous of Dahn.

That was the little boy inside me that Bella had been talking about, being envious of something he never had.

“You don’t have to move out of the house. We’re making do.”

“I know, but I need some space of my own. You understand.”

I did. We all needed space. Some more than others. “Okay then, as long as it’s what you want.”

“It is. So please do come see the boutique soon. I’d love your thoughts.”

I agreed to visit tomorrow. She took her cup and mine and went inside to sew and chat with Granny.

The sun was dipping behind the horizon when the sound of two women and an old sewing machine reached my ears.

The sky was a brilliant red, which led me to believe that Easter Sunday would be a delight.

The screen door opened. Granny stuck her head out.

“Eggs are ready for dyeing!” she yelled and got a whoop from Dodge, Dahn, and me.

It had been years since we’d dyed eggs. Not to toot my own horn, but I’d been damn good at finding all the eggs Granny aka The Easter Bunny had hidden back in the day.

I suspected I would win the hunt in the morning and get an extra special bunny-shaped pancake.

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Sadly, my reign of being king of the egg hunt came to an inglorious end.

Dahn found two more than I did—I may have accidentally overlooked a bright pink egg hidden in the bag of goat chow—and got the special pancake. The rest of us losers had plain old, round flapjacks. I hid the pain of my loss with far too much syrup for a man my age.

We finished chores and then, at the behest of my grandmother, we started getting ready for church.

The others in the house seemed ill-at-ease, so I informed them that it was not mandatory to attend the Easter service.

I was only going to placate Granny. She knew my feelings about organized religion, but I was a big enough man to escort her on special days.

As the other men readied themselves, I moseyed over to the springhouse.

Bella bounced along at my side, chattering away about the fountain, the sign they were working on, and the pretty chiffon that she and Granny had uncovered in a tote.

Not that I really knew much about chiffon other than it was sheer and brides liked it. I was a flannel and denim guy.

When she unlocked the deadbolt, a new addition to the worn door, the tinkle of water met me first. Then, as we stepped inside, a dozen dress dummies scared the shit out of me.

Bella laughed merrily as my heart nearly leaped out of my chest. The forms were wearing dresses of bright colors with sashes around the middle.

They looked very vintage. Like something Audrey Hepburn would have worn in Roman Holiday.

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The fountain sat in the corner, gurgling away. About four feet high, the water that originally fed into the springhouse was now piped out at the top of a small stone platform which then ran over another larger flat stone, and then eventually into a rock reservoir at the base.

“Okay, that is pretty damn good,” I confessed as she beamed at her fountain.

“Right!? I think I can find some fake plants to use as accents on the rocks. I just love it.”

“It’s real nice. The ladies who come out will like it a lot.”

She glowed, then led me through the small space, showing me the spot where her cash register would sit on a weathered slab of oak that they’d pinched from the fallen tree.

Ford was going to sand and polyurethane it.

Then she led me to the backroom, a cramped little closet of a space that was going to be her little personal space.

“I’ll have to keep my stock in the sewing room until we can enlarge, but Granny said that was fine with her. Oh, and we have a window Linc found stashed in one of the line cabins that just needs some cleaning up, so I’ll have a window in my bedroom overlooking the creek that feeds the springhouse.”

She was so damn happy. I’d never seen a person so tickled over an old springhouse

with a bedroom the size of Granny's pantry. Had she never had a place of her own?

"Sounds like it's going to be real nice," I said as she dashed over to fix the shawl draped over one shoulder of a dress form.

"All thanks to you and your generosity." I waved that off.

"Still, I promise I will pay you rent as soon as we have the grand opening. Which is why I'm going to town with you today.

Granny and I printed out flyers, and she said we could hand them out after services to the women leaving church.

"Her green gaze met mine. "Do you think that will be okay?"

I smiled and nodded, but inside a ball of worry formed. Hopefully, people like Manfred would behave themselves on church grounds. I prayed so. Otherwise, we'd have a few Bastians serving knuckle sandwiches instead of the words of Christ on this fine Easter day.

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The Bastian Grange Methodist Church sat on nicely tended land at the far end of Main Street.

Built in the late 1800s by one of my ancestors and a few of the town elders, it has stood next to a weathered American Elm ever since.

The church had seen some disasters over its time.

A fire in the early 1900s, an F-5 twister in 1938, and a nasty flash flood in 1975 that

nearly swept the old girl off her foundation.

Yet, somehow, she persevered. The elm tree at her side was barely clinging to life.

Dutch Elm disease was taking its toll. Funds were being raised to plant a new one after this one was taken down sometime next year.

People in their Easter finery milled about outside, chatting as they filed in.

The sign out front boasted a sermon about the resurrection and a potluck dinner being put on by the Bastian Grange Ladies Prayer Circle, with proceeds going to the elm tree project.

Exiting our vehicles, I could feel the tension flowing from my siblings.

Linc moved closer to Bella. Everyone was freshly washed, shaved, and wearing ironed shirts.

Dodge even had a tie. His son was as nervous as a cat in a room full of Dobermans and withdrew into himself.

Bella and Granny looked very respectable in springy dresses that Bella and she had sewn.

Walking advertisements for Bella Dee's Boutique.

"They're just gobsmacked to see such pretty dresses," Granny told Bella as we slowly made our way to the line leading into the church.

Easter lilies in pots lined the steps going up.

Granny and I took the wheelchair ramp, much to her displeasure.

“Ain’t in no damn wheelchair. I can do steps just fine,” she muttered a few times, but I was good.

I did not remind her that last summer she fell going up those same stairs, which led to a rather long convalescence and a fundraiser for a ramp to be built before snow flew.

Reverend Cox, an older gent with thick silver hair and a kind way about him, saw us coming.

As did the parishioners, making their way inside.

Many paused to gawk as if a circus parade was strolling up the steps.

Most eyes flickered from Granny to Dahn and then lit on Bella, where they stayed until it grew uncomfortable.

Great. Guess Manfred had been at the barber shop talking about our little group of misfits.

Misfits in their eyes, not mine. I might not be super keen on a house filled with strangers, but they fit. Hard as that was for me to admit.

“Hello and welcome to Easter service,” Reverend Cox loudly said as he took Granny’s hand to pat it gently.

“I’m so pleased to see new faces. The Lord is always welcoming to newcomers to our flock.

Leviticus 19:33-34 reminds us to treat foreigners with kindness and love, and to recall

the Israelites' own time in Egypt as strangers. ”

Granny gave a fast glance to the gawkers who, now that the pastor had welcomed our motley group into the fold, quickly turned their gaze to something else.

Granny made the introductions, then marched down the aisle to our pew.

Second from the front on the left. She was quite proud of the fact that the Bastians had their own hard wooden bench.

Being relatives of the town's founding fathers was about the only claim to prestige she had, so she clung to it.

God knows her son hadn't been anything to brag about.

We took our seats, the rows behind and in front of us filled with small-town people who had probably never seen a Korean boy or a transfemme person in their lives.

Granny chattered away to anyone who would turn to speak to her, making it a point to tell them that she had inherited a huge family, complete with a great-grandson and an adopted daughter.

Bella's smile was tense, but while she did her best not to show how edgy she was, I could see it.

Her nicely painted nails dug into Linc's thick forearm, for she had not let go of him since we'd stepped away from our vehicles in the parking lot.

The pastor's wife, Veronica, made a point to visit and shake all of our hands. Whether her husband had asked her to do so or she had done so on her own, I couldn't say, but it was a kind gesture that hopefully would lead others to be civil at



the bare minimum.

Glancing around, I spied several people I grew up with, nodded, and then found Manfred, his wife, and his boys a few pews back, glaring at us with open hostility.

So much for following in the kindness of the pastor and his wife.

Whatever. Haters gotta hate as the saying goes.

As long as their venom stayed on that side of the church, they could simmer in their bigot stew for all I cared.

I had my cattle. The check had been cashed.

He and I were officially done doing business.

What irked me the most was that I'd been soft enough to even interact with such a dick.

I knew he was a shithead. I'd seen his interactions with Ollie over the years.

The only reason Manfred was quiet now around Ollie was the badge that he wore, otherwise, he'd be tossing out racist shit while pretending it was a pun.

Ha-ha, just kidding, man, you people can't take a joke.

When we played poker next, I would make a point to apologize to my friend for not cutting ties with that asshole sooner.

Ida-Mae Bobbins began playing "The Old Rugged Cross" on a well-loved Hammond electric organ, and everyone quieted.

Reverend Cox appeared and took his place behind the lectern under a large stained-glass window that had been installed after World War II from a donation set aside in the will of Wally Oberdeen.

Wally's daughter lived outside of town, or had, before she married an Army fellow.

Now she was in Florida when last I heard and on her third or fourth husband.

As the sermon began, I drifted off mentally as I tried to wiggle a finger under my cast to scratch a nasty itch.

My thoughts did not go to Jesus as they probably should have.

They floated around until they touched on Hanley, who was not here.

I'd invited him. He had politely declined, saying that he would worship in the wildness which I thought was so perfectly Hanley.

Maybe if more of us did that nature would be in a much better place.

Thinking of him as the pastor spoke out about how we were both dead and alive in Christ, I realized that I missed Hanley a lot.

Even though I knew I'd be seeing him for dinner, I sort of wished he was here with us.

His presence was calming. Granny gave my thigh a pinch.

I startled, tugged my pinkie from my cast, and heaved out a sigh that any teen would have been proud of.

No one was happier when the sermon ended than I was.

Perhaps Dahn might have been. He'd been fidgeting the entire time, yanking on the collar of his dress shirt, and generally showing signs of slipping into a boredom coma.

I could relate. If not for thigh pinches, I would have dozed off for sure.

"That was interesting," Ford whispered after we were outside.

Granny was still talking things over with the pastor and his wife.

What they were discussing, I had no clue.

"I don't think I've been in a church since I was a kid.

My mom went occasionally, just big days, you know, but she was never strict about it with me.

Usually Frank and me, that's my stepdad, would go fishing instead.

Like Easter morning, we'd get up and sneak out before the sun was up and head to Penn Pier.

Mostly just caught striped bass and white perch, but afterward we'd stop at a local donut place for sugar glazed and coffee. "

"Sounds nice," Linc said, Bella still tight to his side as churchgoers slipped by, trying to get close enough to see the man in the dress but not too close. Stupid people were annoying.

“Why don’t we head home, get changed, maybe take a ride?” I asked that of Dodge since Dahn was slouched over on a bench a mere breath away from passing out from apathy. “We can saddle some horses or you can take ATVs out for a spin.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Dodge replied, then went over to talk to his son. Dahn came alive instantly, and after I went to pull Granny free from the small mob of people that had pinned her to the front doors of the church, we made our way to the car.

“Do you know what Irene Lawrence asked me?” Granny ground out as we made our way to the truck.

I opened my mouth to ask. “She asked me if I knew that my house was filled with deviates against the Lord. Well, I told her that I knew my house was filled with loving decent folks who were my family, and if she wanted to cast stones, she best look at her own clan. God knows the Lawrences are in and out of Ollie’s drunk tank weekly.

Last week, her youngest grandson was arrested over in Piner County for underage drinking and lewd behavior with a girl not even sixteen years of age.

She nearly swallowed her tongue. That old cow.

I never did like her ever since she entered a boughten pie in the bakeoff at the fair. ”

“Granny, that was sixteen years ago, and there was no proof that the pie was from a store.” I bent down to press a kiss to her cheek. “I do love how you stuck up for us deviates, though.”

“You can tell. The crust ain’t nothing like homemade. That pie was boughten sure as I’m standing here.”

“Okay, probably so.” There was no point in arguing pie crust with her.

She was the expert. The ride back home was filled with Granny grumblings and past misdeeds of Irene Lawrence and her family dating back to the late 60s when a dude named Leroy took up with Irene’s sister Naomi, who was quite the floozy.

I reminded Granny that we didn’t use the term floozy for women who were just exercising their sexual natures in a normal, healthy way.

Granny rolled her eyes, apologized to Bella, who was wedged between us, and then went on to talk trash about Naomi and Irene’s entire lineage.

Bella was much less tense when we got back to the ranch. I spied Hanley on the porch instantly. He was hard to miss in a tacky brown suit with a yellow cotton tee.

“Oh my,” Bella whispered when she saw him. “That man needs fashion help desperately.”

Other than his ugly suit, he looked damn fine to me.

So fine that my heart did this skipping bit as if it were going into AFib.

I rubbed it away with the heel of my hand as I exited my truck.

Hanley stood, smiled, and that dancing heartbeat grew stronger.

That wasn’t good. I either needed to see my doctor stat or I was growing feelings.

I hoped it was something that a pill would get rid of, but I feared it might be something no tablet would cure. Maybe a pacemaker was in order...

### Chapter Fourteen

“A re you in or what?”

I snapped out of a gauzy recollection of Hanley and the siblings playing Monopoly at Easter a few weeks ago.

I’d opted out. Board games weren’t exactly my thing and someone on the damn ranch had to feed critters.

The memory lingered not because it was something scandalous and sinful, or even because something dramatic happened.

I think the damn remembrance kept floating around like a cloud of gnats because it was so simple a moment.

Simple yet knitted tightly into a warm shawl of familial happiness.

Everyone was enjoying themselves, even if Ford and Bella were joining forces to bankrupt everyone else.

Even poor Dahn was feeling the tight fist of the rich, but he did own some railroads, so he was scraping by.

Just. I’d never experienced an evening quite like it.

“Sorry, yeah, I’m in.” I tossed a few poker chips into the pot.

Ollie was our perma-host to our games because gambling in this state, even home poker games, was considered illegal.

Unless you were on tribal lands in a licensed tribal casino.

Which we were. There were a few other card tables with games going around us, and the clatter of slot machines could be heard nearby, but overall, no one bothered us, and we could speak privately if we kept our voices down.

Legacy Winds Casino—managed by Ollie’s uncle Gordon Ahoka—offered a wide variety of gambling that ranged from the one-armed bandits through craps, roulette, and baccarat.

I only came here on poker night because there was lots of temptation in this place.

The bar was the biggest lure, and of course, betting, which wasn’t my addiction of choice, but surely could become it if I wasn’t careful.

Cross-addiction was a thing. “I was thinking about Easter.”

“Easter was that dreamy, was it?” Aiden asked innocently, but I knew he was busting my balls. He’d been out to the ranch midweek to check on the now uncomfortably pregnant goat does and had had to nudge me from a cloudy daydream at least twice.

“Ham will do that to a man,” Ollie commented as he sat staring at his hand as a server moved through the tables to see if refills of cocktails were needed. The Legacy Winds employed over five hundred people, the majority tribal members, but not all. “It’s the other white meat.”

Aiden snorted in amusement as he laid down two pairs. I rolled my eyes and folded. Ollie did the same.

“That’s pork,” I said and watched Aiden scoop up his chips.

“Same thing. And I was making a crack about white meat.” Ollie took a sip of his orange pop before passing the deck to me.

“Technically, ham is a specific cut of pork, the smoked leg,” Aiden interjected as he took the cards and began shuffling.

“But it’s still pork. If you smoke a trout, it’s still a trout,” Ollie argued, leaning back in his seat to stretch the kinks out of his bad shoulder.

A few rolls, a pop, and a wince, and he was better.

He’d suffered a labral tear playing football in high school and then had the same shoulder dislocated in an altercation with a drunk.

Not me, thank God, but some rowdy asshole who had rolled into town on a bender about five years ago.

The dude took umbrage at being asked to vacate his car after he had driven through Polly and Deke Heston’s woodshed.

A small scuffle ensued. Ollie came out victorious, but his shoulder had been wrenched out of the socket.

Now, every time it was about to rain, Ollie felt it in his shoulder.

“True, and I’m not saying that ham isn’t pork. I’m just saying that—”

“Right, so the white meat part of my comment,” Ollie slid in to stall a pig talk from the resident vet. “Are you getting any meat from the picture taker?”



“That’s kind of personal,” I quickly replied, my gaze shifting to the measly stack of remaining chips to my right.

“The question stands.” Ollie leaned back, folded his arms over his substantial chest, and waited as Aiden continued to shuffle. “If you’re not, I might be willing to stop by his little traveling camp and see if he needs company. Gets awful lonely out there on the prairie at night.”

“He’s not lonely,” I snapped far too quickly. Aiden cocked an eyebrow.

Ollie smirked, his arms resting on a well-worn TWO SPIRITS, ONE NATION tee that hugged his pecs like a second skin.

“You keeping him company?” Ollie enquired. A shout from the slots room floated past. Someone is either winning big or losing big.

“We’re enjoying each other’s company,” I icily replied.

The two of them exchanged looks. “No, it’s not like that.

We’re just fucking. He’s leaving for Canada in a week, and I have a ranch to run, family to sort, and too much damn work to get involved with someone again.

I told myself after I blew up my marriage that I was done with commitment. ”

“I don’t think anyone brought up the word commitment,” Aiden offered as he began dealing our five cards.

“You’re also a different man now than you were when you were married to Tanya,” Ollie pointed out and picked up his new hand. I did the same. I had a shit hand. Like, so shitty it could be spread on a corn field for fertilizer. Holy flipping hell.

“He’s right, Baker. Seems like your life is suddenly full of new and exciting things. New family members, new animals, new boyfriend...”

I held up a hand to stall that train of thought. The soft murmur of our fellow card players blanketed the well-lit room like a cloud of smoke.

“Nope, don’t use that word. He’s a wanderer, freely admits that, and I am not interested in trying to tie the man down.” I plucked three miserable cards from my hand, laid them face down, and got three new ones. “It’s just sex. That’s it.”

“Okay, that’s fair. So tell me how Dodge is doing. He fitting in around the ranch? I hear his son is there for a week or so,” Ollie said, switching the conversation neatly.

“And how is Ford making out?” Aiden enquired with a look of pure innocence.

I shook my head as a smile broke out on my face.

“God, you two are ridiculous. Dodge and his son are fine. You could swing by to see them, you know,” I said to Ollie before turning my attention to Aiden.

“And as for Ford, you just saw him two days ago. Make your damn moves, guys. Those who sit around on their thumbs miss out on the dick.”

“Words of wisdom,” Ollie dryly stated before tossing his flush to the table with panache. “I’ll get that on a T-shirt.”

“I take an extra-large,” Aiden quipped.

They both started laughing. “I don’t know why I hang out with you two.”

“We’re the only queers in town that you aren’t related to,” Ollie pointed out as he

raked in his winnings. “You in or are you heading out to get some of that fine shank?”

I left them sitting there singing an old Tennessee Ernie Ford song about a ham bone as I stalked off.

Dumbasses. Loveable dumbasses, but dumbasses just the same.

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Just to prove a point about me and Hanley, I drove back to town to get my broken arm another X-ray at the hospital. Yes, I was shifting. Yes, it sort of hurt. No, I did not care. I was over being ferried around like Granny. A man had to have some pride.

The drive to the ER was uneventful. We didn’t have a GP at the moment in Bastian Grange.

Old Doc Weatherbee used to have a nice practice for many years, then he up and died a few winters back.

His office was at his home, and when his wife sold off the house to move to West Virginia with her son, there went the only doctor we had.

Someone bought the house and turned the office into a craft shop, which soon went belly up.

Rural living made it hard on new businesses.

It was just as hard luring doctors into a poor country town.

I got it. Things were faster paced in the big cities.

They could make more money, have access to specialists, and a long list of other reasons why our town, and many others across the country, were considered “doctor deserts.” It also explained why we went to the hospital for things that an MD like old Doc Weatherbee used to handle.

This overtaxed the emergency room and hiked up insurance rates, but what choice did we have?

Says a lot about an area when a large animal vet can make a good living but a medical doctor can’t pay his bills.

If it were possible, I’d run out to the rez to see their doctor, but non-natives weren’t eligible to get care at the reservation Indian Health Service facility.

Otherwise, I’d have chugged out there to see one of their providers.

Nothing against the ER staff, but it was just a large bill in the making that the ranch would have to cover.

If I’d been thinking and not riled up over the teasing about Hanley, I would have asked Aiden to X-ray my arm.

A broken bone is a broken bone, be it a human or a cow.

He could have seen if it was healing properly.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“Dumbass,” I grumbled to myself, tempted to turn around, but as I was already well into Monroe Falls, I just went and made the left into the Pellman Memorial Hospital ER parking area and shuffled inside.

The place was packed. Like SRO and I spun on my heel and left.

I’d go see Aiden in a day or two and save myself the time and cash like I should have done.

Hopping back into my truck, I sped out of the parking lot and went back home.

My list of shit to do was as long as my arm, the one not in a damn cast. We had turned the cattle out to range, the bull with them, to ensure he covered all the females.

Later, in the off-season, we’d separate him to let him get some R&R from his breeding duties.

So we had that pasture to fence in. A lot of it had been torn up by the twister that had broken my arm.

Then there were the line cabins that needed to be refurbished and one rebuilt from the ground up, which hadn’t started yet.

The goats were now on watch as kids should start coming any day. Hell, any hour, according to Aiden.

Aiden. He of the wandering eye and fey smile. Poor Ford wouldn’t stand a chance if

our resident vet decided to break out all those Irish charms his mother and father passed down to him.

Dodge, I felt, had what it would take to get along with Ollie. They were of a similar age and had lived lives that had been challenging in some regards. Ollie wasn't one to cat around like Aiden was known to do. Dodge would need a man who was faithful and—

“What the fuck are you even doing here?” I asked myself as I sat at a stop sign, my turn signal ticking steadily, staring down the road as if in a daze.

What exactly was this horseshit running around inside my skull like a toddler after guzzling his dad's energy drink?

“Are you suddenly living in a Hallmark movie? Jesus wept.” I threw the truck into gear, winced at the jolt to my arm, and then nearly stalled her out as I fumbled to find the clutch.

“This is what romance thinking does to your pickled brain. Just stop.”

I belittled myself all the way home. Stupid.

What was I even doing letting fluff like who was good for who in my head?

Stalking to the shed where we kept the ATVs, I began flinging whatever I could find into a wagon.

Fencing supplies tumbled out of five-gallon buckets.

Spools of barbed wire were hoisted up, snagged on my flannel shirt, and then, when yanked free, tore a strip out of not only my poker night shirt but the skin under it.

That made me mad. I stared down at the cut on my left forearm, spit into the wound, rubbed the spittle around, and then climbed onto the old blue Honda and sped off.

I needed to clear my head. Pressing on the gas hurt, but pain was good.

Pain would scour the little floating hearts that my poker buddies had planted in my thoughts.

I rode full bore across my land, eyes watering from the chill, the headlight on the ATV bouncing skyward as I hit gulleys and rolling hills.

An armadillo appeared out of nowhere by the cabin that had been sent to Oz.

I yanked hard on the handlebars not to run over the dumb thing.

It ran off into the night, and I sat there, panting softly, my right arm aching like a kick to the gonads, and stared down at the shell of the old cabin.

The moon was bright tonight. It painted the weathered bricks of the chimney in a ghostly white milky color.

The ATV ran roughly beneath me, coughing every now and again.

She needed some new spark plugs. Stacks of lumber, shingles, and premade trusses were waiting for us to get to the actual building.

Ford was the man in charge of this project and he seemed to be ready to go as soon as he was done with Bella's shop.

I sat there for a long time just staring down at the building site.

The wind blowing cool on the back of my neck, and my head lost in the wispy, silvery clouds.

I cradled my arm against my belly. I should have ridden Winnie.

No, I should not have done that. What I should have done was go inside the house to find some peace and quiet.

Ha. As if that was something a grumpy turd like me could even locate in that house anymore.

There were too many people to find solitude.

But is it solitude you seek or something else?

I rode off before my crowded head could fixate on that random query.

The glow of a small lantern in a cozy tent tucked back into a dome of redbud was like a fucking beacon.

I cut the engine and ducked down, removing my hat as I dropped to one knee in front of the open flaps.

Inside the tent lounged Hanley, a paperback book in one hand, his cock in the other.

“I heard you coming,” he said as he gave his thick dick a languid stroke, his sight locked on the John Le Carre paperback.

I flung my hat to the top of his oversized backpack jammed into the corner.

“What if it had been one of my brothers?” I asked and sat down to tug off a boot.



Using both hands. The tugging was not one of my best ideas, but when Hanley gave me a questioning look, I waved it off and let the hurt flow.

“I knew it was you. That cloud of tension brewing around your head arrived five minutes before you did.”

“Bullshit,” I grunted before one boot finally came free. I chucked it over my shoulder, battled with the other, and then proceeded to strip naked as Hanley lay there naked as the day he was born, working his fat cock as he nonchalantly read. “I keep my internal thunderstorms close at hand.”

“I’ve noticed.” He glanced over the top of his paperback when I straddled him, shoving his book-holding hand to the ground as I placed my needy hole right atop his erection. “Did you want something from me, Baker?”

“You know what I want.” I rolled my hips.

He moved like a rattler. All muscle and coiled power, flinging me to my back, then sitting atop me, book forgotten, his hot hazel gaze locked with mine.

“I want you to tell me what you want, Baker.” He took my right hand and gently placed it on my chest. My left he led down to our cocks now lined up and leaking. “I want you to tell me with your words what you want from me.”

I felt some of the rigidity in my body—aside from my prick, obviously—begin to leach into his sleeping bag as he took control.

“I want you to fuck me until my brain is quiet.” The words whispered over dry lips.

His gaze softened as he recognized the candor in my plea.

And so he began to peel away the bark that I shielded myself in, lifting one layer, then another with his touch and his tongue.

He stole a kiss that left me weak under his weight.

I gripped our cocks tightly, rubbing the slits to gather precum as he took me apart with nothing more than his tongue in my mouth and his dick next to mine.

He licked deep, taking each breath, inhaling it then breathing it back into my lungs.

I lost track of who was who as he and I began to merge.

To dovetail. When I was shivering and unable to speak, he took a moment to slip a leg over his shoulder.

“Yes, yes,” I whispered, my hand now clutching my cock as he moved between my legs, his cockhead seeking entry. “Lube,” I croaked out.

He glanced downward and let a string of spittle drop from his lip to where his cock lay in wait. I arched up at the sight. He moved up and back, smearing the spit over my balls and hole.

“More,” I begged, and he gave it to me.

“Get the lube.” I flailed around until I found it shoved under a canteen. Probably from where we had thrown it the last time I’d come here looking for dick. “God your hole is so pink and pretty.”

Sounds that could have been words escaped me.

I handed him the lube and flung everything inside my skull into that beautiful void

where there was no worry, no self-recriminations, no bills, no family, and no endless temptations.

There was nothing but him and me and the pressure of being wholly fulfilled.

He slid in with a soft grunt, his grip on my thigh firm as he pressed it into my chest.

“Give it to me. That last thread that you’re holding onto, Baker. Let go. Let me in.”

He was in, fully, his fat hot dick was deep inside me. What more did he want? I moaned in frustration when he just knelt there, cock growing even fatter as he reached out to run his thumb over my bottom lip.

Unsure of what he was asking, I let my arm fall from my chest, the cast thudding to the thickness of his bedding, and searched his eyes for something.

It took me a moment, given that I was rock hard with a stiff dick in my ass, but once I located it, I felt the final brick that had been holding up that shaky wall crack.

“I trust you,” I croaked as I clenched. His body trembled, tightened, but his gaze grew mellow as if he saw into me, the real me, the scared as shit Baker who so wanted to be loved but was scared to death of driving another poor soul away.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 1:52 am*

“I trust you,” he parroted back and began to move.

I gasped at the sensations that he began to wring out of me.

He drove deep, rocking me hard, pushing in so far that I felt close to bursting.

Each thrust made me cry out as he carried me into the night sky.

We soared over the plump moon, through the thin strings of cloud, and burst through a star.

My cock exploded, coating my belly with pearly ropes as he drove hard, then filled me.

There was no ranch, no failed marriage, no years spent in the bottom of a bottle, no mother drifting away day by day, and no father who cared so little he left and never returned.

All of that was back on Earth. As my muscles contracted and I clung to Hanley’s shoulders, I was weightless.

There was an old sci-fi movie with a tagline about no one being able to hear you scream in space.

As I floated, I held him close, so close, and yet not close enough.

“I feel things for you,” I confessed as we lay there tangled like fishing lines on a

windy day. “Scares me bad.”

He gathered me close, pulled free of my body, and rolled us to our sides, taking care of my casted arm.

Then he kissed me. Tenderly, his pillow lips gently moving over mine, dropping tiny pecks to the corners of my mouth as he situated my cast on my hip.

The air rolling in the open flap gave me chills.

Either that or it was this man’s tender ministrations after he had blasted me into the ozone that were giving me goosebumps.

“I feel those things too,” he confided before tucking the sleeping bag around us. Sharing a pillow was intimate as hell. I wasn’t sure I had ever done anything like this with Tanya. Nose to nose, gazing into each other’s souls. Yeah, that would be a nope.

“I’m not good at relationships,” I said while enjoying the hell out of the warm surge of his spend leaking out of me. Someone should find something to clean up with, but he seemed fine with having his hairy chest tight to mine as my cum glued us together. I was, too, if I were being honest.

“I’m not either. I got hurt once, badly, and decided that running all the time was the best way to not get hurt again. Catch me if you can, Cupid.” I tucked a small strand of cinnamon hair behind his ear. “Then I rolled into Oklahoma and met this cowboy...”

“Sounds like a country song,” I said as the cool air wafted into the tent, chilling my overheated brow and cheeks.

“Yeah, it kind of does. Only this isn’t a song about heartbreak, or I hope it isn’t.

I'm exposing myself here, Baker, and that's something I rarely do.

Most of the time when I meet a man who I like, I get some ass then hit the road.

But there's something about you and this land.

You're wiggling your way into my heart."

"And that sounds like you may have picked up a parasite while swimming in some tropical river."

That made him smile weakly, and I pecked his lips. "Sorry. I'm feeling really open here and when I feel that way, I tend to try to pull back. Sarcasm and grumpiness always work."

"I get it." He placed a hand on my hip, his touch warm and reassuring.

"Trust me, I get it. I'm not great at balancing emotions, so I'm going to have to take this slow.

I think my heading north for a few weeks will be a good thing.

It'll give us time to clear our heads and make sure that it's not just the incredible physical attraction that we have for each other that's coloring our thoughts.

Sometimes people confuse lust with love. I don't want to do that this time."

I saw the sadness enter his gaze even in the shadowed interior of the tent. The small battery-powered lantern showed me a lot of pain in his green-brown eyes.

"Who hurt you?" I dared to ask and got a slow, heavy exhalation.

His breath fanned my face as he gathered a breath, or perhaps it was his strength he was pulling up like a cloak.

“You don’t have to tell me. This isn’t a meeting.

There’s no dictate that you have to share.

Hell, even in meetings, there’s no rule that you must vomit up all your past misdeeds and fuckups. ”

“But it helps,” he offered, and I nodded. “Yeah, see that’s another thing about this thing we have percolating between us. I don’t talk about my past much. It’s not a pretty thing. But you’ve been so damn honest with me that I’d feel like a snake if I wasn’t being just as candid.”

I rubbed his firm biceps under the cover. Somewhere in the distance a screech owl called out in the night. He rolled to his back, the lantern’s glow warming his face. I enjoyed looking at his profile.

“My first year of college, I met a man, much older, a professor.” He peeked my way through his mussed hair. “You don’t look as shocked as I assumed you would be.”

“When you come from a place of dependence like I have, you don’t look down on others for their past mistakes.” I moved closer to rest my arm over his belly. He placed his hands on my cast with delicacy. “He was the one that hurt you?”

“Mm, yeah, but a lot of that was on me. People had whispered about him taking a new young lover every semester, but I dismissed those rumors. And if he had, surely, he would not toss me aside when I returned next fall. I was just that special,” he snorted in derision.

“You are very special.” I dropped a kiss on his shoulder. He hummed softly.

“Thank you, but not that special because when we did return in the fall, he had moved on to someone else. Of course, he’d not been man enough to tell me over the summer when we’d been sexting each other.

No, he just dumped me like a used condom on the first day of classes.

I still remember running to his office, filled with joy about finally seeing him again, and walking in on some freshman giving him a blowjob.

Needless to say, that tore a chunk out of me that never really healed.

I mourned him for months, years probably, if I’m being honest. I never again let another man get that close.

Until you and now I am shitting bricks.”

“Me too. We could build a house with the amount of bricks the two of us are dropping,” I tossed out, and he chuckled.

“Hell, we could probably build a town.” With that, he shuffled back to his side to look at me. “I’d like to take a chance with you, on us, but I’m going to need a long leash for a while. Like roll me back inch by inch when I start to try to break away.”

“Nope, I’m not snapping a leash on you. Either you want to curl up with me at night or you want to roam the wilds alone. I’m not going to force you to stay home when you have a wanderer’s heart. Go take your pictures wherever you wish. You know where I’ll be.”

He wiggled close to steal a kiss. “You could come with me.”



“Maybe someday, but not now. I have a heaping helping of work and family to get settled into place. Also, and I’m being frank as hell here because I want honesty from you in return, I will need to see that you come back to me on your own.

I’ve had a lot of people that I loved leave, and I know it’s a childhood trauma thing, but it lingers.

So go be the man with the camera up in Canada, and when it’s time to come back here, if you still feel the same, I’ll be at the ranch yelling at my brothers to quiet the hell down for fuck’s sake. ”

“I’ll be back.” It sounded like a vow, but I didn’t take it as a promise. We both were men with trust issues, so time would be the only real thing that would chip away at the distrust that shielded our hearts.

“Say that with an Austrian accent,” I teased.

He snorted then rolled me to my back and murmured things ala Arnold as he carried me to the stars yet again.

I’d never ridden a rocket to the moon while having lines from Predator whispered in my ear.

Yes, he was mixing his Arnold movies, but so what?

It was an erotic and oddly endearing experience.

Reaching orgasm as the man inside you grumbled “Get to the chopper!” added a whole new dimension to making love.

### Chapter Fifteen

It was two-fifteen in the morning and I was on maternity watch with an overstimulated ten-year-old.

Why did this kid have so much energy at this time of the morning? Why did this goat decide to go into labor at this time of the morning? Could she not have chosen a better time to get a baby stuck and make us call out Aiden? Would I ever get any rest?

Those were all questions that I had no answers to.

No one had told us that these goats were going to start dropping babies left and right all within a damn week.

I kept shooting dark looks at Willy as he slumbered unconcerned about his children or his lady loves.

The boy was showing more concern for this breech birth than the real father lying over there snoring.

Willy and I were going to have a long heart-to-heart as soon as the vet left.

I glanced at the goat doe, Petal, she had been named, trying her best to give birth but not being able to do so.

So far, all we'd seen emerge was a tail.

I was no veterinarian, but I'd been around cattle long enough to know that front feet and the head should be presenting first. I'd been forced to help a few cows in the past, but that was a much bigger area to work in than a goat.

Also, what I knew about caprines could fit into a thimble, yet here I was with a ten-year-old toughing it out.

Had to give the lad credit, he was one fine goatherder.

He'd been sleeping in the goat barn the past five nights.

The goat kids that had been born had loved it.

Nothing like a slumbering boy in a sleeping bag to leap onto and then off.

If I crashed on the floor of the barn, they'd need a damn forklift to get me to my feet. Oh, to be young again.

"When will Aiden get here?" Dahn asked for the tenth time in five minutes. He paced the small pen we'd filled with fresh bedding like an expectant father. Again, I shot Willy a glower. He reminded me of my father, but I kept that sourness to myself.

I was about to reply when the door to the barn slid open and Aiden hustled in. Petal blatted as Dahn hooted. I pushed off the square bale I'd been sitting on as the vet climbed over the gate and made his way to the tired doe.

"Sorry I took so long," he said as he began prepping to assist poor Petal.

"Dude, it was twenty minutes," I reminded him as we gathered around behind him.

"Twenty minutes can be too long," he said before he realized that we had a child

present. “I’m sure this kid will be just fine, though. Can you run to the house and ask Granny for some fresh coffee?”

Dahn seemed torn, but he raced off. Aiden glanced at me.

“I’m going to show you what to do here since you have experience birthing calves.

It’s not that much different.” I begged to differ.

I doubted you could hook onto a skinny goat leg with a calf puller.

They just seemed so much more fragile than cattle. “Pay attention. First, we wash up.”

By the time Dahn, Granny, and the rest of the house came thundering out, Petal was back on her feet and her enormous baby boy was trying to stand up.

Coffee was served to all. Ford crept into the pen with Daisy, sleepy still, but intent on the new buck kid wobbling about on spindly legs.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” Ford demanded after Aiden had packed his bag and went home, fully caffeinated, after spending a good hour talking with my youngest brother about goats.

“Because you were up all last night. It was our turn. The kid has a long weekend off and doesn’t seem to require rest like us old farts. Everything was fine.”

Ford huffed and muttered at me, but I was too tired to care.

I handed the goat kid watch off to Dodge and his son, now slumbering with the four-legged kid, and fumbled my way to my bed.

After a shower, I took a moment to slip a ruler into my cast to dig at a persistent itch.

I could not wait to get the damn thing off.

Despite what Aiden had said about the bone not knitting as quickly as he would like to see and his suggestion to leave the cast be for another few weeks, I was over it.

I had a Dremel tool out in the shed that would do a fine job and save the ranch a few hundred bucks in ER fees.

Call me a penny pincher. Yes, I saved money by getting my vet friend to X-ray my arm. Was I a poodle? No. Did I care? Nope.

Crawling in between the sheet and the blanket, I rolled to my side, cast resting on my hip, and stared at the stars in the sky.

Hanley was out there, way up north, taking pictures that were truly stunning.

He'd been in contact a few times with images of the Canadian wildlife in the Great Bear Rainforest, praise for the naturalist he was working with, and a cautious tone.

Every time he signed off with a casual "see you soon," I prayed it would come true.

I wasn't sure if I was in love, but it sure felt like something big blooming in my chest. I think I was keeping that bud in the dark, out of the sun, out of fear.

If he came back, I could move it from the dark out into the sunlight and let it grow.

But until he returned, I'd keep that tiny floret in the shadows to protect it and myself.

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Family is dumb.

You'd think you had killed a person when you were found in a tool shed working away at a plaster cast. Bella nearly fainted when she strolled in looking for a hammer and found me cutting a nice, straight line on the damn cast. No one seemed to be impressed with the cut I had made left-handed when I'd been ratted out by a petite thing in culottes.

Granny had put her boot down then and had sent me off to the hospital with Linc and Dodge as escorts to have my arm looked at right.

Aiden should be offended, but he would agree.

He'd been cranky about me not doing that weeks ago, but he'd relented when I'd threatened to use a hacksaw to remove the cast from my arm.

As we sat in the waiting room on the Friday before Memorial Day weekend, I had to wonder if my buddy the vet had possibly lied to me about how slow my bone was healing.

I got up to stretch. My brothers glanced at me from their phones. "Just stretching," I grumbled as my nannies tutted at me. I figured I could possibly take on Dodge if I made a run for the exit. Linc? Nope, he was too big to wrassle with, but on the other hand, that bulk probably made him slow and—

"Studebaker Bastian," a weary nurse called out, and I shuffled off with her to waste time and money that would be better spent on cabin renovations or the shots that all those cute little goat kids were going to need.

An hour and a half later, I was discharged and free of the cast. The bone had healed neatly, the ER doc had said, then scolded me for not coming back for an X-ray as I

had been instructed to do.

I didn't tell him I had Aiden do it. Feeling lighter on the outside than I had since the night of the storm, I took my brothers to the small diner on the highway for lunch.

My treat. Anything to help keep my mind off Hanley.

He'd been gone for weeks now and had mentioned that he might spend more time in Canada as the moose were starting to calve.

I'd been polite and understanding. After all, we were taking this time apart to suss out if our feelings were big enough to bring him back to the ranch.

It seemed that they weren't which hurt—a lot—and made me feel stupid for being jealous of moose. Mooses? Whatever.

I was free of plaster of Paris. And that was what I was going to focus on for this long holiday weekend.

It looked to be a busy one with a house filled with men, women, and a kid that was hellbent for leather to become the world's best majorette.

His other dad, the ex-footballer, had had a fit when Dahn asked to go to a twirling class in California.

Dodge, being a cool dad who wasn't hung up on macho stupidity—how sad was it that a queer man was being a dick to his son about wanting to twirl a baton instead of playing something more masculine, help me understand—had found a small class led by the music teacher at the Brighton Grange elementary school.

As soon as summer break came around, Dahn would be at the ranch and twirling his

little heart out if Dodge had his way.

Seeing as how Chris—the bonehead other dad—was being all sorts of dodgy about summer vacation, I was preparing myself for another round of battle of the exes to take place soon.

There were goats to tend to, cattle to check on out on the range, cabins to continue working on, and of course, the daily chores.

If someone who lived on a farm or ranch ever got bored, I'd never heard tell.

I was on Prissy's back as soon as I got home.

Freed from the cast I rode her hard, giving her the run that she had been craving, all the way out to the twister cabin—or High Winds Cabin as Bella called it—to find Ford hard at work.

The man was a dynamo and with our help, when we were free, we'd managed to get the walls up, the roof in place, and the windows in.

No small feat with the roof trusses, let me tell you, but with some muscle, some ingenuity, and a damn good tractor, we'd hoisted those bitches into place with only a few bumps and bruises.

There may have been a hit taken to a healing forearm bone that may have set things back a week or two, but a man made sacrifices for his land.



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I visited for a bit, then rode on to check on the cattle.

On my way back, I would stop and work on installing the new windows until dark.

Then I'd go home, eat, watch some family-type movie, and collapse into bed exhausted.

Hopefully sleep would be instant. As I slowly rode up to the redbud clump, I felt a lurch in my chest as I gazed on the space where Hanley's tent had rested.

I missed him terribly. His extension of his time in Canada spoke volumes, even when he had been texting me every third day or so.

He was happy being that carefree wanderer.

If he weren't, he'd have come back to Oklahoma a week ago.

I didn't have to ask if he was feeling hemmed in. It was obvious to me.

It had been foolish of me to open my heart to him so quickly. Even though we both were scarred from past mistakes, we'd let ourselves leap headfirst in the raging waters. Now I had a lungful of remorse and hurt to cough up.

I turned my horse around, unable to really cope with the memories this cluster of brushy trees stirred up.

Better to keep myself busy at the ranch and hope like hell the fireworks over Lake

Brewster in Lowing County were spectacular tomorrow night.

They'd have to be to keep me from spending the night curled around a bottle.

The urge was strong. Real strong. When I got home tonight, I'd call my sponsor.

I'd be damned if one foolish romance was going to wipe out years of sobriety.

Fuck that. So yeah, work hard, sleep like the dead, and one foot in front of the other.

Recoil from the temptation as if it were a flame I'd heard more than once in meetings.

Seemed I was already burned but not engulfed.

Perhaps that singe was needed. Maybe I'd gotten complacent and those blisters would serve to remind me of why I'd vowed to never drink or give my heart to anyone else ever again.

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"If you don't turn that machine off, you're going to get blisters on your pedal toes," I called into the sewing room the following night.

Bella glanced up from the overused Singer, her platinum hair falling out of her bun, to gaze at me as if I had just informed her that satin was silly.

"We're all ready to head to the lake for the fireworks. "

"Oh." She wet her lips. Lips void of any coloration or gloss. "You guys go ahead. I have a week before the grand opening of my shop and I have to get some stock ready in case the ladies need a wider variety of sizes."

“Bella,” I said as I made my way to her, sitting bowed over Granny’s old machine.

“You can’t work all day and all night.” I kneeled down beside her as Dahn could be heard thundering about from room to room, asking a thousand questions about the lake, the fireworks, and if there were other kids at the celebration. “You need to take some downtime.”

“Pot meet kettle,” she softly replied and rubbed at her jade eyes with the tips of her fingers. Fingers that had sewn dozens of frocks this week.

“Right, well, yeah,” I agreed as I dropped to one knee. “But I’m working myself into a coma for other reasons. And, you’ll notice, I am going to the lake to watch pretty explosions in the sky and eat overpriced hot dogs that the ladies’ auxiliary will be selling. Come with us.”

She smiled then bit her bottom lip, her usually bright eyes showing her fatigue and worry. “I’m not sure the good people of Bastian Grange will appreciate—”

“You showing up looking like a movie star? Probably not, but once the ladies see you in one of your pretty creations, they’ll be forming a line to get into the boutique for the grand opening next Saturday.

” I gathered her hand and gave it a pat.

“And if anyone gets out of line, Linc will chew them up and spit them into the lake like a fishbone.”

That made her giggle softly. “He is a rather protective bear.”

“Only with you,” I teased and saw her blush.

It was pretty obvious to everyone on the ranch that Linc was enamored with Bella Dee.

He was too shy to make a move and Bella seemed reluctant to invite any sort of courtship.

They seemed like they would be a good match.

But then again, I thought Hanley and I were really well-suited but he was still up north and seemed quite happy to be there, so what did I know about romance?

“Come with us. I promise I’ll come to the boutique tomorrow morning early and help hang those curtains Granny made for the shop. ”

“Well, if you promise to hang curtains, then I’ll come.” She rolled her bowed shoulders back, then tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “Give me ten minutes to freshen up.”

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As we had all learned—with the exception of Ford who already had known this I was sure—ten minutes in Bella-speak meant forty minutes minimum in everyone else speak.

Tonight it was a mere fifty minutes, and that was well spent because she drifted down the stairs in a shimmery pink summer dress with little white sandals on her feet.

I snuck a peek at Lincoln, who was, and this was literally the truth, standing at the bottom of the stairs with his mouth open.

“Catching flies?” I asked in a soft whisper and reached over to chuck Linc’s bearded

chin.

He shook off his stupid look. Ford took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm.

Poor Linc looked crestfallen. The urge to boot him in his ass was strong, but I was the very last person who should be handing out relationship advice, or kicks in the asses.

Trust me, I was kicking my own ass steadily.

Dodge helped Granny get her favorite green sweater on and then escorted her to his brand new used extended cab pickup.

I suspected buying a used vehicle had been a first for the well-to-do dentist, but he seemed pleased enough with it.

We'd needed another truck and Ollie's cousin had given him a hell of a deal, so all had worked out.

Linc climbed in with me, putting some distance between himself and Bella, who was riding with Dodge, Ford, Granny, and Dahn, I suspected.

"Lonely hearts club," I muttered and got a sullen grunt from the big man at my right.

"You know if you just said something to her..." I rolled my hand in a circle while we waited for the truck behind us to get everyone settled and buckled up.

He stared straight ahead as if searching the twilight sky for answers.

I felt bad for the guy. Sure, I felt bad for me too.

Unrequited love was the pits. Guess me and my brother were more alike than I had suspected.

I'd been seeing traits that I thought were solely Baker characteristics appearing in my brothers the longer we lived together.

Like how Ford chewed his lip while concentrating, or Dodge fiddled with his fingers when he was nervous, or how Linc tended to tug on the thick hoop in his ear when he was deep in thought.

Not sure if those were attributes from Cash or not.

Probably. Hopefully, we only inherited that bastard's harmless quirks.

"She's not really ready for that sort of thing. Not sure I am either. I'm here to learn to avoid stress and anxiety."

"And caring for someone is stressful?"

He threw a sharp look my way. "Have you seen the strain you've been wearing on your head like a sombrero since Hanley left?"

Fuck. Okay, he sort of had me there. Caring hurt.

I'd known that and still I'd tumbled, so I couldn't rightfully preach to this man when I had blown yet another relationship to bits.

I was pretty sure it was over. I'd not heard a word in three days.

Nothing. Zip. Zero. Not even a picture of a moose or an eagle or any of the other amazing wild things he'd been capturing with his damn camera so damn far away.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I'd taken that as a sign he had moved on and was ghosting me.

"Point made," I said. "Bella ain't Hanley.

That's all I'm saying about it." With that, I cranked the engine over and began fiddling with the radio.

Seemed Bella had forgotten something, for she was now sprinting for the house.

Linc's brown eyes followed her inside, and he instantly started rolling his ear piercing between his fingers.

"My last therapist advised me not to get into a new relationship until I was more solid in myself."

"Oh, huh. Well, sure, I get that from an addict's point of view. We're told the same thing when we're starting out on our journey to sobriety, but there comes a point when having someone in your corner makes that hard work a little easier."

"Pot meet kettle," he mumbled.

I chuckled. His sight left the front porch to land on me.

"Bella said the same thing to me like an hour ago. Fine, I get it. I'm the last man to take advice from on this subject, but just bear in mind that she is a good soul.

Kind, generous, and loving. And who the hell doesn't need someone like that in their corner when they're trying to fix themselves? "

He said nothing in reply, just turned his head to find Bella skipping out of the house

with a tiny shawl to cover her bare shoulders. She waved at us before disappearing into Dodge's new Silverado.

I played with the radio until I found something that was not sad songs about loves gone wrong, which eliminated 90 percent of country music.

Instead, I found the lone classic rock station, and we made our way to the lake as the DJ spun the entire Eagles Greatest Hits album.

As "Heartache Tonight" filled the cab, I felt kind of called out for my earlier comment about sad songs, but at least this one had a catchy beat and no mention of beer.



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Parking around the lake was basically you pulled in and parked wherever.

People, cars, and food vendors filled the small lake area.

We got Granny settled into one of the yard chairs we'd brought in the back of our trucks and then went to prowl the offerings while she chatted with some of her old friends wrapped in sweaters with blankets tucked around their legs.

The lake was pretty small compared to others but large enough to hold some nice bass and shoot fireworks over.

Our volunteer fire department was here to keep an eye on things and sell raffles for a new hunting rifle.

The ground under our feet was already packed down from the tires and hundreds of shoes that had run over it.

The poor wildlife had probably gone into hiding while wondering what the actual hell was going on.

I always felt bad for the critters when this kind of thing took place.

The rest of us went in search of food. Bella held onto Linc's arm tightly as we strolled along the row of food trucks.

Head high and chin up, she smiled graciously at the people we passed.

Many gave her odd looks, some whispered, and a few refused to acknowledge her greetings. Lots of them gave us all a wide berth.

Dahn seemed oblivious to the vibes. He was more interested in the hot dogs and cotton candy as he searched for kids his own age. A shy lad, he was both hoping to play with some kids but a little hesitant to just leap into the gaggle of boys that raced past, hooting like owls.

“Think the locals have caught onto our little band of queer brothers,” Dodge commented while we waited in line for hot dogs and soda pop.

“Good. Might as well separate the haters from the good folk early,” I said over my shoulder as a local band playing oldies wrapped up something from Bill Haley and the Comets. “Makes it easier to know who to ignore when you go to town next time.”

Dodge snickered softly, his attention on his son, who was petting a dog.

I slipped around in front of him and placed an order for four hot dogs, two bags of chips, and two large sodas for me and Granny.

After paying for my order, I took the dogs that were handed to me in little paper trays and reached for the condiments.

Granny and I both loved chopped onions and lots of mustard on our franks.

I reached for the spoon in the large bowl of white onion chunks when a familiar voice to my left nearly made me drop my wiener.

“Onions make for rough breath when kissing someone hello.”

Hanley smiled at me, scruffy as ever, perhaps even more than the last time I’d seen him, but stunningly beautiful despite the patchy beard and wrinkled clothing.

I opened my mouth to reply but my dumbass brothers shoved in to greet the wandering soul, leaving me standing to the side, frankfurter in hand, brain scrambling to connect the dots. Why was he here? Had he not ghosted me for three damn days? What did this mean?

Hanley glanced around Dodge, Ford, and Lincoln to find me gaping at my siblings' backs with a naked hot dog in my grasp.

"Next!" Mrs. Shindle shouted to get the line moving.

The music had stopped, a sure sign that the fireworks were about to start soon.

I nudged Ford aside to dress my dogs, then moved off to allow others to order.

Hanley fell in beside me, taking the one tray of food and drink from me as we walked back to where we were parked.

"You seem mad," he said while we sidestepped dogs on leashes and little kids waving sparklers. "Are you mad?"

"No, I'm just..." I ran into a verbal brick wall as I sped up my pace. What the hell was I feeling? Shocked, yes. Ecstatic, maybe. Scared, for sure. Was he just here to touch base about something, or was he here for us?

Just ask the man! FFS, Studebaker. Use your damn words.

Internal me was making lots of sense. I would do just that. As soon as I knew what words to use.

"Hanley, welcome back! Is that my dog with onions? My stars, you look good with that beard. Come down here and give me a hug," Granny shouted from her seat amongst the Bastian Grange grand dames.

Hanley bent down to hug Granny before handing off her hot dog, chips, and pop.

“You ladies look comfy,” he said to the elderly gals, eyeballing him and me in anticipation of something, but I didn’t know what.

“I’ve heard this is a great show. Mind if I hang out here and watch with the family, Mrs. Bastian? ”

“Oh shit, don’t start with that Mrs. Bastian nonsense now.

I’m Granny to you. Get your ass in the back of the truck and settle in with Baker,” Granny yelled to be heard over the announcement that the fireworks were starting in five minutes.

My brothers arrived with food and drink.

Granny barked something at them as I sat down on the tailgate of our beater farm truck beside Hanley.

He chucked his backpack behind us, then eyeballed my wiener with a gaze that made my toes curl inside my boots.

“You hungry?” I asked and got a small nod. I passed over a hot dog loaded with onions. “You’ll have to share my soda and chips.”

“Thanks. I didn’t have time to eat at the airport.

My flight out of British Columbia was late, the brush pilot had some personal issues, and that set off the chain reaction of every flight afterward being a fucking sprint to the gate.

I made it to Prince Rupert airport with about fifteen minutes to spare.

Then I crashed on the flight to OKC and woke up when we landed.

Then it was a scramble to find a rental car.

Seems Memorial Day weekend is a big travel time.

Who knew? Well, I did, but my desire to see you spurred me into accepting the last car in the lot, which was a pretty nice Nissan with so-so air conditioning, but I left the windows down so it was fine. ”

“You came back for me?” I stupidly asked.

He paused with his hot dog in front of his face. A smile pulled up at the corners of those luscious lips. “I mean...you came back for me. That’s...I wasn’t sure where we stood. I’d not heard from you for a few days and...” I let it hang.

He took a bite that made half the dog disappear. After he chewed and swallowed, he shifted on the tailgate to stare right at me. I could hear Dahn a few feet away asking when the show would start, followed by Dodge replying with a plea for him to be patient.

“And you assumed I was not returning?” I nodded. He sighed. “That’s fair. I am known for being a rambler, but I knew that there was no way I was not coming back to Oklahoma. To you. I was hoping to surprise you.”

“Well, you did that.” I laughed softly as I cradled my hot dog. “Are you sure this is what you want? I’m not a tumbleweed like you are. I tend to stay put. I mean, as long as you come back when you’re gone, then I’d like to pick up where we left off. I know that’s bold.”

“Eat your hot dog.” I blinked at his bossy tone while I melted internally. I did as he said, shoving one down, then the other. He patiently waited, plucking chips from the

bag as I scarfed down my food. When I was done, he captured my face in his hands.

A burst of sound and light startled everyone.

One bright rocket soared into the night sky, exploding into a starburst of bright red and blue.

Everyone oohed and aahed as his lips settled over mine.

I carded my fingers into his hair as his tongue slipped and knotted with mine.

Another pop and bang took place. He pulled back just an inch, his green eyes alight with desire and affection.

“Dual onion breath,” he whispered, then kissed me again. What a dork.

“I missed the hell out of you,” I confessed over his sweet, sweet lips. “I love you.”

“Same, same, same. So much the same.” Our mouths melded once more. “Love you too, baby, so damn much.”

“You still scared?”

“Terrified.”

“Me too. We’ll be scared together?”

“Yeah, we will.”

When we came up for air, I snuggled into his side as close as I could as a large chrysanthemum burst of pure white lit up the sky. I didn’t know exactly what our future held. No one really did. All that I was certain of was that he had come back. To

Oklahoma. To Bastian Grange. To me.

And right now, that was more than enough.

The End