



Hollis (The Moore Men #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When the universe hands me a hot, older, recently divorced man on a silver platter, who am I to turn down such a generous offer?

Big deal if he also happens to be my best friend's boss.

Ford Wesley, Captain of the Wolf Creek Fire Department, is the whole package, with hair that's a delicious mix of dark and silver strands, and deep brown eyes that hold a touch of mystery.

He's also always been off the market... Until now.

When he gets caught in a bind and has to temporarily stay on my family's property, I know it's my chance to get closer to him, but I never expected it to be so easy.

One night, I match with an anonymous stranger on an app, and it doesn't take long for things to go from innocent and flirty to raunchy and scorching.

Then when I catch a glimpse of my new neighbor shirtless one day, it becomes clear Mr. Tall, Broody, and Off Limits is the mystery man sending filthy messages to me every night online.

The best part? His profile may be anonymous, but mine isn't... He knows exactly who he's talking to.

The chemistry on the app morphs into a reality in the sheets...and at the firehouse, and what starts out as a secret, no-strings arrangement quickly becomes so much more. Before I know it, it's not just his body I crave, but everything he keeps close to his heart as well.

But I'm not the settle down type, and he's fresh out of a long marriage. When push comes to shove, will this turn into something more, or are we destined to crash and burn?

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One

Ford

“ I ’m tellin’ you, Cap. It’s about damn time you get back on the horse, if ya know what I mean.

” Remi, my lieutenant, waggles his brows.

Tipping his half empty beer bottle in my direction, a dimply smirk curves the corner of his mouth before he takes a swig.

A round of grunts follows from the rest of my team at the table as they agree with him.

Heaving a sigh, I swipe my beer off the table and toss back what’s left before standing and eyeing my team. “I’m gettin’ another round, but anybody who doesn’t drop this conversation by the time I come back doesn’t get one. Understood?”

Remi chuckles and rolls his eyes, but eventually nods, the rest of the table relenting too. It’s been a long, grueling couple of days, and what I need is to clear my mind and get some sleep. The last thing I want to do is talk about my dating life, or lack thereof, especially with my subordinates.

Standing at the counter, I signal for another round from Levi, the owner and the only one manning this place currently.

It's not too busy, but it's early, and they've got live music tonight, so I'd imagine the seats will start filling up any time now.

The Rusty Spur is the typical hole-in-the-wall dive bar you'd find in a small town.

Located a few blocks from the fire station, it's a spot my crew and I frequent after shifts to wind down.

Doesn't hurt they also serve the best street tacos around.

Beers in hand, I join the rest of my crew at the table again.

Luckily, they've all seemed to have forgotten about Remi's ludicrous suggestion for the time being as they talk about the call we took earlier today—a rescue for a woman and her donkey who managed to get stuck on the roof of her house.

It was definitely a unique one, and I shake my head, breathing out a chuckle as I remember the way the donkey was hollering at us to get him down.

The owner had attempted to, but when she got up there, the ladder fell away from the house, leaving them both trapped.

As captain of the Wolf Creek Fire Department, with over twenty-five years of experience, I've responded to hundreds of calls that left me scratching my head and wondering how they got themselves in that predicament.

When you receive that call from dispatch, you never know what you're going to get; no two calls are ever the same.

One minute, we could be walking into a Class D fire with mass casualties and the odds stacked against us, and the next, we're called out to rescue a woman and her

farm animal from the roof of her ranch home.

It keeps things interesting, keeps us on our toes.

Over the next hour or so, we all shoot the shit and finish off the rest of our beers while the band gets set up.

By the time they start playing, most of my crew has wandered away from the table, leaving me here alone with Remi.

When he glances my way, I already know what's coming before he even says a word.

For the last two years, I've gone through quite the rough patch with my husband, Trent.

Although, separated but living under the same roof is a more accurate way to put it.

There have been endless evenings spent in individual and couples therapy, dozens of heated arguments that have blown up into days spent not saying a single word to one another, and me living out of our guest bedroom for the majority of it all.

Recently, it all came to a head, when we both seemed to reach our breaking point at the same time.

I hired a lawyer and finally filed for divorce—something that should've happened years ago.

At first, we agreed to continue living together.

It was the most cost effective, and we had been doing it for so long already, but it wasn't working anymore.

So, a few weeks ago, I found a cheap little rental near the station.

Days away from the move, I was all packed and ready to go when a heavy storm rolled into town, sending a huge tree out of the ground and onto the house.

I was back at square one, but there was no way I was returning to the house I shared with Trent, so I've been crashing at the firehouse since then.

Up until yesterday, I've kept my living arrangements a secret from my crew, which is how I prefer it.

I've always been a more private person, and I hadn't shared anything about my marital troubles with anybody at work because it never seemed like something I needed to dump on them.

Especially when they all have their own lives and problems, and our job is high stress as it is.

But also, because Trent is a fellow firefighter, just at a different station.

Everybody knows him. They're friends with him.

I didn't want to put anyone in the middle.

When Trent and I decided divorce was the path we wanted to take, I knew my crew, and his, would find out eventually, but I was hoping I'd be in my new place by the time that happened.

It's more than a little humiliating to admit I'm technically homeless.

It would seem the universe had other plans for me, though, because Trent's sister is

friends with one of my firefighters, Chandler Bernard, and she spilled the beans.

Predictable small-town gossip found its way back to Firefighter Bernard, and when she came to me about it, I knew it was time to come clean to everyone.

Remi's been in wingman mode ever since.

He steps away from the table and comes back a few minutes later with a fresh beer in each hand, offering me one before spinning his chair around and dropping onto it.

Taking a long swig from the bottle, Remi's crystal-blue eyes dance with mirth as they never leave my face.

His excitement is vibrating off him, and it has me grinding my teeth in anticipation.

Out of everyone on my crew, I'm the closest to Remi, and not only because he's my lieutenant.

Charles, Remi's father, had been my best friend our entire life until the day he died when Remi was thirteen.

I was with him in his final moments, and he made me promise to always keep an eye on his family.

Our family, because that's exactly what they were to me.

Since his death, I've done my best to look out for Remi and try to steer him on the right path, even when he's always been hellbent on being reckless and boneheaded... Like his father.

Remi's the closest thing I have to a son, which is why I know whatever he's about to

say is out of love, even though I don't want to hear it.

And sure enough, a minute later, he sets his beer down and points a finger at me from across the table.

“You need to download a datin’ app,” he drawls, a smirk tugging on his lips.

“For real, Cap. The best way to get over someone is to?—”

Holding up a hand, I cut him off. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Buchanan, or I’ll have you cleanin’ the toilets for the rest of the year.”

Remi throws his head back and laughs. “Okay, shit, no need to threaten me. I’m simply suggestin’ downloadin’ the app and seein’ what’s out there. Couldn’t hurt to have a little fun.”

I understand where he’s coming from, I really do, but my stomach twists into a tight, painful knot at even the thought of doing something like that. “I’m too fuckin’ old for datin’ apps,” I spit out before taking a swig from my bottle.

“You’re forty-seven, not ninety.” He snorts. “You’re definitely not too old. I’ve come across plenty of men and women your age, and older, on those apps. This isn’t Santa Claus, Cap. There’s no max age limit to datin’.”

Thinking over what Remi’s saying, I will admit there’s some small part of me that is intrigued. That wonders what it would be like.

But I can’t.

There’s no way I’m ready for something like that.

Not when the divorce papers have barely been filed with the courthouse for the marriage I've been in for the last twenty-three years.

Hell, I don't know if I'll ever be ready.

Sure, Remi is right—forty-seven isn't ninety—but it is old enough to wonder if maybe I'm better off alone for the rest of my life.

Surely, that's easier and less stress-inducing than the alternative.

The smartest move for me is nipping this conversation in the bud before Remi gets too involved.

When he sets his mind to something, he's a dog with a bone, and I don't need that right now. Or maybe ever.

"Drop it, Buchanan," I warn. "It ain't happenin'."

"You're no fun," he groans with a roll of his eyes. "But if you happen to change your mind, Hive is a good one to download. I've had a lot of success on there."

"Not changin' my mind. "

Breathing out a laugh, Remi nods and says, "Okay, but in case ya do."

It's another couple of hours before we all decide to call it a night.

It couldn't come a moment too soon. I'm exhausted in every sense of the word.

Mind, body, soul. The last couple of years have been hard, but I was able to bury the stress for the most part by putting my all into work.

Lately, though, it's becoming impossible to ignore.

The stress is catching up to me, and I feel it in my tired, achy bones.

The walk back to the firehouse only takes about five minutes, and I have every intention of climbing into bed and sleeping for the next twelve hours, but as luck would have it, as soon as I slide in between the sheets, my mind can't seem to shut off.

Remi's ridiculous suggestion is at the forefront, despite me not wanting it to be.

Heaving a heavy sigh, I grab my phone from the nightstand and unlock it, pulling up the app store.

For a moment, I stare at the home page. This is crazy, right?

Downloading a dating app at my age, while going through a divorce... That's a horrible idea, isn't it?

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Although, would it really be the worst idea in the world?

I'm sure plenty of people going through divorces and breakups do this.

What do I have to lose if I download an app and it doesn't work out?

Honestly, nothing, other than maybe my time.

And if anything, it could serve as an interesting distraction from my real life.

Remembering what Remi said, I look up Hive in the search bar.

It pops up right away, and my heart jumps to my throat.

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, my finger hovers over the download button for a moment until the devil on my shoulder wins my internal battle.

It'll be fine.

There's no harm in looking. If I hate it, I can always delete the whole thing and pretend it never happened.

It doesn't have to be this big thing that I'm making it out to be in my head.

Once the app fully downloads, I open it and start setting up a profile.

The number of questions I have to answer is alarming.

Age, height, body type, what I'm looking for, marital status, do I have any kids or pets, my profession, hobbies.

The list goes on and on, and unless I want news of me on this app to spread like wildfire through my small, nosy town—and the entire firehouse—I can't truthfully answer over half of these.

Answering what I can and leaving the rest blank, I move to the next page, where I'm prompted to upload pictures.

Scrolling through my photo album, I quickly realize I don't have a single decent picture of myself that Trent isn't in.

Well, shit.

I suppose I could not put a picture up at all.

But, realistically speaking, who's out there matching with a faceless profile?

Isn't that the whole point of this type of thing?

Not putting one up would defeat the purpose.

Or at the very least, make whatever options I could have a lot slimmer.

No, I have to put something , but that means either using one that has my husband in it or taking one right now.

I don't love either option, but the latter seems like the better choice.

I could always wait until my next shift and have Remi take a few for me, but I'd

never hear the end of it. Besides, I know myself well enough; if I wait, I'll find a way to talk myself out of it.

No. Fuck that. I'll figure this out myself.

Tossing the covers off my body, I roll out of bed and pad into the bathroom.

There's no reason to overthink this, especially when there's a good chance I'll wake up tomorrow, more sober than I am now, and delete the app anyway.

After I flip on the light switch and nearly go blind from the sudden brightness, I stand in front of the mirror and stare at my reflection for a moment.

I may not be in my twenties anymore—or even my thirties, for that matter—and the hair on my head, beard, and chest may be sprinkled with more gray these days, but I'd like to think I look good for my age.

Objectively speaking, I'm an attractive man.

My job keeps me active and in shape, but I also make it a point to hit the gym at least a few times a week or go for a run on days when the weather isn't unbearably hot.

And if what Remi said is true, people go for older guys.

Deciding to not overthink any more about it, I snap a few shots, keeping my face out of view.

With each one, I feel more awkward than the last. Once I have a solid handful, I scroll through them and find a couple that work.

After uploading them, I switch off the light and walk back into the Captain's Bunk,

climbing into bed again as I tap the button to complete my profile, then see who I've got waiting for me.

The first person I'm shown is FreddyXOXO, an attractive man with dark hair and a nice, bright smile.

Reading through his bio, I quickly realize this isn't off to a good start.

"Not looking for a relationship! I'm in need of a strong man to help me install flooring at my new place!

Can provide pizza, beer, and other fun forms of compensation.

" He ends the bio with a winking emoji, an eggplant emoji, and a water drop emoji.

No, thank you.

I'm all for lending a helping hand, but that's not really what I have in mind.

LookingForOurUnicorn is the next profile. The bio states they're a happily married couple looking to add a third to spice things up.

Absolutely not. Nothing against threesomes or open marriages, but it's not for me. Sitting at oh for two, I decide to check out one last profile before calling it a night. Maybe I'll have better luck in the daytime.

Swiping left on the married couple, my mouth dries when the next profile comes up.

KnockinBoots is twenty-eight. Eh, a little young for my liking, but I suppose not a total deal-breaker either.

The first picture is strictly an ab shot; no face or anything, but as I scroll to the next one, my stomach bottoms out, and I drop the phone like a hot potato when I recognize the face staring back at me.

Fuck.

After a minute, I grab the phone again and scroll through the rest of them, just to be sure.

Leave it to me to find somebody I know right away.

Right as I'm about to swipe left on KnockinBoots because—obviously—I'm not interested in climbing into bed with my lieutenant's best friend, something has me pausing.

His pictures are...interesting, to say the least. His bio is witty, which isn't a surprise, and his pictures are...

hot. Hollis lives and works on his family's cattle ranch, so there's some of him with the cows or in front of the barn.

There's even one of him on a tractor, with a caption quoting that classic Kenny Chesney song.

For some reason, I can't stop staring at the last picture on his profile.

Standing in the middle of what looks like an empty pasture, droplets of sweat drip down his chest that's sprinkled with a light smattering of dark hair extending across the center of his chiseled six-pack and continuing down into the hot pink boxer briefs he's wearing.

His large, oval belt buckle and dark-wash Wranglers hang low on his hips, unbuttoned, revealing the beginning of what looks to be an impressive bulge.

Everything about this picture exudes confidence and sex appeal.

And I already know he has no trouble getting laid.

As I continue examining the picture, I can't help but feel...

so mething. Awe, maybe? Or maybe even a little admiration at the confidence it must've taken to post something like this.

But also, maybe a little flair of something else altogether.

Something I refuse to give much thought to, but something that has me unable to swipe to the left for a third time tonight.

Swallowing thickly around the golf ball lodged in my throat, I drag my finger to the right before I have a chance to overthink it, then just as quickly, set it face down on the nightstand before rolling over and forcing myself to sleep.

The swirling of arousal in my gut makes that somewhat of a challenge, especially when the buzz coming from my phone fills the dark, quiet room, but I don't let myself check it.

Tomorrow.

This app can be future Ford's problem.

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Two

Hollis

“ O uch, goddamn!” I hiss, jumping back from the stove while swiping my hand over the bacon grease splatter on my lower stomach.

That got me fucking good. Settling my gaze on the reddened flesh, I know it’s going to leave a mark.

Probably why my dad always gave me shit for cooking in my underwear growing up.

Maybe I’ll finally learn my lesson.

Laughter bubbles past my lips, because that’s seriously doubtful .

When I was younger, my mom would tell me I was like a moth to a flame.

I would get hurt constantly, doing dumb boy shit, yet I would never learn my lesson.

One summer, when I was probably ten or eleven, I jerry-rigged a ramp for my dirt bike that overlooked the creek behind my house.

I thought if I caught enough air and came at the water fast enough, I could almost ride on top of the water.

It was a dumbass idea formed after watching hours of dirt bike YouTube videos in

the dead of night when my parents were asleep, fueled by my older brother egging me on and the inherent need to prove him wrong and be better than him.

That ended with me in a neon-green plaster cast for the rest of summer break, but not even a broken bone could've stopped me from attempting the stunt for a second time—you know, for good measure—which landed me with a gnarly black-and-blue ankle sprain to go with my already broken arm and a long, boring lecture from my parents about the importance of safety.

So, it's safe to say, it usually takes me a few times before I learn my lesson.

An everyday glutton for punishment, if you will.

But to be fair, it wasn't my fault I got splashed with sizzling grease just now.

In fact, I'd even go as far as to say, I'm somewhat of a pro at cooking bacon in my chonies without injury.

If anyone is to blame for my lack of attention, it's FireInMyVeins , the late-forties daddy who I just matched with on Hive .

I don't typically waste my time on profiles that don't show their face or give much information in their bio about what they're looking for—both of which apply to FireInMyVeins —but the sexy, half-naked mirror selfies that gave off major Myspace vibes and the short, three-second video had me intrigued enough to say fuck my usual rules.

Imagine my delight when we were a match.

Hence the grease burn that's quite uncomfortable for how little it is in size.

After I flip the bacon, I turn around and open the fridge, reaching for the cantaloupe sitting on the middle shelf beside an unopened case of beer.

I've been dying to devour it since I picked it up at the market last night.

Grabbing a knife out of the drawer, I cut it into nice, triangle-shaped pieces, pausing about halfway through when a notification comes in, causing my phone to buzz on the counter.

A smile tugs on my lips as I wipe off my hands on the dish towel beside the sink before opening the message from Mr. Fire Daddy.

I was planning to shoot him a message once I finished cooking breakfast, but he beat me to it.

Eager... Just how I like 'em.

I chuckle to myself as I read the message, which is a response to one of my pictures.

FireInMyVeins: Great song. Saw him perform it live when it first came out.

Interesting choice for an introduction message, but I can dig it.

KnockinBoots: Damn, pretty sure I was just a youngin' when that song came out. Maybe instead of calling you Fire Daddy, I should call you Granddaddy Fire instead.
wink emoji *smirk emoji*

Hopefully, this mystery man has a sense of humor.

After a minute passes and it still shows unread, I close out of the app and finish chopping up the cantaloupe.

As soon as I'm done, I'm right back to ogling his pictures and that damn video.

The badass compass tattoo on his ribs is hot.

And the hand trailing down his chest looks like he definitely knows the meaning of hard work, which will always be a huge turn on for me.

Somebody with a strong work ethic and willingness to get their hands dirty will catch my eye ten out of ten times.

As somebody who has been expected to pull his weight on my family's ranch since I was old enough to walk and talk, I've come to learn the squeaky clean, button-up type of people will never do it for me.

Neither will someone who expects life to be handed to them on a silver platter.

I can't relate to somebody with that kind of mindset, which I guess isn't that big of a deal, given the fact I don't do relationships of any kind, so relating to them isn't a huge priority.

But relatability aside, it's also a turn-off, which is probably why the sight of his large, rough hand sliding down his fuzzy abdomen is so damn hypnotizing, and why I can't stop drooling over him and wishing there was more.

My mouth waters every single time I get to the end of the video, when his hand dips below his boxers, giving me the briefest sneak peek of a thick patch of dark hair.

Fuck, what I wouldn't give to see what that patch leads to.

If I have any say in the matter, I'll be finding that out in no time.

By this afternoon, preferably. That is, if he doesn't get offended by my response.

Who knows? Maybe pointing out our hefty age gap will freak him out.

I've bagged my fair share of older men before, even a couple of silver foxes—there's just something about a seasoned man, with a whole lot of life experience under his belt, that makes my dick hard like nothing else can.

I can confidently say most of them don't give a shit about an age difference, but there are the occasional few who prefer not to acknowledge it for whatever reason.

Luckily, I don't have to wait long to find out which side he swings on the pendulum, as a new message from him pops up a moment later.

Despite knowing nothing about this guy, other than the fact that he has a deliciously husky chest and he's, much to my liking, pro-bush, I'm drawn to him and find myself wanting his response to be flirty rather than put off.

Before I have a chance to find out one way or another, an acrid scent fills my nostrils.

Without even looking, I already know what I'm going to find as I spin around.

“Shit! Fuck!” Feet planted in place, I stare at the stove, wide-eyed, my hands held up in front of me as my mind blanks. As I watch the little yellow and orange flames blaze around the really fucking burnt bacon, I'm frozen for a moment.

There's a fucking fire.

A fire!

What do I do ?

In school, you're taught the proper procedure in case of a fire.

Firefighters come out to the school, walking kids through a plan, step by step, even sending them into a dark portable filled with fog that's meant to resemble smoke and have us find our way out safely—which is honestly a little fucking intense for elementary school, if you ask me—so, I should know what to do.

Yet here I am, standing in my kitchen like a moth to a goddamn flame .

Shit.

“Okay, we got this,” I mutter aloud as I open the drawer beside the stove and grab a potholder.

“It's a small fire. No biggy. You've handled worse.

You're a fucking cowboy, for Christ's sake.

” I wave the potholder over the flames while blowing on them with my mouth, but it's not doing much of anything. “Fuck!”

Okay, it's fine. Plan B, it is.

Finding my phone, I pull up a number I know can help me.

The line starts ringing as I place the call on speaker before setting it down on the counter next to the stove.

My heart's beating so fast, you'd think there was a wild herd of cattle fleeing in a wild stampede behind my ribcage.

I keep blowing and waving the mitt over the flames until the line connects, my best friend, Remi's, deep voice coming through.

"Little early for a call, isn't it, Hol?"

"There's a fire!" I blurt out as I toss the potholder off to the side and place my hands on my hips while I stare at the phone.

"What?" Remi hisses. "The fuck ya mean, there's a fire? Where?"

"On my stove. I was making bacon and got a little distracted."

"Did you call 9-1-1?"

"No, I called you. "

Remi huffs a dry laugh. I imagine him pinching the bridge of his nose. "Dude, why the fuck would you call me before calling 9-1-1?"

My brows dip. "Uh, because you're a firefighter? And who would they send here? Firefighters. I'm savin' us both time by cuttin' out the middleman."

"Not really how that works, but whatever. Your world, Hollis. We're just livin' in it."

"Damn right, it is." I chuckle. "Now, are you goin' to help me so I don't burn my house down?"

Heaving a sigh, Remi says, "I'm assumin', based on you being relatively calm, the fire isn't huge?"

I shake my head, as if he could see me. "Not yet, but it's growin'."

“Okay, good. Grease fires have to be handled a bit differently than a regular fire, but I’ll tell ya what to do.”

Remi keeps talking, but as I watch the flames grow taller, his voice fades away, and my stomach twists in knots.

Then it hits me what I need to do—what the firefighters taught us in elementary school...

Water! Honestly, that should’ve been my first thought, but clearly, I’m not cut out for pressure in the face of fire.

Guess it’s a good thing I stuck with the family ranch instead of following my best buddy to the fire academy after we graduated high school.

Swiping the potholder off the counter again, I use it to pick up the skillet by the handle and bring it to the sink.

Once I have it under the faucet, I flip on the water just as my ears tune in to the tail end of what Remi’s saying.

“...but whatever you do, do not use water.”

“Oh, shit!” I sputter, jumping back from the sink as the flames double before I even realize what’s happening.

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“Oh shit, what?” Remi bites out.

“Uh, so... may have used a little water.”

“Christ,” he hisses before I hear him call out to somebody in the background.

“It’s spreading,” I state, my pulse racing and mouth dry while I watch in horror as the flames take hold of the curtains above the sink. I fucking knew those goddamn curtains were a bad idea. “Wait— I have a fire extinguisher!”

“Do not!” Remi barks through the line. “Don’t use the fire extinguisher. That’ll be just as bad as the water. We’re on our way, but it’ll take us around five minutes to get there.”

“Okay, what am I supposed to do in the meantime?” I ask, the roughness in my tone giving way to the panic steadily rising in my chest. “Sit here and watch it burn?”

“Do you have any bakin’ soda?”

Thinking for a moment, I say, “Yeah.”

“Good, grab that,” he orders me.

With a shaky hand, I open the cabinet to the left of the stove, finding the little orange box easily. “Got it,” I confirm as I take my place in front of the sink again, waiting for his next instruction.

“Pour a good amount of the baking soda onto the fire, but carefully .”

“How much of it do I use?” I ask as I do what he said while also trying not to get burned in the process.

“The whole box, probably,” he replies. “I don’t know how much you have, but it takes a lot. If you have a metal lid, you can cover the pan with that when you’re done. The fire should consume all the oxygen and put itself out.”

Emptying the rest of the baking soda from the container, I set it on the counter before searching for a lid. “Metal?” I ask. “It can’t be glass?”

“Glass will shatter,” Remi mutters. “We’re pullin’ into the ranch now. Should be at your place in a minute. If you have a metal one, use that. If not, just wait.”

After I grab what I need out of the cabinet, I drop the lid not-so-graciously on top of the skillet in the sink. “Okay, got it,” I confirm, my shoulders relaxing a little as it appears to be working.

The call disconnects, and a moment later, I hear the front door that’s almost never locked—perks of living in the middle of a several-hundred-acre ranch—open, then the sound of heavy footsteps on the hardwood floor.

Remi’s the first face I see, followed by Chandler and Sam, two of his co-workers, and Ford, his hot-as-sin captain.

They’re done up in full gear, and even though I know there’s bigger fish to fry, I can’t help but drag my gaze as inconspicuously as possible down the length of the sexy, older, and—sadly—very married man standing at the entrance of my kitchen.

Fuck, why must the good ones always be married?

Clearing his throat, my gaze slides forward to Remi, who clearly caught me checking out his boss. A smirk tugs on my lips as I breathe out a chuckle. “Fire’s out,” I offer enthusiastically, gesturing toward the sink. “Curtains ain’t salvageable, though.”

“We’ll take a look at everything in here,” Captain drawls, pulling my attention back to him.

A zip of excitement shoots down my spine as I watch his gaze lower before coming back up to my face just as quickly.

His thick brows are furrowed, lips pressed into a thin, tight line before he adds, “While you put some clothes on.”

It’s not until the words leave his mouth that it dawns on me that I’m still only wearing a pair of briefs. “Oh, yeah.” I snort. “No problem.”

By the time I get dressed and go back to the kitchen, they’re finished with whatever looking around they needed to do.

Ford lectures me on the importance of safety in the kitchen before I walk them out, watching all but Remi file inside the truck—sorry, the “engine,” as Remi never fails to correct me, as if he expects me to remember every last bit of fireman lingo he teaches me.

Patting a hand to my best friend’s shoulder, I say, “Thanks for comin’ out.”

“No problem, man,” he drawls. Arching a brow, Remi adds, “But next time, call 9-1-1 first. If I wouldn’t have been able to answer your call and tell ya what to do, that could’ve ended a hell of a lot worse than it did.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya.”

Remi shifts his body so he's fully facing me, his back to the engine. Lowering his voice, he says, "There's somethin' I want to ask ya before we go, but keep quiet about it."

"Right, because I'm such a town gossip," I tease. "What's up?"

Breathing out a laugh, Remi throws a quick look over his shoulder before bringing his attention to me. "Was hopin' you could talk to Daddy Moore about renting out one of the spare cabins y'all got."

"Why?" My brows pinch, but my curiosity is piqued. "For who?"

"Ford," Remi all but whispers, like the captain's got supersonic hearing. "He's goin' through a divorce and has been staying at the firehouse while he looks for a place to live. I think one of the cabins would be a perfect temporary spot for him until something else comes up."

Oh shit, divorce? My curiosity is more than piqued now.

"Kind of a big ask, my guy," I drawl, groaning dramatically and rolling my eyes, as if the idea of having a newly single, fine-ass specimen of a man living on the property would put me out whatsoever. "But I suppose I could do that for you."

"Oh, please," Remi scoffs with a shake of his head.

"I'm just kiddin'." I laugh. "Of course, I'll talk to my dad. Shouldn't be a problem, man."

"Cool, thanks. And remember, keep quiet."

I mock salute my friend. "Yes, sir."

“Thanks.” Remi strolls down the stairs, throwing me a glance over his shoulder once he reaches the bottom. “And no more fuckin’ fires. People are goin’ to start thinkin’ y’all are doin’ it on purpose.”

“Yup, The Moore men—cattle ranchers by day, pyrotechnics by night.” I chuckle.

Several months back, our barn caught on fire—an electrical issue—and the whole town came together to help us repair it.

That one was a hell of a lot bigger than this one, but thankfully, nothing catastrophic.

We got lucky. The damage could’ve been a lot worse.

“And who knows, maybe I’m startin’ the fires as an excuse to see my very best friend, who never makes time for me. ”

Remi barks out a laugh that’s contagious. “Because hangin’ out several days a week for sure qualifies as never makin’ time, ya fuckin’ dramatic fool.”

“If y’all are about done gabbin’ like a coupla old bitties, can we get this show on the road, Buchanan?” Ford shouts.

“Yeah, Buchanan, can’t keep him waiting.” I snort as Remi pins me with an unamused look and flips me off.

“Comin’ Cap!”

As he jogs away from me toward the engine, I wave at Ford, who’s staring at me through the windshield with an expression I can’t quite place. Whatever it is, though, doesn’t look pleasant. “Thanks for the assistance!” I call out, biting back a laugh at the scowl on his face as they drive off.

Shit, who pissed in his Cheerios this morning?

Remembering what Remi shared with me about Ford's situation, his mood does make sense, I guess. Not that I have any experience as far as marriages and divorces go, nor do I ever plan on it. But I'd imagine going through something like that would probably make anybody a little grouchy.

Still, he should really work on that resting bitch face.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

Three

Ford

D octorDickedDown: Trying to meet up and fuck tonight?

CrownJewels: Let me set the scene for you, big guy: You.

Me. An epic horror movie marathon. Couple of beers.

Maybe we pop an edible or two, depending on how frisky you're trying to get.

Then we spend the night seeing who can make the other cum the most before tapping out.

All I need to know is, your place or mine?

SirDicksALot: I'll show you mine if you show me yours, sexy. ;)

"For fuck's sake," I grumble, tossing my phone on the bed beside me before scrubbing a hand down my face.

This app is a fucking joke. It's barely been two days, and so far, almost every message I've received is way too forward for my liking, creepy, or downright disturbing.

How are people finding anybody actually worth meeting?

A relationship isn't exactly what I should be searching for, but this no-emotion, damn near clinical, quick fuck hook-up culture that seems to be prevalent these days isn't what I want either.

If I wasn't still so hellbent on Remi not finding out about this, I'd chew his ass out for giving me such a god-awful suggestion.

But no, I can't tell him, nor would I want to even if I could.

Not only is it wildly unprofessional for me—his superior—to share personal information in regard to my dating life, but this experience has already been dreadful enough.

The last thing I need is to add humiliation on top of it when he finds out I am horrible at this.

My phone lights up with what I can only assume is either another wildly perverted proposition or a random, unsolicited nude from the most piss-poor angle.

As I stare at the notification, I consider, not for the first time, deleting my profile altogether.

While I'm sure Remi was right when he said there are tons of men my age on there, the more I swipe, the more I truly don't think this is for me.

I'm not cut out for the modern technology aspect of dating.

Call me old-fashioned, or just plain old, maybe, but meeting somebody in person and getting to know them the way I used to back in the day sounds exponentially better than this crap shoot I've managed to land myself in.

It's not like there aren't ample opportunities to meet somebody organically in my line of work.

Not only have I known several colleagues on the force who have found their partner through work, but it's also how I met Trent.

Back when I was a relatively fresh face at the Wolf Creek Fire Department—way before I made captain, or even lieutenant—my crew responded to a call about somebody stuck in the elevator at the doctor's office Trent worked at.

He didn't join the force until a few years later.

A couple of days after the call, he brought a batch of snickerdoodle cookies to the firehouse as a thank you, and the rest is pretty much history.

While our situation isn't a glowing example, it's at least proof that it's possible to meet somebody without the help of a goddamn useless app that was probably created by some horny frat bro just looking to get laid.

Heaving a sigh, I unlock my phone and pull up the app, mentally deciding to call it quits if this is another weird message.

KnockinBoots: Hey, I swear I'm not one of those douche-canoes who match and never make an effort to talk or meet up. It's just been one hell of a couple days over in my neck of the woods. *sweating emoji* But I'm here now and more than a little intrigued by you, Fire Daddy.

KnockinBoots: Or should I say, Granddaddy Fire? *wink emoji*

My nostrils flare as I huff out a chuckle, remembering how he managed to make me blush and feel ancient in the span of a couple of messages.

I really shouldn't reply. It's bad enough that I wound up at his house responding to a fire right after messaging him back, and he was practically naked when we showed up.

It took all my effort to not check him out.

Yet my fingers move across my screen, typing out a response anyway.

FireInMyVeins: You really shouldn't. *face with raised eyebrow emoji*

KnockinBoots: *yawn emoji* if you're boring, that's all you gotta say, baby.

Rereading the last message, it's not until several seconds later that I realize I'm grinning down at the phone in my hand, feeling more amused than I have in weeks.

Which is pathetic, considering Hollis is the last person I should enjoy talking to.

We've only exchanged a handful of messages but, like he said a moment ago, I'm intrigued for some unknown reason.

Since creating my profile, I've gone back and forth about whether swiping right on him was really a simple slip-of-the-finger accident I've been telling myself it was.

My first instinct is to lean into it being a drunken mistake.

It's the easiest answer, the logical and simple answer.

And it's the answer that would likely help me avoid a mid-life crisis, because it's not lost on me that this is exactly what that is.

I'm newly single for the first time in over two decades, and the only person I've

matched with is Hollis, Remi's best friend and somebody nearly half my age.

That said, he's the one and only reason I've been hesitant to delete the app.

It's not like he knows who I am anyway, so who cares if we exchange a few innocent messages?

Before I have a chance to respond, another message comes in.

KnockinBoots: So, gotta ask... what's with the vague as hell profile?

FireInMyVeins: Why not?

KnockinBoots: Ah-ah, that's not an answer. I asked, you must answer. Rules are rules. *smirk emoji*

FireInMyVeins: Rules, huh? Must've missed those during the HR enrollment briefing.

KnockinBoots: Well you're in luck! I've got the rules typed up, printed, and hung up on the wall in my bedroom. You can find me kneeling in front of my bed, reciting them bad boys like a prayer every single night at 8:15 sharp. As a matter of fact, I am HR—surprise!

My chest rumbles with a chuckle as I toss the phone beside me and roll out of bed.

The conversation is ridiculous, yet I can't help but want to keep it going.

It's been too damn long since I've had a conversation with somebody new that wasn't about work or the divorce.

Sure, we've barely exchanged a handful of messages containing hardly any substance, but it still feels...

nice. Even though it can never go anywhere.

But they're just innocent messages from an anonymous face, right?

Padding barefoot across the dark room, I open the fridge and grab a bottle of water before cracking it open and guzzling it down.

Staying at the firehouse is getting old.

It's like living in a college dorm all over again, except this time, I'm middle-aged and pathetic.

I need to find a place to rent, and fast, before I go crazy.

This isn't sustainable, and at this point, I wouldn't even care if my next place was a small studio loft above somebody's garage. I just need something that's mine.

Trent and I have our first court date in a couple of days.

I'm ready to get this over with and get my name off the mortgage.

Knowing I'm paying for a house that I'm no longer living in, and will continue doing so until the divorce is finalized, is a special kind of insanity.

Regardless of who's the most at fault for the split—and playing the blame game is pointless—I was raised by a very southern mama, and she would kick my ass into next week if she knew I wasn't keeping up on my responsibilities.

Leaving Trent the home was the right thing to do; he's always loved it more than me, but that doesn't make forking out the money to pay for it any easier.

It's easy to fall into a pool of bitterness and anger if I think too hard about the situation, which is why I prefer to stay busy as much as I can.

And hell, that could be why I'm enjoying the silly back-and-forth banter with KnockinBoots, aka Hollis .

Maybe talking to somebody I shouldn't through the phone without any expectations or preconceived notions is the exact type of distraction I need.

Maybe it's simply about finding companionship with someone who doesn't know me, or at least, isn't aware that he knows me.

Whatever the reason may be, it has me grabbing my phone as soon as I climb back under the covers.

I reread our last few messages again, laughing at how absurd they sound, before thumbing out a response.

FireInMyVeins: Kneeling... Reciting rules like prayer... HR? Yikes. *wince emoji*
And you say I'M boring? Think the call's coming from inside the house, cowboy.
cowboy emoji

His response is instant, which I like. Having somebody's whole attention. Well, either that, or he's already on the app talking to other people. Admittedly, that makes more sense, but for whatever reason, I don't like that option.

KnockinBoots: Clearly, you've been kneeling with the wrong people if you included that in your description of boring. Ain't nothin' boring about that around me.

My face heats, and like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, I drop the phone and stare up at the ceiling for a minute, my heart a steady drum in my chest, beating so damn hard I can feel it up in my throat.

Christ, Ford, relax!

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

So what? He said something flirty, big deal.

It is common knowledge around town that Hollis is a flirt.

We are on a dating app, after all, so flirting is going to happen.

Besides, it's not like it's the first time somebody on here has said something suggestive to me.

How is this any different? It shouldn't be, right?

Except with the other ones, all I felt reading them was a slight annoyance or even just...

I don't know, indifference. I didn't feel the urge to respond, or do anything, really, other than close out of the message and go about my day.

There was no racing pulse, no dry mouth, no sweaty palms. Reading the brazen things the other people sent didn't have my chest squeezing or send a wave of tingles over my body.

There was no excitement coursing through my veins, no giddiness that can only be compared to sneaking around as a teenager—doing something you know you shouldn't be doing.

The rush that overcomes you, the one that makes whatever you're doing that much more fun because it's wrong... The right kind of wrong.

I didn't feel any of that with the other messages.

So, why do I with him ?

As if Hollis can sense the inner turmoil and near-existential dread, another message from him rolls in. Grabbing my phone, my thumb hovers over the notification for a beat before finally opening it.

KnockinBoots: Uh-oh... didn't scare you away, did I, Fire Daddy?

Did he scare me away? It kind of seems that way, but not enough to un-match with him.

Fuck , this is so wrong. If he knew who I was, he'd probably lose all interest in flirting with me. I'm being deceitful. Deleting him from the app would be the smartest thing to do. Then I could focus on meeting somebody who isn't off limits. Somebody more my age.

But I don't want to.

Not because I'm interested in the idea of taking this further with Hollis—because I'm not—but because the idea of small talking with a stranger on a platform like this makes my palms sweat.

Yeah...that's it. Talking to Hollis is dipping my toes in the water.

I know it could never become anything off the app, so the stakes are lower. It's less scary.

Attempting this whole online dating thing feels similar to when I first joined the force.

The first couple of fires I ran into were scary.

They were an unknown situation that I understood in a roundabout way, from training and stories I'd heard from other firefighters, but hearing about what it's like to run into a burning building while everybody else is running out and experiencing it firsthand are two vastly different things.

No amount of training or stories or pep talks from people with far more experience will ever truly prepare you for the adrenaline flooding your system, the thrill making it hard to catch your breath, or the anxious energy vibrating through your bones.

It's something you have to live through to fully understand. Something that gets a little less scary and unknown the more you do it, until one day, it's second nature.

So, maybe dating for the first time in over two decades is like running into those first few burning buildings...

Scary now, but with practice, it'll become less daunting.

Maybe I'll second guess everything I say or feel for now, and my heart will stutter every time someone says something that makes me a little uncomfortable, but after a few matches, the nerves will slowly shift into something more...

electrifying. Maybe time and experience are all I need.

Experience I can get from Hollis.

With that in mind, I type out a response and send it before I can talk myself out of it.

FireInMyVeins: Nah, didn't scare me away. I'm just new to this type of thing, that's all.

KnockinBoots: New to dating apps or new to men?

FireInMyVeins: New to online dating.

KnockinBoots: Not gonna lie... That does make me even more curious about you.

FireInMyVeins: In what way?

KnockinBoots: Well, for one, the fact that you're in your late forties and this is the first time you're using dating apps is definitely curious.

Prior to now, did you not date/hook up at all?

Do you normally find your partners in person?

Or possibly have you never used dating apps because they weren't a thing the last time you were single...

Is Fire Daddy a newly divorced man? We can start there. *upside down smile emoji*
wink emoji

FireInMyVeins: Wow... straight for the jugular right out the gate, I see.

KnockinBoots: Rule #23: No pussyfooting around shit. We must live, breathe, and abide by rule #23.

Chuckling, I scratch a hand across the scruff lining my jaw. I suppose he does have a point.

FireInMyVeins: Touché. *laughing emoji* I just didn't expect to be asked about my entire life story.

KnockinBoots: Well, fortunately—or maybe, unfortunately—for you, you’re dealing with a pro. Don’t worry, I’ll guide you through it. Think of me as your very own Mr. Miyagi or Yoda... just as wise, but sexier and kinkier. *wink emoji*

Shaking my head, I chuckle to myself as my cheeks heat. This fucking guy. Before I can type out a response, a call from Remi pops up, stealing my attention. Gaze lifting to the top of my screen, I note it’s after nine. Not unheard of for him to call me this late, but it raises concern, nonetheless.

“Remi, everythin’ okay?” I ask, pushing into a sitting position.

“Everythin’ is more than okay, Cap.” There’s clear enthusiasm in his voice, which only strengthens the concern. “You’re goin’ to want to kiss me when I tell ya the news I have for you.”

“Doubtful,” I deadpan. “But I’m listenin’.”

“Okay, you know how you haven’t had very much luck findin’ a place to live?”

“No luck, actually,” I correct. “And yes, I’m well aware of the situation, Remi, but thank you for callin’ me after nine on our day off to remind me.”

Snorting, he says, “If you hush and let me finish, you’ll find out that I’m not callin’ to remind you, but to tell you that I found the perfect place for you to move into!”

“We’ve already been through this. I appreciate you offerin’ me the spare room at your house, but it ain’t happenin’.

We see each other enough at the firehouse; we don’t need to live together too.

Contrary to what you’d like to believe, I don’t want to see you every second of the

day. It's nice of you to offer, but no."

Remi barks out a laugh. "Okay, first of all, Cap, that's a lie. I'm the light in your life. Seein' me brightens your whole day. I know it, you know it. But it's okay, we can go with your story to avoid makin' everyone on the crew jealous."

"Okay, whatever." I heave an exaggerated sigh, feigning annoyance that isn't there.

Remi sometimes comes off like an overly excited puppy that can't sit still.

One that can't help but stick his nose where it doesn't belong, and while it can be a bit much at times, I know it comes from a good place.

"Regardless, my answer is no, but thank you. Now, if that's all, I'm?—"

"Pipe down, old man." He chuckles, and it has the faintest smile pulling at the corner of my mouth.

"It's not my house. It's one of the fully furnished cabins on the Moore's ranch.

They rent them out and have a few available.

I talked to Hollis the other day when we were there for that fire.

He just let me know that Gentry agreed to rent it to you for as long as you need. "

I'm silent for a moment .

A cabin on the Moore Family Ranch.

No.

Nope.

I don't care how badly I want out of here, that can't be my solution.

"That won't be necessary," I mutter.

"Of course it's necessary," he drawls. "Where else are ya gonna go?"

"Somethin' will come up soon. I'm not gonna take handouts from people I barely know."

Remi's quiet for a moment. "What are you talkin' about? It's not a handout, and they aren't people you barely know. It's Hollis and his family. And it's a hell of a lot nicer than your current digs. Have you seen how nice their property is?"

Even though I shouldn't, I find myself considering it.

Yeah, being there means I'm closer to Hollis, but that doesn't change anything.

He still doesn't know who I am on the app, and it's not like I'd make a move.

Yet something is still holding me back that has nothing to do with Hollis and how his flirting sets my body on fire.

"That's very thoughtful of you to do, Remi.

Thank you." Some would call it pride, a therapist would probably call it a trauma response, but I've rarely ever asked for help.

If it's not something I can achieve on my own, then it's not for me.

Or at least, that was my thought before.

But now... Well, the urge to turn away from this handout is still front and center, but now the logical part of my brain acknowledges what a great opportunity this would be, especially considering the alternative is more of this glorified dorm living.

Maybe it's time to put away the pride, or whatever it may be.

Tuck my tail between my legs and take what I can get.

"Can I think on it and get back to you in a day or two? "

Okay, old habits die hard, clearly.

"What?" Remi balks, huffing out a small chuckle. "No way, Cap."

My brows furrow as I wonder if I heard him right. "Excuse me?"

"Listen, no disrespect or judgement, but you've been livin' at the firehouse for weeks. There's nothin' to think about. I'm not lettin' you be stubborn this time. I've taken care of everythin', and Hollis and I are goin' to help you move all your stuff next week."

My stomach drops. I breathe a harsh breath through my nose. "Remington..."

"Don't you dare full name me." He laughs. "I think the words you're lookin' for are, 'thank you, Remi. I'm so lucky to have such a thoughtful, caring, and handsome friend like you.'"

"I'm hangin' up now," I groan.

“Next week, Cap. Be ready,” he says in a rush before ending the call.

Phone in hand, my chest feels cut open and exposed while emotion clogs my throat. It’s a terrible combination, and it triggers some sort of fight-or-flight mode. After I force myself to take a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart, I unlock the phone and pull up Remi’s text thread.

Me: Thank you.

No matter how uncomfortable all of this is, Remi didn’t have to do any of it. He doesn’t owe me a damn thing. Knowing he went out of his way to make this happen for me means a lot, and I need him to know I appreciate it. Appreciate him.

Remembering the message I didn’t respond to, I open the app again. It’s late, so there’s a chance Hollis won’t even respond tonight, but maybe that’s for the best. It’ll give me time to answer the question and prepare for whatever one he comes back with tomorrow.

FireInMyVeins: You’re right, in that I’m relatively fresh out of a relationship that began long before dating apps were even a thought.

It’s not something I’ve shared with many people, but in favor of abiding by rule #23, I’ll be honest and admit it almost feels easier sharing something personal with you, since you don’t know who I am.

I close out of the app after hitting send, plugging my phone in and setting it on the nightstand. It’s time to go to bed before my mind has a chance to overthink the whole evening.

I’m going to be fine, even if it doesn’t feel that way right now.

Everything's going to be fine.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

Four

Hollis

F uck, an ass that nice deserves to be eaten morning, noon, and night. Goddamn...

“Hey, ya fuckin’ perv,” Remi mutters, voice quiet enough that only I can hear him as he nudges me in the arm with his elbow. He’s carrying two stacked plastic totes in his hands, his thick, dark brow arched as he pins me with a look. “More movin’, less checkin’ out my fuckin’ boss, would ya?”

I chuckle. “Not my fault your boss looks like a whole fuckin’ meal in them damn shorts.

” As if on cue, Ford drops into a squat to set down the stack of totes he was carrying from his pickup.

Who knew plain cotton shorts would do it for me.

“I had no idea Captain was carrying around an absolute fuckin’ dump truck under all that gear. ”

“Don’t even think about it, man,” he grits out, making it nearly impossible to keep my composure.

“Thinkin’ about what, Rem?” Holding up my hands in front of me innocently, I bite back a smirk trying to break free. “Sheesh, get your mind outta the gutter, would ya.”

Remi's eyes narrow as he works his jaw, but before he has a chance to say anything, heavy footsteps sound behind us.

Turning in that direction, I watch my father saunter into the cabin, wearing his usual scowl.

He's always so damn serious, like cracking a smile might actually kill him.

A trait he shares with my stick-in-the-mud brother.

Although, I will admit, the latter has loosened up marginally since he had his later-in-life queer awakening and fell into bed—and in love—with his nanny-turned-boyfriend, Ash, last year.

Getting properly fucked down will do that to a man, that's for damn sure.

"How's it goin' in here, fellas?" My dad's gaze finds mine before sliding over my shoulder toward the back of the cabin as he offers Ford one of those polite yet pinched Southern white people smiles and a nod.

"We're just 'bout done," I drawl, deciding to head out to my truck to grab the last of the stuff. This morning has been a piece of cake, mostly because Ford doesn't have a lot of stuff. Between my rig and his, the three of us were able to get everything in one trip. I barely even broke a sweat.

With the final load in my hands, I'm trudging up the steps toward the cabin when my phone vibrates in my pocket, and that same little dopamine rush I've had every time I get a new notification lately rolls through me.

I wonder if it's from my timid Fire Daddy.

After the night I found out he was new to the app, he's been hit or miss.

Flighty , if you will.

We've talked almost every day since we matched, but for the last week, there's only been a few messages here and there throughout the day, and the conversation remains firmly in a category I've deemed as Fire Daddy safe topics .

Small-talk stuff, like how I learned last night he hates Mountain Dew, even Baja Blast—which is fucking criminal, if you ask me—or how I shared with him that my ultimate guilty pleasure is, and always will be, applying one of those sheet masks once a week and watching The Real Housewives.

I left out the part where I fix a bowl of popcorn, pour myself a large glass—sometimes two—of Rosé, and slide into my favorite thick, hotel quality robe before crawling into bed, mask on, reruns locked and loaded, surrounded by a plethora of pillows and fuzzy blankets, like I'm wrapped up in my very own comfort cocoon.

I can't show all my cards yet. Where's the fun in that?

Regardless, since last week, it's sufficient to say he's been drier than Arizona in June.

Normally, something like that would have me un-matching and moving on to the next, so it's interesting that I haven't done that with this guy yet.

In all my twenty-eight glorious years on this planet, I've managed to stay far away from all things commitment, emotional attachment, and relationships.

With the exception of the one fucked-up period of time as a teenager that resulted in the no attachment, no feelings rule, I don't have any plans in the foreseeable future to

change that.

It's worked for me thus far. Why fix what's not broken, right?

But it's definitely curious that I haven't gotten bored and moved on from this guy yet.

Knowing me, it's the challenge of it. It's been a hot minute since I've had to put in any actual effort and practice patience to land a hookup.

The thrill of the chase is what I need right now, I suppose.

Whatever the reason may be for my continued interest in the mystery man, opening the notification waiting for me—that may or may not be from him—will have to wait until I'm back at my place later.

For now, I'm going to enjoy spending the rest of my afternoon checking out Ford, because even though I know I can't take my best friend's boss to bed, there's nothing saying I can't look.

In the span of two weeks, my life went from boring—mundane, even—to well on its way to exhilarating.

I fucking love it.

Back inside, I drop the totes labeled “kitchen” in their respective part of the cabin before grabbing a drink out of the fridge and joining the guys where they're now sitting in the living room.

I plop down on the couch beside Remi, setting my newly opened beer next to his on the table.

My dad is sitting in the old recliner in the corner that used to live in our house growing up, his tall, wide build almost too large for the chair, while Ford sits across from us on the chipped brick hearth in front of the wood stove.

His arms, corded and dusted in a thick layer of black hair, are propped on top of his knees as the neck of a beer bottle dangles from his fingers.

Good god, this man is a fucking wet dream.

Knowing he's staying a measly three-minute drive across the ranch from me feels like a smutty gift from the universe.

Between seeing him around town growing up and him being present at all the work functions I've attended in the past with Remi, I've known Ford for quite some time.

He's always been a delicious piece of eye candy, but he's also been married for as long as I can remember, so I never bothered putting much thought into him.

If there's one thing I don't make a habit of doing, it's sticking my dick in somebody else's marriage. Too goddamn messy to be worth it.

"Thanks again for renting this place to me," Ford says, gaze fixed on my father.

"Oh, it's my pleasure. Most of these cabins occupy nothin' but dust and the occasional mouse in the cooler months. It'll be nice to make use of this one for a while."

Ford huffs out a breath, his mouth tipping up in the corner. "Yeah, was startin' to worry I was gonna be stuck at the firehouse for the rest of my damn life."

"I believe it." A gruff chuckle rumbles through my dad's chest. "You'd think with all

that new construction happenin' out by Lake Everdy, there'd be more options.

But apparently, the only thing them new, fancy condos are good for is causin' traffic from all them lanes constantly bein' closed.

Drivin' out to the feed store every week is a goddamn nightmare. ”

“ Ooh-wee , you know I love it when ya get all fired up, Daddy Moore,” Remi drawls beside me.

My dad's jaw pops as his gaze slices over to my dumbass best friend. “I've told you to stop callin' me that,” he grits out.

I roll my eyes and breathe out a dry laugh, swiping my beer off the table and taking a swig.

Remi's been vocal about his little crush—or whatever the hell he wants to call it—on my father since we were teenagers.

And he's not the only one. I lost count of how many girls in high school fawned over the “tall, mysterious rancher”—their words, not mine—any time he'd pick me up from school or during the annual field trip out to our ranch, so I'm more than used to it, but that doesn't make it any less fucking weird to hear, especially from my best friend.

I'm not fully convinced he doesn't do it as payback for the time I fucked his boss during our senior year when he worked at the hardware store in town.

It's not my fault Little Miss Home From College And Looking To Piss Off Daddy couldn't understand the meaning of casual and got her feelings hurt.

She took it out on Remi's schedule when I ended our arrangement after she drunkenly professed her love to me before hurling all over my new boots.

The goddamn Red Wing's I hustled all summer to pay for.

That was one of the few times Remi and I really got into it, and I know it's why he gets pissy when I talk about how hot Ford is.

After my dad heads back to his place a while later, Remi and I help Ford unpack before deciding to toss some burgers on the grill.

Ford's got his ancient record player set up, a little Waylon filtering through the open windows as we eat and polish off the rest of the twelve-pack I picked up on the way here this morning.

"Nobody stays in these?" Ford asks, gesturing toward the rest of the cabins.

I take a pull from my beer before saying, "My cousin, August, lives in the one on the end. You'll probably see him and his boyfriend, Tripp, every so often, but they're cool and know how to keep it down."

"What 'bout the other two?"

"Vacant."

Ford nods, a thoughtful look passing between his eyes as he takes in the log-style cabins that line the back end of my family's property and, fuck, I've never realized how captivating his eyes are.

Dark irises that, in the direct sunlight, look like the perfect storm, surrounded by a thick bed of long lashes.

I huff out a breath before finishing my beer.

I've never seen a man with eyelashes as pretty as those.

Bet they'd look real damn pretty fanning the top of his cheeks as he lets me eagerly drop to my knees and take that fat captain cock in my mouth.

I just fucking know he's packing behind those shorts.

The impressive bulge taunting me as he sits with his beefy thighs spread wide in the folding chair he's occupying is a dead giveaway.

Goddamn, just the thought of me throating him nice and deep while those eyes stare down at me is enough to give me a chub. Especially knowing the reality of it would, no doubt, be even hotter than the mental image .

Why the hell does he have to be Remi's boss?

Nudging me in the arm, Remi pulls me from the filthy thoughts swirling around in my clearly sex-deprived mind. "You're still comin' on the annual trip with us, yeah?" he asks.

"You bet your ass I am," I confirm.

Remi and his whole crew go camping together every year for a couple of days at a place a few hours south of here.

I've tagged along almost every year since Remi was a rookie.

He and I have been thick as thieves since we were in kindergarten, and because of that, everyone in town always assumes we're a package deal.

Where Remi goes, I typically go too, and vice versa.

Being the captain, Ford will be there too, and with the news of him and the split, it'll make drooling over him while we're there both fun and torture at the same time.

Knowing he's single and I could make a move, but doing so risks pissing off my best friend.

A little drunken flirting couldn't hurt, though.

It should be an interesting trip, and I can't fucking wait.

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Five

KnockinBoots: Two truths and a lie... You're up.

FireInMyVeins: I speak three languages fluently, I'm scared of clowns, and my comfort hobby is doing puzzles.

KnockinBoots: Hmm... interesting. *smirk emoji* I'm going with the fear of clowns being a lie?

FireInMyVeins: I'm embarrassed to say that one's actually true.

I remember my mom hiring a clown to come to my birthday party when I turned seven.

He wasn't too friendly and had a creepy smile, but the part that really freaked me out was when the power went out from a thunderstorm.

I ran into him in a dark hallway in my house.

His face paint had started to run from the rain and he pretended to lunge at me, then laughed maniacally when I cried. Scarred me for life.

KnockinBoots: I've never understood the hype with having clowns at kids' birthday parties. I don't have a fear of them, but they definitely give me odd vibes whenever I'm around one. I'm curious which one is the lie then.

FireInMyVeins: I don't speak three languages fluently. The Spanish I took in high school gave me a basic understanding, but outside of that, it's strictly English for me.

KnockinBoots: So, puzzles, huh? I don't think I've put together a puzzle since I was a kid.

FireInMyVeins: Yeah, I don't know what it is about them, but I love it. They help take my mind off life. I started when I was little, with my mom. Haven't done one in a long time, though.

KnockinBoots: How come?

FireInMyVeins: Life got busy...and complicated. *shrug emoji*

FireInMyVeins: Your turn to hit me with two truths and a lie.

KnockinBoots: *evil grin emoji* Got a tattoo on my dick, I'm vegan, and I'm left-handed.

FireInMyVeins: The tattoo has to be a lie, right? Who in their right mind would get a tattoo on their dick?

KnockinBoots: Probably someone with a nice dick and a pain kink, if I had to guess. *shrug emoji* Is that your final answer?

FireInMyVeins: Hmm... I'm not sure because I find it hard to believe you'd be vegan especially when you work around cattle.

KnockinBoots: Maybe I own a cattle sanctuary. What's your guess gonna be, baby?

FireInMyVeins: You being vegan is a lie... and if I'm right, I'm intrigued—and

impressed—by the tattoo.

KnockinBoots: Guess you'll just have to wait and see. *wink emoji*

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Six

Hollis

“ G et ready to have your ass kicked tonight, Holli-boy,” Remi drawls, humor dancing in his gaze as he chawks his pool cue.

I snort. “You fuckin’ wish.” Taking a drag from the Marlboro between my teeth, I finish racking the balls.

With a shake of his head, he chuckles, placing the cue ball on the felt table before flashing me a cocky grin.

“I can feel it in my bones. Tonight’s the night you pay our tab, motherfucker.

” Leaning into position, Remi makes the break shot, sending the cluster of numbered balls in every which direction.

As a solid blue one sinks into the pocket closest to me, he stands tall and points a finger at me from across the table, barking out a laugh that has a couple of people turning to look at us. “You were sayin’?”

I laugh, finishing off the rest of my cigarette while he takes his next shot. “Careful, don’t get too cocky, too early.”

“Here you fellas go,” our bartender announces, a sweet smile on her face as she sets our beers down. “Let me know if ya need anythin’ else.”

“Thank ya, ma’am.” I tip my chin as my gaze drops to the name tag on her tight, white, V-neck shirt. Emily . She must be new because I don’t recall seeing her here before.

“Alright, well, y’all have fun.” Before she leaves, Emily throws one last flirty look in Remi’s direction, her full, glossy bottom lip tucked between her straight white teeth as she winks at him.

I watch her walk away, the black shorts she’s wearing barely covering her round ass as they show off her long, tan legs.

Shaking my head, I scrub a hand over the smile spreading across my face. If only that poor girl knew she was barking up the wrong tree. She’s a very attractive woman, but the long, blonde hair and perky tits spilling out from her shirt couldn’t be further from my best friend’s type.

Well, that and the vagina she most likely has between her legs.

Remi and I are similar in many ways—it’s one of the reasons we’re as close as we are—but he couldn’t be more my opposite in this department.

See, where I’m bisexual and have always been more of an equal opportunist when it comes to who warms my bed, Remi’s preferences have always been a bit more...

defined. He likes them tall, rugged, and all man.

It’s why I’ve never been able to tell if he’s fucking with me as a twisted form of payback for his high school job when it comes to the weird little “crush” he has on my dad or if he’s serious.

As disturbing as it is, Gentry Moore is definitely Remi’s type.

I've always leaned more toward the former, though, mostly because the latter icks me out if I think about it for too long.

The Rusty Spur is a dive bar in town, and it's one Remi and I frequent at least once a week.

This place opened years back, when we first bought our Harley's and started riding.

Coming here after a ride has become somewhat of a tradition for us.

We have a long-standing deal that whoever loses at pool that night pays the tab, which is why Remi's so hellbent on me losing.

The place is mostly empty tonight, save for us and the handful of regulars that are always here, but that's not surprising given that it's barely eight o'clock on a Wednesday night.

A mix of country and classic rock music plays from the Jukebox in the back corner and the compact space is lit by the neon lights, basking the room in a calm, relaxed feel.

It's the perfect setting to wind down after a long, hard day on the ranch.

Since we're approaching breeding season, things have been busy while we make sure the cattle are ready.

Finn, August, and I spent most of today vaccinating the herd and performing check-ups on all of them.

It's a hefty task to complete in one day.

Add in how unusually warm it is for this time of year, and I was exhausted and ready to toss back a few cold ones by the time noon rolled around.

Thankfully, Remi's off today and tomorrow, so it worked out perfectly.

"Cap seems to be settling in nicely at the cabin," Remi murmurs when it's my turn to shoot.

"Haven't seen him a whole lot," I drawl, lining up my pool cue with the ball.

It's been a week since we helped Ford move.

I've been meaning to be neighborly and drop off some beer or something as a housewarming gift, but with our schedules, it hasn't worked out in my favor.

I sink two striped balls, my smirk wide as I peer over at my now-scowling friend.

"I've been tryin' to convince him to get back out there," Remi says before taking a swig of his beer.

Arching a brow, I ask, "Meanin' sex? "

"Meanin' datin'," he corrects. "I think seein' what's out there could be good for him."

"I think hot, meaningless sex would be a better route."

Remi scoffs, and I can't help but chuckle. "Not everybody is afraid of feelings like you are."

"I'm not afraid of feelings," I explain. "I just prefer to keep them out of my sex life."

“Right, keep tellin’ yourself that.” Finishing what’s left of his beer, he holds up the glass and meets my gaze, brow lifting questioningly. “Want another?”

Nodding, I swallow down what’s left in mine before handing the empty glass to him. “Thanks, man.”

As soon as Remi walks away, I grab my phone from the breast pocket on my leather riding vest. I scan several notifications waiting for me, a grin curling my lips when I spot one from somebody who’s been on my mind more than I’d like to admit.

FireInMyVeins: Since we already talked about my dating history before, it only seems fair if you share a little bit about yours...

Aside from the few good morning messages he’s sent, this is the first time he and I have spoken in a couple of days.

Given the fact he’s admitted to being new at online dating, I chalked the silence up as nerves on his end, especially since he never unmatched with me.

I’m typically not in the business of chasing anybody, so I didn’t go out of my way to talk to him either, figuring he’d reach out when and if he was ready.

Admittedly, I’ve found myself more than once checking the app throughout the day and almost hoping to find a message from him.

I still can’t put my finger on what it is about this guy that has me so interested.

Usually, if I don’t meet up with someone after a few days, I’ll un-match without a second thought, because another thing I’m not in the business of doing is securing any sort of pen pal.

KnockinBoots: There's not much to share. I'm not exactly what you'd call the dating type.

I breathe out a small laugh at the speed his reply comes in.

FireInMyVeins: What type would you be then?

KnockinBoots: The type that'll give you toe-curling orgasms.

FireInMyVeins: ...Aren't toe-curling orgasms something that comes as a result of dating?

KnockinBoots: Oh, sweet Grasshopper, I have much to teach you. *wink emoji*

"Got these for free," Remi drawls with a smirk as he hands me a fresh beer. "You're welcome."

"Only because she's hopin' you'll dick her down in the bathroom later." I chuckle, tucking my phone back in my pocket.

After Remi and I finish our game of pool—and I absolutely smoke his ass like I always do—we take our beer outside to the covered patio area.

Grabbing the pack of smokes from the pocket on the inside of my vest, I offer one to Remi before lighting another for myself.

Smoking is a nasty habit I know I should kick, and for the most part, I have.

I rarely smoke these days, unless I've had an exceptionally shitty day at work, I've been drinking, or after I've had some exceptionally great sex.

We've all got our vices, right?

Taking a drag, the smoke dances down my throat and fills my lungs before I exhale and fix my gaze on Remi. "So, back to your fine-ass captain. He's not interested in givin' the dating idea a shot, or what?"

"Nah, I don't think so." Remi shakes his head. "Maybe eventually, but he's been pretty adamant about his answer whenever I've brought it up."

"Bet I could change his mind." I waggle my brows suggestively.

Remi's brows furrow as he pins me with a hardened stare across the table, and I have to bite back my amusement. "Not fuckin' happenin', Hollis."

Chuckling, I hold up my hands. "What? I'm simply curious about the guy, because maybe I'm considering helpin' him get back out there too. That's all."

Rolling his eyes, Remi says, "Right. Your intentions are pure and not at all selfish."

"Why wouldn't they be pure?" I tease, my grin wide. "Ford's my new neighbor, and I'm a helpful guy."

Remi barks out a laugh. "You're only helpful as long as it gets you what you want. It's like you forget I've known you our whole life."

"Hey now." My mouth curves down into a frown.

"I've done plenty of helpful things that had nothin' to do with getting somethin' I want.

Remember when you bought your house and I gave up my entire Saturday to help

you move, just the two of us because your movers cancelled at the last minute, after bein' up all night deliverin' calves? ”

“Yeah, but that’s different.” He waves me off. “I’m your best friend and you love me, therefore helpin’ me out will always be a gain for you. Regardless, you’re not fuckin’ my captain, Hollis. Don’t even think about it.”

“You’re so touchy.” Laughter vibrates through my chest. “Maybe you should worry less about who I’m fuckin’ and more about gettin’ yourself laid.”

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Flipping me off, we finish smoking, then head back inside for one more round of pool before calling it a night.

Tonight is perfect for a late-night ride.

It's easy to lose myself in the long stretch of highway with hardly any cars around us as music blares from our bikes.

The air is warm, the moon full, and the stars are bright and out by the dozen.

You can't beat nights like this. Riding across town, Remi waves before hanging a right at the stop sign while I go left.

It's a little after ten when I turn onto my family's property.

My eyes lift, taking in the Moore Family Ranch sign as the dark, winding gravel road leads me past my dad's house, then my brother's, before mine comes into view.

When I was younger, I wasn't sure if I'd stay on the ranch when I became an adult.

Like most teenagers who come from a family run business, I went through a phase where I considered leaving Wolf Creek, doing something completely different from what was expected of me.

In the end, my desire for something new could never outweigh my love for this ranch and my family.

Besides, I may share these hundreds of acres of land with my dad and brother, but our houses were built far enough apart that it doesn't feel suffocating.

Once I get my bike parked in the garage, I lock up and head inside, stopping in the laundry room to strip before continuing into the house.

Light from the porch spills in through the blinds as I step into my room.

After I drop my wallet and keys on top of my dresser, I don't bother turning on any lights before climbing between the soft, cool sheets on my bed.

Anticipation warms my chest as I unlock my phone and immediately pull up Hive.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket when we were still at the bar, but I didn't want to check it until I got home.

I wanted to give Fire Daddy my full attention.

FireInMyVeins: Okay... so teach me something.

Reading it back for a second time, a groan rips from my throat. Fuck, that's hot .

KnockinBoots: I can teach you many things, baby. We can start with how I'm a firm believer that the toe-curling orgasms can come without all the messiness of dating.

I hit send and chew on my bottom lip while I wait.

For all I know, this guy could already be asleep.

It is a weeknight, after all, and he could have to work in the morning.

We haven't shared any real personal information, so I don't even know what he does for a living or what his schedule looks like.

Not that I would need—or want—to know any of that.

A moment later, my phone brightens with a response from him. Seeing his username pop up on my screen sends a shot of arousal straight to my dick, reminding me how long it's been since I've gotten laid.

FireInMyVeins: A no-strings guy, huh? Maybe I should follow in your footsteps.

KnockinBoots: Highly recommend *smirk emoji* In fact, you can follow my footsteps right into the bedroom.

FireInMyVeins: I've never done the whole casual sex thing, if you can believe it.

Oh, trust me... I can't believe it.

KnockinBoots: Come with me to the dark side. *evil grin emoji* Trust me, it's fun over here.

A couple of minutes pass, and I wonder if he's not going to reply, or maybe he's really asleep now. But then...

FireInMyVeins: Hypothetically, if I did... What would that look like?

KnockinBoots: It could look however you want. Whatever you're comfortable with.

FireInMyVeins: How would it look with you? Still hypothetically, of course .

Oh, here we fucking go! My heart races in my chest as I thumb out a response.

KnockinBoots: It varies depending on the person. Sometimes it'll strictly be about sex and nothing else. Other times, it'll be like we're friends. Have a couple drinks and hang out before ending the night by hooking up. But with you... I'd probably go with something similar to the second option.

FireInMyVeins: Why's that?

KnockinBoots: Because I can tell you'd be nervous. Having a drink or two would help calm your nerves, while hanging out would presumably make you feel more comfortable.

It's clear he's, at the very least, interested, but if I had to bet, I'd say he's second guessing himself as I wait for a reply. Maybe even trying to talk himself out of responding. His desire must outweigh whatever apprehensions he may have because he eventually does respond.

FireInMyVeins: After we had a couple drinks, then what would happen?

My cock throbs, his flirty curiosity doing something to me. Especially when I picture what we could be like right now. Maybe he's naked in bed like I am. His pulse is probably racing, fingers trembling, as he waits for my response. And I'll bet, like me, his dick is hard too.

Fuck, I hope it is.

KnockinBoots: We'd be sitting on my couch—or yours—and I would get on my knees in front of you, bring my hands to the front of your pants and work them open while you watched me.

FireInMyVeins: Then what?

KnockinBoots: I'd pull out your cock, mouth watering as I admire how it looks in my hand.

You'd already be hard, your body desperate to feel my touch.

With your gaze on me, I'd lick my lips before taking you in my mouth.

A drop of pre-cum would spill onto my tongue, and I'd groan as the flavor flooded my senses.

Then I'd take you to the back of my throat, swallowing around your thick, delicious cock before hollowing my cheeks and sucking all the way to the tip again.

I slip my hand beneath the covers and fist my stiff, aching length, pumping a few times before I continue.

KnockinBoots: In my mind, I imagine you biting down on your lip, trying to stifle any sound, but it doesn't work.

You can't help but moan as I suck you nice and deep, or when my tongue swirls around the tip before taking you to the back of my throat again.

You can't help but moan when my hand comes to your balls, rolling them in tandem with my mouth.

And hearing how responsive you are for me would drive me wild.

I'd pull my stiff, throbbing cock out and stroke myself, feeling the weight of your hungry gaze on me.

You'd be so unbelievably turned on, watching as I stroke my own cock while I suck

on yours, that you wouldn't be able to hold back.

Before you even knew what was happening, you would spill down my throat, your big, juicy dick pulsing as I swallow down every drop, the taste making me explode next.

As soon as I send the message, I shove the covers off and really give it to myself.

The image in my mind of that exact scene plays over and over, each time hotter than the last. It doesn't even matter that I don't know what he looks like.

My fist flies up and down my length while my other tugs on my full, heavy balls, pleasure flooding my veins.

The visual then morphs into him jacking off right along with me.

Him reading what I wrote and being so turned on he can't help but relieve the tension.

I wonder what his cock looks like. I bet it's impressive.

Maybe veiny and thick, just like his arms are in his pictures.

Imagining his voice in my ear, deep and husky, dripping with lust.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Muscles tight and my jaw slack, my release hits me hard and fast. I throw my head back, a guttural groan ripping from my chest as thick, white ropes spill onto my stomach.

A thin sheen of sweat covers my body, heart pounding against my ribcage as I catch my breath and come down from the euphoric fantasy.

After I find a towel to clean myself up, I climb back into bed and grab my phone, not all that surprised to find no response waiting for me.

He's either jacking off right now...or freaked out about what I said.

As I plug my phone in and roll over, there's a pang of disappointment in my chest at the thought of him possibly not replying at all, but I'm too damn tired to care, especially considering it's not the most confusing part of all this.

The fact that I came as hard as I did from a little sexting is wild. One sided sexting, at that!

Damn, I need to get laid.

Seven

Ford

K nockinBoots: You freaking out about last night?

I'm staring at the message that was waiting for me when I opened the app a few minutes ago, wondering what to say— or if I should say anything at all— because no, I am not freaking out, but I am a little taken aback by how turned on I was.

I have nobody to blame but myself. It's not like anything he said wasn't one hundred percent instigated by me in the first place.

It was me who took the conversation there, so why am I being so damn weird about it now?

It's not a big deal. So what? He painted a—very graphic—picture in my mind of him giving me a blow job. Big deal. No reason to get weird about it. It's not like he even knows who he was saying that to.

My thumb hovers over the reply button, pulse erratic as I contemplate what to say.

I could go with the truth... Finally tell him who I am.

Or I could lie. Tell him I'm perfectly fine.

It was late when we were messaging last night.

It wouldn't be all that unbelievable if I claimed to have fallen asleep?

Although, who in their right mind would've read what he sent and been able to go to sleep immediately after?

There's no way.

Sure, I did pass out— and slept like a fucking baby, which is rare these days—but only after I jacked off to the scene he laid out for me.

I came so damn hard, my vision went black.

It's been years since I've felt a burning need so strong I couldn't think about anything other than giving in to the fantasy. It was...intense.

Besides, I'm not ready to reveal my identity. This can't get back to the station.

FireInMyVeins: Maybe a little.

“Mornin’, Cap.”

At the sound of Remi's voice, my heart jumps to my throat as I fumble with the phone in my hand. He slaps a hand against my back a moment before the screen goes black, and as I turn my head, meeting his bright-eyed, cheerful gaze, I toss it on the counter in front of me and take a step back.

“Oh, hey, Remi.” I wince at the way my voice cracks on his name. Real smooth. Clearing my throat and ignoring my racing pulse, I ask, “You just get here?”

“Yeah.” He nods, grabbing an everything bagel and a plastic knife from the table where I've got a breakfast spread laid out. “My phone updated last night and turned

off my alarm. Thought I was gonna be late.”

I hum and check my watch. “Not late.”

“No, sir,” he drawls, flashing me a dimply grin as he spreads a layer of cream cheese on his bagel. “Do anythin’ fun the last coupla days?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “Ran some errands, did some laundry.” Sexted with your best friend on the dating app you suggested I download. Clearing my throat, I say, “That’s ’bout it.”

“How’re you likin’ things at the cabin?”

“Pretty good,” I say as an image of Hollis unloading barrels of hay from the back of his truck, shirtless, the other night as I was driving home, flashes in my mind.

Sun beating down on him, sweat glistening all over his chest. It was like the start of some cowboy porno, and I was practically drooling.

“Yeah, the views are nice.” It wasn’t just him; his brother and a couple of other guys were helping, but they all paled in comparison to the way Hollis made my blood pump hotter.

“And you’re settlin’ in okay?”

Like Remi can read my mind, my pulse kicks up speed as my cheeks heat. Fuck, all of this is so wrong. “Mmhmm.”

My stomach flips as my phone buzzes with a new notification on the counter. Then it goes off for a second time. A thin layer of sweat lines the back of my neck, the sound deafening as my gaze darts from the device to Remi across the room.

The corner of his lip twitches as he arches a brow and asks, “Gonna get that, Cap?”

Thankfully, before I’m forced to respond, the station’s alarm system goes off, dispatching us to a priority one call for an adult patient reporting chest pain.

Remi quickly shovels the rest of the bagel in his mouth while we shuffle out of the kitchen, heading toward the lockers with the rest of my crew.

Having been a firefighter since I was twenty-one, all of this is muscle memory.

The steps we take—changing into our protective gear, climbing in the engine, and flying out of the station in under ninety seconds—is second nature to me. I could do it in my sleep .

No two calls are ever the same, but the process we follow to get on scene is .

It has to be. We’re the first responders, the ones people’s lives depend on, and taking even half a minute longer to respond to a call could quite literally be the difference between life and death in some instances.

Especially with calls like this one, where there’s a possible cardiac emergency.

Being ready and on scene rapidly allows us to assess the situation and administer life-saving interventions, like CPR and defibrillation, if needed, within those first few crucial minutes, significantly increasing the patient’s chance of survival.

In the event the patient is experiencing a heart attack, every second counts.

Arriving in just under four minutes, we jump out of the engine, equipment in hand, and bound up the steps of the older, brick, two-story complex. After we find the appropriate unit number, I bring my fist up and pound on the door. “Wolf Creek Fire

Department.”

It’s not but a few seconds later when we hear a muffled, “Come in,” from a man inside the house.

I step inside, my crew following behind, and we’re immediately hit with a strong, unpleasant odor—musty and stale, but also sour too, like maybe milk’s been left out.

The narrow entryway is made even tighter by the row of cardboard boxes stacked four high against either wall, and as we walk farther into the house, more clutter fills each room.

Dishes are piled high in the sink and empty containers take up most of the counter space in the kitchen.

The dining room is nearly inaccessible. More boxes, three and four high, and black trash bags filled and tied off occupy the small space around the table covered in stacks of unopened mail and loose papers.

A frantic voice leads us to the living room, where a gentleman who looks to be in his late seventies sits on the edge of a teal, well-worn, floral recliner.

Face red and slick with sweat, the man clutches his chest, seemingly unable to catch his breath.

Similar to the rest of the house, this room is just as cluttered, but there’s a path carved out I follow to get to the patient.

“Hi there, I’m Captain Wesley. Myself and the firefighters behind me are from the Wolf Creek Fire Department,” I state, kneeling in front of the man, meeting his wide, panicked gaze.

James, one of the guys on my crew, comes to the left of me, placing the medic bag on the table beside the recliner as I continue.

“This is Firefighter Brown. He’s goin’ to be takin’ your vitals while I get some information from you.

Is that okay?” The gentleman looks over at James for a moment before he nods, bringing his attention back to me.

“Great. Can you tell me your name, sir?”

“Larry,” he croaks as James secures a blood pressure cuff around his bicep. “Larry Pickens.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Larry.” I offer him a smile. “I’m told you’re experiencin’ some chest pain this mornin’, is that correct?” He nods. “Okay, well, we’re here to help, and I can assure you, you’re in great hands. Aside from chest pain, what other symptoms are you experiencin’?”

“It feels like...” Larry swallows harshly before blowing out a ragged breath. “Feels like I’m p-paralyzed. Like a weight is sittin’ right here...” He brings his hand to his chest again. “Makin’ it h-hard to breathe.”

“Any dizziness or vomiting?” I ask, making sure to keep my voice soft and soothing.

“Dizzy, yes, kind of. No v-vomiting, though.”

I nod. “Okay, and can you tell me when these symptoms started, Larry?”

Squeezing his eyes shut, the hand pressing against his chest drops, gripping the armrest on the recliner, his knuckles blanch. “A while now,” he rasps as he opens his

eyes and meets my gaze. They're wet and bloodshot. "Since I lost my Dolly. B-but it's never been like this."

"Is Dolly your wife?"

"We were married for fifty-four years before she died," he laments, voice trembling, the anguish and poignancy he feels palpable.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I say sincerely. "When did she pass?"

"Three months ago," Larry offers, barely above a whisper.

"Came home from running errands one day and found her unconscious on the floor in front of her vanity." The corner of his mouth twitches as a longing, thoughtful look passes through his gaze.

"Dolly would do her hair and put on makeup every single day, even though I always told her she didn't need to.

She was just as beautiful without it, but she loved it.

It made her happy." The thoughtful expression turns sad.

"I called 9-1-1, and they took her to the hospital, but it was too late. They couldn't save her.

An aneurism in her brain." Larry drags in another ragged breath. "They couldn't save m-my Dolly."

My throat tightens. I can't imagine loving someone for fifty-four years, and then losing them in the blink of an eye.

Death is inevitable; we all experience loss at some point, but I don't think anything—not time, not wisdom, not age—can prepare us for the pain that comes from outliving the person you love most in this world. It's heartbreaking.

Given what Larry's told us and the way his breathing is slowly returning to a normal pace, I have a hunch about what happened this morning, but I won't know for sure until we find out some more information.

"Can you walk us through your mornin' up until you called 9-1-1?" I ask, hoping something stands out that can prove my hunch.

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Larry nods as he removes the oxygen from his face.

“I’m what my Dolly called a creature of habit.

Been that way since my time in Vietnam.” He chuckles.

“Every mornin’, I wake up at six, shower, eat breakfast, then spend a couple hours outside, readin’ the newspaper and workin’ in my vegetable garden.

My Dolly loved gardening.” A far-off look clouds his gaze as he glances out the sliding glass door to the balcony.

Following his gaze, I spot the garden he describes, taking up about a third of the space out there.

“When I moved in here after she died, I wanted somethin’ that reminded me of her.

Workin’ in the garden has become my favorite part of each day. ”

“That’s sweet.” A smile tugs at my lips. “I’m glad you found something that brings you joy. What did you do after working in the garden?”

“Well, then it was time to check the mail. After walkin’ down to the mailboxes, I was feelin’ hungry and had planned to eat once I got back up here and opened the mail.

The chest pain came on before I had a chance to fix myself somethin’ to eat, though.

” Then Larry reaches for a piece of paper stuck under the medic bag and hands it to me.

Reading through the letter, it’s a notice to enter and do an annual inspection from a property management company who appears to own the building.

“I don’t want no fuckin’ strangers comin’ in my house,” he grumbles.

Folding the paper, I hand it back to Larry. “I understand that. I’m not fond of people comin’ in my personal space either, but it looks like they do this every year for all units. They’d probably be in and out in no time.”

“No!” he booms, the grip on the armrest tightening as his breathing kicks up again.

My gaze flits over to James, and he nods, putting the oxygen mask up to Larry’s mouth.

A minute later, he relaxes some, and as he takes the mask off, his shoulders sag and he looks down to his lap.

“I don’t know how it got this bad,” he murmurs quietly.

Confusion wrinkles my forehead until he continues.

“I know how my house looks. The boxes, the trash, the dishes. I know, okay? I’m not proud of it.

I just... I can’t bring myself to get rid of any of it.

I tell myself I’ll tackle a room tomorrow, then tomorrow comes, and I can’t.

They can't come in here and see all this. My Dolly would be so embarrassed."

His voice cracks as a tear spills over, streaming down his flushed cheek.

I'm hit with the strongest urge to wrap him in a hug when he turns his head away from us, as if trying to hide his emotion—a reaction I'm all too familiar with.

Not wanting to overstep or make the patient uncomfortable, I don't do that.

After we administer more oxygen and finish our work up, we're able to conclude it's not a heart attack Larry's experiencing, but instead, most likely anxiety.

Meaning, my hunch would be correct. Given when his symptoms started, I'd say Larry's been struggling with it since losing his wife, and what happened this morning was likely a panic attack caused by the inspection notice.

Once my team explains everything to Larry, we strap him to the gurney and prepare him for transport to the hospital.

Firefighters aren't medical professionals, so we aren't able to diagnose anyone.

Given how intense his symptoms were and how they mimic more serious medical conditions, like a heart attack, we prefer to err on the side of caution and have the patient checked over by a doctor.

Outside, James and Chandler get him loaded in the back of the ambulance before they head to the hospital while me and the rest of the crew hop in the engine and start the short drive back to the station .

With a deep breath, I grab my phone and pull up Hive , reading the notification waiting for me.

KnockinBoots: What part freaks you out?

“Is that what I think it is?”

At the sound of Remi’s voice, my head snaps up and meets his gaze as I fumble with locking my phone. “Sorry, what?”

Nodding toward the phone in my lap, he smirks and asks, “That was Hive , right? You took my advice?”

“Whoa, hold up.” Kian cuts in from the driver’s seat, lifting his gaze to the rearview mirror. “You tellin’ me Captain’s on the hunt for a pretty fella to warm his bed? Since when?”

“That’s what I’m tryin’ to find out,” Remi drawls. “Since when, Cap?”

Sam chuckles to himself from the front seat beside Kian while Millie, who’s sitting directly across from me, turns her gaze out the window as she tries—and fails—to bite back a grin.

Jesus Christ.

“It’s none of your damn business,” I grumble, cheeks heating. “And never say ‘pretty fella’ ever again.”

Kian clicks his tongue. “Come on, Cap. Where’s the fun in that?”

“My personal life isn’t meant to be fun for you .”

“Ya know, out of everyone on the crew, Remi and I could probably help you the most,” he drawls, a smirk curling his lip as he waggles his brows. “We are

experienced with this type of thing.”

“He’s not wrong.” Remi smacks a hand to my chest. “We’re the boys for the job.”

My jaw tics. “If you don’t knock it the hell off, the only job you’re gettin’ for the next week is bathroom duty, Buchanan.

” Slicing my gaze toward the rearview mirror, where Kian is watching me with amusement dancing in his gaze, I add, “More drivin’, less yappin’, Watkins, unless you want bathroom duty too. ”

Nausea churns in my gut at the mere thought of talking to either of them—or anybody, for that matter—about this.

Even the acknowledgement that I’m on the app is enough to make me break out in a cold sweat.

Then thinking about them finding out who I’m talking to makes my heart palpitate.

Am I enjoying talking to Hollis? Yeah, I am, but that’s none of their damn business.

It would be different if I thought this was actually going anywhere, but it’s not.

All I’m really doing is fooling myself and wasting his time.

Thinking about Larry, I relate to him in so many ways. Being a creature of habit, liking my privacy... But also, the anxiety.

I’m intimately familiar with the soul-sucking leech that is anxiety.

I’ve struggled with it my whole life, or at least for as long as I can remember.

Growing up with an angry drunk of a father makes it impossible not to.

The screaming. The fear of pissing Gregory Wesley off when he had too much to drink.

The constant need to make myself as small as possible to avoid his wrath.

His fists hurt, but the scars from his malicious words cut way deeper.

Trent reminds me a lot of my father.

It wasn't always that way. For many years, he was the kindest, most gentle man I'd ever known. He knew what I went through growing up, knew my anxiety and what made it flare up. He knew how to calm my mind and my soul in a way even I couldn't. Trent was a safe space for me... Until he wasn't.

The anger didn't come all at once. It was gradual...

Subtle. Something I didn't notice at first. As time went on, like with most abusive people, it escalated, but by that time, I was in too deep to notice.

I cared more about chasing his love than my own self-worth.

I did whatever I could to keep him happy.

Every smile, every laugh, every kiss, and every single time he fucked me, it felt like a prize.

Like I was worthy of his love and attention again.

Trent became a trigger for me.

My husband brought up old wounds caused by my father while carving new ones right beside them. I had married my father, a man I swore I'd never be like. A man I hate. That realization was a wake-up call. It broke the glass, the illusion I forced myself to see through.

Back at the station, I sit down at the desk in my office and open our message thread again.

KnockinBoots: What part freaks you out?

Staring at the screen, I chew on the inside of my cheek as my palms slick and my heart thunders.

FireInMyVeins: That's a loaded question, and I'd imagine someone like you has better options on this app than a man who gets easily spooked. I wouldn't at all blame you if you unmatched and went on to someone more fun and with less baggage. Sorry for wasting your time.

My thumb hovers over the screen for a long moment before finally sending the message.

There, it's done. It's for the best.

I'm too damn old, and far too damaged, for this dating shit anyway.

It's for the best.

Eight

Hollis

“ I t’s baby makin’ time, fellas,” I drawl as Finn opens the trailer, revealing the five fifteen-hundred-pound beasts waiting for us inside.

Springtime is here, and that means breeding season has arrived.

Every year, like clockwork, around the beginning of April, we bring in a handful of quality bulls—those with great genetics and sturdy, masculine structures—and turn them out with the cows for a forty-five-day breeding period.

This ensures we’ll have calves before the end of January, which is exactly how my father has always done it—and how his father and grandfather did it before him.

As cattle ranchers, breeding is one of the most important aspects of the job.

Simply put, if we don’t have calves, then we don’t pay our bills.

Period. There’s a lot riding on our cattle, and to make sure they have a healthy, successful breeding season, a lot goes into preparing for it.

From separating the heifers from the mature cows and adjusting their diet because their nutritional needs are different, to performing wellness checks and making sure each and every one is properly vaccinated, then finally, monitoring the herd for signs of heat.

It's an extensive, yet imperative process.

After Finn and I get the bulls in the pasture with the cows, we head back toward the barn, needing to get started on the rest of our mile-long to-do list. We're down a guy this week, and I can feel it.

August went out of town with his boyfriend, Tripp.

He's a student at the college, and school's out for spring break.

Think they went to visit Tripp's family, but I'm not sure.

I kind of tuned him out when he was telling us about it.

It's one of those days where I already know neither Finn nor I will take a single break.

It's Wednesday, and both of us want to finish everything before it's quitting time.

Every Wednesday, we gather at my dad's house for dinner.

It's something we've done for years. Working on the ranch, we see each other all the time, but the weekly dinners are a chance for us to relax and catch up outside of work.

Nine times out of ten, we end up talking about ranching anyway, but it's still something nice to look forward to.

After grabbing the tools from the barn, we ride out to the north pasture.

The fence needs fixing because something—a coyote, if I had to guess—damaged a

corner of it over the weekend.

We've put it off all week because we've had other, more important, shit on our plate, but it has to get done before we move the herd in here.

During breeding season, we rotate them between pastures every week or so.

While Finn's checking out the fence, I pull out my phone and click on Hive .

It's been almost a week since my mystery man all but encouraged me to un-match with him and apologized for wasting my time.

After reading the message, I considered doing just that, but for some strange reason that I don't understand, I didn't want to.

Sure, the guy is skittish, and because of that, we might not ever meet in person, but even knowing that, I don't feel like he wasted my time.

It was my choice to chat with him, and there's something about him I'm still drawn to.

And besides, I promised to be his Modern-Day Dating Yoda.

I may not be many things, but one thing I am is a man of my word, which means I have to see this through, even if he's flighty.

Figuring the guy probably needed a little space, I didn't reply right away. And honestly, how fucking insightful of me. I'm killing this Yoda thing already; he should feel pretty damn lucky. Impatience and boredom had me finally responding last night after I got home.

KnockinBoots: Based on the fact that you sent that message instead of just un-matching with me, I'd say the intrigued part of you outweighs the part that's freaked out.

He never responded, and I wondered if maybe he wouldn't at all. Maybe he deleted the app. But a smirk tugs on my lips as I notice the unread message from him. My stomach does a weird dip and roll as I click on our thread.

FireInMyVeins: You're probably right about my intrigue outweighing the fear. This is way outside the realm of anything I've done in the past. I don't know what I'm doing or how I'm feeling, and it's honestly a little overwhelming. I'm not used to questioning myself this much.

Dang, hitting me with some vulnerability on this fine Wednesday afternoon.

KnockinBoots: That's fair. But you don't need to know what you're doing all the time. I'm here to teach... Remember?

"You gonna pull ya damn weight and help me, or sit there and smile down at your phone like a damn fool the rest of the day?"

My head snaps up, gaze landing on my brother. He stands in front of the fence with a hand on his hip. "Someone's sassy today," I tease. "What's the matter, brother? Not gettin' your daily dose of dick?"

Finn's jaw tics, and his scowl deepens. "My sex life is not the problem here," he mutters. "My issue is with you slackin' off while I bust my ass. Put your fuckin' phone away and get to work."

I bark out a laugh, shoving the phone into my back pocket. "Would you relax, ya big fuckin' grump. I was on it for a few minutes, no need to get your panties in a bunch.

Besides, I see you textin' Ash all the time."

"Yeah, about my kid," he grits out. "Think that's a little different than you textin' your latest conquest."

"Oh, only about Tucker?" A smirk slides into place. "What about the other day when Ash sent you a picture? Ya know, the one in the shower, with his hand wrapped around his co?—"

"Don't even finish that sentence," Finn cuts me off.

"I'm just sayin'! It was a hot-as-fuck photo but had nothin' to do with your kid, so you ain't no better than me." Laughter spills out of me as his scowl deepens. Nothing amuses me quite like watching Finn get all territorial over his boyfriend. "Ya know what they say about glass houses, brother."

I don't need to see under my brother's sunglasses to know he's rolling his eyes. It's too damn easy to rile him up. "Cut the shit and get back to work, Hollis," he growls. "And next time you look over my shoulder at shit you've got no business seein', I'm kickin' your ass."

Throwing my head back, my shoulders shake with laughter.

The rest of the afternoon drags on miserably, especially when we get hit with a downpour.

Normally, a little rain wouldn't bother me, especially since it usually only lasts about ten minutes or so, but it's hot as hell out.

The moisture mixed with the heat creates a humid sort of hell.

By the time we call it a day, I'm dripping sweat and exhausted.

Back at my house, I preheat the oven before getting naked and hopping into the shower.

The cool water feels incredible as it beats down on my overworked body.

Once I clean myself and get out, I wrap a towel around my waist and saunter into the kitchen, tossing a frozen pizza in the oven.

My stomach grumbles, knowing I've barely eaten anything all day.

I need to make sure to pack a lunch for tomorrow because it's going to be just as long and grueling as today.

Swiping my phone, I open the app, finding a message waiting for me.

FireInMyVeins: What'd you have in mind?

I pull myself onto the counter, sitting across from the oven while I wait for the pizza to cook. What do I have in mind? We could meet up and fuck. That sounds like a pretty damn good idea. But nah... I want to get a little deeper now.

KnockinBoots: Let's start with your story.

FireInMyVeins: My story?

KnockinBoots: Yeah. You've admitted to being fresh out of a relationship... But how fresh? And are you gay? Bisexual? Pansexual? Were you married? Have kids? Tell me more about yourself. *smirk emoji*

FireInMyVeins: We're getting real personal tonight, I see.

KnockinBoots: Think we've been doing the small talk bullshit long enough, don't you? *wink emoji* I want to know the down and dirty details about you. Make you less of a mystery .

FireInMyVeins: I don't know... I kind of like the mystery. I like how you don't know who I am.

KnockinBoots: Yeah, well we're moving past that. Answer the questions.

I stare at my phone long enough for the screen to go black, and then I stare at it some more, confusion clouding my mind. Why do I care so much about this guy's back story? What is it about him that has me so curious?

Is it really just the mystery aspect of it?

FireInMyVeins: Can I be honest with you for a minute?

Huffing out a breath, I shake my head. This fucking guy.

KnockinBoots: Please. That's kind of the whole point.

FireInMyVeins: Talking about this stuff is hard for me. It's uncomfortable, but knowing I'm just another stranger to you makes it feel less uncomfortable.

KnockinBoots: I'm glad I make you feel that way. Just relax, baby. I'm not asking for first, last, and social here. I simply want to get to know you better. So I know what I'm dealing with. Mr. Miyagi, remember? *smirk emoji* Gotta know the facts to be the best teacher I can be.

And that's all it is.

FireInMyVeins: Okay... You first, though. Have you always known you were attracted to both men and women?

KnockinBoots: A little tit for tat, huh?

Okay, I'll bite if it'll help you open up.

High school was when I fully realized I was bisexual.

Although, early in middle school was when I started noticing how guys were attractive, like I did with girls, but up until high school it was always unattainable guys, like Tom Welling or Hugh Jackman. Celebrities or men way too old for me .

FireInMyVeins: So, what happened in high school?

Before I have a chance to type out a response, I freeze, re-reading the last couple of messages.

How did he know I was bisexual?

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Pretty fucking sure we've never talked about that. For a moment, I consider asking how he came to that conclusion, but decide against it. This incessant need to know more about him outweighs everything else apparently, so instead, I answer the question.

KnockinBoots: What didn't happen in high school? *laughing emoji* Puberty happened. Sports happened. Parties happened. Everything's a little easier to do a few shots deep and under the guise of playing a game. Spin the bottle, truth or dare, you name it.

FireInMyVeins: And you weren't worried about it getting out? Or about people giving you shit for it?

KnockinBoots: Not really? I guess I never really thought about it. Sure, it was a new part of myself, but I never felt like I needed to hide it or be ashamed of it.

FireInMyVeins: That's admirable.

KnockinBoots: Living your truth and being proud about it shouldn't be something that's seen as admirable.

It should be standard, you know? Like how people aren't one size fits all...

Sexuality isn't either, and the sooner society stops treating straight as the standard, the better.

Enough about me! I answered your question, now it's your turn to answer mine,

mystery man.

Spill the deets. *upside down smile emoji*

FireInMyVeins: 1. I'm gay. 2. I have been married. 3. No kids.

FireInMyVeins: And for what it's worth, I agree with everything you said.

Straight shouldn't be the standard, but unfortunately, we live in a part of the country where it is seen that way most of the time, whether we like it or not.

Wolf Creek is a pretty progressive town now, compared to other places in Texas, but it hasn't always been that way here.

KnockinBoots: Does that mean you dealt with hate when you came out?

Nothing sours my mood more than hearing about somebody getting shit for living their truth.

I know it happens every single day, way more often than I'd care to admit, but I hate it.

That's not how the world should be. Who gives a shit who somebody likes?

Way too many people find issues in situations that don't concern or affect them in any way.

FireInMyVeins: I didn't deal with too much hate when I came out, but I did witness a decent amount of it when I was younger, so I think it's only natural that I felt a little unnerved about exploring my feelings.

The nervousness definitely led to me coming out later than I would have had it been a different, more accepting time.

KnockinBoots: And what did you witness?

FireInMyVeins: It was mostly back in middle and high school.

If kids didn't fit inside the clean-cut boxes of what a guy or a girl should look or act like according to what society deemed as masculine or feminine, other kids would pick on them and make their life hell.

That, and the way my dad would get extra opinionated after a few beers.

KnockinBoots: He's a homophobe?

FireInMyVeins: I don't know that I'd say that. He's just an old-fashioned, traditional man, who believes marriage should be between a man and a woman.

KnockinBoots: Yeah, so actually, that's exactly what homophobia is.

FireInMyVeins: Alright... Next topic, please.

KnockinBoots: Okay, okay...

KnockinBoots: Did my messages last week turn you on?

FireInMyVeins: THAT'S your topic change question?

I chuckle to myself just as the timer goes off. Hopping off the counter, I grab a potholder from the drawer and pull out the pizza, setting it on the counter before I respond.

KnockinBoots: Yeah, why not? It's not like you responded, so I've been a little curious.

FireInMyVeins: Oh, just a little curious?

KnockinBoots: Answer the question.

FireInMyVeins: Yes, it did. But I'm sure you probably could've guessed that.

Fuck, that's so goddamn hot.

KnockinBoots: Tell me what you did after you read it...

I place the phone face up on the counter as I cut the pizza. Pulse racing, my body's on fire while I wait for his response. By the time his response comes through, I'm barely even hungry anymore.

At least not for pizza.

FireInMyVeins: I did exactly what you think I did.

KnockinBoots: Fuck, that's so hot. You've got me so turned on just from the thought of it.

FireInMyVeins: Are you hard? Right now?

KnockinBoots: Wanna see for yourself?

FireInMyVeins: How would I do that?

KnockinBoots: You could come over...

I'm not one bit surprised that it takes him a few minutes to respond. What I said would normally be no big deal. It's the way these apps work... But I've long since realized this situation is anything but normal, so the suggestion is bold.

FireInMyVeins: Ah, I'm not sure if that's a good idea.

KnockinBoots: Kinda figured you'd say that. But what's the worst that could happen?
smirk emoji

FireInMyVeins: Well, it is a small town...

KnockinBoots: You think we could know each other?

I'm practically waiting on the edge of my seat for his response to come through. Something about this guy has me absolutely enthralled , and I don't understand it.

FireInMyVeins: We might.

KnockinBoots: Does that freak you out?

FireInMyVeins: Maybe a little.

My dick throbs at his honesty, and I can't help but wonder, not for the first time, what this guy looks like. What he smells like. If he's clean shaven or has a beard. Or what his body would feel like pressed against mine.

I'm dying to know.

Patience isn't my forte, but the unknown surrounding him has me wanting to practice it a little harder.

KnockinBoots: Okay, let's start slow then.

FireInMyVeins: What are you suggesting...?

A grin splits my face as my fingers fly over the screen.

KnockinBoots: There's this little thing called a camera. *wink emoji* I could send you a picture, but I'd want one of you in return... to prove if it turned you on or not. Deal?

I press send and wait. A minute passes, and then another.

No response.

"Goddamn," I mutter under my breath, shaking my head, a smile still tugging on the corner of my mouth.

Patience.

Nine

Ford

Staring at my phone on the counter, where it's taunting me, I bring the half-empty bottle of beer up to my mouth, finishing the rest of it in one go.

I've got work in the morning and should've stopped drinking a while ago, but a little liquid courage felt necessary for what I want to do—what I've wanted to do since the night before last, actually.

So, after I toss the empty bottle in the trash, I retrieve another from the fridge, twist off the cap, and take a long, slow pull, letting the cool, crisp beverage roll down my throat.

Setting it on the counter, I flatten my palms against the countertop, my gaze fixed on the phone in front of me as I muster up the courage to grab it and open the app I've avoided for the last forty-eight hours, and tell KnockinBoots, or Hollis, what I want.

If I feel like shit in the morning because of it, then so be it. Hopefully, it'll be worth it.

I want to do this. But more than that, I think I need to do this. For clarity. And maybe a little rousing curiosity too. Ever since he sent that message the other night suggesting we send each other dirty pictures of ourselves, I swear my heart rate hasn't settled.

Did I slightly panic and close out of the app in a hurry? Yes.

But in my defense, the station got called out to a warehouse fire not long after that, so I couldn't have responded even if wanted to. There's no valid excuse for the last day since my shift ended, other than plain old cowardice.

Hence the need for liquid courage.

Taking one more swig, I swipe the phone off the countertop and pull up the app before I talk myself out of it.

I don't even give myself the opportunity to reread the last message sent before typing out one of my own.

I don't have to... The words are burned into my mind.

They've been on a constant loop behind my eyes every time I close them.

FireInMyVeins: Deal.

As soon as I press send, I drop the phone like it burned me and guzzle some more beer.

My heart thunders against my ribs and my stomach twists into tiny knots that make me nauseous.

I can't decide which outcome would be worse; Hollis responding or him ignoring the message all together.

Considering this isn't the first time I've gone silent on the guy, the latter is probably just as likely.

Luckily, I don't have to wait long to find out.

A moment later, the screen lights up with a new message.

The nausea and heart pounding kick into overdrive, and paired with the handful of beers running through my system, it causes my head to swim.

But like before, I don't give myself a chance to overthink or talk myself out of it.

KnockinBoots: That so? *smirk emoji*

Not for the first time, I imagine what he's doing when he messages me.

Is he wearing the smirk he so often gives me through text?

What's he wearing? If he knew who I was, would he find me attractive?

I give those questions a voice for another minute longer before shoving them out of my mind and thumbing out a reply.

FireInMyVeins: If the offer still stands, then yes.

KnockinBoots: Oh, it absolutely still stands.

A flicker of heat shoots down my spine. I set the phone on the counter and take another swig off the bottle, my palms sweaty and my hands trembling.

This is silly, the visceral way my body is responding to him.

This is Hollis. A man I've known for years, a man who, up until recently, I've never thought twice about.

Sure, I've always thought he was an attractive guy, but never in a sexual way.

KnockinBoots: Kinda like knowing you've been thinking about this since the other night.

FireInMyVeins: Who says I've been thinking about it since then? Maybe it just crossed my mind, so I decided to respond.

KnockinBoots: HA! I don't believe that for a second, baby. I want you to admit it. Admit how turned on you've been because of me and the things I've said. Admit it, or no deal.

Fuck. Why am I so damn nervous?

Well, probably because I have no idea what I'm doing.

This whole thing—flirting, enjoying having someone flirting with me—is something I haven't experienced in way too long.

I'm out of practice and he's effortless with it.

Not knowing what I'm doing, or what I should say, or how I should act terrifies me.

For as long as I can remember, I've prided myself on being the best I can be at everything I do.

When I decided to become a firefighter and join the academy, I lost countless hours of sleep studying my ass off, wanting to be the best damn cadet the academy has ever seen.

Then when I joined the force, I kept studying, kept asking questions, kept learning.

I don't do well with the unknown, which is ironic, given my career is quite literally walking into the unknown with every call we respond to, but that feels different.

I know how to be a firefighter. I know how to put out even the worst of fires.

I don't know how to do this , and what if I make a complete fool out of myself?

Say something that's the opposite of sexy or flirty or smooth?

Finishing off the rest of my beer, I toss it in the trash and grab another, ignoring the part of my brain telling me I'm going to feel like shit in the morning. What do I really have to lose? If I say something embarrassing, who cares? It's not like I'll have to face him after this.

Okay, I will , but he won't know it.

Fuck it.

FireInMyVeins: Okay, yes. The things you've said have turned me on. You've turned me on.

KnockinBoots: Good boy. *smirk emoji* Now, was that so hard?

Yes.

But also, good boy... What the hell?

Do I like that?

No, of course not. Although... rereading the message, I can't exactly say I hate it either.

KnockinBoots: Have you touched your cock thinking about me?

Another bolt of arousal spreads through my groin like wildfire. My cheeks heat, and my heartbeat roars in my ears.

FireInMyVeins: Yes.

KnockinBoots: *hot face emoji* Describe it to me.

Describe it to him? God, this is awkward .

FireInMyVeins: I jacked off in the shower a couple times.

KnockinBoots: Come on... Try again. You can do better than that.

Nothing to lose, Ford. You've got nothing to lose, so just do it.

FireInMyVeins: Fine. As I stood under the faucet, letting the hot water slide down my back, I imagined your hands roaming over my body instead of the water.

I imagine your palms are probably calloused from years of hard work, giving a roughness to your touch.

And each time I stood in the shower with this thought in my mind, I realized how much I wanted it to be a reality.

KnockinBoots: What'd you do after realizing that?

FireInMyVeins: I wrapped my hand around my stiff cock and pumped myself from base to tip, letting my eyes close as my head rolled back onto my shoulders.

The fantasy played behind my eyelids—behind me, your breath hot against my neck as your hand came around and fisted my cock.

In my mind, you stroked me slowly at first, but it didn't last. Your grip tightened, your fist flying up and down my cock with a desperation we're both feeling.

With my head resting on your shoulder, you pressed your lips to my neck, nibbling on the flesh.

My hips would be thrusting into your tight, rough fist. Then I imagined you bringing your other hand up to the front of my throat, holding me and applying a little bit of pressure.

And at that point, lost it. Warmth spread through my veins and my balls tightened up.

My release barreled through me and my cock throbbed as hot, thick cum spurt out of me, dripping down the wall until it reached the bottom of the tub, the water washing it down the drain .

Hitting send, I drop the phone on the counter again and take a step back, my stomach clear in my throat as I thrust my fingers into my hair.

Holy shit. I can't believe I sent all that.

My chest rises and falls with rapid breaths, heart pounding harder as a mix of adrenaline, nerves, and desire floods my system.

The buzzing of his response fills the otherwise silent kitchen, and I grab my phone without a second thought.

A blurred-out picture appears on the screen.

KnockinBoots: I knew you had it in you, baby. *smirk emoji* Look how turned on you have me already.

With a shaky hand and blood roaring in my ears, I tap the option to reveal the image.

It doesn't take a genius to guess what it is, but knowing and seeing are two very different things.

The organ in my chest catapults against my ribs and a tingly ache settles deep in my balls as my eyes take in the raunchy picture.

My mouth waters at the sight of his hard cock.

Hollis's hard cock. It's long and thick, with a bead of pre-cum dripping from the tip and glistening against what looks to be blue LED lights illuminating the otherwise dark room he's in.

He's not circumcised, a thick layer of foreskin blanketing most of the crown.

And there's a tattoo of a cowboy hat near the base.

When we first started talking, he hinted at having one, but I didn't think he really did, but there it is... Wow. Fuck, my mouth waters. This is so wrong. I shouldn't be looking at Hollis's dick, and I really shouldn't be imagining what he would taste like as I licked up his sticky arousal.

My heart leaps into my throat when another message comes through.

KnockinBoots: Your turn.

Right... my turn.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

As I hurriedly shove my pants down, my stiff, throbbing length springing free, it's not lost on me that I've sent maybe three dick pics over the course of my life.

There's not a whole lot of dirty texting going on when you're married.

At least there wasn't in mine. Clicking on the camera button, I hold the phone face down in front of me and wrap my hand around the base, cupping my balls at the same time.

Trying not to overthink it, I snap the photo and quickly send it.

Scrolling up to what he sent again, I take it all in, cataloging every detail to memory.

The trimmed, dark patch of hair, the way the bubblegum-pink tip pokes out from the flesh-colored foreskin, the dark vein running along one side of the shaft.

My mouth waters once again as I wonder what it would feel like to trace that vein with my tongue.

Would the scent of him be intoxicating? Would it make my head swim?

All thoughts come to a halt when my phone lights up with a message from him.

KnockinBoots: Fuckkkk, baby. *drool emoji* Look at you... so fucking hard for me. The way I'd love to drop to my knees and gag on that big, beautiful cock. Give you the best head you've ever had. I'd worship it and have you begging me to make you come.

Jesus Christ. That has me wrapping a hand around my length, giving it a few lazy strokes while the tip leaks onto the kitchen floor.

I can't remember the last time I was this horny.

Not wanting to come yet, I remove my hand from my cock, gritting my teeth at the loss of friction, and type out a response.

FireInMyVeins: Mmm... I like that idea. Think you could take the whole thing in your mouth?

KnockinBoots: Abso-fuckin-lutely, I could, and I'd do it happily. Feeling your thick cock slide across my tongue and down my throat would get me so goddamn hot, you have no idea. I'm a fucking slut for a nice, fat cock .

Unable to help myself, I spit in my palm and wrap it around my dick again, pumping slowly as I use my other hand to respond.

FireInMyVeins: I'm stroking myself right now... Are you?

The response is immediate.

KnockinBoots: I think you already know the answer to that.

FireInMyVeins: Is it my hand you're picturing instead of yours?

KnockinBoots: Fuck yeah... You're doing such a good job too. Feels so fucking good.

FireInMyVeins: It's your hand around my cock too...

KnockinBoots: You're standing in front of me naked, that sexy, fuzzy chest heaving as we jack each other off.

Your other hand is gripping my hip, nails digging into my skin, while my hand is wrapped around the back of your neck.

The closer I bring you to the edge, the louder you get.

What starts out as nothing but heavy breathing turns into low, needy moans and grunts falling from your lips.

And fuck, I just know you're sexy as hell as you fall apart.

FireInMyVeins: I'm close... I'm gonna come.

KnockinBoots: Do it, baby. Show me the mess you make because of me.

Slamming my eyes shut, my head drops back onto my shoulders as I pump myself faster and rougher, my fist flying up and down my length while I desperately chase my release.

Starting deep in my groin, heat blooms and spreads, my sweat-slick skin tingling as every inch of my body thrums with electricity.

My balls tighten, cock throbbing in my fist, and a deep, guttural sound rumbles from my chest as I explode.

As thick, white ropes spill onto the counter, my legs tremble, the orgasm hitting me in waves, each one impossibly stronger than the last.

By the time I wring the last drop from my cock, I'm out of breath and my body feels

like Jell-O.

I steady myself with a hand to the counter as I snap a picture of the cum and send it to him.

Setting the phone down, I pull up my sweats before turning and grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

I chug it all at once before tearing off a paper towel from the roll to clean up the mess.

I can't believe I just did that. As I'm tossing everything in the trash, my phone vibrates, the sound causing my heart to skip a beat.

It's a video.

My body heats all over again as I watch him fuck his own fist, movements rapid and jerky.

The video shakes, and I can hear him breathing.

It's harsh and fast, and my spent cock twitches at the sound of it and the sight of him strangling his cock.

A deep, broken groan erupts from him as he finally comes.

Once he's done, Hollis drags two fingers through the sticky mess before taking them somewhere behind the camera.

The video ends, and my pulse roars in my ears, wondering what he did with those fingers.

Was it just for show? Or did he bring them to his mouth and lick them clean?

Fuck, that's way hotter than it should be.

Closing the video, I notice a new message from him.

KnockinBoots: Well, that was hot and satisfying as hell.

FireInMyVeins: Yeah, it really was.

KnockinBoots: I'm sleeping like a damn baby tonight, so thanks for that. *wink emoji*

Chuckling to myself, I type out a response .

FireInMyVeins: Me too, and I need it. I've got an early morning tomorrow at the firehouse.

After I send the message, I pocket my phone, switch off the lights in the kitchen, and head toward the back of the cabin to get ready for bed.

It's way later than I should be awake, but falling asleep should be easy.

Once I brush my teeth, I strip out of my clothes and climb into bed.

As I'm plugging my phone into the charger, I see a notification from him.

KnockinBoots: Firehouse, huh? *smirk emoji*

The blood drains from my face as I reread my last message, realizing what I said.

Shit!

Shit. shit. shit!

How did I not realize what I said? Fuck!

Setting the phone on my nightstand, I lie down, staring up at the ceiling as my mind spirals.

Maybe it's not as bad as I think it is.

So, he knows I'm a firefighter? That doesn't mean he knows who I am. There are plenty of us at the house. Letting that one tiny detail slip doesn't reveal my identity.

It's fine.

It'll be fine.

God, I fucking hope so.

Ten

Hollis

“Dude, what the hell is with all this traffic?” I grumble. “It’s fuckin’ Wednesday. Where is everybody goin’?”

Remi chuckles from the driver’s seat, turning his head to meet my gaze before returning his attention to the road. “Would you relax? You’re not even drivin’, so why do you care?”

“Maybe I’m just really excited for campin’. Ever thought of that, smartass?”

“Or you have a serious case of road rage,” he throws back, flashing me a dimply grin.

I snort. “Okay, yeah, maybe a little of that too.” But also, I am excited too.

This week is the annual Station 14 A-shift camping trip, which is always a fun time, but this year is particularly exciting, thanks to my new Hive friend, who I’m fairly certain is Ford, based on that little goose egg he dropped the other night.

It would make total sense... The username, him being newly single, him being older.

There’s no way it’s not Ford, but I have no hard and solid proof... yet.

It’s nearly three in the afternoon by the time we finally make it to the campground.

What's typically a two-hour drive ended up being closer to three, due to all the damn traffic we hit.

Once everyone gets their shit unpacked from their vehicles, it's a race to get tents up before we lose sunlight.

Thankfully, Remi and I are no strangers to camping, so we're able to get both our tents ready in no time before helping the others.

Ford and Chandler are the only ones who don't need any help.

You'd think since this is an annual trip that's gone on for several years now, everyone would be better at this type of shit, but apparently not.

With that done, we dive right into getting started on the food.

Ford mans the grill, like he does every year—that man is particular, to say the least, about his meat—while the rest of us get everything else ready.

“Yo, Hollis!” Remi calls out.

Glancing over at him while I shuck the last husk of corn, I tip my chin by way of response.

A grin stretches his face as he holds up an unopened bottle of Don Julio Blanco, the question loud and clear.

“Oh, hell yeah. Count me in, brother!” After I bring the tray of corn over to the grill and get a greedy eyeful of the man in front of it, I shuffle over to the long folding table Remi's standing behind while cutting the limes.

“Who else wants one?” he asks.

Millie, Sam, and Kian join us while I open the roll of mini Solo cups and line them in a row. Grabbing the tequila and twisting off the top, I fill the cups to the brim. “Ford, Chandler, James, none for y’all?”

“Can’t leave the steaks,” Ford mutters, not bothering to look up from the grill. Boring.

I flit my gaze over to where James is getting the fire going. Shaking his head, he says, “Nah, not yet. I can’t do tequila on an empty stomach or else I’ll puke and pass out before the night even starts.”

“Chandler...” I purr, shifting my attention to where she’s propped up on the tailgate of Ford’s truck, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a Kindle in her hand. “Get your fine ass over here and do a shot with us.”

Her gaze lifts from the device, meeting mine as her lip twitches. “Absolutely not.”

Arching my brow, I fold my arms over my chest. “And why the fuck not, Miss Girl?”

“Because the last time you fed me tequila, I ended up dancing with you on that picnic table over there, belting out the words of Baby by Justin Bieber with my top off, and my wife was pissed.” Chandler chuckles before adding, “And I’m not really tryin’ to catch her wrath for a second year in a row. So, not happenin’, Moore. Nice try.”

Ford spins around and gestures toward all of us with his spatula. “Nobody is gettin’ naked this year,” he growls.

Yeah, we’ll see about that.

Holding up my hands in front of me, I bark out a laugh. “Damn, Cap, layin’ down the law already. No tequila for Chandler and no strippin’ and dancin’ around the fire tonight?” I shrug, clicking my tongue. “Kinda borin’, but alright.”

Giving me a deadpan stare with furrowed brows and a tight jaw, he turns back toward the grill without bothering to respond.

I huff a laugh and pass out the shots, which the five of us throw back before I crack open a cold beer and turn on some music.

It’s not long before the food’s done and we eat.

I’ll give it to Ford; he may be a stuffy when it comes to letting loose on these trips, but my man sure can grill a ribeye. Goddamn, that was delicious.

Several hours later, all of us, except Chandler, who took her ass to bed around nine, are sitting around the fire, shooting the shit while music plays softly in the background—a superior playlist, of course, because it’s mine.

Most of us are a handful of drinks deep, and between the crackling fire and the tequila swimming through my bloodstream, I’m feeling pretty toasty.

Even Ford is working on his second beer of the night.

Kicked back in a folding chair, a fresh cold one in hand, I’m halfway paying attention while everyone talks shop.

Remi’s been a firefighter for long enough that I’ve picked up on most of the lingo, but some of it still goes over my head.

Their stories never fail to amuse me, though.

The phone tucked away in my pocket taunts me as I flit my gaze across the campfire, taking Ford in and if he really is the man I've been talking to on the app.

When FireInMyVeins let it slip that he worked at a firehouse, I'll admit, there was a brief moment of panic at first, wondering if this man I've been talking to for over a month now, who I'm now also sexting, could be Remi.

It wouldn't be the first time one of us ran across the other on a dating app.

That thought was almost enough to make me delete my profile altogether.

I mean, if it was him, that's Remi... my best fucking friend and somebody I could never look at in that way.

Thankfully, it didn't take long to piece together that it couldn't be him.

For one, Remi isn't fresh out of a relationship, and for two, my profile isn't anonymous, and there's no way Remi would swipe on me, knowing who I was.

Not to mention, I've seen Remi without a shirt on hundreds of times during our friendship, and he's nowhere near as fuzzy as the guy on the app.

I'm one hundred percent certain it's not my best friend—thank god—but damn, that moment of panic was real.

Especially because it would've been a real fucking bummer to find out the glorious cock I was drooling over belongs to somebody who's like family to me.

Well, that, and it's usually not the smartest move to fuck your best friend, but there'd be no way I couldn't take a cock like that for a spin.

Safe to say, I'm thrilled about not having to worry about ruining my friendship with Remi by insisting he fuck me immediately.

Nudging me with his elbow and momentarily pulling me from my thoughts, I look to my left at Remi. "Turn it up," he says, nodding toward the speaker my phone is connected to.

The beginning of Shania's Any Man of Mine is playing, and I chuckle to myself as I reach into my pocket and grab the phone, doing exactly that.

Remi and Millie simultaneously belt out the lyrics, singing the classic country song like it's their birthright.

Laughter from the rest of us mixes in with their loud, obnoxious singing.

After I pound the rest of my beer, I join in as the next song plays, followed by the other guys, and by the time Song of the South comes on, Ford's even out of his chair and singing along.

It's a damn miracle we don't wake up Chandler with how loud we are.

Nights like this are exactly why I love coming on these trips every year.

It's a chance to let loose and forget about responsibility for a couple of days.

I've always been more relaxed and easygoing than my dad and brother, something I get from my mom.

Working side by side with them, day in and day out, can get a little suffocating.

Being out here with my best friend and the people who are like family to him is a

much-needed reset. It's good for the soul.

Toward the end of the song, Ford reaches behind his head and tugs off his sweatshirt. My mouth dries, because in the process, his shirt rides up, revealing a whole hell of a lot of his abdomen, including a hidden tattoo...over his ribs.

A compass .

Holy. Shit. It's him.

FireInMyVeins is Ford.

I was right.

A layer of goosebumps pops up over my arms, the hair on the back of my neck standing up as the sweet confirmation settles deep in my groin.

The man I've been talking to—the mystery man with the nice cock—is Captain Ford Wesley.

And the best part? I may be just now figuring out who he is, but he's known who I am. Ford's been knowingly flirting with me.

Not some random guy on an app.

Me.

Fuck me, that's so goddamn hot.

What a dirty, sneaky man...

Every part of me wants to call him out on it right this second, to quit wasting time and get to ripping each other's clothes off, but I know I can't.

Not yet. Somehow, I manage to school my features and continue on with the night.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but eventually, I step away from the group in search of something to drink.

Flipping open the lid to one of the coolers, I pull out a bottle of water.

It's late, and if I don't want to wake up with a pounding headache in the morning, I need to hydrate with something other than beer and tequila.

I prop my ass on the edge of one of the tables as I crack open the bottle and down a few gulps as I try to figure out a plan of action.

Twisting the cap back on, I set it beside me, then grab the pack of cigarettes out of my pocket, deciding now would be as good a time as any to enjoy a quick smoke break.

Nobody on Remi's crew smokes, and they all have no problem reminding me how bad it is for me any chance they get.

I take a long, slow drag, letting the smoke and nicotine fill my lungs while my gaze takes in the sight before me.

Everybody except Remi and Millie is back in their chairs, amusement gleaming in their eyes as they watch the drunk pair slow dance to Paramore's The Only Exception and serenade one another .

After a moment, like he can sense me thinking about him, Ford's eyes slide over and

lock onto mine.

An electric buzz courses through my veins as a smirk tugs on the corner of my mouth.

He holds my gaze for a few seconds before shifting his focus back to Millie and Remi.

It's impossible to miss how his jaw pops and the harsh way he swallows, causing his Adam's apple to bob in his throat.

Even though I have all the proof I need to know, without a doubt, that the man I've been talking to is Ford, getting him to admit it out loud is going to feel so fucking satisfying.

And I'm going to do just that by the end of the night.

The anonymity has been fun, but now that I'm certain the guy is Ford, somebody I've always been attracted to, somebody I've hung out with before, and somebody who has known this entire time who he's talking to, makes this so much sweeter...

and hotter. Taking one last drag, I put out the cigarette, tossing the butt in the trash as I wrack my brain on how this should play out.

I could always take the straightforward route by pulling him to the side and telling him what I know.

In my experience, being blunt and to the point is often the way to go.

However, this situation is different. Knowing what I do about Ford—about how flighty he's already been on the app, and about his past—I quickly decide that plan

wouldn't work for a multitude of reasons.

Whatever I do, it'll have to be smooth and careful.

If I spook him, I run the risk of scaring him off.

Or worse, embarrassing him. Neither of which I want to do.

My desire to pursue this man is still a huge fucking mystery to me, though.

Sure, Ford is sexy as hell, but even before knowing his identity, I was drawn to him.

And yeah, I already wanted to fuck Ford, but this feels...

different. I wanted to fuck Ford in a one-and-done type of way.

A conquest. A fantasy come to life. But this guy, the man from the app...

Well, he intrigues me in a way that doesn't feel one-and-done, which isn't like me at all.

Yet knowing all of that, I still can't let it go.

I'm like a dog with a bone. Honestly, though, it does make sense.

Getting laid has never been hard for me, and not even in a conceited way either.

I've always been a more naturally flirtatious person, so finding somebody to get sweaty with typically doesn't require a whole lot of effort on my part.

And don't get me wrong, sometimes that's exactly what I need—a quick, easy

release—and usually what I prefer.

Something I don't have to think too hard about.

But this isn't something I can get easily.

This guy—both the man from the app and Ford, the man in real life—is someone I have to put in effort to get.

It's been too fucking long since I've had to do any chasing, and that's usually half the fun. So, the reason I'm hyper-focused on him, so intrigued by him, and why I'm so adamant about fucking him, is because it's a challenge. He's a challenge.

And fuck me , if I don't love a good challenge from time to time.

It's not long before we call it a night.

After James puts out the fire and we tidy up the campsite, everyone heads to their respective tents.

As soon as I have mine zipped, an idea forms. An idea that erases any bit of tiredness I was feeling a moment ago.

Quickly stripping down and sliding into my sleeping bag, I reach for my phone and pull up the chat with my not-so-mystery man, my heart pounding as my thumbs fly over the screen.

KnockinBoots: You up?

My lips curl into a grin when his response comes through not even a minute later .

FireInMyVeins: As a matter of fact, I am.

KnockinBoots: Are you as horny as I am? *evil smirk emoji*

FireInMyVeins: Maybe...

Arousal floods my system, and I swallow thickly, my cock throbbing beneath the covers.

Here goes nothing...

KnockinBoots: Well, maybe I can help you with that...

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

Eleven

Ford

K nockinBoots: Well, maybe I can help you with that...

My body heats as I read the message back again.

FireInMyVeins: Yeah? What'd you have in mind?

I should go to bed. I should put my phone away, roll over, and get some sleep since we've got an early morning.

What I absolutely should not be doing is responding to Hollis when I have a pretty good guess at where this is going.

And based on the way my cock is growing harder by the second, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want it to go there too.

Lying here on this air mattress, with my phone unlocked, and my eyes zeroed in on our text thread, waiting on bated breath for him to reply, it becomes crystal clear that I'm ignoring the rational part of my brain telling me what I should and shouldn't be doing.

Hollis is here... He's a few tents away, and this clearly is wrong.

I'd like to blame the alcohol, but that would also be a lie.

No, it's something else altogether. It's a rush to the head.

Like, adrenaline pumping through my bloodstream, knowing I'm in a small, flimsy tent, surrounded by my subordinates, and him, in the middle of nowhere.

Knowing I could get caught. It's a thought that should be enough to put a stop to this, but instead, it makes my dick twitch against my thigh.

KnockinBoots: Question first... Are you as hard as I am right now?

FireInMyVeins: Yes.

Sending it without a second thought, I reach down, palming my rigid length through my briefs.

KnockinBoots: What's got you so hard, baby? *thinking face emoji*

FireInMyVeins: You.

KnockinBoots: Do tell...

FireInMyVeins: I'm thinking about how good you'd look between my legs right now. Watching you pull my pants down, the way your eyes would light up as my thick, hard cock is freed, and the way you'd lick your lips as you wrap a hand around me.

I hurriedly shove my briefs down, needing to touch myself fully. Needing to ease some of the tension mounting inside me. Closing my fist around my length, I slowly stroke from base to tip, my eyes rolling back as I breathy groan falls from my lips. Fuck, that feels good.

KnockinBoots: Mmm... Fuck yeah. You'd feel so hot and smooth against my hand.

What do I do next?

FireInMyVeins: You'd stroke my cock nice and slow for a while. Get me all worked up with nothing but your hand before flicking your tongue against the tip, cleaning up the pre-cum dripping out of me .

KnockinBoots: You'd taste so fucking good, baby. I'd be dying for more.

FireInMyVeins: I know you would, but you'd have to be patient.

KnockinBoots: *eye roll emoji* I guess I can be patient, so long as you tell me what I do next... and be detailed, baby.

Fuck. My hand tightens around my cock as my hips thrust up into my fist. How can this be so hot?

How can I be this turned on by the idea of him being here and doing this?

It doesn't make sense, but now isn't the time to stop and analyze it.

Forcing myself to stop before I come, my thumbs fly across the screen as I type out a response.

FireInMyVeins: You'd keep jacking me off while you lean down and suck on my balls. Your hot, wet tongue would feel like heaven as it swirled around and teased me.

KnockinBoots: Fuck, I love your imagination, baby. You've got me so fucking hard... Wanna see?

FireInMyVeins: Yes. Show me.

While I wait for him to send proof, I bring my hand back to my cock, stroking faster and with more fervor than before.

Every inch of my body feels keyed up. His response comes through, but instead of a picture waiting for me, it's a video.

My pulse kicks up a notch, heart beating so powerfully I can feel it in my throat as I fumble with the volume, wanting to make sure it's quiet enough to not be heard outside the tent, before pressing play.

Hand wrapped around his dick, Hollis pumps himself, flicking his wrist on the upstroke.

A deep, throaty groan fills the speakers, the sound sending a shot of hot, dripping arousal straight to my cock.

A desperate, hungry need washes over me, and before I know it, I'm reaching down and mimicking what he's doing on myself, imagining it's his hand instead of mine.

"Look how fuckin' hard you've got me, baby." His voice is low and full of gravel. "The thought of suckin' on your big, juicy nuts while I rub on that beautiful, fat cock has me fuckin' leakin' for you."

The video zooms in on the tip. A pool of sticky pre-cum sits on the slit, dripping down the side, and my mouth waters, wanting to know what he would taste like.

He swipes his thumb through the mess, spreading it around, before stroking himself a few more times before the video ends.

As I close out of it, a new message pops up from him.

KnockinBoots: Your turn, baby...

There's no hesitation. No nerves swimming low in my gut, causing my mind to freeze.

Tossing the sleeping bag off my body, I sit on my knees and open the camera.

As soon as it's recording, my hand is moving—no, flying —up and down my shaft.

A deep ache settles in my balls as pleasure soars through my body.

The knowledge that he's going to be watching this in a minute makes it feel that much better.

“You gonna take this cock in your mouth when you're done sucking on my balls?

” My words come out gruff, thick with arousal, and louder than I intend, but fuck it.

It's late, and everybody else has probably already passed out.

“You'd look fucking sexy with your lips wrapped around my dick, wouldn't you?

I'd grab a fistful of your hair as I took control.

Your eyes would be bloodshot and wet, cheeks flushed, spit dripping from the corner of your mouth as I fucked your tight little throat. You'd love that, wouldn't you?”

A growl rips from my chest as let go of my cock, not wanting to come yet. Sweat beads across my forehead and down the back of my neck as I end the video and send it. I scroll back up to the one he sent, watching it again. Everything about it turns me on.

The muffled sound of his voice.

His labored breathing.

The tight grip he's got on his dick.

Even the way his foreskin moves with each thrust. Covering the pink tip before revealing it again.

It's hypnotizing, like a seductive game of peek-a-boo.

I want to replace his hand with mine, want to feel his cock against my palm.

Feel how hot it is, how hard it is, and knowing it's because of me.

I want to lick up the pre-cum and have his taste and scent fill my senses.

A response comes through, and the speed at which I scroll to read it is embarrassing.

KnockinBoots: You know what's even hotter than that video?

FireInMyVeins: What's that?

KnockinBoots: The fact that you're only about forty feet away from me right now and I could help you with that in person...

Oh, god. Dread washes over me, my blood running ice cold as I read the message over again. Dropping the phone on the air mattress, I sit back on my legs and thrust my fingers into my hair, tugging on the strands.

Oh, fuck. He knows.

Hollis knows it's me.

No, no, no.

Fuck.

My chest tightens as I swallow against a lump of dread. The walls of this tent are closing in on me. It's making my head swim.

Is he fucking with me and making a guess? Or does he know ? And how does he know? Clicking on the video I sent him, I rewatch it, looking for any distinguishable signs, but I see nothing. I was careful. And then it hits me... My voice.

Fuck!

I was so lost in the heat of the moment that I didn't even realize what I was saying, or how stupid it was to say anything at all.

I need fresh air.

After I tug my briefs around my waist, I grab the closest shirt I can find, pulling it over my head.

Shoving my feet into my sneakers, I unzip the tent with shaky hands and step into the night.

I glance around at the tents surrounding mine.

It's hard to make out anything with how dark it is, but it doesn't appear like anyone else is awake, nor does it look like Hollis is out here.

Thank god.

How could I have been so fucking stupid?

I'm nauseous and lightheaded, and my knees feel like they're going to buckle any second now.

Walk... I just need to walk. Sticks and leaves crunch under the soles of my shoes with each heavy-footed step I take.

I should've brought my phone with me. At least then I could've used the flashlight to illuminate the path in front of me instead of walking aimlessly in the pitch black.

As I trek farther away from my tent, it all happens so fast. One minute, I'm focusing on my breathing—taking in deep breaths through my nose and exhaling fully through my mouth—and the next, my body is being jolted to the side by a fist around the front of my shirt as I'm shoved against a rough, solid surface.

A tree.

What the fuck is going on?

A growl erupts from my lungs, my mouth like sandpaper as all words seem to escape me.

No matter how many times I blink or strain my eyes, I can't make out who's in front of me.

It's too fucking dark now that we're under a bed of trees, but I know...

I know exactly who's standing in front of me.

I attempt to push off the massive tree trunk that's digging into my back, but I can't because the hand grabbing the front of my shirt is quickly replaced with a strong, steady forearm.

The weight against my chest has my breaths growing heavy and my heart thrashing against my ribcage.

Hollis leans forward, bringing his face beside mine.

The new proximity does two things at once.

First, the side of his face brushes against mine, thick, coarse hair covering his cheek and lining his jaw scratches against mine, sending a wave of goosebumps all over my flesh.

And secondly, his rich scent surrounds me, invading my senses.

Leather, tobacco, and something woodsy.

Alarm bells go off in my mind, heart pounding so hard, I'm sure he can feel it beneath his forearm. Bringing his mouth to the shell of my ear, Hollis says, "Fuckin' knew it was you, Captain."

And then his lips are on mine.

Twelve

Hollis

My lips tug into a grin as Ford sucks in a sharp breath and his body goes rigid against mine.

A rush of adrenaline and exhilaration swim through my veins in tandem, making me feel drunk on this new change of pace.

My cock is harder than granite, balls full and aching from the release I never got to have, but I just fucking know it's going to be worth it.

“Get the fuck off me,” Ford growls once again as he brings his hands up, palms flat against my abdomen, and pushes me away.

Or rather, unsuccessfully attempts to because I'm ready for him.

The feel of his fingertips against my skin sets me on fire.

I chuckle when he huffs out a frustrated grunt, realizing I didn't budge.

Clicking my tongue, I say, “Ah, ah, ah, not so fast,” tracing the left side of his stubbled jawline with my lower lip.

A burst of heat blooms in my chest as I feel his body tremble against mine, and the way his breath hitches has my dick throbbing beneath my sweats.

“What an interestin’ turn of events this has become, wouldn’t you say, Captain?”

Imagine my surprise when I figured out the sexy, and dirty-mouthed man I’ve been messagin’ back and forth with has been you.

But you must’a been just as surprised as me... Right?”

His jaw flexes against my cheek before he once again says, “Get the fuck off me.” Except this time, the crack in his voice gives him away.

“Oh, but that’s not the case, is it?” I ask before nipping his earlobe. “Because you knew from the start who I was, didn’t you? You knew exactly who you were sayin’ all those filthy things to.”

His silence has me fucking beaming.

A groan vibrates in my throat as I press my body against his. “What a dirty fuckin’ man you are, baby,” I taunt softly, voice barely above a whisper, spoken directly into his ear.

“Don’t fuckin’ call me that,” he snarls, his chest rumbling, his hands still pressed against my bare stomach. I’m not even sure if he’s aware that he’s still touching me.

Huffing out a breath, I move my arm off his chest, flattening my hand to the tree trunk beside Ford’s head.

Bringing my other hand to his hip, my thumb slips under the hem of his sweatshirt and brushes against his warm, smooth skin.

I don’t miss the shudder that rolls through him at the barely-there touch.

He's affected, even if he doesn't want to be.

I nip at his ear again, smiling against his cheek when his body stiffens and he inhales sharply.

"If I remember correctly, you didn't have an issue with it before," I murmur softly before dragging my tongue along his stubbled jaw.

As I reach his chin, I nip at the skin again, then pull back enough to look him in the eyes.

It's too dark out here to make out much.

His breath is hot and sweet, coming out in quick, shallow pants, fanning my face.

Removing my hand from the tree and cupping the side of Ford's neck, my fingertips brush the thick hair on his nape as I breathe out a quiet chuckle.

"You know, I should've put it together sooner...

Your username, the fact that you're newly single.

I'm not sure how I didn't, but I can't deny how fuckin' hot all of this makes me. "

He scoffs. "How'd you figure it out?"

"Your tattoo," I drawl. "That sexy little compass piece on your ribs. Saw it earlier around the fire and remembered it from your pictures on Hive."

Ford's silent for a moment, the crickets in the distance the only sound to be heard around us.

What I wouldn't give to be able to read his mind, to know what he's thinking but not saying.

Finally, after clearing his throat, he says, "Well, as fun as talkin' to you has been, it obviously can't go any further than it has. "

My face screws up. "Why the fuck not?"

"How about because I'm your friend's boss, and it's completely inappropriate?"

"Inappropriate for who?" I ask, unable to keep the amusement out of my tone. "You said it yourself... Remi is my friend, not my boyfriend. So, what would you bein' his boss have anythin' to do with you and I?"

Okay, clearly, I know what the issue is, but like hell am I going to admit that.

Ford sighs heavily, jaw flexing against my palm before he grits out, "There is no 'you and I,' Hollis."

"Wrong again," I murmur. "The proof of that is on both our phones, Captain. And it's not like you can lie and say you had no idea who you were talkin' to. You knew, and if memory serves me right, you messaged me first."

His jaw flexes. "I shouldn't have done that. "

"Okay, then answer me this." I take a step closer and bring my body flush with his again. We're so close, there's barely an inch of space between our lips. "Now that I'm standin' right in front of you, does thinkin' about all the things I said I wanted to do to you do nothin' for you?"

My thumb caresses over the skin on his hip, a gentle motion I know is driving him

wild, even if he won't admit it.

It's in his labored breathing, the way the vein in his neck pounds against my palm, and especially, it's in the way he says nothing at all.

His silence—the inability to deny it—gives him away.

It tells me all I need to know, and it has me fucking elated .

“Yeah, that's what I fuckin' thought,” I murmur darkly before flicking my tongue across his bottom lip.

Ford doesn't move.

He doesn't speak.

Hell, I don't even think he breathes for a moment.

My lip curls into a grin, knowing I have him right where I want him.

Knowing before long, Ford Wesley, the big, gruff fire captain at Station 14 and the mystery man I've been flirting with for over a month, will be putty in my hands.

I'm about to rock his fucking world, and he doesn't even know it.

Sure, Ford may pretend he doesn't want this anymore, given who I am, but I don't believe it for a second, and I'm willing to bet he doesn't actually believe it either.

Why else would he message me for so long?

The hesitancy and silence prove it. All I have to do is get him to break—or at the very

least, crack a little—and given how Ford hasn't made any more attempts to shove me away, nor has he decked me in the face, I'd say that shouldn't be too hard.

Wanting to up the ante a bit, I decide to tease him a little more.

Make him sweat. Using the hand on his hip, I bring it around his back, letting my fingers slip beneath the waistband.

Clamping his mouth shut, Ford exhales harshly through his nose.

His body is tense as I caress his skin. My hand sinks lower with each featherlight and sensual pass until my fingers are hidden underneath his sweats.

Simultaneously, I bring my other hand down to his throat, barely applying any pressure, but letting my thumb trace the sharp edge of his tightened jaw.

“Tell me, baby... If I dropped to my knees right here and gave you my mouth to use, would you?”

Ford swallows, Adam's apple rolling against my palm. “No,” he croaks before clearing his throat and trying again. “No, I wouldn't.”

“You almost sounded convincin' there, and I might've believed you had it not been for that little video you sent me from inside your tent.

” My middle finger teases the top of his crease, and Ford fucking trembles against me.

“Hot as fuck, by the way. I'm sure you can imagine how fuckin' turned on I was watchin' it.

Especially the part where you described how you'd grab a fistful of my hair and take control of me while you fuck my throat.

” Leaning forward, I brush my lips against his, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth before asking, “Remember sayin’ all that, Captain? ”

A mix between a whimper and a snarl sounds from him as his nostrils flare with another sharp exhale.

“Answer me,” I grit out, my hand tightening around his throat. Not enough to cut off any air, but enough to make him listen.

“That was before,” Ford growls. The muscles in his neck flex under my touch and his pulse is racing.

My body heats and a smirk slides up my face while I use the hand around his throat to turn his head to the side, bringing my lips to his ear.

“ Tsk, tsk , that’s not an answer, and I don’t much appreciate repeatin’ myself.

However, I suppose I’ll be nice and give you a pass.

Just this once, but do not make me repeat myself after that.

Am I makin’ myself clear, Captain?” A clenched jaw and a deep sigh are the only responses I get, and goddamn , if it doesn’t rile me the fuck up.

“Do you remember sayin’ how much you wanted to fuck my throat? ”

With his palms still flat against my abdomen, Ford curls the tips of his fingers, nails digging into my flesh as he huffs out, “Yes.”

Sliding my hand farther down the back of his sweats, I grab a handful of his ass—which is a whole lot fatter than it looks—and turn his head to face me again, our mouths a hair’s breadth apart.

“Such a good fuckin’ boy,” I purr as my hand comes up and gently taps him on the cheek a few times before bringing it back down to his throat.

“I saw how fuckin’ hard you were when you sent that video. You were ’bout to bust, weren’t you?”

Ford opens his mouth to respond, but before he can, I cut him off.

“Remember, I don’t fuckin’ wanna ask twice.”

“Yes.”

Pride and something much more titillating washes over me at hearing that single word.

“What a quick learner you are. Feel how fuckin’ turned on that makes me?” Grinding against him, a groan rumbles from deep in my chest when I feel it... His erection. “Fuck, baby, this all for me?”

Rolling his lips together, Ford drops his head back against the tree, but doesn’t say anything.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

“I know you’re leakin’ all over your sweats.

Fuck, my mouth is waterin’, just thinkin’ about it.

You’re so fuckin’ hard, the vein runnin’ along the side is probably throbbin’, ain’t it?

” I continue to grind my hips against him, his thick, stiff length brushing along mine, making me dizzy.

“Bet your balls are just a fuckin’ achin’ too, aren’t they, baby? ”

Slamming his eyes shut and relaxing his jaw, Ford’s chest rapidly rises and falls as his breathing comes out in hot, shallow puffs across my face, and I use it to my advantage, closing the short distance between us and sealing my lips to his.

His whole body tenses, hands flexing against my abs, and I brace for him to push me away.

A second passes, and another, but nothing happens.

Then I feel it... The tension evaporates, his shoulders drop, and every single muscle in his body relaxes.

Hands falling to his side and lips parting, Ford gives himself to me on a silver platter, and I waste no time taking what’s offered to me.

My tongue flicks into his mouth, greedily tasting him, as my hand comes down to his

thick, rigid length.

I stroke him over his sweats, swallowing his groans, the sound a direct line to my throbbing cock.

Ford kisses me back with fervor, giving just as much as he's getting, while he grinds against my hand desperately.

I suck on his bottom lip, nipping at the slick flesh before dropping to my knees before him, because as much as I'd love to make out with him until we're both gasping for air, there's something else I need to do even more while I have him under my spell.

My fingers hook into the waistband of his sweats, and I tug them down until they're pooling around his ankles.

His cock springs free, my mouth watering as it bobs in front of my face.

Even in the dark, I know it's better and more glorious in person, and I'm already dying to have him naked for me a second time, but in better lighting, so I can well and truly appreciate its beauty and catalog every ridge and vein and curve to memory.

My heart pounds, the blood roaring in my ears as I flick my tongue against the tip, lapping up the sticky pool of arousal waiting for me.

The salty, sweet flavor explodes on my tongue as I savor it.

One taste ignites an inferno of need through my veins.

Saliva pools in my mouth as I close my lips around the fat mushroom tip and suck.

I swirl my tongue, teasing him for a few moments before taking more of him into my

mouth.

Inch by thick, delicious inch, I swallow Ford's cock until he's touching the back of my throat.

Until my nose burrows in the short patch of dark pubic hair and my every sense is consumed by this man.

His musky, earthy scent fills my nostrils, making my head swim.

Placing one hand on the front of his beefy, thick thigh, I wrap the other around his girthy base, gripping him as I suck all the way to the tip before sinking back down again.

His hands are curled into tight fists at his sides, and when I peer up at him from beneath my lashes, I'm met with an overwhelming amount of lust and heat reflecting back at me.

My lips tug into a grin as I pull him out of my mouth and drag the flat of my tongue along the underside of his cock.

"Do it," I say, my voice rough with arousal. I don't need to see Ford's face clearly to know he's watching me with a puzzled expression, so I elaborate. "Do exactly what you said you wanted to do to me earlier. Fuck my throat. Take control. Lose control on me."

I swirl my tongue around the tip before lazily sucking on it like a lollipop while waiting for him to find the nerve, but luckily, he doesn't make me wait long.

Before I even realize what's happening, Ford grabs a fistful of hair and yanks my head back, forcing his cock past my parted lips and across my ready and willing

tongue.

He doesn't bother going slow, and he's not gentle, as he uses the brutal grip on my hair to guide me up and down his length.

The sexiest groans I've ever heard fill the air as he bottoms out and holds my head in place, properly fucking my throat exactly as he promised.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I gag, but I don't try to pull my head back. I don't try to set the pace. I don't do anything except let him use me the way he needs, because I fucking love it.

I love how big his cock is. How thick, and how my lips have to stretch to accommodate the impressive girth.

I love how stuffed my throat feels, and how it's a struggle to take all of him.

I love how my jaw already aches from how wide it has to open. It's an ache I can't get enough of, one I'll feel for days.

And I love the dizzy, intoxicating feeling that crashes into me with each passing moment and every thrust.

Ford eases out of my mouth, leaving only the tip between my lips.

My lungs burn as I gasp for air, spit dribbling out the corners of my mouth and my cheeks wet from the tears spilling over my eyes.

Wrapping a hand around his shaft, he strokes himself reverently while I suck on the tip.

The grunts and throat-deep groans I can tell he's trying to hold back and the harsh, erratic sound of his breathing consume me, the sound of his pleasure shooting down my spine like wildfire, spreading low in my groin, and I swear, I've never been harder than I am right now.

What I wouldn't give to see his face in better light.

See every ounce of need twisting and pinching his features.

See the way his eyes glaze over and get heavy with each flick of my tongue.

I want to watch his jaw relax and his chest heave as he gets closer—as I bring him closer.

I want to look him in the eye and watch him shatter.

But most of all, I want him to see the way I take him so well, the way I so effortlessly make him come undone and give into what he said we couldn't do.

Letting go of my hair, Ford grabs my head with both hands, holding it in place as he sinks his cock deep in my mouth again. He unleashes on me, in the exact way I knew he could. No hesitancy. No gentleness.

The way Ford ravages my mouth...

The way he stuffs my throat full...

The way his big, bouncy balls slap against my chin with each brutal snap of his hips...

It's primal and raw and better than I could've imagined.

“F-fuck,” he sputters, fingertips digging into my scalp as he holds on to my head in a punishingly tight grip.

“I’m, ungh... Fuck, I’m—” The words die in his throat as he lets out a sinful, guttural groan.

His cock throbs against my tongue, and he bottoms out, holding my head in place as he spills down my throat.

Swallowing, my muscles contract and squeeze his tip, making him moan, and as I bring my hands up to his thighs, I feel them wobble beneath my touch.

Once he finishes, his hands drop from my head and he pulls out of my mouth, body melting against the tree trunk while I sit back and drag in lungfuls of air.

Wiping the spit off my chin after I’ve caught my breath, I watch Ford fumble with his sweats as he rights them around his waist. As the seconds pass, I can feel the tension growing thicker as I can practically hear his mind spinning.

Which is why I’m not surprised when he steps away from the tree and looks down at me, hand rubbing over his mouth and along his jawline, before he leaves without a single word.

Like he’s fleeing the scene of a crime he committed in a moment of frenzied passion .

Huffing out a small chuckle, I stand up and adjust my raging erection before reaching for my cigarettes and lighter in my pocket.

With my shoulder pressed against the side of the tree, where Ford’s back just was, I light up, inhaling the smoke slowly.

The burn from my lungs as they fill up and the buzz the tobacco sends to my brain pales in comparison to the euphoria I felt mere minutes ago.

I already know once isn't going to be enough.

Whether Ford wants to admit it or not, that's definitely happening again.

And soon.

Thirteen

Ford

B ringing the bottle up to my lips, I tip my head back and let the chilled brew fill my mouth while the condensation drips onto my lap. With my line of sight hidden behind the dark sunglasses on my face, I can't help but watch him... Hollis fucking Moore.

He's sitting beside Remi on the picnic table directly across from me, wearing teal board shorts, still wet from the river, a pair of black slides, and a black Moore Family Ranch hat sitting backwards on his head, with dark brown strands of hair on his nape peeking out from underneath the bill.

No shirt. The half-empty bottle of tequila sits next to him, and he's got a beer in his hand and a portable fan around his neck as his attention stays focused on his friend.

Why the fuck can't I tear my gaze away?

Why am I suddenly noticing the littlest things about him?

Like the way his cheeks crease and his eyes squint as he throws his head back and chuckles at whatever Remi is saying. Or how the sound is infectious and oddly arousing. How the fuck can his laugh turn me on?

It's been like this all goddamn day, and it's becoming a problem.

After I ran away and left Hollis sitting in the woods last night, I climbed back into my

tent and passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The full-body relaxation and utter exhaustion that settled in my bones from that mind-blowing orgasm was clearly strong enough to quiet my mind and stop my spiraling.

At least, for the rest of the night. As soon as I peeled my eyes open this morning, everything—the messages, his realization, the blow job, the way it made me feel—came rushing back, hitting me like a ton of bricks.

My dick was hard, my heart was pounding, and my mind was going a mile a minute.

All day, I've done my best to avoid Hollis, but he's not making it easy.

During breakfast, he came up beside me, and his arm brushed against mine when I was fixing myself a burrito.

His smirk told me it wasn't accidental. Then the group hiked down to the river to do some fishing, and while I managed to sit away from him, I could feel his gaze burning a hole through the side of my head the whole time.

For the most part, I've been successful at dodging eye contact, and surprisingly, he hasn't brought up last night, but none of that matters because, much to my chagrin, my body now seems to be in tune with his.

It's infuriating.

Even when he's not in my line of sight, I can sense when he's near.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up, my skin tingles, and goosebumps cover my arms. How can one quick, frenzied blow job leave this kind of effect on me?

I don't even know what to make of it. Nothing should've happened—that much I do know—but I can't bring myself to regret it or wish it didn't happen because it was...

Well, it was the best damn blow job I've ever had.

I can say that confidently.

And that's not to say my sex life has been boring or terrible before now, because it hasn't.

Communication in bed has never been something I've struggled with, and sex has always been important to me, been something that helps me feel connected.

It's something I enjoy, and not just the physical release, but the emotional aspect too.

The intimacy . I crave it. Learning their body while they learn mine.

But last night, with Hollis... We didn't need communication.

He knew exactly what I needed before I even knew.

And fuck me , the things his mouth can do.

He swallowed me down like his life depended on it.

Like he was attempting to suck the soul from my body.

And hell, maybe he did. Maybe that's why I can't stop looking at him, or why my body thrums like a live wire any time he gets too close, or why the deep, rich sound of his laughter sends a rush of heat down my spine.

I fucked up.

I was weak.

But having him in front of me, feeling his body heat burn into me, feeling his lips against my ear as he repeated everything I said I wanted to do to him, hearing the raw desire and need in his tone, was too much.

Too arousing.

Too enticing.

Too fucking tempting.

Even the strongest of man would've given in.

“Yo, Cap!” The sound of Remi’s voice cuts through my mental fog, and I realize I’ve zoned out so much that he and Hollis have gotten up from the picnic table. Sitting up straighter and clearing my throat, I tip my chin at Remi. “Get your ass over here and play a round of beer pong with us.”

Before I can stop myself, my gaze shifts to Hollis, who’s standing beside him with a cocky smirk tugging on his lips.

The same lips that were wrapped around my cock.

Fuck, knock it off! Stop thinking about it.

“Yeah, Cap, get your fine ass over here,” he drawls tauntingly. “You’re my partner tonight.”

“I’m not playin’.” I stand and finish off what’s left of my beer before walking over to the cooler to get a new one.

“Oh yes, you are,” Remi pushes. “Quit being a fuddy duddy and have a little fun for once.”

Clenching my jaw, I begrudgingly walk over to the table.

Chandler is on one side with Remi, while Hollis is on the other.

The cups are set up, and after Hollis wins the eye-to-eye shot, we go first. I’m used to this, playing ridiculous college drinking games.

My team somehow manages to talk me into it every single year.

But standing here now, beside Hollis, after what happened between us, feels suffocating.

It feels like everybody knows. And hell, maybe they do.

Hollis isn’t exactly one to be quiet about his conquests , but the idea of my team knowing something so personal—and confusing—is enough to make me want to crawl out of my own skin.

Given that nobody has said a word to me about it, or been acting weird today, I’m hoping that means he’s kept his mouth shut.

For the most part, Hollis and I remain in the lead; he’s oddly good at this game, but Remi and Chandler sink a couple balls back-to-back. Nudging my arm, Hollis says, “Drink up, Cap.”

“What?” My brows pinch. “Why me? I drank last time.”

“Because them’s the rules,” he drawls, his chocolate brown eyes flicking to mine. My body heats.

“Since when?” I scoff before downing a mouthful of lukewarm beer.

“Since I made them up.” Hollis winks before taking a swig from his own can. “Anybody ever told you that you could benefit from lightening up a bit?”

“I don’t know,” I deadpan. “Anybody ever tell you that you’re a pain in the ass?”

He chuckles, and before he even says a word, I already regret my choice of words. “A time or two,” he offers. Biting down on his lip, Hollis drags his gaze over the length of my body before adding, “No complaints yet.”

“Alright, knock it off,” Remi cuts in. Eyes narrowed, his finger points toward his best friend as his lip twitches with a smile he’s trying to hold back. “Back to the game.”

Hollis and I end up winning this round, but then we switch and play another round, this time with Chandler as my partner.

We kick their asses, and I won’t lie... It’s a little more exciting than it should be, beating Hollis at such an immature, mindless game.

Once we get the table cleared off and the fire out, we all head to our separate tents.

As I lie down on my air mattress, I breathe out a sigh of relief that Hollis didn’t try to pull anything.

A good night’s sleep is probably exactly what I need.

The last month, or however long it's been since he and I matched on the app, has been one long fever dream. One where I lost all sense of rational.

But I'm thinking clearly now.

It was a slip.

A moment of weakness.

I'm in the middle of a divorce from a marriage I was in for far too long.

A marriage where I didn't feel appreciated, or seen, or even wanted...

It's not surprising that I would seek something out from somebody like Hollis.

There's no denying how seen or wanted I was last night, but that doesn't mean it can happen again. He must know that...

Clearly, I spoke too soon, though. My attention jerks to the front of my tent as I hear the unmistakable sound of footsteps approaching. Then the sound of the zipper opening.

Fuck.

"No," I grit out quietly as his tall frame steps into the small space.

Breathing out a small chuckle, Hollis closes the tent before crawling onto the air mattress beside me. His scent fills the area, and it makes my head swim. Goddamnit, pull yourself together, Ford.

"No what?" he asks, his voice raspy and no more than a whisper.

“This is not happenin’ again, Hollis.”

“What’s not happenin’?” It may be dark in here, but I don’t miss the flirty grin on his face as he lies down on his side and rests his head in his hand. “Maybe I just wanted to talk.”

“Talk.” I huff. “Right. I’m sure that’s exactly what you wanted to do.”

“Gosh, somebody’s mind’s in the gutter,” he teases. “Tell me, Cap... How many times today have you thought about me on my knees for you?”

“None,” I lie through a tensed jaw. “Because I’m not some teenage boy incapable of controllin’ myself.”

“If that’s what you wanna go with,” he murmurs under his breath.

The air in here evaporates. My heart’s beating so fast, I’m certain Hollis can hear it. My senses are overwhelmed by him, and as the minutes pass, I’m forgetting why him being in here is such a bad idea .

“I gotta say...” he continues. “I’m a little surprised by how you’re actin’.”

My brows furrow. “Why? Because you think that highly of yourself that you can’t fathom the idea of somebody not bein’ interested in you?”

His laugh rolls through me like an electric shock, sending a wave of goosebumps all over my body and causing my dick to throb. “No, it’s not that at all.”

“Then what?”

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“You’ve known who I was on that app from the start,” he says with a shoulder shrug. “It’s never been a secret who you were talking to. Who you were flirting with. So why the fuck did you freak out once I finally figured out who you were?”

Blowing out a frustrated sigh, mostly at myself, I stare up at the tent, like it’s holding all the answers. “I shouldn’t have matched with you in the first place,” I admit. “I don’t know what I was thinking, or what I expected to come of it, but it can’t be this.”

“Why not?” There’s no judgment in the question. “You certainly enjoyed yourself last night.”

I huff out a breath. “You’re far too cocky for your own good.”

“Am I?” he asks. “Or maybe I’m just cocky enough, and it freaks you out how much you like it.”

I don’t respond. What’s there to say? He’s not exactly wrong, and I know if I were to lie, he’d see right through it.

“And what’s so wrong with giving in to something you want?” His voice is flirty and full of gravel. “We’re both adults, so why not do what feels good?”

“Because I’m not interested in repeating anything that happened last night,” I say, knowing full well it’s bullshit. “You caught me at a weak moment, and it won’t be happening again.”

“Yeah?” Hollis leans in closer. I can feel the heat from his breath on my face. “Then

why won't you look at me when you say that? And why's your voice shaking?"

"It's dark. Why's it matter if I look at you?" I scoff.

"Cause I want ya to... Come on, Cap. Look at me."

The second I look at him, my resolve will snap. I know it. It's all I want. All I can think about.

This is wrong. It's messy, and nothing good will come of it. Do not look at him!

Then his fingertips brush against my chin, turning my head toward him, and a wave of arousal rushes through me. I can barely make out his gaze, but I know it's full of heat.

And I know it matches mine.

"You're a stubborn man, Captain Wesley," he drawls, his fingers still on my face. "But now that you're finally looking at me... Let's hear it. Let's hear how much you totally don't want it to happen again."

My jaw pops from how hard I'm clenching.

Between Hollis's scent surrounding me and the grip he has on my chin, I can't breathe.

He's everywhere, and it's becoming difficult to think clearly, much less respond.

I know what I should say, but my brain and my cock are not on the same page.

Hell, they're not even in the same book.

“Got nothin’ to say, Cap?” he asks after a moment, when it becomes clear I’m not responding. “That’s okay. You can listen instead...”

Leaning closer, his fingers leave my chin and trail down my neck to my chest. His touch is featherlight, and I have to suppress a shiver.

“See, you may like to pretend that you haven’t been thinkin’ about it all day, but I’ve got no problem admittin’ that I have.

” Rumbly and low, his admission sends bursts of desire all through my insides.

“The weight of your big, fat cock slidin’ over my tongue...

The taste of you... And how deliciously rough you fucked my throat once you finally got out of your own head. ”

He groans, the sound like a gentle caress over my dick. I’m on fire, sweat beading across the back of my neck, every touch from him over my flesh heightened, and I’m waiting on bated breath for what he’s going to say, or do, next.

“You should let yourself have a little fun, Cap,” he murmurs, his fingers dancing lower, toward my abdomen.

I should stop him from going any farther...

But I don’t. I can’t. “And I’m here to help with that.

” His hand sinks lower until his fingertips tease along the waistband of my briefs.

I inhale sharply and squeeze my eyes shut as I feel his hot breath fan across my cheek, his lips against my ear.

“Now, tell me the truth... You want my help, don’t you, baby? ”

Baby.

It’s not the first time he’s called me that, but fuck me, it does something illicit to me every single time. Trent wasn’t into pet names, and prior to marrying him, I’ve had a few people call me that, but none of them hit like it does right now.

“Answer me,” he growls before nipping at my earlobe with his sharp teeth.

A gasp falls from my lips, and despite my mind being hazy, I’m able to grit out, “We shouldn’t.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk... That’s not what I asked, Captain Wesley. Let’s try again... Do. You. Want. My. Help?”

There’s an eruption sitting just below the surface.

It’s thrumming and pulsing, dying to come out, and with each second I deny to myself how badly I want this, the more it threatens to explode.

I’m like a dormant volcano, trying to hold myself back, but it’s not working.

The chemistry between Hollis and me is clear.

It’s loud and vibrant, and it refuses to be ignored.

Maybe it’s simply because we’re out in the middle of nowhere, and I’m able to pretend this doesn’t count, that we’ll head back to Wolf Creek tomorrow and it’ll be like none of this ever happened, I don’t want to ignore it.

I don't want to hold myself back.

I want Hollis, even though I shouldn't.

I want him, and in this tent, with him so close to me, his hands on my body, I'm incapable of pretending like I don't.

It doesn't have to mean anything, and after this weekend, it won't ever happen again, but for tonight, I'm giving in.

"Yes..." The word leaves my mouth on a whisper. A confession. "Help me."

That's all the encouragement he needs before turning his head and crashing his mouth into mine.

His tongue parts my lips while his hand slips into my boxers and palms my hard length.

I groan into his mouth, my head swimming as I roll onto my back, bringing Hollis with me.

He settles between my legs and shoves the material down, never breaking away from our kiss.

As soon as he rids me of the only piece of clothing I have on, he takes his off next before straddling my thighs.

The weight of his stiff cock slides against mine as Hollis sits back on my lap.

Reaching behind his head, he tugs off his shirt and tosses it to the side before he tucks his chin, letting spit fall from his lips onto his cock, then mine.

Once we're coated in his saliva, Hollis closes his hand around us and rolls his hips, letting his slick, hard cock glide against mine.

It feels so fucking good, and I can't help the moan that slips past my lips as he tightens his grip.

My hands come to his hips, holding them in a bruising grip as I thrust into his fist.

"This what you wanted?" I grit out. "Is this what you've been thinkin' about doin' all day?"

"Fuck yeah, it is." Hollis smirks as he glances down at us. "And you feel just as good against my dick as I thought you would."

My teeth are bared as pleasure erupts through my body. "Yeah, well, enjoy it now, because this ain't happenin' again."

Hollis leans down, resting his free hand on the mattress next to my head. Flicking his tongue into my mouth, he breathes out a dark chuckle. "Sure, it isn't," he rasps, arrogance seeping through his words. "That's what you said about last night, yet here we are."

Nostrils flaring, I flip us so I'm on top. Hollis groans as I slap his hand out of the way and wrap mine around us instead. My hips snap against his as I feel myself lose control. I've never met anybody so full of themselves as Hollis is, and it's infuriating.

And hot.

"Look at you," he drawls, his darkened gaze locked on mine. "Look how needy you are for me. How hard you were before I even touched you. You were probably hopin' I would come in here tonight, weren't you?"

“You don’t know what you’re fuckin’ talkin’ about.”

The blood pumping through my veins is molten lava, every inch of my skin on fire. I’m so turned on, so on edge, I can hardly take it.

“I see right through your bullshit, Cap,” he tosses back, a groan rumbling from his throat as he brings his hand back to mine until we’re moving as one.

“And I’d almost believe you if it weren’t for the fact that you knew who I was this whole time.

You knew, and you flirted with me anyway.

You knew, and you let me get you off. You knew while I was in the dark, and goddamn, that shouldn’t turn me on so much, but it does. ”

“I knew it wouldn’t go anywhere,” I bite out, but the excuse is weak to my own ears. “It was just talk.”

“Was it?” The roughness of his voice lets me know he’s close, just like I am. “Or were you just able to hide behind your anonymity while acting on your desires?”

Pleasure swims through my veins, making my head dizzy and my body hot all over. We’re both thrusting into our fists, grunts and groans filling the air. I hope like hell nobody’s awake because this tent is far from soundproof, and there’s no hiding what’s happening.

“Come on, Cap,” he purrs as he slides his hand up my abdomen. He teases my nipple with his fingers, and the sensation ripples down to my toes. “It wasn’t just talk, and you know it. Just like how you know this won’t be the last time you have me naked beneath you.”

“It will,” I growl, my nuts tightening into my body as pressure builds at the base of my spine. I groan as he twists and tugs on the hardened bud. “Fuck, I’m close...”

“Me too,” he moans. “Give it to me, baby. Let me see you come for me again.”

Throwing my head back, I squeeze my eyes shut and let the pleasure take control.

Pulse after pulse, I empty myself onto Hollis’s stomach, and when his hand around us tightens and he lets out a long, low moan, I glance down and watch as he spills all over himself too, his thick, creamy release mixing with mine.

The sight is erotic and enthralling; I can’t look away.

I collapse onto the air mattress beside him once we’re finished, my breathing rapid and shallow as I rub a hand over my mouth, wondering how the hell I let this happen twice. Using his discarded shirt, Hollis cleans himself up before rolling onto his side to face me.

Shoving me playfully, he says, “Get outta your head.”

“I’m not in my head.”

“Yeah, you are.” He chuckles. “Is this an ideal predicament we’ve found ourselves in? No, not exactly. But that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy it for what it is.”

Turning my head, I meet his gaze and ask, “And what’s that?”

“A damn good time, of course,” he drawls, lip curling into a grin. “This was fun. Don’t overthink it.”

Then, giving me whiplash, Hollis presses a quick kiss to my lips before grabbing his

pants and pulling them on before leaving without another word.

Don't overthink it.

I huff a breath and shake my head.

Right, because it's that simple.

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Fourteen

Ford

K nockinBoots: Morning Cap. You've been awfully quiet since we got home.

I stare at the message. Then reread it a couple of times. I want to respond...but I also don't. This past weekend feels like a fever dream. I can't stop thinking about Hollis and everything that transpired. It was amazing, but...

It was foolish.

I was foolish.

All of this is so confusing; it feels like I'm losing myself.

Or maybe it's that I lost myself so long ago that I don't even know who I am anymore.

Either way, downloading Hive was a terrible idea.

I knew it before I even went through with it, and now that I've fooled around with Hollis, of all people, I know it even more.

What was I thinking?

I'm not this guy... I'm not the guy who meets people online, the guy who casually

hooks up with them, and I'm certainly not the guy who gives in to desires I have about men I shouldn't.

If all this confusion and frustration with myself tells me anything, it's that I'm nowhere near ready for something like this—whatever the hell this is.

I've known from the moment I matched with Hollis that it was a bad idea.

That it couldn't go anywhere. That I'd never be able to act on what I wanted.

And yet, I let it happen anyway.

Day after day, I kept messaging him. Kept finding myself opening up to Hollis without even realizing it.

I kept doing it all, knowing exactly who it was I was talking to.

What did I think was going to happen? It's a small town...

The chance of Hollis finding out my identity was never in my favor.

If I'm being honest with myself, I think I always knew he'd figure it out, and maybe, deep down, I wanted him to.

Maybe deep down, I wanted this to happen between us because there's something about Hollis that's just so... exhilarating.

I can't explain it, but it's true.

He makes me feel free.

Hollis makes me feel seen in a way I've felt invisible for so many years.

I'm the captain of the Wolf Creek Fire Department, so of course, I'm not invisible.

I'm looked to every single day for direction, for wisdom, for advice.

But that's work. It's different. The way Hollis talks to me on the app...

The way he looked at me this weekend... He makes me feel wanted.

Like he couldn't get enough of me. No kiss was deep enough, and he couldn't get close enough.

Even after we both came, it was clear he didn't want to leave.

He wanted more, and that realization was intoxicating.

And addicting, because all I've been able to think about for the last two days since coming home is him and how badly I want to do it all over again .

But we can't.

I can't.

No matter that our chemistry was off the charts, no matter how good being with Hollis made me feel, it can't happen.

For one, it would be too messy; he's my lieutenant's best friend.

For two, after Trent, I'm not even sure I'm capable of letting somebody in like that—or worse, what if I do let him in?

Hollis isn't the settling-down type. No matter which way I look at it, I'm setting myself up for failure with him.

And for three, the divorce isn't even finalized yet.

I can't be gallivanting around with a man twenty years younger than me before I'm even technically single.

I can already see the stares and hear the whispers around town.

I need to put a stop to this.

I need to tell him it won't be going any further than it already has... That what we've done is a mistake.

I know I need to... So why haven't I yet?

Leaving the station after a shift, I walk down the street to Trixie's Diner.

It's been a long day, and all I want to do is eat, get my mind off Hollis, and then go to bed.

I scan the area as I walk in, spotting Larry in a booth toward the back by the window.

He waves when he notices me heading toward him, a faint smile tugging on the corner of his mouth.

"Captain Wesley," he says by way of greeting as I slide in across from him.

"Please, call me Ford," I tell him. "I'm glad you came."

“I was surprised to hear from you.”

The server comes and takes my drink order before leaving us to peruse the menu as if I haven't been here a million times before and don't have the menu practically memorized.

“How have ya been?”

Since my team was called out to Larry's house when he thought he was having a heart attack, I haven't been able to stop thinking about him. In my line of work, we deal with dozens of people on a weekly basis, but every once in a while, there's one person or situation that just sticks with you.

“Oh, not too bad,” he murmurs with a shrug.

“Why do I feel like you're not tellin' me the truth?” I ask, arching a brow as I take a sip from my ice water.

Larry's chuckle is tired and gruff. “I'm fine.”

“Had any more anxiety attacks since then?”

His eyes narrow, and he cocks his head to the side. “You're one nosy son of a bitch, ya know that?”

I huff a laugh, shaking my head. “Not usually.”

Larry's quiet for a moment, then our server comes and takes our order. Once she takes our menus and walks away, with his gaze focused out the window, he says, “Not as bad as it was that day.”

His face carries the weight of years. Sunspots are scattered across his cheeks, his arms, even the back of his hands, and deep lines frame his mouth and eyes. Without knowing much about Larry, I know those lines aren't just from time, but all the things he's seen and experienced in his lifetime.

"They wanted to put me on pills." He breathes out a small chuckle as his gaze drifts over to meet mine finally. "Told them I didn't need no damn pills."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me." A smile spreads across my face. "You got any family around, Larry?"

He shakes his head. "My Dolly and I, we never did get around to having any kids."

"I'd imagine now that she's gone, you'd be feelin' pretty lonely."

"I'm fine by myself," he insists. "I've never needed much; been that way my whole life. But Dolly... I need her. In all our years together, I never expected to outlive her."

His agony and grief are palpable; I feel it in the center of my chest.

"I want to share something personal with you, Larry," I say. "If that's okay with you."

"Course it is." He rubs his hands together, like doing so soothes his anxious mind.

I wiggle my toes inside my boots for the same reason.

"This is a hell of a lot different than your situation, but I'm going through a divorce right now.

” Swallowing thickly to bring some moisture back to my dry mouth, I say, “Despite it bein’ for the best, I’ve found myself feelin’ a little lost lately.

Like I don’t know where I’m supposed to go from here. ”

“I’m sorry to hear that, son,” Larry offers, his tone genuine. “How long were y’all married for?”

“Twenty-three years.” I clear my throat before adding, “I figure if I’m feelin’ this lost, I can only imagine how you must be, and I just thought maybe you could use a friend in your corner.”

“A friend,” he repeats quietly. “Yeah, I sure could use one of them.”

I chuckle softly. “Well, alright then. It’s settled.”

That’s all that’s really said about it, and then our food comes.

Larry asks me about my job, and I ask some more about his late wife while we eat, and it’s nice.

I don’t know what it is about Larry; maybe it’s the anxiety we share, but eating a meal with him and hearing his rich stories is exactly what I needed. And I think it’s what he needed too.

Once we finish, I pay the bill and we make plans to meet here for dinner again in a few days.

Walking back to the station and climbing in my truck to head home, I realize for the hour I was in that diner with Larry, I was able to push all thoughts about Hollis to the back of my mind.

But they're back in full force now, and as if his ears burn and he knows I'm thinking about him, a notification comes through.

It's a message from him on the app, and my stomach twists as I read it.

KnockinBoots: You can't hide forever, Cap. *wink emoji*

With a heavy sigh, I toss my phone on the seat beside me as I start the short drive back to the cabin.

Living on his family's property isn't helping matters any.

I'm sure that's at least half of the temptation, him being so close.

I desperately need to find another place to rent, but there's nothing out there.

I checked out a house a few blocks from the station last night after work, but it reeked of mildew and looked like an electrical fire waiting to happen.

I opened a can of worms, letting things go where they went with Hollis.

The memory of his lips and hands exploring my body, the weight of his on mine...

it's burned into my mind, and no matter how hard I try, I can't make it go away.

I want to experience it all over again. I want to experience more of Hollis, but just because I want something, doesn't mean it's going to happen.

I'm a grown man with self-control and restraint.

These urges and desires will pass with time.

At least I hope they do.

Fifteen

Hollis

“Y’all, I think I’m broken.” I wipe the sweat off my brow with the back of my hand. Goddamn, the Texas heat is out for blood today.

Finn and August exchange an amused look before my brother says, “This isn’t news.”

Narrowing my gaze, I flip him off. “I’m serious. Something is wrong with me.”

Surely, something inside of me is broken, because why the fuck can’t I stop thinking about Ford?

Finn removes his hat and runs his fingers through the sweaty brown strands as he exhales a heavy sigh. “Fine, I’ll bite,” he huffs. “Let’s hear it, brother.”

“I’m so glad you asked,” I drawl, pulling out my pack of smokes and lighting one up. “I hooked up with someone this weekend, and?—”

“Like I said before,” Finn cuts me off. “This isn’t news.”

“Would you shut the fuck up and let me finish?” I groan, which makes August chuckle.

My brother rolls his eyes and gestures with his hand for me to continue.

“As I was sayin’, it was someone I really shouldn’t have hooked up with, but it happened...

twice, and now I can’t stop thinkin’ about it.

And what’s worse is that they’re barely even talkin’ to me. It’s drivin’ me fuckin’ nuts!”

“What do you mean, it was someone you shouldn’t have hooked up with?” August asks, resting his shoulder against the tree we’re standing under for shade. “And weren’t you camping with Remi this weekend?” His eyes widen. “Oh, shit! Did you fuck Remi?”

“What?” I hiss, my head rearing back. “No, I didn’t fuck my best friend. What’s wrong with you?”

“Do not tell me you hooked up with that woman who’s married on Remi’s crew,” Finn mutters.

“Absolutely not.” I shake my head, my face twisting up. “You know I don’t fuck with married people.”

“Well, then, who?” he asks, and he couldn’t appear more unenthused to be a part of this conversation.

I really shouldn’t tell them.

But I have to tell somebody.

“Fine, but you have to keep it to yourselves,” I say. “I’m serious.”

“I won’t tell a soul. Scout’s honor.” August holds up a three-finger salute. “Other than Tripp, of course.”

“What? No!” I scoff. “Nobody!”

“Yeah, I don’t keep shit from Ash,” Finn adds.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I mutter under my breath.

Taking a long drag off my cigarette, I consider my options.

I can’t talk to Remi about this, for...obvious reasons, but I need to get this off my chest. I’m losing my mind over Ford, and I don’t understand it.

Fuck it. Heaving a sigh, I say, “It’s Ford. ”

“Captain Wesley?” August’s eyes bulge from their sockets. “The man livin’ two cabins down from me?”

“That’s the one.”

Finn chuckles and shakes his head, kicking at the dirt with the toe of his boot.

“You’re a fuckin’ idiot,” he drawls.

“Fuck off,” I bite out. “You’ve got no room to talk. You fucked your nanny, who also happens to be your ex-girlfriend’s twin brother.”

“Break’s over,” he announces, flipping me off. “You wanna keep yappin’, get back to work while ya do it.”

“Okay, I’m not seein’ the big deal,” August says as we make our way back to the

truck.

I groan. “The big deal is, it’s been days —three, to be exact—since we all got home from the campin’ trip, and it’s all I can think about. It’s driving me up a fuckin’ wall.”

“How did this happen in the first place?” Finn asks. “I’ve seen Ford’s ex-husband, and you do not strike me as that man’s type.”

A smirk tugs on my lips. “Shit, I’m everyone’s type.”

“Sure, you are,” he deadpans. “But again, how did it happen? What, you two got drunk during the trip and one of you ended up in the other’s tent? While that’s on par for you, it doesn’t really seem in line with his character.”

“Get this,” I say, holding back a smirk. “I matched with a guy on a dating app about a month or so ago. His profile was mostly anonymous, so I had no idea who it was until I saw a tattoo on Ford that matched the guy on the app.”

“And then you two figured it out?”

“That’s the wild part... My profile isn’t anonymous.”

“Oh, shiiiiit .” August throws his head back and laughs. “Captain Wesley knew it was you?”

I nod. “The entire fuckin’ time. ”

“Well, that makes things interesting,” Finn hums under his breath.

“I’m still not understandin’ why you said you shouldn’t have hooked up with him.”

Confusion wrinkles August's forehead. "You're both consenting adults. Why would it matter?"

"Remi would be pissed if he found out," I explain. "I kind of have a track record of fuckin' his boss." I pause with a wince, then add, "Okay, it's really only one other boss, but it's a sore subject. He'd be pissed."

"So, don't do it again," Finn says. "Problem solved."

"Yeah, that's the thing, brother... I don't think it's possible to not do it again."

Memories flit through my mind, heating my body in a way the Texas heat could never.

The way Ford's mouth ravaged mine in the tent that second night.

The way his hungry eyes held mine as our cocks slid together.

His tight, rough hand wrapped around us, and mine on top of his.

Every groan and grunt. Our shared heavy breathing.

And the way he utterly fell apart for me— because of me.

Everything about it was fucking hot.

The gravel in his voice scratched something inside my brain, and after we finished, I found myself not wanting to leave. Lying beside him in that tent was nice...comforting. I left in a hurry because I was worried if I didn't, I'd end up staying there all night.

What is it about him?

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Finn drawls, pulling me from my thoughts. My brother looks from me to August, his brow lifted. “You seein’ what I’m seein’?”

“That Holli-boy has feelings for the hot captain?” August chuckles and nods. “Yup, sure am. ”

My face twists up. “Don’t be fuckin’ ridiculous,” I spit out. “I do not. I barely know the guy.”

Finn’s watching me with amusement dancing in his gaze. “Sure. Whatever you say, brother.”

Flipping him off, I drawl, “What happened to gettin’ back to work, asshole?”

August rolls his lips to stop from laughing, and that’s the end of it.

The rest of the day drags on, feeling never-ending, and I can’t seem to stop thinking about what Finn suggested.

An absurd suggestion at that. Just because I enjoyed hooking up with Ford—and want to do it again even though I shouldn’t—doesn’t mean I have feelings for the guy.

Yeah, I enjoy being around him, I like getting to know him, and so what if my heart races any time I think about him now? That doesn’t mean shit.

Once we finish everything we needed to get done, we head back to the barn and put everything away before Finn, August, and I walk over to my dad’s house.

We’re having dinner there tonight, and I can’t wait.

My lip curls into a grin when I spot Ford's truck parked out front.

My father must've invited him. Ash's beater of a car is here too, meaning we're the last to arrive, which isn't surprising.

That's the life of a cattle rancher, though.

Known it and lived it my whole life, don't know any other way.

Sunup to sundown is the norm this time of year.

Late fall and winter things will slow down a bit, but in the spring and summer, our days are long and taxing.

We could benefit from hiring a couple more ranch hands to help out around here, but convincing Mr. Cheapskate—also known as my father—to do that is damn near impossible.

This ranch has been in our family for nearly seventy years, and for as long as I can remember, my dad's always been weird about bringing on non-family employees.

He had to when Finn and I were kids after my grandpa passed, but I distinctly remember him bitching about it any chance he could.

But sometimes it's necessary, like now, as we ride into busy season, especially since my dad had to take a step back from a lot of the day-to-day work when he was diagnosed with osteoarthritis at the end of last year.

Stepping into the house, the air conditioning sends a chill down my spine as I kick off my boots and hang my hat while my brother and cousin do the same. My stomach grumbles as the savory aroma from the brisket my dad smoked fills my nostrils.

“Fuck, I’m starvin’,” I mutter, turning my gaze toward August. “Is Tripp comin’?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, he’s got a shift. I’ll bring him home a plate.”

I can hear my nephew giggling from deeper in the house, and it brings a smile to my face instantly.

That kid has the most infectious laugh I’ve ever heard, and it’s impossible not to be in a good mood around him.

The three of us stroll down the hallway toward the kitchen, the chatter and laughter getting louder the closer we get.

Music also plays softly, the quiet beat reaching my ears as we round the corner.

With the ‘ Flipping Awesome Grandpa’ apron Tucker got him for Christmas tied around his waist, my dad is the first one to come into view.

Resting his hip against the counter next to the stove, with a beer in hand and a grin splitting his face, he watches Ash and Tucker dance around the kitchen to some old George Strait while Ash serenades the giggly, squinty-eyed five-year-old in his arms. Bubba, their rambunctious puppy, trots around them, his tail wagging and his tongue hanging out of his mouth, like he, too, is dancing .

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I turn my head, glancing at Finn, a smile spreading on my face as I watch my brother watch them.

The love and adoration are plain to see, and it warms my chest. Finn's been doing this dad thing on his own ever since Tucker's mom skipped town when he was a baby.

It's been a special thing to witness Ash weave his way into their lives.

Seemingly effortlessly too. First, as Tucker's manny —Finn hates that term, but I think it's great—to now, barely a year later, the three of them—four, if you count Bubba—are a family .

I've never seen my brother as happy or unabashedly in love as he is with Ash, and nobody deserves it more than him.

The way he's standing with his shoulder pressed against the door frame and hearts in his eyes almost makes me want to find my happy too.

Almost.

Looking away from my brother, my gaze lands on the smoking hot piece of man meat across from me.

Like my dad, Ford has his hip rested on the counter beside the sink, and he's watching the two of them with amusement in his eyes.

Turning his head, he meets my gaze, and I flash him my signature flirty smirk.

Clenching his jaw, Ford doesn't return the smile as he looks away just as quickly.

I greedily drag my gaze down the front of him, damn near drooling at how sexy he is.

He's dressed comfortably in a black V-neck t-shirt, jeans that hug his thighs beautifully, and a pair of black cowboy boots tucked under the denim.

"Daddy!" Tucker squeals, a huge smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye when he spots Finn. Ash sets him down, and he runs over, wrapping his arms around his neck in a tight hug when Finn picks him up.

"Hey, bug, how was your day?"

Tucker spouts off something, but I miss it entirely when an elderly man I've never met before strolls into the kitchen .

"Nice painting you got above the fireplace," the man mutters to my father.

Finn, August, and I share a look; they're clearly as confused as I am.

"Oh, thanks," my dad grunts. "My ex-wife painted that years ago."

The painting in question is based on a picture my mom took of my brother and me surrounded by the first herd of calves my father had after taking over the ranch when we were little.

My mother only paints for fun, but she's incredibly talented, and that one is my favorite. It looks identical to the photograph.

Walking over to the older gentleman now standing beside Ford, I offer him my hand.

"Howdy, sir, I don't think we've had a chance to meet yet. I'm Hollis." Tipping my

head toward my dad, I add, “Gentry’s favorite son.”

Finn scoffs behind me, making me chuckle.

The man shakes my hand. “Larry,” he offers. “Nice to meet you, son.”

My gaze flits over to Ford, who’s surprisingly already watching me as Finn and August step up beside me and introduce themselves too. “This your dad, Cap?” I ask, arching a brow. Given everything Ford’s told me about his dad, I doubt he’d invite him over, but you never know.

“No.” He shakes his head.

“Not his father, son,” Larry grunts. “He’s just forcin’ his friendship on me because he feels sorry for my old ass.”

“Is that right?” I huff a small chuckle, shifting my attention back to Ford. The way his smoky gray gaze holds mine sends a rush of heat through my veins. “That’s awfully kind of you, Captain Wesley.”

Ford’s jaw pops as he purses his lips, completely unamused with me. Although, after this weekend, I’m willing to bet he’s the furthest thing from unamused, and he probably hates that. He drags his gaze from me to my dad. “Anythin’ I can help with?”

Shaking his head, he says, “I’m just waitin’ on the bread to finish, then we’ll eat. Y’all can get yourselves somethin’ to drink and find a seat at the table.”

After I grab a beer from the fridge, I crack it open and take a long pull before strolling into the dining room.

My plan is to steal a spot right next to Ford to mess with him, but by the time I make it in there, he's sitting with Larry on one side of him and August on the other, so I take the next best spot...

Directly across from him. My cousin breathes out a chuckle and shakes his head, while Ford glowers at me, but says nothing.

It's not long before we dish up, and once we start eating, I glance to Ford's left and say, "I don't think I've seen you around town before, Larry. Are you new here?"

Underneath the table, my foot rubs against Ford's, and I relish the way his nostrils flare on a harsh exhale and he clenches his jaw, but he doesn't move his foot.

"Lived in Wolf Creek my entire life," he offers. "But don't get out much. I sure know your family, though."

My lip twists into a grin. "Do you?"

"Course, I do." He nods. "Knew your grandparents; went to school with 'em, and even played ball with your grandfather. Great man."

My chest warms at the mention of my papa. He died when I was younger, but he certainly was a hell of a cowboy and a damn good man. "Hell, I bet you got some fun stories about him."

Larry chuckles, the warm, weathered sound rumbling from low in his chest, and it brings a smile to my face. "You'd be right about that, son," he says before nodding toward my dad. "Even got a few about your dad from when he was barely big enough to run around this ranch."

I flick my gaze to my dad, finding him grinning from ear to ear too. "Well, I'd sure

love to hear about 'em one day, if ya got time.”

“Oh, I’ve certainly got time,” he replies gleefully.

My foot trails up Ford’s calf while holding a conversation with Larry. Slow, deliberate, and electric. Glancing over at him, his cheeks are splashed pink, his shoulders tense, and I can see the sweat on his brow from across the table. I love it.

If Remi were to find out about this, he’d be pissed, and I hate fighting with him, so I really should put a stop to this.

I shouldn’t want to push Ford to his breaking point, shouldn’t want to jump back into bed with him, but god, I do.

There’s just something about him, even if I can’t quite put my finger on what it is yet, that I can’t seem to ignore.

And Ford’s ability to ignore it makes me want it even more.

It would be one thing if I knew he truly wasn’t interested.

I’m not one to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, but that’s not the case.

Ford wants this.

Ford wants me, and if he thinks he can keep his distance for long, he’s out of his mind. He will break, and I can’t fucking wait to hear him beg for it.

My sights are set, and I always get my way.

Sixteen

Ford

I 'm folding the last towel out of the dryer when there's a knock at the front door.

I'd say I'm surprised, but really, I'm not.

After Hollis's little game of footsie at dinner, I had a feeling he would show up here tonight.

I hate the buzz in my veins and the way my dick twitches beneath my sweats as I meander through the house toward the front door.

Excitement should be the last emotion I feel as I unlock the deadbolt and open the door, and as my gaze lands on the six-foot-tall cowboy standing on the porch, my mood should sour, but instead, my heart races.

Not waiting for an invitation, Hollis blows past me and into the cabin. Nicotine, leather, and something entirely him fills my nostrils as I shut the door and face him. I'm inexplicably drawn to this man, like a magnet. I hate it.

"You're infuriatin'," he blurts out, finger pointed in my direction.

"Little late to be showin' up at someone's house, don't ya think?" I drawl .

Hollis takes a step toward me, and I instinctively take one back, my body flush with

the door. There's a wild look in his eyes, and the sight has my blood running hot. "I've got a proposition for you, Cap," he offers, a smirk tugging on the corner of his mouth.

My stomach does a flip, his proximity making it hard to breathe. "Oh yeah? And what's that?"

"I enjoyed myself last weekend, and I'm guessin' you did too. Right?"

I consider lying, but it would be futile.

"Yes."

His gaze dips down to my mouth before coming back up to my eyes, and he rests his hand on the door while his other brazenly comes to my hip. "Good, so we should keep goin'," he suggests, his voice low and raspy.

"I already told you?—"

"I know what you told me," he cuts me off. "But why deny yourself what you want?"

"Who says it's what I want?" I ask. "Just because I enjoyed it doesn't mean I want it to happen again."

Hollis brings his hand to my chest, holding my gaze as he cocks a brow. "Then why's your heart beatin' so fast?"

"Your heart can race for a number of reasons, Hollis," I deadpan. "That doesn't mean I want to fuck you."

"Who said anythin' about fuckin' me, Cap?" Another infuriating smirk curls his lips

as he brings his body flush with mine. I swallow thickly as my dick twitches. “But since you offered... Please do.”

“That’s uh...” I clear my throat as I feel my cheeks flush. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Aww, it’s adorable how flustered you are, baby.

” Hand sliding up to my throat, Hollis grips me right under my jaw.

“ Quit thinkin’ so hard. You’re single, I’m single, we’re practically neighbors...

Why not take advantage of that? Let’s have some fun.

It doesn’t have to mean anythin’, and nobody has to know. ”

My heart pounds against my ribs as my breathing comes out in harsh, shallow pants.

Goosebumps cover my flesh, every inch of me electrified.

I’m hyperaware of Hollis... The way his fingertips press into the side of my throat.

His hand on my hip. His breath on my face.

Dark brown eyes nearly black with desire.

And how good it would feel to give in, to take him up on this asinine offer...

To sink into him and feel his warmth all around me.

And he’s right... Nobody has to know.

So why not? Why am I trying so hard to avoid him, knowing I want what he's offering?

Why can't we have fun and take advantage of our current situation?

"Fine," I grit out. "But there must be rules."

Hollis chuckles darkly before he nips at my bottom lip, tugging on the tissue before letting it go. "I've never been too good at followin' the rules, but for you, I just might."

Huffing a breath through my nose, I say, "I'm serious."

"Yeah, but can we lay them out after you fuck me? Because I can't think of a goddamn thing other than havin' that fat fuckin' cock in my ass."

My mouth collides with his without another hesitation, hand flying to his chest and fisting the front of his shirt as I walk us farther into the house.

The kiss is frenzied—teeth clashing and nipping, tongues fighting for control—but so are our hands all over one another.

His ass connects with the back of the couch as his fingers come to the hem of my shirt, and he rips his lips from mine long enough to yank the shirt off my body.

Doing the same to him, we're in a mad dash to get each other naked as quickly as possible.

As his mouth finds mine again, we somehow make it to the bedroom without knocking anything over.

Falling onto the bed, Hollis positions himself in the center, palming his thick cock and stroking himself while I do the same.

The lighting in here is better than it was in the tent, so I have a mouthwatering view of his body and, fuck, it's a sight to see.

Where I'm broad and bulky, Hollis is lean and tight, his skin a golden tan, showcasing the long hours spent under the hot Texas sun.

Corded arms flex as his fist glides up and down his impressive length, full balls bouncing with each stroke.

"Like what ya see?" he asks, dark eyes heavy and a titillating smirk curving his lips.

"Yeah, I do," I drawl, then smack his hand away as I take over. "I'd like it even better in my mouth, though."

A gravelly moan sounds from Hollis. "Well, by all means," he drawls, voice rough with desire. "Have at it."

Dipping my head, I close my lips over the flared tip poking out from under his foreskin, and I swirl my tongue around it, lapping up the sticky, salty mess dripping from the slit.

I groan as the flavor erupts on my taste buds, and I already want more.

Lying flat on the bed, I wrap one of my arms under his thigh while I take more of him in my mouth.

Hollis sucks in a breath through his teeth as he rakes his fingers through my hair, his muscles tensing under my touch.

“Oh, fuck yeah...” He groans, the erotic sound shooting straight to my dick. I grind my hips on the bed as his tip touches the back of my throat. “Suck my fuckin’ cock, Cap... Just like that.”

I swallow around him, my throat contracting, before pulling off and replacing my mouth with my hand for a moment as I tip my head toward the nightstand. “Reach in that drawer and grab the lube and a condom.”

As soon as he tosses them to me, I crack open the bottle and pour a drop on my middle finger, then bring it to his hole.

With his cock back in my mouth, I ease in slowly, slipping past the tight muscle and into his hot channel.

Hollis throws his head back, letting out a deep, husky groan as my mouth and finger work him in tandem.

My pulse is erratic as I slip in a second finger, needing to get inside him as quickly as possible, but also wanting to make sure he’s properly ready for me.

Hollis thrusts up into my mouth, needy little moans falling from his lips, and when I peer up at him, I nearly come from how fucking sexy he looks.

Propped up on his elbows, he watches me, his eyes bottomless pits, cheeks rosy, and his lip tucked between his teeth.

I’m dying to feel him wrapped around my cock, and he looks just as desperate for it.

When I can’t wait any longer, I sit back and grab the condom off the bed.

Ripping it open with my teeth, I roll it onto my dick before applying a thick layer of

lube and spreading it around.

“Turn around,” I mutter, stroking myself as he does just that. “On your knees.”

Coming up behind him, I grab a handful of his ass and spread him open, kneading the flesh as I line myself up.

Hollis turns his head, a grin flashing back at me before his mouth is on mine.

His tongue slips past my lips, rolling with mine as I ease the tip of my cock inside his hole.

I swallow his broken moans as I slowly inch deeper until he’s taking all of me.

He’s so tight, I can barely breathe, and he feels like heaven wrapped around me.

“Fuck...” Resting my forehead against his, I give us both a moment to adjust before I withdraw my hips and sink back in.

My body is thrumming, and it’s so easy to lose myself in him.

In this moment. I’ve barely gotten started, and I already know I’m not going to want to stop. His body fits against mine perfectly.

“Harder,” Hollis moans, pushing his ass back, meeting me thrust for thrust. “I wanna feel you when I walk tomorrow.”

Nipping at his bottom lip, the fire burning inside of me grows with each thrust into his tight ass. “Careful what you wish for, boy.”

“I know ya got it in you,” he taunts. “Make it hurt, Captain.”

A growl rips from my throat as I pick up the pace.

Grabbing onto his hips, I pound into his tight, hungry hole, giving him exactly what he begged me for and loving every second of it.

Sweat drips down the back of my neck, my pulse pounding as pleasure soars through my body.

I crack a hand down on his ass, reveling in the way he cries out.

Hollis hangs his head between his shoulders as he pushes back against me, taking every inch of my cock.

“There ya go, baby,” he purrs. “Don’t hold back... Fuck!”

I grab a fistful of Hollis’s hair and pull him back.

Wrapping my arm around his shoulders, my fingers bite into his flesh as I hold his body against mine.

His skin is slick and overheated, and his scent is intoxicating.

My other hand finds his dick, rock hard and begging to be touched. Hollis whimpers as I stroke him.

“This what ya wanted?” I growl into his ear. “To get it from both ends, like a little fuckin’ slut?”

“Oh, fuck ...” Dropping his head on my shoulder, he grabs ahold of my forearm pressed against his chest, his nails digging in as he whimpers.

“Is this what you were thinkin’ about earlier at the dinner table?

” I ask, my voice throaty and dripping with lust. “ Fantasizin’ about me filling this needy hole with my cock?

” I hum as he nods feverishly. Heat spreads from the base of my spine all through my body, pressure building.

“And ya just don’t know how to quit, do ya?

Comin’ over here unannounced, beggin’ for me to fuck you. Is this what you needed, boy?”

“Yes... Oh fuck, yes!”

“You gonna come for me?”

“Yes,” he gasps. “I’m so fuckin’ close. Don’t stop!”

I moan at his desperation, fire swimming through my veins as I inch near the edge too.

Hollis turns to me, his dark, heated gaze on mine.

He looks as gone as I feel, and it steals the breath right out of my lungs.

Brows drawn together and his jaw slack, his eyes flutter closed as his release hits him.

His whole face twists up beautifully, raspy moans falling from his lips, and it’s impossible to hold back with the way he pulsates around my cock.

Balls drawn up tight, I throw my head back and groan gutturally as I spill into the condom, wishing it was his tight ass I was making a mess of instead.

After I pull out, Hollis rolls onto his back, catching his breath while I pad into the bathroom to dispose of the condom and find a towel to clean up with.

It takes no time at all for the haze from my orgasm to fade and reality to crash back into me.

Holy shit, that really just happened. Stopping in the kitchen, I grab two bottles of water before heading back to the room.

Handing him one, I sit on the edge of the bed, knowing I probably should get dressed, but not wanting to yet.

I crack open the bottle and guzzle some down before glancing over my shoulder at Hollis doing the same. “Ground rules,” I mutter, knowing there needs to be, at least, a few in place to keep this from getting out of control, since clearly control is something I lack around Hollis .

Shaking his head, Hollis chuckles. “Wow, you really don’t waste any time, do ya?”

Ignoring him, I say, “I was serious before... Nobody can know about this.”

“Yeah, I was too, Cap. Don’t worry.” Grabbing me by the shoulder, he spins me around. The sight of his flushed cheeks and disheveled hair sends heat down my spine all over again. “But you just fucked me so good, my legs are wobbly, so no...we are not discussing ‘ground rules’ right now. Nice try.”

In the far back of my mind, I know I should push the subject, insist we lay out some boundaries, but I...don’t. For whatever reason, I just don’t.

Letting it go, I grab a pair of shorts from the closet, pulling them on as Hollis walks out of the room, ass naked.

Assuming he's going to find his discarded clothes in my living room so he can leave, I'm surprised to find him standing in front of the fridge when I follow him out a minute later—still naked.

“What’re ya doin’?” I ask, rubbing my hand over the back of my neck.

The freezer’s wide open, and he doesn’t reply right away. Finally, swiping a bag of pizza rolls out of the door, he glances at me and says, “Want some?”

“Sorry?”

What is going on here?

“I’m fuckin’ starvin’ after that,” he says plainly with a shrug. “Aren’t you?”

“Uh, yeah. But what happened to this just bein’ fun? You have your own house, with your own food. Go eat there.”

Hollis throws his head back and laughs as he tosses the bag on the counter. “Don’t be fuckin’ weird, Cap. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with eating a midnight snack together after the dickin’ ya just gave me. ”

Standing in the entrance of the kitchen, I watch, beside myself, as Hollis makes himself at home, sifting through the cabinets in search of a cookie sheet. Once he’s got them in the oven and the timer set, he hoists himself onto the counter by the sink.

“Turn on some music,” he says.

“Your asshole is on my counter...” I can only blink at the sight before me. My mind can’t seem to comprehend what’s going on.

“And? It was on your cock ten minutes ago. What’s your point?” Chuckling, he adds, “You gonna turn on some music or what, Cap?”

“I don’t recall signing up for this,” I grumble as I, in fact, do turn on some music, though I’m not sure why.

“Don’t be so clinical,” he drawls. “Havin’ fun doesn’t have to mean just sex and run. I happen to be a very fun person to be around. Honestly, you should be thankin’ me for stayin’ and makin’ us food.”

“Oh, right.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll be sure to get right on that.”

Beaming at me, he says, “That’s more like it.”

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

And why couldn’t I just...stay away?

Seventeen

Hollis

I spot my best friend as soon as I step inside The Rusty Spur. He's in one of the back corner booths, messing around on his phone, with a tray of nachos in front of him. Strolling through the bar, I slide in across from him, grabbing one of the fully loaded chips and popping it in my mouth.

"Fuck, that's tasty," I murmur in between chewing.

Remi sets his phone down on the table before grabbing one for himself. He flicks his gaze up to me and wrinkles his nose. "Dude, you fuckin' stink," he says, the corner of his lip twitching.

"Fuck you." I chuckle as I grab another chip. "I didn't wanna keep you waitin' here, so I didn't run home and shower once I finished with work."

"Next time, be late, my friend."

"This is the smell of a hardworkin' man, my friend . What do ya know about that? "

Remi snorts. "I know hard work. That's just plain cow manure and sweat."

Flipping him off, he huffs a laugh as I grab my phone from my pocket. My pulse kicks up when I see a notification from Ford. After he fucked me last week, I insisted we exchange phone numbers. He fought me on it, but in the end, I won. I always win.

Daddy Ford: Mmm... That all for me?

Heat spreads low in my groin as I thumb out a response.

Me: I don't know... You took so long to reply, maybe I got someone else to take care of it for me. *smirk emoji*

About halfway through the day, I snuck out behind the barn and sent Ford a picture of my cock—a glorious one, if I do say so myself.

“Why’re you smilin’ like that?” Remi asks, pulling my attention away from my phone.

Shaking my head, I slip it back into my pocket. “No reason.”

“Bullshit. Who is it?”

“Just some guy I met on Hive .”

It’s not technically a lie, but it still tastes bitter on my tongue.

I enjoy fucking with Remi and telling him how hot his boss is, but the truth is, I don’t love lying to him.

It’s not something either of us does, but this is a tricky situation.

Not only do I know he won’t approve of this, but it’s also not just my secret to share; it’s Ford’s too, and he specifically said he didn’t want Remi to know.

“Have you met him yet?”

“Yup. What about you?” I ask, wanting to change the subject. “Any new men on the Remi roster?”

Like me, my best friend has never really been a relationship kind of guy, but unlike me, he hates hookup culture.

He’s not into meeting someone and immediately taking them home.

Instead, he prefers a more friends-with-benefits approach.

Which to me feels an awful lot like a relationship without all the labels.

Keeping it strictly about the sex and nothing more is way less messy, but what do I know?

I think Remi is a closeted romantic; he just hasn’t found the right person to bring out that side of him.

He’d never admit that, though. Mostly because I don’t think he even knows it himself.

“Except for your dad?” he teases with a wink. “Nah, I’m kinda over the whole app thing.”

“Hilarious,” I deadpan, rolling my eyes as I bite back a laugh. Grabbing my phone again, there’s a response from Ford, but it’s a picture. My dick twitches and my body heats. There’s no way I can open this in front of Remi. “Be right back,” I announce, sliding out of the booth. “Takin’ a leak.”

“Grab a pitcher of beer on your way back,” Remi calls out behind me.

Locking myself in the stall, I'm buzzing with both excitement and arousal as I pull up the message. I haven't even seen the picture yet, and I already know it's going to be hot as fuck.

Daddy Ford: Well, then maybe I should give this to somebody else...

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ..."

Resting my back against the stall door, I admire the work of art presented to me.

This might be the nicest dick pic I've ever received.

Sitting in a chair in what looks to be his office, Ford's wearing his navy-blue Station 14 shirt, those sexy-ass fire pants with the red suspenders, and his helmet's resting on his head.

He's fisting his cock, and the angle of the photo lets me see every glorious ridge and vein, making my mouth water.

Me: Absolutely fucking not.

Daddy Ford: Then quit your bitchin' .

Fuck, he's hot. I picture him saying that to my face, his voice all growly.

Me: You put all that gear on for me, Cap?

Daddy Ford: Maybe. Or maybe I was already wearing it.

Me: The only time y'all wear that gear is when you go out on a call. I know better than that. You put that on special for me... Admit it.

He sends the shrugging emoji back, and I chuckle. I do love the idea of knowing he put all that on just to send me a picture. After I really do take a leak and wash my hands, I reply before heading back out.

Me: Why are you still at the station? Y'all's shift ended an hour ago, didn't it?

Daddy Ford: Had some paperwork I needed to get done.

Swinging by the bar, I order a pitcher of beer, then meander back to the table, where Remi's wearing an amused expression, staring at his phone.

"What'd I miss?" I ask as I slide back into the booth.

Glancing up, he breathes out a laugh as he pockets the phone. "You know how Chandler's goin' on that cruise in a couple weeks?"

"Yeah. What about it? Her wife is sick, and she needs a replacement vaca buddy? Because I volunteer."

"No," he says with a chuckle. "We're gettin' a loaner from the 120 to fill in for her, and Cap just sent out a text to the team, letting us know who it's goin' to be."

I wait to see if he's going to say anything further. "Well, don't keep me waitin'," I say. "Who is it?"

"It's Tanner Baker."

Remi says it like I'm supposed to know who that is, and it takes a minute, but then... "As in, the firefighter you fucked in the bathroom during the Christmas party last year?"

Groaning, he nods. “That’s the one.”

I burst out laughing before I can help it. “Shut the fuck up. That’s gold.”

Remi isn’t the guy to randomly hook up with somebody he’s never met before, but he got ridiculously drunk after he ran into his ex-boyfriend who cheated on him at the party with one of the firefighters, and ended up in the bathroom with Tanner. I was proud of my best friend.

He was...not so proud.

The drama between firefighters is honestly astounding, but very interesting to me.

“Glad you find this so amusing.” Remi narrows his eyes.

Pulling myself together, I ask, “Have you talked to him since that night?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, not really. It’s going to make for an awkward as hell week at work.”

“Wait, the 120...” I pause, holding a hand up. “Isn’t that the station Cap’s ex-husband works at too?”

“Well, they’re still technically married, but yeah, it’s Trent’s house.”

I nod, trying to appear nonchalant. “Do you think they run into each other much?”

“I have no clue.” He shrugs before taking a pull from his beer. “Definitely not at work, though.”

If it weren’t for me knowing the fire station’s business because of Remi, I wouldn’t

even know Trent existed.

I've rarely seen him around town, and we've never interacted at any fire department events, and because he works in a different county, he and Ford lived more on the outskirts of Wolf Creek.

I don't know him, but I don't like him, and I'm not entirely sure why.

Ford's never shared any details of their marriage, or their separation, with me, but I'm suddenly wishing he would have.

Did they end on good terms? Bad?

Who ended it?

Is Ford still hung up on the guy?

Will working around him stir up old feelings?

Why does the thought of that put me on edge?

"You think things are civil between them?" I ask, my curiosity getting the best of me.

"I don't think so." He shakes his head. "Trent's a sensitive subject, so I try not to dig too much."

Well, that's unhelpful.

"What do you think of him?"

"I think he's all ego and nice hair." Remi huffs out a laugh. "I've only had to work

with the guy a handful of times, but it's clear from the very first hello that he thinks his shit don't stink."

I try to picture Ford with a man like that, but I can't see it. Ford's all grump; he needs somebody to lighten him up. Surely, an egomaniac can't do that.

Maybe that's why they're getting a divorce.

"Who ended things?" I ask, my knee bouncing a mile a minute under the table.

"Damn, Hol." Remi chuckles. "What's with the twenty questions tonight?"

I force a laugh and shrug before the conversation veers in another direction.

What is with all my curiosity, though? Yeah, I'm into hooking up with Ford, but so what?

Where's this sudden need to know the guy's whole backstory? I don't need to know somebody on a deep, personal level to fuck them, but with Ford...

For whatever reason, I find myself wanting to get to know him.

It's just like the other night at his place after he fucked me; I wasn't in a hurry to leave.

I wanted to be around him.

It's different... And confusing.

But that doesn't stop me from pulling out my phone and finding our text thread as soon as we pay our tab and walk out of the bar.

Me: Free your afternoon tomorrow, Cap. We're gonna have some fun.

Daddy Ford: Meaning you want to have sex?

I chuckle to myself.

Me: I'm good for more fun than just sex, thank you very much.

Maybe getting him out—getting him relaxed —will let me dig around and find out some of the answers to my questions.

Purely for nosy reasons, of course.

Eighteen

Ford

I didn't know what to expect when Hollis texted me last night, but sitting on the back of his Harley as we ride...

somewhere certainly wasn't it. It's later in the evening, the breeze warm as it whips past us.

This isn't my first time on a motorcycle—I rode one of my buddy's years ago when I first joined the force—but it is my first time riding on the back of one, and it's been years since I've done anything like this.

I didn't anticipate how stiff my legs are going to feel once we finally make it to where we're going.

My hands are resting on top of my thighs, but as he takes a sharp corner, I bring them to his hips to steady myself.

Even through the leather and his clothes, the touch is electric, and it has my heart pounding harder.

I've made it a point to keep things friendly during this ride.

Sure, we're sitting in close proximity, and we have to, given what we're on, but that doesn't mean I need to be plastered to his back...

Even if keeping my hands to myself has proven to be more than a little challenging.

Despite the breeze surrounding us, my body is on fire, all too aware of Hollis's every move.

Filthy thoughts flit through my mind before I can help it...

Me sliding my hands along the top of his thighs, feeling the muscle tense beneath my touch.

Scooting closer until our bodies are flush, so he can see how turned on I am being near him like this.

I'd palm his cock next; see if he's turned on too, then bring my other hand around his throat.

Feel his pulse race against my fingers as I rubbed him over his jeans.

I don't even realize how tight I'm gripping his hips until Hollis turns his head and says, "You good, Cap?" His voice is muffled beneath the helmet, and the organ in my chest thumps against my ribs, like he can somehow sense what's on my mind.

Fuck, pull yourself together.

Clenching my teeth, I nod, but say nothing.

When Hollis finally comes to a stop and turns off the bike, I take in our surroundings. We're on some sort of a lookout over a canyon, and there's nothing or no one around as far as the eye can see.

"Take me up here to kill me?" I ask teasingly as I climb off a moment before Hollis

does the same.

He chuckles, pulling off his helmet. “Nah, you fucked me too good to kill you.”

My body heats, from his words, but also from the sight of him as I drag my gaze down the front of his body.

When he picked me up, I was too focused on the fact that he expected me to climb on the back of his bike that I never got a good look at him.

A leather vest is draped over a plain white t-shirt, straight-leg Wranglers perfectly hugging his thighs and ass are cuffed around the ankle, showing off his black riding boots that are vastly different from his usual cowboy boots, and as he sets his helmet on the seat and reaches into the left saddlebag, he pulls out an all-black trucker hat that he places backward on his head.

Goddamn .

Biker Hollis is just as mouthwatering as cowboy Hollis.

Placing a Marlboro between his teeth, Hollis lights the end with a Zippo, flashing me a cocky smirk. “Keep lookin’ at me like that, and I just might get the wrong idea, Cap.”

Fire spreads through my veins. “Oh, is that right?”

He nods, humming as he takes a drag off the cigarette. “And I don’t know what type of man you take me for, but I don’t much like puttin’ out on the first date.”

“Just beforehand?” I tease, before pausing when my mind finally registers what he said. “You think this is a date ?”

Lifting a brow, he asks, “Don’t you?”

My heart stutters. I already don’t know how I feel about what Hollis and I have done already, but a date ? No. This isn’t a date.

Hollis busts up laughing. “Would you fuckin’ relax, man? I’m just messin’ with you.” Sauntering over to me, he pats the side of my face. “God, you should see your face right now.”

Narrowing my gaze, I grit my teeth. “Then what are we doin’ out here?”

“Watchin’ the sunset, obviously,” is all he offers before taking off in the other direction, leaving me to follow him.

Oh, watching a sunset. What a totally normal thing for two people to do together who aren’t on a date.

“One thing about me,” Hollis drawls over his shoulder. “I’m a slut for a pretty sunset, and this place has one of the best views around here. It’s also far enough from town that you can practically see every star in the sky.”

We don’t veer too far from the bike when Hollis comes to a stop. There’s a little ledge area where we can sit. It’s kind of small, though. Our knees brush as I take a seat next to him. My palms are sweaty, and my pulse is still racing. I’m on edge being here with him, and I don’t understand why.

“What about you?” he asks.

My brows furrow. “What about me?”

“You like sunsets too? Or are you more of a sunrise type of guy?”

“I like ’em both.” I shrug. “Don’t think I got a preference one way or another.”

“Ever been out here before?”

I shake my head. “Nope, can’t say that I have.”

Hollis takes one last drag before dropping the cigarette on the ground and putting it out with his boot. I’m just about to give him shit for littering when he bends down and picks up the butt, shoving it in the pocket of his jeans.

“What’s your favorite place to go to unwind, or just relax?” he asks after a while, the question taking me by surprise for whatever reason.

Rubbing my hand along the scruff covering my jaw, I think about it for a moment before I huff out a breath. “Hell, I guess I don’t really have one anymore.”

“Okay, what was your favorite place?”

My stomach twists, mouth going dry as I consider whether I want to share this part of me with him. It’s not some big secret or anything, but it is diving into a part of my life I typically avoid thinking about if I can help it. What the hell...

“At the house I shared with my ex-husband, there was a creek running through a part of the property,” I explain. “When we first bought the house, I built a porch swing near the water, and I loved goin’ out there in the evenings during the summer.”

“With your ex?” Hollis asks .

Shaking my head, I say, “That was always a place just for me. Trent wasn’t much of an outdoorsy type of guy. His idea of relaxing was in his recliner in front of the television, with a beer in his hand.”

The mention of Trent reminds me that our final court hearing is coming up. I'm almost free of all of this, and the process has been...easy. Almost painfully so, considering how much time and heartache this marriage took from me, but I'm almost there.

"How boring." Hollis huffs. "I've always loved the outdoors more than anything."

"Me too."

"Is that why you take your crew campin' every year?" I feel the weight of his gaze on the side of my face. I meet it, and nod.

"Yeah. I used to camp all the time as a teenager with my grandfather. Right on the lake, or at the creek. We'd wake up with the sun, spend the mornin' fishin'.

I love it, but Trent couldn't stand the idea of campin', and I wasn't about to go alone.

"I pause, before adding, "Well, that, and it's affordable for everybody. "

"And I'm there," he says, a flirty smirk curving his lips. "That's an obvious plus too."

I huff a laugh. "You sure do love yourself, don't ya?"

"What's not to love?" Hollis leans in closer, his shoulder brushing with mine. "I mean, you clearly don't hate the idea of me. Isn't that right, Cap?"

There's something in the way he calls me that, that makes my blood heat every single time, and I don't understand it.

People all day, every day call me Cap, and it's whatever.

I don't even bat an eye, but with him... It's flirty and suggestive, and I really shouldn't enjoy it as much as I do.

Especially when Hollis is just flirty by nature.

I'm over here, overthinking every interaction we've had since we went camping, trying to tell myself it meant nothing, or that it was a mistake, and that we can't do it again, while he probably hasn't even thought twice about it.

I'm sure Hollis flirting with me, or sleeping with me, doesn't mean anything in his eyes.

That's probably a normal night of the week for him.

"I don't know about that," I tease, playfully jabbing him in the arm with my elbow. "I definitely enjoyed you suckin' my cock because at least then you weren't talkin'."

Throwing his head back, Hollis laughs, the sound sending a wave of goosebumps down my arms. "Sure, we'll go with that. Although, I didn't see any complaints when you fucked me either, and I definitely talked then."

"Just because my dick tolerates you doesn't mean I do."

The truth is, Hollis fascinates me. He's my opposite in almost every way, and I can't help but be intrigued by him.

This rugged cowboy who doesn't give a fuck what anybody thinks about him.

Hollis is who I probably would've been if it weren't for my father or my ex-husband.

He's who I would've been if people who were supposed to love me didn't tear me

down.

“You’re a terrible liar,” he drawls.

Neither of us are looking at each other, both our gazes on the sun setting along the horizon—and he wasn’t wrong about the views here—but my pulse thrums from his proximity. I haven’t felt this exhilarating type of rush in years. Like high school jitters.

“Can I ask you somethin’, Cap?” he asks after a few moments.

“Go for it.”

“Was I the first person you’ve been with since your husband?”

I glance over at him, my brows pinched. “Yeah. Thought that was pretty obvious from things we talked about on the app.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured, but you never outright said that.”

“Why do you ask?”

Hollis shrugs. “Just curious, I guess. I’ll be honest...” He meets my gaze, something akin to amusement dancing in his eyes. “We really shouldn’t have done any of what we did, with you bein’ Remi’s boss and all.”

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“Ya don’t say?” I drawl with a chuckle.

Huffing a laugh, he continues. “But we shouldn’t stop.”

“Is that right?” He nods, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “And why is that?”

“Oh, come on, Cap.” Hollis sucks on his teeth. “We’re incredibly sexually compatible, and we’ve had fun. Right?”

I heave a sigh. “Well, yeah, but?—”

“So, why stop a good thing?” he mutters, cutting me off. “Yeah, us hookin’ up is probably murky territory, given that you’re my best friend’s boss, and he probably wouldn’t be happy with me if he knew.”

I raise a brow. “And you’re okay with pissin’ off your friend?”

“Well, no, not really,” he says. “But he’d only be pissed because he’d be worried it would affect your workin’ relationship if this went south, but we’re just havin’ fun, and I think we’re both mature enough to not let it affect anythin’ outside of us. Right?”

Chuckling, I say, “You got it all figured out, don’t ya?”

He flashes me a wide grin. “Yup. Believe it or not, I’m pretty smart.”

Thinking over everything he said, I clear my throat. “For starters, you’re right... I

wouldn't ever let my personal life get between work."

"Why am I sensin' a 'but' comin'?"

"But this feels a whole lot like mixin' business with pleasure, and after doing that for years with my ex-husband, I don't know if it's such a good idea," I explain, even though it's not what I want to be saying.

"The station—both mine and Trent's—knew way more about our marriage than I prefer, and with you bein' friends with my lieutenant...

I prefer to keep my private life private, and you're not exactly quiet about your private life is all I'm sayin'."

Hollis places his hand on my thigh, his heated gaze on mine.

"I'm cool with keepin' this on the down low," he practically purrs, the rasp in his voice like a potent shot of arousal to my core.

"It's not like this is goin' anywhere serious, so why bother lettin' people know?

Yeah, I may not be as private as you, but I sure as hell can respect any boundaries you put in place.

You want quiet, I can be quiet, baby." Then, squeezing my thigh, he adds, "Except in the bedroom... But I don't think ya want me to be quiet in there."

Fire races down my spine, and my cock throbs as it thickens in my pants. "No, never be quiet in there," I husk.

His lip curls as he leans in closer, his face mere inches from mine. "We got a deal

then?” he asks. “Hot, fun sex that we keep under wraps?”

My heart pounds against my ribs. “I guess we do,” I drawl, my dick already aching.

Hollis flicks his tongue out, gliding it across my bottom lip before tugging it between his teeth. The small, nearly innocent act sets my blood ablaze. “In that case, I kinda wanna see you get on your knees for me this time, Cap.”

A deep chuckle rumbles in my chest. “Oh, yeah? ”

Humming, he brushes the tip of his nose against mine.

“We both already know I rocked your world with my mouth,” he rasps, tone as cocky as ever, but he’s not wrong.

“Now, I wanna see what your mouth can do.” Groaning, he adds, “And fuck me, I bet you love taking cock in your throat, don’t you, Captain Wesley?”

You and your serious demeanor, but underneath it all, you’re a fuckin’ freak, just like me.

” Hand trailing up my thigh, Hollis cups my erection, slowly stroking it over my pants.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” he murmurs. “Tell me you aren’t dyin’ to taste my cock, to feel the weight of it slide across your tongue, to fill your throat. ”

My mouth waters. I grit my teeth to keep from groaning, but he’s right... I do want to taste him. I do want him to fill my throat. I want to taste his cum and feel him fall apart because of me.

Huffing a breath, he says, “That’s what I thought. Now, get on your knees for me, Cap.”

There’s zero hesitation. I do exactly as he says.

My head is dizzy as he works his jeans open and pulls himself out.

His cock is stiff and dripping, the veins running along the length of him making my own dick throb.

I’m so fucking hard, and I haven’t even tasted him yet.

The glistening bead of pre-cum pooling from his slit is taunting me and has me salivating.

He must know it too, because a moment later, he fists himself and drags the tip over my lips, coating them in his sticky arousal.

My tongue dips out, licking them clean, and as his flavor erupts on my taste buds, a groan rips from my throat, deep and carnal.

Parting my lips, I stick out my tongue, allowing Hollis to feed me his cock inch by inch. His deep brown eyes darken, jaw popping from how hard he’s clenching, and it’s not until he hits the back of my throat that I close my lips around him and hollow my cheeks .

“Fuck,” he rasps. “No gag reflex? You love suckin’ cock, don’t you?”

I nod, peering up at him from beneath my lashes as my head bobs. His natural musk surrounds me and makes me dizzy.

“Yeah, you do,” he purrs. “And you do it so well too.”

With one hand behind him, Hollis threads his fingers from his other hand through the strands of hair atop my head, watching me with parted lips and a heavy-lidded gaze.

His cheeks are stained pink, chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

I easily lose myself in the moment. The husky sounds falling from him, the way his thighs quake beneath my hands, the taste of him... I love it all.

My hand comes to his full, bouncy balls, gently squeezing, then rolling them in my palm as his moans grow deeper.

I peer up at him as I pull my mouth off his cock.

Bringing my tongue to his sack, I lick a hot, wet path across them before sucking one into my mouth.

I swirl my tongue around as I pump him in my hand at the same time before switching sides and showing it the same attention.

Hollis's jaw is slack as he watches me, his hips thrusting up.

I'm not even sure if he's aware he's doing it.

After a moment, I close my lips around his cock, needing to feel him in my throat again.

“Pull yourself out, Cap,” he rasps. “Let me see you stroke that fat cock while you suck me off. Wanna see how much you're lovin' this.”

He doesn't have to ask me twice. My dick's so hard, it has its own heartbeat, and my balls feel like they're going to explode with how full they are. My eyelids flutter and a groan rumbles in my chest as soon as I wrap a hand around myself.

Hollis guides my head up and down his length, taking control while I stroke myself. "Tell me..." he says, voice full of gravel. "You like when I call you Cap while you suck my dick and fuck me?"

I hum, unable to nod with the grip he has on my head. A whimper rolls off his tongue that has my dick leaking.

"Yeah, I fuckin' knew you did. But what about...daddy?"

Grunting around his length, I pump myself harder and faster.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"You like that, don't ya?" he asks, his hips thrusting up and his grip painful as he fucks my mouth from the bottom.

Fingers tightening in my hair, he holds my head down, dick settled in my throat as tears spring to my eyes.

Jaw slack and his eyes barely open, Hollis moans when I swallow around his tip.

"You're gonna make me come, daddy. Is that what you want?"

I try to nod as he pulls my head off his cock, spit dribbling down my chin. "Yes," I gasp, dragging in lungfuls of air.

"That's right," he husks, thrusting his dick back into my mouth. "And you're gonna

swallow every last drop I give you. Isn't that right?"

Groaning, I suck him to the back of my throat again, desperate for him to fill my senses. My fist flies up and down my cock, my balls drawn up to my body. I'm close— so fucking close —but I want him to come first.

"Fuck, daddy," he moans, sending a burst of heat through my body. "Your mouth is fuckin' heavenly. I'm right there... Don't stop..."

Throwing his head back, his thighs tighten as he lets out a guttural groan a moment before his release floods my mouth.

I swallow every last drop, my eyes fluttering closed as pressure builds at the base of my spine.

Pleasure ricochets through my body as my dick throbs, and then I unload all over the ground with a muffled groan.

"Fuck, that's hot," Hollis rasps as he pulls my mouth off of him. Patting my cheek, he smirks as I gaze up at him. "I knew you'd be good at that."

I breathe out a chuckle as I tuck myself back in my pants. My knees ache from the hard ground as I stand, and I'll probably be sore for days because of this, but it'll be worth it. That was exactly what Hollis said... Hot. I can't believe we did that out here, where anybody could've seen us.

Once Hollis tucks himself away too, he stands, grabbing the side of my face as his lips devour mine.

His tongue licks into my mouth, and he groans when he tastes himself.

Nipping at my bottom lip before pulling back, Hollis says, “I’ve worked up an appetite.

Let’s get outta here and go get some food. ”

“Why’re you always hungry?” I ask teasingly as we make our way back to the bike.

Hollis chuckles and shrugs. “Good dick—or, in this case, good head—makes me hungry.”

As he tosses his hat back in the saddlebag and puts on the helmet, I can’t help but wish I would’ve had him wear that while I sucked his dick. Now, that would’ve been hot as hell.

Next time...

Let’s just hope this little deal of ours doesn’t blow up in my face.

Nineteen

Hollis

Turning onto the gravel road that leads to the ranch, I shoot a quick text to Ford.

Me: I'll be at your place in five.

I huff a chuckle when his response comes through immediately.

Daddy Ford: What if I'm busy? Or not home?

Me: Don't be ridiculous. You're home.

He doesn't respond, but the message shows as read.

I can see him in my mind, grumbling and probably fighting the urge to unlock the door, but as I park my car, grab the pizza box and six-pack off the seat beside me, then climb out, I'm not the least bit surprised to find him on the porch already.

Hands on his hips and a scowl on his face, Ford watches me as I approach.

"Howdy, Cap," I drawl. "Sure hope I didn't interrupt anythin' too important."

"Oh, just the first day off I've had in a week," he grumbles.

"What better way to spend it than with me?" I flash him a toothy grin. "And I brought

pizza and beer. You're welcome. ”

I shamelessly drag my gaze down the front of him before coming back to his face.

“Goddamn, you sure are lookin’ good today, daddy.

” The black shorts with the five-inch inseam and the AC/DC muscle tee he’s wearing are really doing it for me.

“What were ya up to before I got here in that slutty little outfit?”

Ford’s scowl deepens as he glances down at himself. “Slutty little outfit?” he repeats slowly. “I was putting together my new bed frame.”

Handing him a beer, I waggle my brows as he saunters inside, and I follow. “So, what you’re sayin’ is, we need to break it in?”

He clicks his tongue. “What are you doin’ here, Hollis?”

“Aw, would ya relax a little, Cap?” I tease, setting the pizza down on the counter and grabbing a slice. “August mentioned you were bringin’ in a bunch of boxes earlier. Thought I could offer my assistance and feed you. Now, turn around. Let me see that dump truck of yours.”

“My what?” he hisses, but gives me a spin anyway.

“ Fuck, Cap...” Biting my knuckle, I say, “You’ve got such a fine ass. Next time, I wanna fuck you.”

Ford spins around quickly, his jaw tight as he clears his throat, but I don’t miss the flash of heat in his gaze that he’s quick to school. “That ain’t happenin’”

I chuckle. “You say that now, but you’ll be singin’ a whole different tune once I got my tongue in you.”

He groans with exasperation, rubbing his temple. “My god, must you talk like that all the time?”

“Oh, please.” I snort. “You sure don’t seem to mind the way I talk when I’m makin’ you come.”

Rolling his eyes, he grabs a piece from inside the box before taking a large bite. As he walks off, he mutters over his shoulder. “Don’t need any help, but thanks.”

I scan the living and dining room, noting the various unopened boxes of furniture all over. “Yeah, the state of your place would beg to differ.” Then I ask, “Isn’t the closest Ikea, like, five hours away?”

He nods, looking completely bored with this conversation. “Yes. Drove there this mornin’ to pick all this up. It’s the first weekend I’ve really had time to do any of this since movin’ in here.”

“Ikea furniture is a bitch to put together. Quit bein’ stubborn and accept my help; otherwise, you’re about to be here all night.” Getting a closer look at everything, I ask, “What were ya gonna do next?”

Ford stares at me for a moment, his brows furrowed and his lips pinched, before heaving a sigh and gesturing toward one of the boxes. “The end tables.”

“That’s more like it.” I wink, flashing him a grin before bringing the box to the living room, where all his tools seem to be. “Really sprucin’ this ol’ cabin up, aren’t ya?”

He grunts. “Hopin’ to find a place to rent sooner rather than later, and then all this

will already be done.”

The idea of him moving off the ranch leaves a bitter taste in the back of my throat, but I can’t put my finger on why .

Obviously, he’ll move. Ford’s a grown man; there’s no way he’d live in a cabin in the back of a cattle ranch forever, but still, having him a short drive away is nice... and convenient.

Yeah, that’s what it is... Convenient.

Ford and I are in a new situationship—or would it be friends with benefits?—and having him close by allows for easy access. Since the night a little over a week ago when he gave me a fucking incredible blow job at the lookout, we’ve fooled around a couple more times. Definitely convenient.

That has to be why the idea of him moving is twisting my stomach.

“Why’d you give your ex the house?”

Shrugging, Ford says, “Didn’t want it.”

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn’t. Maybe he doesn’t like talking about it, and I should probably let it go, but I can’t...or don’t want to. The few times he’s opened up to me have felt so good. I want to get him to open up to me more.

“Just didn’t like the house or...?”

Ford glances up at me from beneath straight-set brows, and I swear I can hear him griping at me in his mind.

I half expect him to tell me to fuck off, or just get out altogether, so I'm surprised when he breathes out a sigh and says, "No, I loved the house." There's a sadness in his tone that surprisingly makes my chest ache.

"I was the one who found it, and did most of the renovations, but...I don't know.

There were too many bad memories in that house, on that property, and over time, I started hating it. "

"I can understand that," I offer, not really knowing what to say. I've never been married, nor even experienced a long-term breakup, but the urge to comfort him is overwhelming. "Why'd you get a divorce in the first place? He cheat?" Then, realizing how shitty that sounds, I add, "Or did you?"

Ford huffs out a small chuckle. "I shouldn't be talkin' to you, of all people, about this."

My face twists up. "Why not?"

"I don't talk about this to anyone, really, and I don't know... That's not what this is. It's fun, right?" His stormy eyes meet mine. "That's what you said last week."

"Well, yeah, what we're doing is fun, but that doesn't have to be all that it is." I shrug. "Sometimes you just gotta get shit off your chest. Who knows, maybe I'm the best kind of person to tell."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "How do ya figure?"

Breathing out a small laugh, I say, "I'd imagine with how much you work, the only people you really talk to are your team, right?"

” He nods, but doesn’t look at me as he continues putting together one of the end tables.

“And with your ex bein’ a firefighter too, it probably makes it either awkward or uncomfortable, or maybe both, to open up to your team about anything. Am I close?”

“Pretty much,” he mutters. “Well, that, and I’m their captain. Their superior. I struggle with feelin’ like it’s not appropriate for me to talk about my personal life with them. They don’t need to worry about me.”

“Yeah, but y’all are a family,” I point out. “Family leans on each other. Regardless, that’s why I’m probably the best guy to talk to about this.”

Ford’s nostrils flare as he exhales a heavy breath. “Nobody cheated,” he offers, his tone clipped. “We fought. A lot. And toward the end, they got pretty explosive more often than not.”

Swallowing thickly, I ask, “Like physical?”

He shakes his head, his jaw tight. “No, never anythin’ like that. Just...mean, I guess would be the right way to put it.”

Ford may be grumpy, but I can’t picture him being mean to anybody, especially someone he loves, so I have to assume he’s talking about Trent. The guy has always given me asshole, better-than-everyone vibes.

“How long did that go on for?” I ask. “Just the end?”

Clearing his throat, Ford tosses the Allen wrench on the floor and grabs his beer. After he finishes what’s left, he shakes his head. “It went on for quite a few years.” Then he laughs dryly. “Truth be told, if it weren’t for my therapist, I probably never

would've left."

I tilt my head to the side, my brows cinched. "Why do ya say that?"

"I loved him, to a fault." His voice cracks, and he coughs to cover it up.

"And I guess I just wanted him to love me back so much that I was willin' to look the other way, or make excuses to myself for the rest of my life—it won't always be this bad, he's just stressed about work, about bills, about his mom's sickness, then it turned into his mom just died, he needs me to be there for him—but that's all they were. Excuses and lies."

The air around us is tense. So thick and uncomfortable, it's almost suffocating. Standing, I walk into the kitchen and grab a couple more beers. Back in the living room, I hand him one before sitting back down. "What finally did it?"

"Realizin' how much Trent reminded me of my father," he mutters.

A chill slithers down my spine. Ford's only mentioned his dad a few times, but it's not hard to deduce the guy was a shitty father, and probably a shitty man all around. "Damn..." I breathe, my throat tight. "That had to be a harrowing realization."

He huffs. "You have no idea."

"Sounds like you made the right choice."

Nodding, Ford continues on one of the end tables while I work on the other, and the conversation fades after that.

The vibe in here is tense, but not necessarily in a bad way.

I feel like I have a better understanding of Ford, like he let me in on a small piece of him he tends to keep shaded.

I like that, even if my heart aches a little for what he went through.

And what that must've been like, living in a home with so much hostility and aggression after growing up in a home like that too .

It doesn't take long for us to finish them both, and once we get them placed where he wants them, we move on to the dresser. We finish the pizza and kill the rest of the six-pack, and it's not until we're nearly done with the last piece of furniture that he speaks again.

"How's growin' up on the ranch been?" he asks, taking me by surprise. For the most part, it's only ever been me asking any of the questions.

"Eh, it's all I've really known," I say. "There have been a few fleeting moments, all when I was younger, when I wondered what it'd be like to not continue the legacy."

"And what would that look like?"

"Fuck, who knows." I chuckle. "Maybe I would've been a lawyer."

Ford snorts. "No, you wouldn't."

"Why the fuck not?" Amusement fills my tone. "Don't think I got what it takes, Cap?"

"I'm sure you do," he replies. "I've got no doubt that when you put your mind to somethin', you get it. But you're a cowboy; it's in your blood. Anythin' else, you wouldn't be satisfied." Glancing at me, he adds, "It's the same with me and

firefightin’.”

I tip my chin toward him. “You always know that’s what you wanted to be?”

“Pretty much.”

“Was anybody in your family a firefighter?”

He shakes his head. “One of my neighbors growing up was, and I remember always lookin’ up to him, thinkin’ he was so cool. A hero.”

A smile curls my lips, and I waggle my brows. “You’re the hero now.”

Ford’s Adam’s apple bobs, and there’s a look in his eyes I can’t quite place before he finally says, “I’m no hero; just doin’ my job.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Yeah, okay, whatever you say, Cap.”

Once everything’s put together, Ford and I load all the garbage and boxes into the bed of my truck.

I’ll run it to the dump sometime tomorrow.

Standing beside him in front of my truck, the urge to kiss him hits me.

And not even a kiss meant to start anything hot.

I just like kissing him...which is probably more than a little weird to say.

Sure, I’ve always enjoyed a good make-out session, but it usually comes with intentions.

Clearing his throat, Ford says, “Thanks for your help tonight.”

“No problem, Cap. Can’t have you pullin’ an all-nighter and doin’ it by yourself. My mama would have my ass if she knew I let that happen.”

He chuckles, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ll be sure to tell her that her son is a southern gentleman.”

“Preciate that,” I tease. The smile on his face is genuine and light. It steals the breath right out of my lungs.

“I’d invite you to stay,” he says, gesturing toward the house, “but I’m beat. Between the long drive and puttin’ all that together, I could probably sleep a week straight.”

I wave him off. “All good, Cap. You have yourself a good night. But I’ll be seein’ ya soon, that’s a promise.”

His lip twitches, and I swear there’s a flirty glint in his eye. “I don’t doubt it. Night, Hollis.”

Climbing in my truck, I make the short drive back to my place, and by the time I get inside and kick off my shoes, I’ve got a feeling swirling around inside of my stomach that I don’t understand.

Coming over under the guise of helping him was mostly an excuse just to see him, spend time with him, and maybe even fuck him.

I’m not even disappointed that nothing sexual happened.

I just spent the last several hours with Ford—the hot-ass fire captain I’m now hooking up with—but we didn’t do anything, didn’t even kiss, and yet, it was...

satisfying. Like, really fucking satisfying.

Who am I?

And what the hell's up with that?

Twenty

Ford

“W hat’s a bukkake?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I mumble under my breath, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Hollis chokes on the drink he just took, hand flying up to cover his mouth. He barely manages to swallow as Larry looks at each of us, his brows furrowed, clear confusion written all over his face, while holding up the ‘pixelated bukkake’ card he just drew. “Oh, fuck, that’s great.”

“Well, what is it?” Larry asks again.

Remi snorts beside me while Finn clears his throat across the table, trying not to laugh.

“It’s probably best you don’t know,” Hollis says, tears in his eyes from how hard he’s laughing. “Don’t need to be horrifyin’ you tonight.”

“What’s what?” Ash asks, padding back into the living room with a Bud Light and a can of some spiked seltzer in his hands. Handing one to Finn, he sits beside him and glances around the table. “What’d I miss?”

“I wanna know what the hell a bukkake is,” Larry grumbles as he tosses the card on the table for everyone to see.

Ash huffs a breath and nods. “Oh, that’s when a bunch of men come on another person.”

Larry’s face twists up, like he sucked on a lemon. “Well, for Pete’s sake. Who the hell comes up with this shit?”

Meeting my gaze across the table, Hollis’s eyes are lit up with mirth as he takes a pull from his beer.

He invited everyone over for game night tonight.

Even though I declined the invite, feeling it wasn’t a good idea, given our current situation and his friendship with my lieutenant, Remi insisted I come, so here I am.

Hollis grilled steaks for everyone when we first got here and managed to not start a fire this time.

I’m about three beers deep, and we’ve all been playing Cards Against Humanity for a while now.

It’s my first time playing, and while it’s kind of a fucked-up game, it’s also pretty damn entertaining.

Larry has never played either. He keeps forgetting the directions, then gets all grumbly when it’s his turn.

It doesn’t help that he also doesn’t understand what half the cards mean, which admittedly makes it all the more amusing.

“Who’s winnin’ so far?” Hollis asks.

“Probably your brother,” Remi says, glancing at Finn as he counts his black cards.

Finn glances up. “I’ve got nine.”

“Goddamn,” Hollis mutters. “Since fuckin’ when are you funny? I always win.”

“Aww, poor baby.”

The words leave my mouth before I even realize what I’m saying, and my heart stops as several sets of eyes come to me.

Hollis coughs to cover his laugh, Finn and Ash look at each other, both biting back a laugh too, Larry’s brows are furrowed, and Remi is staring at me, wide-eyed, with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Sorry, what was that?” Remi asks.

“Call me baby again, Cap,” Hollis interjects. “I kinda like it.”

Remi smacks his friend in the arm. “Alright, no. None of that. Let’s get back to the game.”

It’s Ash’s turn next, and once I set my card down in the center of the table, I catch Finn’s gaze. He’s watching me with a look in his eyes that sends a shiver down my spine. Glancing over at his brother before coming back to me, his eyebrows raise before he takes a pull from the bottle.

He knows.

Hollis must’ve told him about us.

My heart's racing as I do my best to avoid Finn's gaze for the rest of the evening.

Why would he tell him?

We decided to keep it between us.

Who else has he told?

About twenty minutes later, the game ends, and I excuse myself to the bathroom right as Hollis, Finn, and Ash head out the back door.

After taking a piss, I wash my hands and stare at my reflection.

Finn knows; that was a knowing look he gave me.

There's no way he doesn't. How do I feel about that?

I should be pissed—we agreed to keep things a secret, and he went and told his brother—so, why aren't I?

Why does the idea of Hollis talking to his brother about me—about us —make my skin tingle and my heart beat a little faster?

I don't have time right now to figure all that out, so after I splash some water on my face, I unlock the bathroom door and pull it open... only to come face to face with Hollis.

“You hidin’ in here, Cap?” he asks, smirking .

“Why would I be hidin’?” I try to walk around him, but he places a steady hand in the center of my chest. I grit my teeth as I meet his gaze, heat spreading down my spine

at our proximity.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “You tell me, baby .”

Then he shoves me back, forcing his way into the bathroom before shutting the door behind him.

“What are you doin’?” I hiss as my breath catches in my chest. “We can’t be in here.”

“Oh, sure we can.” Hooking his finger through my belt loop, Hollis pulls me toward him. “Say it again.”

“Say what again?”

He chuckles, his breath fanning across my face.

“You know exactly what I wanna hear you say.” His other arm wraps around my waist, hand slipping beneath my jeans.

Arousal swims through my veins, setting my blood ablaze as his fingers tease the crease.

With our bodies flush, I can feel the warmth rolling off him in waves, and my mouth waters as his scent surrounds me.

“Come on, say it again for me... Please, daddy?”

Something in me snaps, hearing him call me daddy again. Shoving Hollis against the door, I bring my hand to his throat, forcing his chin up until his hungry gaze meets mine. “You wanna hear me call you baby, is that it?”

His mouth curves into a grin as he nods. “Yes.”

“Okay, answer me this first... What’d you tell your brother?”

Brows cinched, he breathes out a small chuckle. “What do you mean?”

“The way Finn looked at me out there...” My hand comes to his hip, pushing him farther into the door. “He knows somethin’, but I could’ve sworn we agreed to keep quiet. ”

Hollis smirks, then nips at my bottom lip. “Okay, so I may have told him about us.”

My heart thumps to my throat. “Who else?”

“Nobody—”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“God, you’re hot when you’re bossy,” he drawls, using the hand still wrapped around my waist to pull me into him, letting me feel how hard he is. “Just him and August. Needed to talk to someone ’bout it, but clearly, it couldn’t be Remi.”

That shouldn’t turn me on.

But it does.

“What’s there to talk about, baby?”

A groan rumbles in his chest as he lets his head fall back against the door. “Oh, there’s plenty to talk about.” To emphasize his point, Hollis palms my cock through my pants. “Are you mad, daddy?”

I clench my jaw, swallowing down the groan wanting to escape. “Maybe...”

“I’ll just have to fix that, won’t I?”

My cock twitches, and my balls already ache. “And what’d you have in mind?”

The smirk he flashes me makes my blood heat. “Kiss me and find out.”

My lips are on his before I can even take my next breath.

I’m starving, but he is too, if the way his tongue explores every crevice of my mouth is any indicator.

This is risky, doing this here in the bathroom, with everybody down the hall, but I don’t care.

At this very moment, I don’t care about much of anything, except for the sweet desire on Holli’s tongue, and the way his body responds to me.

His fingers come around to the front of my jeans, working open the button before sliding the zipper down.

“Fuck, so hard for me,” he purrs as he pulls me out.

His warm, rough palm strokes my length as his mouth finds mine again.

This time, he only kisses me for a moment before dropping to his knees.

Peering up at me from beneath his lashes, Hollis flicks his tongue against the tip of my dick, pleasure shooting to every nerve ending in my body. “And so fuckin’ wet too.”

As soon as his lips close around me, he takes me to the back of his throat. My fingers thread through his messy dark brown strands as his head slowly bobs up and down. His mouth feels like heaven, and my toes curl as he sucks me deep.

“Fuck...”

He hums, the sound sending a vibration through my cock and down into my balls. I can't help the groan that comes out of me.

“You look so fuckin’ good takin’ my cock. Does it turn you on knowin’ anybody could catch us?”

Eyes rolling back, Hollis nods and groans.

I bite down on my bottom lip and drop my head back as Hollis strokes me in tandem with his mouth.

Bringing his hand to my balls, he rolls them in his palm before going further.

My breath catches in my throat as his index finger circles my hole.

Glancing down at him, the arousal pouring from his gaze is staggering, and as he takes me deep in his throat again, he applies the lightest amount of pressure.

I bear down against his finger, ready to let him do it, but before he can, the doorknob jiggles, then a knock sounds.

“Hey,” a voice calls out. Remi . “Ya almost done in there? I gotta take a leak.”

My blood turns ice cold as I pull out of Hollis's mouth and step back. His eyes are wide as he stands, adjusting his own erection while I tuck mine away.

“What do we do?” I whisper, my stomach in knots .

Hollis shrugs, mouthing, I don’t know!

“This is bad.” Of all people to knock on the door, why the fuck did it have to be Remi? “This is so bad.”

Chewing on the inside of his cheek, Hollis thinks for a moment before shoving me back. “Get in the shower.”

“What?”

“Hide in the shower, and I’ll get rid of him.” Gesturing toward the tub, he whisper-shouts, “Go! Now!”

Even though I don’t know how he manages to do this without getting us caught, I do it anyway. Once I have the curtain closed, I hear the door open.

“Have you been in here this whole time?” Remi balks. “Dude, I gotta go.”

“Stomach’s all fucked up,” Hollis offers. “Toilet’s pretty clogged. Go piss outside. It’ll be quicker.”

“Damn, you good?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go.”

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A moment later, the door clicks shut, and I breathe out a sigh of relief.

With my heart still racing, I wait a minute to climb out of the tub, just to be sure, and another minute after that to leave the bathroom.

Heading into the kitchen, Finn, Ash, and Larry are in there, snacking on a bowl of chips around the counter, all three sets of eyes coming to me as I approach.

“Where the hell you been at?” Larry asks.

“Face is all flushed,” Finn adds, humor dancing in his gaze. “You good?”

Swallowing wrong, a cough barks out of me as I try to get it under control. My face flushes, probably turning a darker shade of red than it already is. He’s fucking with me, I know it.

“Just went for a walk outside to get some fresh air,” I say .

Finn hums with his gaze locked on mine, and the corner of his mouth twitches. “Right... A walk. Makes sense.”

Heavy footsteps sound down the hallway a moment later, pulling the attention from me as Remi and Hollis appear.

“Miss us?” Hollis teases as he saunters over to where we’re standing. His gaze finds mine, a glint in his eyes from the secret we share.

“Yeah, we were wonderin’ where everybody went to,” Finn drawls before Ash shoves him on the arm.

“I’ve got an early mornin’, so I’m gonna head home,” Remi says, before turning his attention to Larry. “If you want, I can give you a ride home.”

“Don’t worry ’bout it,” I cut in. “I’m takin’ him home.”

“Oh, I don’t mind, Cap. No sense in you leavin’ the ranch, only to turn around and come right back.”

“Let me grab my coat,” Larry announces. “Remi’s right, Ford. Thank you for bringin’ me.” Turning toward Hollis, he says, “And thank you for havin’ me. I still don’t understand that damn game, but I had fun.”

“You’re more than welcome anytime,” Hollis drawls, rounding the corner and patting him on the back. “Better see ya next time.”

Once they’re gone, Finn and Ash announce they’re leaving too, and then it’s just me and Hollis. As he locks the front door, he spins around, gaze finding mine as he saunters toward me. “Stay over.”

My heart stutters. “What? No. The cabin is a two-minute drive. Think I can manage.”

“I don’t give a fuck about what you can manage,” he growls, coming to a stop in front of me. Wrapping a hand around the back of my neck, he brings his body flush with mine. “We’re finishin’ what we started in the bathroom, so you’re spendin’ the night.”

“Oh, you think so?” I arch a brow and bite down on my molars to keep from smiling. I like the idea of sleeping over more than I should, but I don’t want him to know that.

“I know so.” My body is still buzzing from the blow job that got interrupted, and it doesn’t take much to have my dick thickening all over again. Especially when he adds, “Go to my room, and lose the clothes.”

Doing what he says, I step into the dark room, reaching behind me as I tug the shirt over my head.

Turning around, I watch Hollis do the same.

The room is silent, neither of us saying a word as we shed each layer of clothing until we’re standing in front of each other completely bare.

There’s an invisible pull between us. It’s magnetic.

I need him, need to feel his body beneath mine, and I didn’t even realize how badly I did until right this moment.

What happened in the bathroom was a tease, a mere taste of what I’m really craving from him.

Hollis moves first, taking a step in my direction, then another, his hooded gaze trailing down my body before coming back to my face. He fists his length, brushing the tip against mine, and it’s unbelievable how good that one small touch feels.

“I changed my mind,” he murmurs as he takes me in his other hand. “I’d rather you sink that fat cock in my ass instead.”

Groaning, I say, “Good, because that’s exactly what I planned to do.”

A smile spreads across his face as he bites down on his bottom lip. “You gonna fuck me real good, daddy?”

Hollis doesn't give me a chance to respond before he's on me.

From the moment my tongue parts his lips, we can't seem to get close enough.

Somehow, we make it over to the bed, and as we fall onto the mattress, I climb over his body while I pepper his jawline with kisses, working my way down to his neck.

With his hands on my hips, Hollis thrusts, gliding our cocks together in a way that has me seeing stars behind my eyelids.

I'm stuck between wanting to draw this out for as long as possible and feeling like I can't wait a single second longer before I'm inside him. The latter wins as I sit back on my heels and ask, "You got lube and condoms?"

Pulling himself up on his elbow, Hollis slowly strokes his dick as he nods toward the nightstand. "Course, I do. They're in there."

Suddenly, the idea of Hollis being in here with other people, using those items with them, pops into my head. Pushing those unwanted thoughts out of my mind, I lean over and open the drawer, grabbing the bottle and an unopened box of condoms.

Unopened is a good sign, I suppose.

Unless he used so many already, he needed to get more.

"Hey..." Hollis sits up, cupping my face as his eyes soften. "Where'd you go just now?"

I clear my throat and shake my head, feeling my cheeks heat. "Nowhere. Sorry."

His brows furrow, and he watches me for a moment. "You good?"

“Yeah, I’m good.” I toss the box on the bed before my mouth crashes into his again.

Hollis brings his hands up to the back of my head, his fingers tugging on the strands of hair on my nape.

Not breaking the kiss, I flick the cap open on the lube and pour a glob onto my finger.

His legs wrap around my waist as I bring the slick digit to his hole, a whimper falling from him as I slowly sink inside.

He’s hot and so fucking tight around my finger, and I groan, knowing how good he’ll feel around my cock.

My heart thrashes against my ribs as I press soft, open-mouthed kisses down Hollis’s chest and over his stomach until I reach his thick, hot cock.

I wrap my mouth around the tip, swirling my tongue, and the moan he rewards me with nearly makes me combust. As I take more of him in my mouth, I work another finger inside of him, feeling more impatient the longer he’s writhing under me.

Hollis must feel it too, because a moment later, he grabs a fistful of my hair and brings my gaze to his. “Hurry, I need you inside me.”

I need you.

Those three words send flames through my bloodstream and down to my core. My skin tingles, and my pulse races. I feel frantic...desperate. Like I can’t breathe, or like my heart is about to combust because I need Hollis just as badly as he needs me right now.

Once I’m sure he’s properly stretched, I sit back, and with trembling hands, I rip open

the wrapper before rolling on the condom.

Coating my cock with a generous layer of lube, I add a little more to his hole, just to be sure, before pushing his legs back and positioning myself between them.

Lining up the tip, I peer up at him, holding his gaze as I ease inside.

Hollis's lips part on a breathless sigh the more I give him.

I take my time, because no matter how out of control I feel, I want to enjoy this. Savor it.

"Whose ass is this?" I ask, my voice throaty and almost unrecognizable to my own ears.

His gaze burns into mine. "Yours."

I'm nearly all the way in, his tight heat pulling me deeper, and the one simple word sends a shiver down my spine and goosebumps all over my flesh. "All mine?"

His breath catches, a cocky smile tugging on the corner of his mouth as his dark, hungry eyes hold mine. "All yours, daddy."

I can't explain it, but this feels different than the other times we've been together.

My hips connect with his ass as I feed him the last inch, and I lean in and kiss him, giving us both a moment to adjust. His desire is sweet on his tongue, and he whimpers into my mouth when I pull out to the tip and slowly sink back in again.

His noises, the way his ass squeezes my cock, how his hands are gripping my biceps like he can't let go...

All of it fuels the inferno that's been raging for Hollis since the minute I walked into his house tonight.

Though, if I'm being honest, it's been burning a hell of a lot longer than that, and I'm starting to think the flames run deeper than I thought.

I slide one hand under the back of his neck to hold him tightly as I bring my other to rest on the pillow beside his head.

There's barely any distance between us, but it doesn't feel close enough.

If I could, I'd crawl inside of him and live there.

I can't put my finger on what it is, exactly, about this that feels different, but it does, and I know he feels it too.

It's in the way his dark, hooded gaze bleeds into mine, in the way he's holding on to me just as tight as I am, and it's also in the quiet.

In the way neither of us has to say anything to know how we're feeling.

The only sounds filling the air are our bodies gliding together, and our shared moans.

It's...intense.

Rolling my hips, I feed Hollis my cock with slow, precise strokes. Deep, and unhurried. He licks into my mouth, tongue flicking against my teeth, as if silently begging me to kiss him, so I do. Our lips move at the same slow pace.

"You feel like goddamn heaven, baby," I rasp, rolling my hips slowly, each stroke feeling better than the last.

Bringing a hand up to cup my face, Hollis kisses me, moaning as our tongues glide together. Then his hot, spit-slick lips follow the path along my jaw until he reaches my neck. His sharp teeth graze the skin just beneath my ear, sending electric shock waves straight to my balls.

“So do you.” Nipping at my earlobe, he whimpers before adding, “You fuck me so good, daddy.”

A growl rumbles from deep in my chest. I reach down and grab the outside of his thigh in a bruising hold, lifting it until his leg wraps around my waist. The new position lets me go even deeper as I hold his heavy-lidded gaze.

Disheveled hair, crimson bleeding from his cheeks down to his neck, and his full, pink lips parted with pleasure, Hollis looks like a masterpiece.

A rugged, sensual, breathtaking masterpiece.

Sweat glistens along his forehead and over his chest, and his chocolate brown eyes are nothing more than black pools, filled with desire, and fervor, and insatiable need... for me.

Pleasure fills me until I'm overflowing, until it feels impossible to hold on any longer.

It's overwhelming and intoxicating. Reaching between us, I wrap my fingers around Hollis's dick.

He's as hard as steel, but velvet soft, with a sticky mess dripping all over.

I swallow his moans as I stroke him, and I can tell by the way his body stiffens that he's as close to the edge as I am.

I don't want it to be over, but I also can't find it in me to stop.

I need him...need this. What started as a quick bathroom hookup that almost got us caught has somehow turned into so much more.

My head can't make sense of it, but I don't care.

Pulling back just enough to look Hollis in the eye again, I'm once again taken aback by the sight.

His brows are cinched together as he holds my gaze.

We're breathing the same air. Chasing the same high.

"Look at you, fallin' apart so beautifully for me." I flick my tongue against the roof of his mouth as he moans. "Think you can come with me?" I ask, my voice coming out deep and throaty.

He nods, wetting his lips as his eyelids flutter, fighting to stay open. "I'm right there... D-don't stop."

Pressure builds at the base of my spine, heat spreading through every limb.

As soon as I feel myself leaping over the edge, I take his lips with mine, every sense drowning in Hollis, and as if the kiss was all he needed too, Hollis follows behind, spilling his release all over my hand and his stomach, crying out into my mouth.

This moment feels both never-ending and not long enough, and once it's over, exhaustion is quick to take its hold.

I pull out of him and kiss him for a few seconds longer before I pull off the condom

and tie it, disposing of it in the bathroom connected to Hollis's room.

Grabbing a washcloth from under the sink, I run it under warm water and pad back into the room.

Hollis looks damn near passed out, his body molded to the bed as I clean the mess off his stomach.

Climbing back into bed with him feels like the most natural thing in the world, which should confuse me, or freak me out...

but it's doesn't. Not even when Hollis rolls over, tosses his leg over me, and nuzzles his face into my neck, falling asleep almost instantly.

His even breaths and the weight of him against my body relax me in the blink of an eye, giving me no time to overthink anything before I'm meeting him in dreamland.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

Twenty-One

Hollis

I 'm lying on my side, watching Ford sleep as the morning lights peek in through the blinds, basking him in a golden hue.

Like I am every morning, I've been up since the ass crack of dawn, my internal alarm clock never letting me sleep any later than that.

As quietly as I could manage, I rolled out of bed a little while ago and started a pot of coffee in the kitchen before brushing my teeth and running some cold water over my face.

I slipped back into bed about fifteen minutes ago, and it's an oddly relaxing thing watching Ford's chest rise and fall with deep, even breaths.

His features are soft and relaxed. He looks peaceful.

He's on his back, one hand on his stomach, the other on the bed between us.

At some point in the middle of the night, the covers shifted down so his whole abdomen is exposed, and I can't seem to tear my eyes away.

The salt-and-pepper fuzz on his chest trails down to his navel, then dips just beneath where the blanket lays.

It's not often I share my bed. And by not often, I mean never .

Never been a sleepover type of man, and typically, I like it that way, but it felt so natural asking him to stay last night.

And surprisingly, I slept great. I thought for sure I'd end up tossing and turning, knowing somebody else was there, but it was quite the opposite.

I'm sure he'll wake up soon, and I should probably climb out of bed, or roll over, or do anything other than get caught being a creep when he opens his eyes, but I don't.

I could stare at him all day and never get sick of the sight.

Ford is beautiful in the way dusk settles over the land—quiet, steady, and soaked in gold.

He's rugged, and gruff, and covered in wounds nobody can see, but he's beautiful.

Being with Ford is so different from anybody else I've been with.

I can't explain it, but what we're doing feels like more than just hooking up , and to be honest, it's kind of freaking me out.

Not enough to kick him out of my bed and never speak to him again, but enough to make me wonder what the hell is going on with me because I like that he's in my bed.

I like that he spent the night. And I already know I'm going to want it to happen again.

A few minutes later, Ford stirs. His eyelids flutter open, gaze unfocused and bloodshot as he blinks a couple of times before his focus settles on me. "Mornin'."

“Mornin.” A smile curves my lips.

“What time is it?”

Glancing at the clock on my bedside table, I say, “Only ’bout seven.”

Ford nods, sitting up and stretching his arms over his head. “Your bed’s ridiculously comfortable,” he offers.

“It is, isn’t it?” I chuckle. “Take it that means you slept well?”

“Better than I’ve slept in months.”

My chest warms, heart pounding against my ribs, and I feel all jittery.

Not in a too-much-caffeine type of way, but more like a teenage-crush sort of way.

That’s weird, though... Right? Why would Ford telling me that he slept good at my house make me feel like that?

Maybe all this top-tier dick I’m getting from him lately is making me lose my mind.

Or maybe it’s the way he fucked me last night.

That was definitely one for the books. I don’t think I’ve ever felt as connected with someone during sex as I did with him, and I don’t just mean physically.

The slow, deep strokes, and the heady eye contact that felt like he could see into my soul, unlocked something inside of me.

Clearing my throat, I ask, “Want some coffee?”

“Sure, that’d be great.”

I climb out of bed, still naked from last night, and when I turn around, I catch Ford checking me out. My stomach flips as a smirk spreads across my face. “Like wakin’ up to all this, Cap?” I ask, wagging my brows.

“It’s not a bad way to wake up, I suppose,” he drawls as the corner of his mouth twitches.

“Not bad, he says.” I huff a chuckle. “Come on, I’ll make us some breakfast too.”

“Let me,” he offers, climbing out of bed, also still naked . Goddamn, he’s sexy. “I don’t need you burnin’ the house down while I’m in it.”

“Oh, he’s got jokes too?” I tease as we walk out of my room. “I should let ya dick me down and sleep over more often if you’re this funny in the mornin’.”

Glancing over at me, Ford raises a brow. “I wasn’t jokin’.”

Then he strolls into my kitchen and finds what he needs in the fridge and the cabinets, and literally makes us breakfast, like he’s done this here a hundred times before. I like it a little too much .

“How do ya take your coffee?” I ask, maneuvering around him to grab a couple of mugs.

“Also, if you’re about to cook that bacon, I’d suggest puttin’, at least, your briefs back on.

Speakin’ from experience.” Then, shamelessly dragging my gaze down his body, I add, “But I also wouldn’t complain if you made breakfast just like this. ”

As if just now realizing he's still naked, Ford glances down. "Good idea."

"That should speak volumes about how much I care about your safety because, damn, I was likin' the view." Then I call out, "Grab me a pair of sweats from the bottom drawer, would ya? You can wear a pair too, if you don't feel like puttin' on yesterday's underwear."

His chest rumbles with a chuckle before he disappears into my room again, coming out a moment later with two pairs.

Tossing me one, he slips his legs into the other, and like a pervert, I watch.

They barely fit around his beefy thighs, and since they're gray, I can make out every last inch of his cock and balls.

"Fuck, daddy," I groan. "Keep flirtin' with me like that, and I'm gonna have to eat you for breakfast instead."

"You're fuckin' insatiable," he drawls, rolling his eyes like he doesn't love it as much as I do.

"For you? Abso-fuckin'-lutely." Walking behind him, I grab a fistful of his ass before bringing my other arm around to hand him the coffee mug. My mouth next to his ear, I add, "I mean, have you seen you? How could I not be?"

I expect him to make some deadpan comment, or brush it off with a dry chuckle, but instead, he leans into the touch, bringing his back flush to my chest, and turns his head, pressing his mouth to mine.

The kiss takes me by surprise, because we've never kissed outside of sex, but also because of how tender and slow it is.

It reminds me of how he kissed me last night.

Goosebumps break out all along my flesh, my stomach doing another flip while my dick thickens all at the same time.

It doesn't lead to anything else, nor does it last very long, but by the time we pull apart, my head is dizzy, and I don't quite know what to make of the warmth spreading through my chest.

"How do ya like your eggs?" Ford asks, like he didn't just rock my world with nothing more than his lips against mine.

It takes my mind a second to catch up. Clearing my throat, I say, "Scrambled is fine."

A barely-there smirk tugs on the corner of his mouth, like he's completely aware of what he just did to me, but he doesn't say anything about it. Nodding, he gestures toward the bar. "I got it," he murmurs. "Sit."

My throat is thick, tongue feeling like it's twice its normal size as I do what he says.

What's my problem?

Why am I so affected by one simple kiss?

"Last night was fun," he offers, glancing over his shoulder at me.

"Yeah, it was." I nod. "It's been a while since I've hosted a game night."

"Didn't think it was a good idea to come, but I'm glad I did."

Memories from last night, specifically making out with Ford in the bathroom, flit

through my mind, and my stomach clenches. “Think Remi saw anything?” I ask.

His body tenses, and for a moment, he doesn’t say anything. “I’m guessin’ if he had, he woulda said somethin’,” he finally says. “We just gotta be more careful. ”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I nod as if he can see me. “Yeah...”

Panic shot through my body as soon as Remi approached last night.

Ford is probably right; it’s not like Remi to keep quiet about something, especially something like this.

I’ve known this entire time that I shouldn’t be doing this with Ford, that it would more than likely piss Remi off, but it hasn’t been an issue up until now.

It’s been in the back of my mind, but nothing’s happened where he could even find out... until last night.

It’s not that I think Remi would stop being my friend if he found out, but this thing with Ford isn’t going anywhere serious— so I keep telling myself— so Remi finding out, or worse, catching us in the act, seems like it would cause more tension than necessary. We’re just having fun.

That’s all.

“I’m curious,” Ford says, turning around and pulling me from my thoughts, “In all the time I’ve known you, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a relationship. Why is that? It can’t be from lack of options.”

I breathe out a laugh and shrug. “Just not that kinda man.”

Lifting a thick, dark brow, he asks, “And what kinda man is that? The monogamous type?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “I can definitely be monogamous if I want to be, but my life is goin’ pretty well the way it is. Why fix what’s not broken? It’s the whole feelings, and drama, and inevitable hurt that comes along with dating and relationships that I’m not interested in.”

“Inevitable hurt,” he echoes with a chuckle. “Damn, you sound jaded.”

“How aren’t you jaded?” I snort. “You can’t honestly say you’re in a rush to jump into another relationship after your divorce?”

“Well, no, but I’m not closed off to the idea either.” Taking a drink of his coffee, he says, “Have you ever been in a relationship?”

I nod. “Yeah, once, in high school.”

“Okay... And how did that end?”

“Terribly,” I huff. “No, it wasn’t all bad. We dated junior and senior year, but as graduation approached, it became harder to ignore the big, glarin’ issue that we wanted very different things in life.”

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“How so?”

“She was goin’ to Austin for college and had dreams of livin’ the big city life, while I had no desire to ever leave Wolf Creek, or my family’s ranch.”

Ford’s gaze finds mine across the kitchen as he places two pieces of bread in the toaster next to the stove. His brows are furrowed. “So, y’all broke up, and that’s what swore you off of relationships for the rest of your life?”

“Careful, Cap. You sound a little judgmental right now.”

“I’m not judgin’,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m just tryin’ to understand.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I breathe out a laugh, realizing how stupid this sounds.

“It hurt,” I explain. “I really liked her and thought I could convince her to stay. When she left, I told myself I was going to stay single because it didn’t feel worth it to let myself care for somebody who was just going to end up leaving.”

Sure, I’ve thought about what it would be like to leave this town, or what my life would’ve been like had I not been born into a ranchin’ family, but when push comes to shove, there ain’t no way I’m leavin’.

Wolf Creek, this ranch, the cattle, my family...

it’s who I am. Like you said before, it’s in my blood, it’s who I am.

I watched a lot of people from my high school ditch this town as quickly as they could, so it seemed inevitable that I'd find myself in that situation again, so I just stayed single. ”

With his ass pressed against the counter, Ford folds his arms over his chest. “But that was, what, ten years ago? That’s a hell of a long time to stick with it.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I suppose it is. But as I got older and took on more responsibility on the ranch, it made even more sense to be alone. I mean, look at Finn, for example. Tucker’s mom skipped town, leavin’ her entire life behind to live a different one.

She hated ranch life. The hours are long and constant, and I rarely get time off.

It’s a lot to ask somebody to accept, ya know? ”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do know,” he murmurs, grabbing the plates from my cupboard. “Not everybody will want to live a life like that, but that doesn’t mean nobody will. Just gotta find the right type of person.” He pauses as he dishes up. “Maybe someone who understands long, constant hours.”

That last sentence makes my pulse race. There’s no way he’s insinuating what I think he is...

Right? My brain goes haywire for a moment, and it’s like I can’t seem to find any words.

But then I take a deep breath, reminding myself that Ford recently got out of a very long marriage, and he said he was also just looking for fun.

There’s no way he’s alluding to himself.

Clearing my throat, I shift the conversation away from me and ask, “Is that why you married a firefighter?”

Ford hands me a plate before taking the seat beside me at the bar. “One of the reasons, sure,” he offers. “Although, it didn’t always work out in our favor. We often worked opposite shifts. ”

“Then you grew apart?”

“Not overnight.” He shakes his head. “But eventually, yes, but that had nothin’ to do with our work schedules.”

Glancing at him, my brows pinch. “Oh?”

“I think it started when I made captain,” he says.

“It was a position he’d always wanted for himself, but he never had what it took.

His temper always got the best of him in high-stress situations.

” He tilts his head to the side, a far-off look in his eyes, like he’s remembering something.

“That honestly should’ve been my first clue.

” Then, shaking his head at whatever thoughts he has, he continues.

“So when I promoted, it caused tension between us. He knew how much I wanted it, so I think, at least for a while, he tried to bury his bitter feelings toward me. He tried to be happy for me, but it didn’t last long. ”

“That’s fucked up,” I blurt out before biting off a piece of bacon. “I get being disappointed in not gettin’ something you want, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be happy for the person you love for getting what they want.”

Rolling his lips together, Ford nods. “It was gradual, and I didn’t even put two and two together until after we separated. He started drinkin’ more and was angry all the time. It’s like we couldn’t even be in the same room without an argument startin’ and usually over nothin’.”

My throat is tight, remembering how he told me his dad was an angry man too.

Ford grew up around that, then married the same type of man.

“You didn’t deserve that,” I murmur. “I’m sorry you were treated like that, and that instead of being proud of you, he made you feel like shit for your accomplishments.

” Swallowing thickly, I add, “I’m proud of you.

And I know a lot of other people are. You didn’t deserve any of that. ”

Ford’s eyes meet mine, and I can’t quite place the look in them.

His jaw is tight, and his nostrils flare as he exhales.

Then I watch his Adam’s apple roll before he says, “You don’t deserve to deprive yourself of love, or a life with someone, just because one relationship didn’t work out ten years ago. ”

Oh, goody... We’re back to me now.

My stomach clenches, and my skin tingles. It’s uncomfortable, yet I keep going back

to what he said earlier... “Maybe someone who understands the long, constant hours.” What did he mean by that? And why won’t he let the subject go?

I push down all the questions and slap a smirk on my face. “You sure know your way around a kitchen, Cap. I’m gonna have to have you sleep over more often if this is what I get.”

He huffs a laugh. “Your bed is more comfortable than mine, so might be a fair trade.”

“Well, and you’d get all of this.” I gesture over my body. “Can’t pass that up.”

Shamelessly raking his gaze over me, he lifts a brow. “No, I suppose I can’t.”

Thankfully, that’s all it takes to shift the conversation elsewhere.

After we finish eating, I wash the dishes while Ford wipes down the counters.

I do my best to ignore how domesticated it feels, and I try even harder to ignore the way I could see us doing it more often, and how much I’d like that.

Ford gets dressed in the clothes he wore last night once the kitchen’s cleaned up, and I can’t help but watch him as he slips his feet into his boots sitting on the edge of my bed. The sight hits me in the center of my chest, like a dull ache.

“I’m gonna take off,” he says as he stands. “I’ve got a laundry list of shit to get done today before I go back to work tomorrow.”

A flash of...something rips through my chest at the idea of him walking out of my house in broad daylight. Like so mebody—Remi—might be out there, waiting to catch us, which is silly. It’s early, and there isn’t anybody around, especially not my best friend, who values sleeping in on his days off.

A smile tugs at my lips as I throw that worry aside. “Yeah, I have a few things I need to get done too.”

Closing the distance between us in three long strides, Ford wraps his hand around the back of my neck, and for a moment, he doesn’t do anything.

Goosebumps cover my arms as our gazes remain locked, and then he leans in and presses his lips to mine.

When his tongue slips into my mouth and rolls against mine, and I forget how to breathe.

He kisses me slowly, but deeply, and it’s so unexpected.

I don’t know what to make of it. All I know is it does make me feel something .

By the time he pulls away, my heart is beating chaotically, and my skin feels like it’s on fire.

Ford’s jaw pops as he peers at me from beneath thick brows. “I realize we probably should’ve discussed this before jumpin’ into bed with one another, but I’m not sleepin’ with anybody else.”

Chest tightening, I take in what he’s saying...and the silent question weaved in between that he doesn’t seem to want to ask. My mouth dries, my pulse kicking up. “I’m not either,” I reply honestly.

“Good.” Ford nods. “And I got tested after Trent and I split up. All clear.”

The air between us feels thick, making my heart thud against my ribs.

It's different... Like his admission, and mine, means so much more than either of us are saying.

Swallowing down the uncomfortable vulnerability I feel, I breathe out a small chuckle and say, "This your way of tellin' me that you wanna fuck me raw next time, Cap? "

He huffs, raising his brows suggestively. " Maybe."

"Such a dirty man you are." I click my tongue to my teeth and flash him a flirty smirk. "But I'm all good too. I get tested regularly."

Humor flashes in his gaze. "Is this your way of tellin' me that you want me to fuck you raw next time?" he asks, throwing my words back at me and making me chuckle.

"Do I want to feel your cock in my ass without any barrier and let you fill me with your cum?" I ask huskily, my body heating. "Yeah, actually, I do. I want you to breed me, daddy... I want you to make this ass yours."

Ford's eyes dilate, and he sucks in a sharp breath before crashing his mouth to mine for one last, heated kiss that ends too quickly.

"Thanks for lettin' me stay the night," he says, the words spoken barely above a whisper. He doesn't bother waiting for a response before he walks out of the room. A moment later, I hear the front door close, and I'm still standing here...dazed and really...really fucking confused.

And a little horny, too.

Twenty-Two

Ford

Grabbing the twelve-pack of beer off the passenger seat, I climb out of my truck and head inside.

It's been an...eventful day, and all I want is to relax, get drunk, and do whatever I can to take my mind off everything.

Once inside, I kick off my shoes, set the beer on the counter, then head to my room, where I strip out of my work clothes and get into something more comfortable.

I should've taken a personal day, but I figured work would occupy my mind. It did, in fact, not occupy my mind.

After I'm dressed, I crack open a cold one and stare into my fridge, wondering what the hell I'm going to make for dinner.

Before I can settle on anything, a knock sounds at the front door.

Taking a pull from my beer, I set it down before strolling toward the front of the cabin.

When I pull open the door, my heart stutters as I come face-to-face with the last person I expected to see tonight.

“Hollis.” I clear my throat and rub my hand across the back of my neck. “What’re you doin’ here? ”

Holding up a large brown paper bag, he flashes me a grin. “Thought you could use a little distraction.”

“What...do you mean?”

He shrugs, a soft, boyish look in his eyes that hits me right in the chest. Before he says anything, I already know the answer. “Remi told me,” is all he says, confirming my suspicions.

I step to the side and gesture for Hollis to come in.

“Of course, he did,” I murmur under my breath.

I don’t know whether to be mad at Remi for opening his big mouth, or grateful because, the truth is, I could use the distraction.

And even though I’ll never admit it out loud, I don’t want to be alone tonight.

Hollis sets the paper bag beside my beer on the counter before fetching one for himself from the fridge, making himself right at home.

Confusion furrows my brows as I quickly glance inside the bag. “What’s all this?”

Twisting off the cap, he takes a long pull while watching me over the top of the bottle. It sends an icy-hot chill down my spine and causes my stomach to flip. “Listen, I realize this might sound ridiculous,” he drawls, tossing the bottle cap in the trashcan, “but just trust me, okay?”

I huff. “Yeah, that’s such a reassuring way to begin.”

He chuckles, coming to a stop in front of the counter beside me.

“Fair point,” he says before reaching into the bag, removing various items, none of which make a lick of sense to me.

There’re a couple white packets of...something, I’m not sure what, two long-stem wineglasses, a bottle of pink wine, a bag of popcorn, fuzzy socks, and finally a couple of... towels? Robes, maybe?

“What the hell is all this?” I ask again .

“Remember when we first matched on the app, I told you my ultimate guilty pleasure was watching The Real Housewives ?”

“Wearing a face mask,” I add, then nod tersely. “I remember.”

I also remember what an amusing, and oddly satisfying, visual that was too.

“Yup, with the face mask.” He chuckles. “Don’t laugh, but there’s more to that guilty pleasure that I left off.”

Clenching my jaw to avoid smiling, I gesture for him to continue. “I’m listening.”

Hollis clears his throat, and I swear, he stands a little taller.

“Okay, so, I happen to be a secret believer in the importance of self-care,” he starts.

“Whenever I have an exceptionally rough day, or week, or whatever, and I wanna relax and unwind, I’ll do the masks and watch the show, but I’ll also add in a little

more... pizzazz, if you will.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, really fighting back a laugh because hearing the word “pizzazz” come out of Hollis’s mouth is too much, but somehow, I manage.

“I also remember what you said your guilty pleasure was.” He continues, before reaching back into the paper bag and retrieving a rectangular cardboard box.

Placing it beside the other items, Hollis meets my gaze.

“How relaxin’ doing puzzles was for you, how it was your way to unwind.

But I also remember you tellin’ me that it was something you hadn’t done in a while.
”

“So, you got me a puzzle...and all of this?” My voice comes out shaky and rough, my throat uncomfortably tight, and it feels like there’s a weight pressing down on the center of my chest. None of this is making any sense—I mean, it is , but also...not. Like my brain can’t seem to compute. “Why? ”

Hollis huffs, the corner of his mouth lifting in the softest of smiles. “Because while I’ve never gone through it myself, I’d imagine the official ending of a marriage you’ve spent many years in, with someone you once loved more than anything, would suck, no matter how much it needed to happen.”

My mouth dries, and it’s like suddenly, I can feel every single hair on my body.

Feel the way they stand on edge beside the goosebumps prickling along my flesh.

They cover my arms. My heart thumps uncomfortably hard against my ribs, like it’s trying to escape from my chest altogether, palms slick with sweat, and my knees

wobble ever-so-slightly.

I grab the edge of the counter in an attempt to steady myself. To center myself.

To make sense of this.

But it's impossible because I can't think.

I can't find my voice. I can't do anything other than blink at the man in front of me.

The man nearly half my age. The cocky cowboy who's typically all flirt and sarcasm and charisma, but is now standing in my home being nothing of the sort.

Instead, he's being caring and sweet and...

concerned. He's in front of me, not for sex, but to be here for me today—a day I truly didn't anticipate being as tough as it's been—and I don't know how to process that.

I had a court hearing first thing this morning.

The judge signed the final divorce decree, which means me and Trent are no longer married.

Over twenty years of our lives, dissolved in the blink of an eye with nothing more than ink on paper.

And while I'm relieved, and ready to move on with my life, to close this painful, disappointing chapter, I'm also...

sad. It fills me as much as relief does, like they're working in tandem.

Blinking against the pressure building behind my eyes, I clear my throat, unable to look Hollis in the eye. “You didn’t have to do all this. ”

“Yeah, but I wanted to,” he offers nonchalantly.

Like he’s completely unaware of what he’s doing to me.

“So, here...” Handing me one of the white robes, not towels, and a pair of the fuzzy socks, he says, “Go put these on, preferably with nothing on underneath—just trust me—and meet me in the living room when you’re done. ”

In true Hollis fashion, he has no shame and doesn’t waste any time stripping down in my kitchen to do the same, but before he gets completely naked, I scurry off to the bedroom, my heart in my throat while I do what he says.

I feel a little ridiculous, wearing this thick, fluffy robe, pulling on a pair of yellow fuzzy socks with mini brown cowboy boots all over them.

It's fine.

I’m fine.

Sure, this may be really fucking weird and, yeah, my heart is beating so fast, I wouldn’t be surprised if I went into cardiac arrest, but aside from that, all of this is incredibly thoughtful.

I appreciate it, and him being here, even if I’m unable to voice it.

And even if I haven’t a damn clue what I’m about to walk into.

Scratching a hand along the scruff lining my jaw, I drag in a long, deep breath

through my nose while I stand in the center of my room.

Holding it in, I let my arms fall to my side, shaking out the nerves before exhaling through my mouth.

I do this a few more times before finally finding the courage to walk out of the room, albeit on unsteady legs.

Sitting on the edge of the couch, with the coffee table pulled close, Hollis flicks his gaze over to me as I approach, eyes bright as his mouth curves into a wide, toothy grin.

“Fuckin’ knew you’d look good in that,” he drawls, patting the seat beside him.

Wagging his brows, he adds, “The socks are a nice touch, aren’t they?”

Once I’m seated, I allow myself a moment to really look at Hollis.

His robe is tied, but the top is loosely open, showing off his chest, and the bottom rides up on one of his legs, showing me just how naked he is under the terry cloth.

The sight, and that knowledge, makes my blood heat.

Then I notice his socks. Like mine, they’re yellow and fuzzy, but unlike mine, his have little flickering flames all over them, instead of boots.

Remembering he asked a question, I clear my throat and meet his gaze. “Sure, nice is one way to describe them,” I say teasingly, despite the hoarseness of my voice.

“Don’t be coy, Cap. I know you love ’em.” Shoving me playfully, he adds, “And they’re an ode to the app... Knockin’ boots and fire in my veins.”

I can't help but chuckle. "So clever of you."

Hollis snickers to himself before handing me one of the long-stem glasses. "Rosé, chilled, obviously." Holding up his, he says, "To ditchin' that ball and chain!" Then he clanks his glass to mine before taking a sip.

Another unexpected laugh rolls off my tongue.

"To ditchin' the ball and chain," I repeat before doing the same. Placing the drink on the table, I lift a brow as I fix my gaze on Hollis. "Could've gone with a more sympathetic toast."

"Yeah, but this one made you laugh." He shrugs, another boyish grin tugging into place before he stands. "I'm gonna make the popcorn. Open the puzzle, would you? So we can get started when I get back."

I watch him saunter toward the kitchen, my brows pinched, but the ghost of a smile grazing my lips. "You're not actually going to put this together with me, are you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" he asks, tossing me a quick glance over his shoulder.

"Do you even like puzzles? "

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“I don’t know, but I like you.” The words flow out of him effortlessly, but they hit me right in the chest. My pulse races as I busy myself with removing the plastic from the box.

Starting the microwave, Hollis spins around and rests his hip against the edge of the counter.

“And I didn’t come here for me,” he says. “Came here for you.”

“Right.” Swallowing thickly, I nod. “And why is that?”

He snorts. “I already told you why. Wanted to take your mind off shit.”

“Yeah, but...why?” No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to wrap my mind around it. “You could’ve just brought over some whiskey and insisted I fuck you. Why go through all this trouble?”

His face lights up with a smirk. “I mean, I could do that,” he purrs. “If you want.”

I shake my head, feeling flustered. “No, that’s not what I’m sayin’.”

Shrugging lazily, he runs his fingers through his hair.

“To be honest, sex didn’t feel like the answer,” he admits softly.

“I don’t know what the answer is, exactly, but sex sure as hell didn’t feel right.

Just wanted to...I don't know...be here for you, in case you want it, and bring you somethin' that I know brings you joy.

And I figured, why not let you in on things I do when I've had a day from hell. ”
Another shrug. “It's no big deal.”

Except that it is.

I don't know what to say, so instead, I remain quiet.

Once the popcorn is finished in the microwave, Hollis pours it into a bowl he found in the cupboard before swiping the Rosé off the counter on his way back into the living room.

He sets the bowl on the floor between us before tossing some in his mouth.

After I finish what's left in my glass, I refill it before we start on the puzzle.

It's of a lake, and there's a porch swing off to the side, so I know he picked it out specifically for me.

No matter how many times I try, I can't seem to unclog the emotion filling my throat.

Before matching with Hollis on the app—and hell, even when we first started talking on there—I would've never been able to picture him doing something like this.

He says it's not a big deal, and maybe, to him, it really isn't, but it is to me.

All of this is overwhelming because it shows me that Hollis didn't just listen to things I shared with him, but he heard them.

I can't even remember how long it's been since I've felt heard.

And not only that, but here he is, putting this puzzle together with me.

I spent countless years with a man who could never take an interest in things I enjoyed.

There's no fucking way Trent would've ever sat down and worked on this with me.

And yeah, what Hollis and I have is nowhere near as serious as what I had with Trent, but that doesn't negate the fact that this is easily one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me.

Hell, I didn't even tell Hollis about the court hearing because I assumed he wouldn't care, or that it would be awkward for him, and yet, he still showed up, wanting to be here for me.

I'd be lying if I said that I don't love seeing this softer side of him.

That I don't feel something at the effort he put in...

That I don't feel something for him . Something deeper and way more intricate than I should.

Hollis and I work together on the border for a while, talking here or there about simple things, but mostly, we're quiet while we piece it together.

It isn't uncomfortable, and there's no urge to fill it.

It's relaxing, and his presence calms my nerves and brings me comfort.

A month ago, that thought would've surprised me, but it doesn't now.

Whether I like it or not, I've become used to having Hollis around.

In fact, I look forward to it. I crave it.

We finish off the popcorn pretty quickly and make our way through the rest of the Rosé, but once we do, he grabs another bottle that he must've stashed in the fridge when I was in my room.

"How are you feelin' about everythin'?" he asks, his gaze focused on the piece in his hand and finding its proper place in the puzzle.

"Like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders now that I don't have this hangin' over my head."

"Were y'all civil with each other?"

"Yeah." I nod, my chest squeezing. "We didn't communicate very much since everything went through our lawyers, but this is something we both wanted and knew needed to happen.

The only thing that could've made this process tense, or difficult, would've been the house, but since I said he could have it from the beginning, there was nothin' for us to fight over, really. "

"Are you happy?" Hollis turns his head, dark eyes finding mine. "Knowin' it's over, and you have no more ties to the man who reminded you of your father?"

My breath gets caught in my throat, and there's a pounding in my ears that's deafening.

Aside from my therapist, Hollis is still the only person I've shared that with, and he remembered...

He heard me. My chest is cracked wide open, like my deepest wound is on display for him to see, to pick apart.

In the back of my mind, I know I should want to hide, I should want to change the subject, talk about anything other than this deep-seated trauma, but I don't do any of that because I feel safe with him.

Little by little since we started seeing each other, and without me even realizing it, Hollis has become a safe space.

I don't know what it is, and I may never understand it, but he brings me a sense of ease, and warm comfort, and it's been that way since the very beginning.

"I don't think happy is the right word," I say. "It's bittersweet, sayin' goodbye to such a notable chapter, and I didn't anticipate all the feelings swirlin' around inside of me."

His eyes are soft as they take me in. "What kind of feelings?"

I swallow thickly, shifting my gaze away from him.

"The sadness took me by surprise the most," I murmur.

"And not even because I wanted to make it work, or wish things could've been different.

Just...sadness. I didn't expect to feel as though a part of my story died today, like I lost a piece of me.

I've already cried all the tears before today.

I've already grieved the loss of the husband and the marriage I thought would last a lifetime, already cycled through the five stages, accepted that my future doesn't look the way I had planned...

And I was okay with that—I am okay with that— more than okay, actually, because while I will probably always care for Trent, and have love for him, and cherish the good moments we shared, I'm no longer in love with him. ”

My eyes sting, and my throat aches. It feels good saying all of that out loud, getting it off my chest, like I'm letting it go.

“I think that makes total sense,” Hollis offers.

“You're allowed to be relieved that something is over while still feeling sad about it.

” Hollis turns, the shift causing his leg to press against mine.

The small touch is somehow exactly what I need.

“That doesn't mean you made a mistake by leaving, or that you should've stayed in a marriage that brought you pain and misery.

It just means that you cared. It's okay to grieve something that no longer serves you, Cap.

It doesn't have to mean anything more than that. ”

I bite down on my molars hard enough I feel them pop as I drag in a sharp breath through my nose, willing the pressure to fade from behind my eyes. “For someone

who hardly has any experience with relationships, you're weirdly insightful about them," I murmur, trying to keep my tone light.

Hollis chuckles, the sound washing over me and calming the heavy beating of my heart. "Yeah, well, I watched my mom and dad's marriage come to an end. Watched how hard it hit both of them despite knowin' they had no business bein' married."

Turning my head, my brows pinch. "Why do you say that?"

"Neither of them will probably ever admit to this, but they got married simply because it was expected of them. Don't get me wrong, my parents love each other, and they would do anything for one another, but their marriage was never about burning passion and true love.

It was to appease their parents and do what they were told was the right thing.

"Hollis clears his throat before adding, "What my mom and dad had was safety and a deep understanding of each other."

Shaking my head, I huff out a breath. "You just somehow said so much while sayin' absolutely nothin' at all."

The lines around his eyes crease as he chuckles. "My mom moved to Austin when they got a divorce," he says. "She's lived with a woman named Kelly Ann the entire time she's been there. I'm fairly certain Kelly Ann isn't just her roommate."

Suddenly, everything Hollis previously said makes total sense. "Have you asked her?"

"My brother and I have both asked throughout the years who Kelly Ann was to her, but her story has always been that she's her close friend."

“Why hide it, though? You and Finn are both bisexual. She has to know you’d be accepting. ”

A thoughtful look passes through his eyes that makes my heart squeeze.

“Her house growin’ up wasn’t as acceptin’ as mine was,” he says.

“And my great-grandfather on my dad’s side was a mean ol’ southern man with very traditional values.

I think it’s ingrained in both of them to protect themselves, but I do hope one day they’re able to free themselves from the shackles of shame and live their truth out loud the way they allowed my brother and I to do. ”

It's not lost on me how he’s no longer referring to just his mom. He’s talking about both of his parents, and as much as I want him to tell me more, I don’t pry. Instead, I ask, “Does it bother you that they keep that side of themselves hidden from you?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. It used to, but as I’ve gotten older, and seen and heard different things about our family, I’ve grown an understandin’ for them. It’s got nothin’ to do with me, or my brother, and they’ll tell us if, or when, they’re ready.”

A moment passes where neither of us says anything, but then Hollis clears his throat. “Anyway, that’s where all my brilliant insight comes from regardin’ marriage.”

I chuckle. “Didn’t say anythin’ about it bein’ brilliant.”

“Yeah, but it was inferred.” He flashes me a toothy grin. “I just said the quiet part out loud.”

Shaking my head, I breathe out a laugh, bringing my attention back to the puzzle

while he does the same. “Would expect nothin’ less from you,” I drawl.

There’s no more discussion of my divorce for the rest of the evening, which is fine by me.

We’re able to finish the rest of the puzzle a lot quicker than I thought we would, and once that’s done, Hollis forces a sheet mask on my face before turning on an episode of The Real Housewives .

He brings out my comforter and all my pillows, insisting it adds to the vibe, and I have to admit... He’s right.

It's late by the time we call it a night, and instead of sending Hollis home after we clean everything up, I take his hand and lead him to my bed, where we sleep skin to skin all night.

No sex; we do nothing more than sleep, but by the time my eyes peel open in the morning, I feel more refreshed than I have in a while.

I needed Hollis, without even realizing it, and he was there for me. It’s impossible to ignore what that does to me.

It’s impossible to ignore how things are changing.

Twenty-Three

Ford

I lift my gaze to the clock on the wall, heaving a sigh. It's barely noon. Focusing back on the paperwork laid out in front of me, I get through most of it until a knock at the door pulls my attention. Chandler waves as our eyes meet, and I gesture for her to come in.

"Hey, Cap," she murmurs as she steps into my office. "Sorry if I'm interrupting anything."

"You're not, don't worry. Have a seat. What can I do ya for?"

It's impossible to miss how nervous she looks, chewing on the inside of her cheek, her knee bouncing a mile a minute, and it almost looks like she's about to cry. "First, I want to say how much I love my job, and how much I love you, and our entire crew."

"Are you quitting?" I blurt out before I can stop myself.

"No!" Chandler waves her hands in front of her. "God, no. It's not..." She gets quiet for a moment, twisting her hands together in her lap before she announces, "I'm pregnant. "

My eyes widen, brows hiking clear up to my hairline. "Chandler, that's wonderful news! Congratulations!"

“Britt and I have been trying for a while now,” she explains.

“I didn’t want to say anything about it, and make y’all feel like I needed special treatment, like I couldn’t take all the same calls as everyone else, but now that I’m actually pregnant, I think I gotta tell you. ” She breathes out a laugh.

“I’m glad you did.” My eyes soften as I hold her gaze. “This is wonderful news, and I’m sorry if you felt like you couldn’t talk to us about it.”

Her shoulder lifts in a lazy shrug, and she averts her gaze. “I know how hard it can be havin’ to pick up someone else’s slack when they’re out of work,” she says, looking unsure. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

“Chandler, this job asks a lot of us. It takes time, dedication, sweat, and sometimes blood, but it shouldn’t cost you your whole life.

You’re allowed to want more than a locker and a turnout coat.

You and Britt have wanted to start a family for as long as I’ve known you, and I want you to have that.

I’d never ask anyone to put their dreams on hold for this job, because in the end, the best team is one where we support each other beyond the fireground. ”

Shoulders relaxing, Chandler blows out a sigh, a smile curling up her face. “Thank you, Cap. I really appreciate you sayin’ that.”

“I know whenever you feel comfortable tellin’ the rest of the team, they’re goin’ to say the same thing to you,” I say with a smile, happy for her. “We’re a family.”

Movement at the door catches my attention a moment before the knock comes.

Glancing up at the same time Chandler looks over her shoulder, my heart palpitates when I lay my eyes on Hollis.

Wearing his signature smirk, he waves before pointing to the door, silently asking if it's okay to come in.

I don't know what he's doing here; we haven't spoken much today since it's been such a crazy day.

He slept over again last night, something we've sort of made a habit of doing since the night of my divorce a few weeks ago, but his mornings are even earlier than mine, so he was already gone by the time I woke up.

Clenching my jaw, I roll my lips together before shaking my head.

I hold up a finger, indicating to give me a minute, and he nods before walking off.

"Hollis finally comin' to join the force?" Chandler teases as she sits forward again.

"When pigs fly," I say with a deep chuckle. "Probably just here for Remi."

She nods, a glint of...something in her eye. "Right. Must be why he's knockin' on your door, then."

Chandler holds my gaze as we sit in a silent stare off for a few moments. The longer it goes on, the faster my heart beats. There's something about the way she's watching me, and what she said that has me pausing.

"I'd imagine he's just wantin' to know where Remi is, or if I know when he'll be back," I finally offer. My throat's dry all of the sudden. To be fair, it's a valid suggestion. Remi left about fifteen minutes ago to pick up some groceries for the

station. Hollis very well could be here to see Remi.

Her lip twitches as she sits forward. “Captain, respectfully, you can cut the crap.”

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead. “Excuse me?”

“You and Hollis are clearly a thing.”

My breath catches. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Chandler.” Sweat breaks out over the back of my neck, the temperature in the room too hot for comfort.

Chandler breathes out a small chuckle, rolling her eyes. “ Okay, look... I wasn’t goin’ to say anythin’ because I figured you would when you were ready, but come on.” Giving me a look that makes me want to squirm in my seat, she says, “My tent was right next to yours when we went campin’.”

Oh no...

My face heats, and I don’t have to look to know it’s quickly becoming a deep shade of red. Chandler doesn’t need to say anything more; the insinuation is loud and clear.

She heard us.

Chandler heard Hollis and I...in my tent...fooling around.

Jesus Christ, this is bad.

“Chandler, I—” Clearing my throat, I’m at a loss for words. What do I even say? I can’t lie. Fuck.

“I thought it was maybe just a one-time thing, and I can’t say that I blame you,” she

says with a chuckle.

“I’m gay as hell, and even I see the appeal in Hollis.

But that was months ago, and now, seein’ him show up here for you, when he’s never stopped by the office any time he’s come to visit Remi, I’m thinkin’ it’s a lot more than a one-time thing. ”

Huffing a breath, I scrub my hand along my jaw, my heart thrashing against my ribs. “Chandler, I’m sorry for whatever you heard that night. That was completely inappropriate and severely unprofessional.”

“Stop.” Chandler holds up a hand. “Those campin’ trips are never meant to be professional, and don’t worry about it.

Was I a little shocked to hear that comin’ from your tent, out of all of them?

Yes.” She chuckles. “But it’s about damn time you do somethin’ for you that makes you happy.

” Then, with a shrug, she adds, “Besides, Britt and I found it quite entertainin’. ”

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. I’ve never wanted to crawl out of my skin more than I do now.

“What I don’t understand is why you two are keepin’ it a secret? Why not just come out with it?”

My jaw is tight, every muscle in my body tensed, as I look at my firefighter across the desk. As I think over her question. It’s a simple one, really, so answering it should be easy. But it’s not.

“It’s...complicated,” I say.

The truth is, I don’t know why we’re still keeping it a secret. I don’t think either of us thought it would last this long—I know I didn’t—but it kind of seems like neither of us really wants it to stop either.

Or maybe that’s wishful thinking on my part.

“It’s probably not as complicated as you’re makin’ it, Cap.

” Before Chandler can say anything else, a call comes through for a motor vehicle accident.

She’s out of her seat, running for the door in the blink of an eye.

“He’s all yours,” she shouts over her shoulder as she sets off toward the engine.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out who she’s talking to.

My stomach twists as Hollis saunters into my office, closing the door behind him. A smirk curled on his lips, and a well-worn cowboy hat on his head, he’s a sight for sore eyes.

“Howdy, Cap,” he drawls as he sits, not in the chair, but on the corner of the desk right in front of me. “Miss me?”

Yes. “What are you doin’ here, Hollis?”

He shrugs. “Was workin’ and figured I really could use a little midday break, if ya know what I mean.” And as if that weren’t clear enough, he waggles his brows.

“Yes, Hollis, I know what you mean,” I deadpan. “But that is not happenin’.”

Wrinkling his nose and furrowing his brows, he says, “Why not? Nobody’s here.”

“They’ll be back.”

“Yeah, but not for a while. They just left.” Rubbing his leg against the side of mine, he says, “Come on, Cap... Looks like you could use a little stress reliev’in’.”

My body heats, but I school my features, not letting Hollis see how much I like that idea. How much I really could use that. “Not at the station.”

“Well, where’s the fun in that?” He pokes his lip out into a pout.

“I have work to do,” I mutter. “And I’m sure you’re needed back on the ranch too.”

Hollis hooks his foot around my ankle, spinning me in the chair until I’m fully facing him.

Leaning forward, he removes his hat, setting it on the desk before placing his hands flat on the tops of my thighs, bringing his face close to mine.

His dark eyes drop down to my mouth before coming back up.

“Please, daddy?” Rubbing his hand closer to my groin, he says, “We can be quick.”

My cock throbs against my leg, and a groan rumbles from my chest. Hollis knows exactly what he’s doing.

He knows the second he calls me daddy, I’m doing whatever the hell he wants.

It's like I have no control around him, and I hate it just as much as I love it.

The corner of his lip tics up, proving my theory, and the next thing I know, his mouth is on mine.

His tongue slips inside, and then he nips at my bottom lip, sending a shot of potent arousal down to my dick.

Despite knowing we shouldn't, I kiss him back with just as much fervor, and he swallows my moans as he palms my erection.

The touch is electric.

And I want more.

"In the room," I murmur against his lips. "We're not doin' this in the office."

Hollis pulls back, his lips slick with our shared spit. Chuckling, he stands and adjusts himself. "That's more like it."

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He leads the way, and as soon as we enter the dark space and I close the door, we're back on each other like two magnets.

My back crashes against the heavy wood as his fingers quickly work open my belt, and then my pants before pulling me out.

He wraps his fingers around me, stroking from base to tip, his heated gaze holding mine.

"You give in so easy," he rasps, voice barely above a whisper. "You want this as much as I do, don't you?"

I grit my teeth, breathing harshly through my nose as he tucks his chin, letting a string of spit fall from his mouth onto my cock before he spreads it around with his hand.

His grip is just the right amount of firm, setting my body ablaze.

Needing to touch him, I shove him with a hand to the center of his chest.

"Get on the bed," I order him.

I step out of my shoes before letting my pants fall to the floor.

Kicking them off, I watch Hollis do the same before reaching behind his head and ripping off his shirt.

He drops onto the bed, and I'm right behind him.

Our mouths meet again in a messy, frenzied kiss as our hands roam all over each other's bodies, like we're starving for one another despite me having just fucked him last night. It's never enough.

"We have to be quick," I say in between kisses.

He nods. "I know."

"They won't be gone long."

"Don't worry, this won't take long." Hollis slides down my body, tongue caressing my overheated flesh as he goes.

I'm already hard and ready to go, and the second I feel his hot breath against my swollen tip, I know he's right...

This won't take long at all. Closing his lips around me, I groan as he sucks me deep in his mouth.

His hands come to my balls, tugging and rolling on them as I touch the back of his throat.

I nearly come on the spot when he swallows around me.

"Fuck," I grit out, threading my fingers through his sweaty, mess brown locks.

Hollis hums, sending vibrations through my cock as he bobs his head. Using his other hand, he spreads my thighs open wider, and before he even gets any further, I already know what he wants to do.

I don't stop him, because I want it too.

Peering up at me from beneath his lashes, Hollis pulls off my cock, and sucks two fingers into his mouth, getting them dripping wet with his saliva.

The sight sends another powerful wave of arousal through my body, the feeling only intensifying as he brings them to my hole.

Taking me in his mouth again, Hollis circles me with the tip of his finger, and as soon as he feels my body relax, he applies a little bit of pressure as he sucks me deep.

It's been a long time since I've had any ass play done to me.

Not because I don't enjoy it, but because it wasn't what my ex-husband preferred.

He liked me to fuck him, and it was rarely the other way around.

Which, for the most part, is fine. I do prefer to give rather than receive, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss it.

Hollis has joked about fucking me before, and I've been hesitant, simply because it has been so long, and it's something I generally have to be pretty comfortable to do.

But that's the thing... I do feel comfortable with Hollis.

I suck in a breath as he slips past the tight ring of muscle.

Pulling myself up on my forearms, I watch the way my cock disappears into his mouth, how his eyelashes flutter each time.

It's not hard to tell that Hollis enjoys this, maybe as much as I do.

He takes his time, slowly easing more of his finger into me as he sucks my cock in

tandem.

Since it's been a while, it's a little uncomfortable at first, but it doesn't take for the burn of the stretch to turn into something much more pleasurable. It helps that Hollis isn't rushing.

By the time he works a second finger in beside the first, my chest is heaving, and my heart is beating so hard, I can hear it in my ears.

He swirls his tongue around the tip as he curls his fingers in a come-hither motion, grazing over a spot inside of me that has a long, low moan tearing from my throat.

My balls are full, and they ache with a need for release as he sets a delicious pace, skillfully working me over with both his mouth and fingers.

"You like this, daddy?" he asks, mouth pulling off my cock as he strokes me with his free hand.

I nod as I drag my tongue across my lips, trying to bring back some moisture to my mouth.

"Tell me how much you like it," he rasps.

"Fuck," I gasp, throwing my head back as he massages my prostate over and over, applying the perfect amount of pressure. "It's so...g-good. You feel so good."

"You gonna come for me, daddy?"

"Mmhmm... Don't stop."

He sucks my cock back into his mouth again, swallowing it down like he's starving.

My skin tingles with electricity buzzing just beneath the surface.

Pleasure swims through my veins, and I can hardly catch my breath.

He never once slows down. He's giving his all to this right now, and I can't get enough of it.

"Fuck, I'm close," I grit out. My balls draw up to my body, pressure building until I can't take it anymore. "Oh, fuck, Hollis..."

It hits me all at once—it consumes me. Starting at the base of my spine, it spreads like lava.

My head is foggy, and I slam my eyes shut as my cock pulsates on his tongue, thick ropes shooting down his throat while my ass clenches around his fingers.

He swallows every last drop, and then he's on his knees, climbing up my body, with his fist wrapped around his stiff cock.

"Open up," he growls. "Give me your tongue."

Hollis grabs onto the headboard and slides the underside of his dick over my tongue.

Closing my lips around the tip, I lick and suck while he strokes his shaft at the same time.

His eyes bore into mine, nearly black and overflowing with lust, his jaw slack.

He's close, I can taste it. I grab onto his ass with both hands, squeezing the plump cheeks as we work together to bring him to the edge.

“Fuck, your mouth feels good,” he groans. “Make me come, daddy.”

Moaning around his length, I hollow my cheeks as I suck him deeper until he removes his hand altogether, and it’s just me getting him there.

The salacious sounds of his grunts and moans fill the air, and his scent fills my nostrils, making me dizzy.

I want his release just as bad as I wanted my own.

I want to swallow him down, have his taste on my tongue.

I want to watch him fall apart as he lets go, see the bliss on his face as I make him come.

My nails bite into his flesh, forcing him deeper in my throat, and as I swallow around the tip, his muscles tense.

“Oh, fuck...” His orgasm has his eyes rolling back, taking control of his body as he cries out. He unloads in my mouth, and I gladly savor every last drop. Hollis is so goddamn beautiful as he rides the wave, the sight of him hitting me in the center of my chest like a dull ache.

Once he’s finished, he rolls onto the bed beside me to catch his breath while I do the same.

“That was fuckin’ hot,” he blurts out after a minute .

Then he presses his mouth to mine. Hollis licks into my mouth, groaning when he tastes himself.

I kiss him back, circling him with my arms and holding him tight.

I know we need to get dressed before the team comes back, but I don't want to...

Not yet, at least. I want to stay right here with him and enjoy this moment.

My conversation with Chandler runs through my mind.

Maybe she's right; maybe it's not as complicated as I'm making it out to be.

And things have shifted. It's clear it's not just about the sex anymore.

Maybe we should tell people about us... Take this a step further.

But would Hollis want that? He's already told me he doesn't do relationships or feelings, but I'm also not oblivious.

I can see the way he looks at me, the way he holds me back just as tightly.

Could I really be the one to change his mind?

There's only one way to find out...

Right as I'm about to open my mouth and say something, a knock at the door startles me. "Fuck, they must be back already," I hiss under my breath before I call out, "Yeah?"

"You plannin' on gettin' started on that roast any time soon?" Remi .

Fuck.

Hollis and I jump off the bed at the same time, looking at one another with wild eyes. “What do we do?” he whispers.

“I don’t fuckin’ know!”

“Hello?” Remi calls out.

“I’ll be out in a minute!”

Waiting on bated breath, I hear the door to my office slide shut a moment later. Turning toward Hollis, I grit out, “I told you this was a bad idea.”

He chuckles, swiping his jeans off the floor and pulling them up his legs. “It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah? How do ya figure?”

“You go out first,” he suggests as we both rush to get dressed. “Remi will follow you into the kitchen, and I’ll slip out of your office. Nobody will see me.”

“You better be right,” I growl as I reach for the doorknob.

“Relax, Cap.” Grabbing my shoulder, he spins me around and presses his lips to mine for another quick, tender kiss. “It’ll be fine. And even if it’s not, we’ll deal with it.”

After that, I walk out, leaving him in the room. He is right; Remi follows me into the kitchen, discussing something completely unimportant, but I don’t hear any of it because my mind is still inside the room with Hollis, and the last thing he said.

“Even if it’s not, we’ll deal with it.”

What did he mean by that?

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Twenty-Four

Hollis

C an't Tell You No by Muscadine Bloodline floats down the hall from where it's playing in the living room as I brush my teeth.

It's Saturday morning, I've got the next two days off, thanks to our weekend farm hands, and I've got all the windows open.

The smell of freshly cut grass and wildflowers drifts in, reminding me of long summer days spent as a kid running around by the creek and through the woods with my brother.

The conversation I had with Ford a couple of weeks ago comes to the front of my mind.

There's nothing quite like growing up country.

I can't imagine being a city slicker. Never getting to experience nature in its truest form. No better way to live, in my opinion.

The slowed-down life.

The simplicity.

Thinking about Ford brings back other memories...

More sordid ones, like the time in his office.

Fuck, my dick gives an appreciative twitch just at the thought.

That was so goddamn hot. It always is with him.

Since we started sleeping together, I haven't had any interest in finding it anywhere else.

This is the closest I've come to monogamy in years.

I go back and forth with how I feel about that.

Some days, it freaks me out. This thing with Ford feels very akin to a relationship, or at the very least, like we're dating, and as somebody who swore that off a decade ago, it's a weird thing to think about.

But then other days, I don't even bat an eye about what we're doing, and how Ford makes me feel.

With him, it's easy.

Natural.

And there's no denying that I do feel something more for him.

Swishing some mouthwash, I pause when I hear what I think is the door.

Tapping on my phone screen, my brows pinch together, wondering who the hell could be knocking right now.

Maybe it's my brother. Though, he usually texts me first. Oh...

Maybe it's Ford. That sends a zap of heat down my spine as I turn off the bathroom light and meander down the hall.

I switch over the deadbolt and pull open the door, coming face to face with neither my brother nor Ford.

"What's up, man?" Stepping to the side, I gesture for Remi to come in. "Everythin' okay?"

Confusion wrinkles his forehead as he spins around to face me as I close the door. "Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"Just wonderin'. You never come over this early."

Flashing me a grin, he holds up his helmet. "It's a nice day," he drawls. "Figured we could take a little day trip up to a certain waterfall?"

"Which one?" I ask, just as it comes back to me. "Bay Ridge Falls, right??"

"Hell yeah." Remi snaps his fingers. "You down?"

It doesn't take much consideration on my part. Nodding, I say, "Let's fuckin' do it."

"Cool. Get your shit ready so we can hit the road soon."

"Five minutes," I promise, patting him on the back as I stroll past him toward my room.

Bay Ridge Falls is about two and a half hours south of Wolf Creek.

Neither of us has ever been, but Remi recently discovered it on social media, and I knew we had to go at some point.

He's a huge sucker for a waterfall, and based on the pictures he showed me, this place is beautiful.

Plus, I'm always down for a day trip on the bike.

Once I'm dressed, we're on our way. As soon as we merge onto the highway, the same jolt of adrenaline that hits me every time I ride rushes through me.

The rumbling of the engine is steady and wild.

I feel it everywhere—in my chest, my spine, my legs, even in my teeth.

The world quiets down when it's just me and the open road—well, and Remi.

I love my bike, but I don't get to ride nearly as much as I'd like, so days like this are rich and therapeutic for me.

Twisting the throttle, she surges forward, and with the wind pressing against my chest and whipping around me as Remi and I pass every single car around us, a smile splits my face under my helmet. It's freeing.

We make it to Bay Ridge in good time, and despite it being a Saturday morning, the place doesn't look too crowded...yet. I'm sure that'll change as time goes on. It's hot as hell outside, and we have to hike about a mile to get to the waterfall, but once we do finally make it, it's worth it.

"Damn," I huff, my t-shirt clung to my back, thanks to the endless amount of sweat from the no-shade trek here.

“I know, right?” Remi flashes me a toothy grin as we keep walking closer. “It’s even better than the pictures. ”

The breeze coming off the water feels great against my overheated skin, and luckily, there’s a few shaded spots here. Taking a seat, we spend a little while people watching. There aren’t many people here, but the ones that are, are interesting.

“Think they’re on a first date?” Remi asks, nodding toward a couple that can’t be older than twenty-one. She’s in a red sundress, her hair perfectly curled, and he’s in what I can only guess are his nice Carhartts.

“I’m goin’ with third,” I guess.

“Why do ya think that?”

“They both look nervous,” I explain. “Which could indicate a first, but look at the way they’re laying, with their legs intertwined. That’s not first date positioning. My guess is that they’re gonna bang for the first time after this.”

Remi barks out a laugh. “You got all that from their legs?”

“Yeah, man. How did you not?” Tipping my head to the left, I say, “What ’bout them? What’s their story?”

Checking them out, he smirks, dragging his gaze back to me.

“They’re friends,” he says. “Best friends, probably. But she”—he gestures toward the brunette woman, who has to be at least mid-thirties, her dark brown hair tossed into a messy bun—“is definitely in love with her”—talking about the friend, similar age, wearing flip-flops, and waving her hand in front of her face at the mosquitos trying to feast on her—“and she is completely oblivious.”

“Think so?”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “What do ya think?”

“The same thing.” I snort.

Remi reaches into the backpack he brought with us, handing me a bottle of water before grabbing one out for himself.

Comfortable silence settles as we take in the sights.

I think what I love most about my friendship with Remi is there’s never been this uncomfortable need to fill the silence.

He and I have known each other for so long, been through various chapters of life together, that there’s no need for useless small talk.

That’s true friendship, in my opinion; being able to simply exist together and find comfort in that.

Clearing his throat, Remi glances over at me after a while, and asks, “So, when were ya gonna tell me?”

My stomach bottoms out, and I break out in a sweat all over again that has nothing to do with the heat. He doesn’t have to clarify what he means. I can see it in his eyes. Rubbing the back of my neck, I blow out a breath. “How’d you know?”

“So, it’s true?” he asks, his brow arched, but I can’t read his expression. “You and Ford?”

Wincing, I nod, my heart clear in my throat. “I’m sorry, man. I would’ve told you,

but I wasn't sure how you'd react. At first, we were just havin' fun; it was just sex, so tellin' you seemed like it would stress you out more than necessary, and?—"

"At first?" he parrots.

"Huh?"

"You said, 'at first we were just havin' fun.' Is it more than that now?"

"No." I shake my head, the two-letter word falling from my lips before I even process the question. "Well..."

"Oh boy," he murmurs. "I'm gonna need you to start at the beginning."

Fuck. I guess we're doing this.

"It wasn't intentional," I preface before diving into it all. The app, how I didn't know it was him at first, then how I found out it was him. I lay it all out for him, and by the time I finish, I'm not even sure I took a breath once.

I still can't read the look on his face, and for a moment, he doesn't say anything. "Why'd it have to be Ford?" he finally asks. "You could've picked anybody, but you picked my captain. You picked my boss... again . What the fuck, Hollis?"

His tone isn't angry; maybe a little annoyed, but not angry, which I'm taking as a good sign.

"I didn't know it was him at first, I swear to you, Remi."

"Yeah, but even if you did, you probably still would've gone for it," he mutters.

“Ouch.” I chuckle. “You think so highly of me.”

“I’m not sayin’ it to be mean, but we both know it’s true.” He pins me with a look, like he’s daring me to disagree. “You haven’t exactly been quiet about your attraction to him.”

“Okay, yes,” I say slowly. “But that doesn’t mean I would’ve done it. I knew how you felt because of what happened when we were younger, and I wouldn’t have done that.”

Remi pauses, and I swear, I see the corner of his lip twitch. “But you did do that.”

“Well, yes, but the circumstances were complicated.”

He scoffs, this time unable to hide the smile as he rolls his eyes. I continue before he has a chance to respond.

“By the time I found out who he was, I was already into him, and when I confronted him when we were campin’, I wasn’t exactly thinkin’ logically.”

“So, you have feelings for him?”

“What?” I shake my head. “Uh, that’s not wha?—”

“I think that’s exactly what you’re sayin’,” he says, cutting me off. “First, you said it was just fun in the beginning, and now you said you’re into him. Hollis, you have feelings for him.”

That hits me square in the chest, and it steals the breath straight out of my lungs. Sure, I’ve acknowledged how I feel something for Ford—that much is obvious—but to have feelings for him... That’s a whole different thing.

Right?

Or no?

That can't be what this is. I would know.

Yeah, what Ford and I have going on is more than just a physical connection, it's more than just sex, and yeah, being around him feels good, and I look forward to the times I get to see him...

which, admittedly, is a whole lot lately.

And okay, I admit, the nights I do spend alone now are never as good as the ones spent with him, but that doesn't mean I have feelings for him.

I don't do feelings.

Scoffing, I shake my head. "No, that's... No, you're wrong, Remi.

" A dry laugh bubbles from me as I digest what he's saying.

Every encounter with Ford since we matched flashes through my mind like a slideshow.

Every message sent. Every single time we flirted with each other.

Every picture sent. How it felt seeing that tattoo and knowing he was the guy on the app.

That first time up against the tree... Then again, the next night in his tent.

Each time we've hung out after that, and the way he's made me feel.

The gentle kisses, the cuddling, the deep, desperate need to see him any chance I can.

Oh, god.

"Shit..." My gaze slides over to Remi, who's already watching me with...amusement in his eyes? "I think you might be... I think I might... Holy fuck, Remington!" Jumping to my feet, I thrust my fingers into my hair. "Remi, how did this happen?"

Throwing his head back, Remi laughs—fucking laughs—to the point of tears in his eyes. "Oh shit, that's good," he breathes out .

"How is this funny?"

"You are spiraling over havin' feelings for somebody," he explains. "Hollis, you're nearly fuckin' thirty. It was bound to happen at some point."

"But that's... That's not what this was supposed to be." I'm pacing now. "This was supposed to be fun. That's it."

"How does Ford feel?"

My brows pinch together as I stop pacing and narrow my gaze. "How am I supposed to know?"

"Uh, haven't y'all talked about this?"

I nearly balk. "No? What is there to talk about?"

"I don't know, Hollis." He snorts. "Maybe that you have feelings for him? Don't you

wanna know if he feels the same?”

I shake my head quickly. “He doesn’t.”

“And you know that how?”

“Because that’s not what this is,” I repeat through gritted teeth. “Wait— Are you not mad?”

“I’m not exactly thrilled , but I’m not mad either.” Then he adds, “I mean, I guess I was a little annoyed at first. Mostly because you were keepin’ it from me, and because I don’t want your dick to get in the way of my career.”

“Ford would never allow that to happen,” I say, tone very matter of fact.

Heaving a sigh, Remi stands up too. “I know that.”

“Remi, I swear, this was never supposed to get this far.”

He places a steady hand on my shoulder, looking me in the eye. “Okay, but now that it has, you have to talk to him. With the divorce behind him, you need to tell him how you feel, see how he feels.”

My face scrunches up. “I don’t get why you’re being so nonchalant about this.”

“I don’t either,” he drawls. “But you’re my best friend, Hollis, you’re my family, and I want you to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. You’ve sworn off dating and relationships for so long... I guess the idea of seeing you in love makes it kinda hard for me to be mad at you.”

I’m already shaking my head, even as my stomach flips. “I’m not in love.”

He snorts. “Yeah, okay, buddy. Denial isn’t only a river in Egypt.”

“Oh, fuck off.” I chuckle. “That’s not what?—”

“This is,” he finishes for me. “Yeah, I heard you.”

I stare at him for a moment, at a loss for words. Remi knows... My best friend knows I’ve been sleeping with his boss. He knows, and he’s not mad.

Wow.

Not how I saw today going, but okay.

“How’d you figure it out?” I ask, needing to know.

“Dude...” He huffs out a breath. “You left your hat on his desk.”

“Oh, shit.” I wince. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.” Chuckling, he says, “Pretty easy to put two and two together.”

“Damn...”

That’s all that’s said about it for the rest of the day.

We end up walking closer to the waterfall, and Remi snaps some pictures, then we hop on our bikes and head back to town.

Stopping at a diner on the way, I’m surprised how not awkward things feel between us.

It's like the conversation back at Bay Ridge never even happened.

But there's one thing I can't get out of my mind...

I'm not in love with Ford.

Yeah, okay, maybe I was completely oblivious to the feelings I have for him, but love is different. I would know if I was in love with somebody... Right? I haven't been in love before, but surely, that's something someone would know, even if they had no experience in that situation.

This is feelings... Not love.

He might've been right about one thing, but Remi's wrong about this.

He is.

I think.

Twenty-Five

Ford

The thunder claps, shaking the windows from its force. It's nasty outside. It's been like this for the last half an hour, and it came out of nowhere too. It's been sunny and clear skies all day, and now it's downpouring. Can't imagine things will stay quiet with the weather the way it is.

I'm finishing up the dishes from lunch when footsteps pull my attention over my shoulder. Remi saunters in, lifting his chin when he meets my gaze. "Hey, Cap. Can we talk?"

"Sure." My heart squeezes as I switch the water off and grab a towel to dry my hands.

I knew this was coming since Hollis told me that Remi knows about us.

It was through text, and we haven't had a chance to talk about it yet since it was late, and I had an early morning.

I don't know how Remi knows, or how the conversation went, but I've been on edge all day because of it.

"In here, or my office?" I ask, tossing the towel on the counter.

"Let's go to your office. "

Oh boy.

Walking through the station, I see some of my team in the rec room, watching the news.

Chandler being one of them. She catches my eye, then drags her gaze over to Remi, mock saluting me, as if she knows what's going on.

Hell, maybe she does. Remi could've talked to the team about this before even coming to me.

In my office, I take a seat at my desk, gesturing for Remi to do the same. "So..." I clear my throat. "What's up?"

Remi breathes out a small chuckle, shaking his head. "Happen to talk to Hollis lately?" he asks.

My chest squeezes, and my throat dries as I nod. "I have."

"What did he tell you?"

"Just that you knew," I say. "Nothing more than that." Remi opens his mouth, like he's about to say something, but I cut him off before he has the chance. "I'm sorry, Remi. We shouldn't have kept this from you."

Holding up a hand, he asks, "What are your intentions with him?"

I lift a brow, taken aback by the question. "Uh, I'm sorry?"

He chuckles. "I already talked to Hollis yesterday, and know where his head's at, so now I wanna know where yours is."

My curiosity piques. “And where is Hollis’s head at?”

“Ask him for yourself.” He bites back a grin before saying, “Answer the question, Cap.”

I don’t say anything right away, the knot in my stomach tightening as I consider the question.

He wants to know how I feel about Hollis, and the thing is...

I know how I feel, but saying that out loud, to Remi , of all people, is a little nauseating.

Hollis and I have done a great job at skating over any conversation even remotely close to how we feel, or what we want, and to be honest, I’m not sure who’s avoiding it more at this point.

“This is a little weird,” I murmur, sitting back in my chair, and linking my fingers together over my stomach.

Remi snorts. “Yeah, well, so is my boss bangin’ my best friend, yet here we are.”

A chuckle flies from me before I can help it. It’s right there on the tip of my tongue to give him the same answer I gave Chandler the other day: It’s complicated ... But it’s not complicated.

Not anymore.

Heaving a sigh, I say, “Remi, I—” But I’m cut off when the alarm sounds, and dispatch comes over the radio.

“Engine 14, Rescue 14, respond to a single motorcycle accident. Location is northbound on Highway forty-three near mile marker thirteen. Caller reports one rider down in the roadway, not moving. Unknown injuries. Law enforcement en route.”

My body freezes, stomach dropping as Remi and I look at one another.

Something shifts in my chest, tightening and making it hard to breathe.

My mind shouldn't go there—not with the job, not with protocol, and because it probably isn't true—but it does.

Fast. Remi's eyes are wide, the color draining from his face, and before he even opens his mouth, I know he's thinking the same thing.

“It's Hollis.” The words are like a bucket of ice as we both jump out of our chairs.

I shake my head, hands trembling as I throw on my gear. “No, he's on the ranch.”

“It's him,” Remi repeats, firmer this time.

The blood whooshes in my ears, my body on high alert as I work to steady the rapid beating in my chest. It can't be .

“You don't know that, Remi,” I snap harsher than I intend to, an edge of panic in my tone.

“The last I talked to him, he was headin' into town to meet with a couple guys about some cattle.”

Fuck.

My crew rushes around me, but I don't see any of them. Nausea churns in my gut, my skin on fire, yet I feel freezing. "When was that?"

He checks his phone as we climb into the engine and pull out of the station. "An hour ago."

I can't think straight. The siren wailing sounds sharper than usual, and every second longer we're on the road feels like a second stolen or lost. My knuckles blanch from how hard I'm gripping the doorframe.

It doesn't take long to arrive on scene, but with every red light we blow through, every car we have to go around, I do my absolute best to remain positive, to hold back the part of me that's breaking loose at the seams. The part of me begging the universe to let it not be Hollis.

I'm trained for chaos—we all are—for control in the worst of situations, but as I jump out of the rig, rushing toward the scene, and see a helmet that looks all too familiar, I feel my heart stop.

Logic fades as I run over to the body lying on the concrete as fast as I can, Remi hot on my heels.

I'm grasping for hope as I scan his body and the scene.

Hollis is unconscious on the side of the highway, and there's blood.

My gaze darts around, panic rising and burning a path up my throat.

Where is the blood coming from?

Is he okay?

What if he's not?

Harsh breaths expel past my lips as my vision blurs. Just as I'm about to drop to my knees in front of him, as I'm about to assess the scene, strong arms wrap through mine, pulling me back.

"No." Chandler spins us around before shoving me away.

"Get out of my way," I growl, trying to move past her. "We need to help him!"

"And we will!" she shouts, her eyes wild as she shoves me in the chest. "But you need to step back—both of you!"

That's when I notice Sam holding Remi back too. Face red, tears streaming down his cheeks as he, too, tries unsuccessfully to shove past them.

"You're both too close to this call," Chandler says. "You're not thinkin' clearly. Let us handle this."

"Not fuckin' happenin'," Remi grits out.

"Wait by the engine," Sam barks, leaving no room for argument. "We got this."

The rest of our team is already on scene, accessing and helping Hollis, and as much as I want to be right beside him, doing whatever I can, I know they're right.

And Remi does too. Standing off to the side, we watch everything.

Time warps, the seconds stretching cruelly.

There's a heavy weight sitting on my chest. It's crushing my lungs, making it

impossible to get air.

My head throbs, the endless what ifs running circles in my mind.

I can do this job a thousand times over.

No matter how tragic or heartbreaking, I do it.

I help families, save lives. I can do it.

But not now.

Not when it's Hollis.

Not when he could die, and I never got the chance to tell him how I feel. Tell him that I'm in love with him.

Please... He can't die. Please don't let him die.

I can't lose him.

Please be okay, baby. I need you to be okay.

Twenty-Six

Ford

It's too quiet.

Even with the steady beep of the monitor and the low hum of fluorescent lights overhead, it's too damn quiet. I can't take it. My knee won't stop bouncing, and I don't think I've taken a proper breath since we arrived on scene.

Remi sits on one side of the bed while I'm on the other.

Neither of us has spoken a single word. We're still in our gear, wet from the rain, even though it's been hours.

Finn was here, but he left about a half hour ago to drop Ash and Tucker off at home so the latter can go to bed, August and Tripp are down in the cafeteria grabbing something to eat, and Gentry is on his way.

He's been in Austin since yesterday morning, helping Finn and Hollis's mom move all her horses into her new farm. His plane should be landing any minute.

Exhaustion clouds my mind, but I don't care.

All I care about is the way his chest rises and falls beneath the blanket.

Slow. Steady. I've never been so grateful for something so simple.

So ordinary. The surgeon said it went well; a clean break, reset without complications, but my heart hasn't let go of the fear yet.

It can't. Not until I hear his voice, not until his eyes open and he gives me that crooked, sleepy smile like nothing's wrong, like he doesn't even realize the storm he just put us through.

I need to hear his voice, need to hear his deep laugh. Feel his hand holding mine.

I need to see him alive and well.

Hollis is lucky; it could've been a hell of a lot worse than it was.

One broken arm, a sprained ankle, and a concussion.

He could've lost his life. All the what ifs that rushed through my head when we got the call, then seeing him lying unconscious on the pavement...

It reminded me how fragile life can be. How easily it can be ripped away from you.

I reach out and carefully take his hand, avoiding the IV and bandages.

His skin is warm; it helps anchor me. I know that soon he'll stir.

He'll groan and blink at the ceiling, maybe even mutter something groggy and ridiculous.

And maybe then my heart will unclench. Maybe then I can take a deep breath and relax my shoulders.

Not taking my eyes off Hollis, I say with a cracked voice, "I love him."

The weight of Remi's gaze on the side of my head is heavy. "Yeah, you do."

Glancing over at him, I notice how red his eyes still are, the bags under them. He looks about as tired as I feel.

"The way you reacted when we got that call told me everything I needed to know," he explains. "You're in love with him, and I'm guessin' you didn't even realize it until you thought you might lose him." Lifting a brow, he says, "Am I right?"

A breathy laugh blows past my lips as I nod. "I think I knew before now. I just didn't want to admit it."

"Aww, you love me, Cap?"

Remi and I turn our heads toward Hollis at the croaked sound of his voice, my heart skipping a beat as I sit up straighter. "How are you feelin'?"

His lip curls into a smirk that makes my stomach roll in the best way. "Pretty damn good," he drawls.

"Do you remember what happened?" Remi asks.

Brow furrowed, and his jaw tight, Hollis pauses for a moment before shaking his head. "Not really. I remember the storm hittin', and gettin' soaked, but everything after is pretty blurry."

"You were in an accident," I say, emotion making it hard to talk. "We think you lost control of the bike when you rounded the corner, probably due to the slick roads and the standing water."

Hollis squeezes my hand when my voice cracks, and then looks over at Remi before

coming back to me, gaze dipping down to my gear. “You responded to the call.”

I nod, swallowing thickly and trying to blink back tears. It doesn’t work.

The door bursts open, and Gentry storms inside. His gaze is wild and frantic, but he physically relaxes some when he sees his son awake on the bed. “I got here as soon as I could,” he mutters just as the door opens again.

Glancing over his shoulder, I spot two women entering the room. One of them, I’ve never seen before, and the other I recognize from pictures. Blonde, significantly shorter than Gentry, and she has her son’s dark eyes. Or rather, Hollis has hers.

“Mom, what are ya doin’ here?” he asks, wincing as he attempts to sit up in bed.

“Honey, you were in a motorcycle accident,” she says, rushing over to him. I stand from my chair and scoot back to give her space. “Why on earth wouldn’t I be here? ”

“But I’m fine.”

“I told you them fuckin’ bikes were a bad idea,” Gentry growls, and I don’t miss the way he directs the statement to both Hollis and Remi.

His mom scoffs and swats at her ex-husband. “Now is not the time for a lecture, Gentry.”

Hollis flits his gaze over to me before taking in his parents. The smile he’s wearing makes my pulse race. “Y’all just missed it,” he says. “I was just learnin’ that Captain Wesley, here, is in love with me.”

“What?” Gentry hisses, his dark, narrowed eyes slicing over to me. “What is he talkin’ about?”

Jesus Christ. Really, Hollis?

My face heats as words fail to come to me. This isn't exactly how I pictured this moment going, but nothing ever seems to go as planned when it comes to Hollis, so I really shouldn't be surprised.

His mom turns around, a smile spreading across her face as she takes me in. "Sorry, who are you?"

"Mom, this is Ford," Hollis chimes in again.

I chuckle as I offer her my hand. "I'm Ford Wesley, ma'am. Captain of the Wolf Creek Fire Department. I work with Remi."

"Oh, it's very nice to meet you," she says sweetly. "I'm June, his mother, and this"—she gestures toward the other woman in the room—"is Kelly Ann." There's a pregnant pause before she adds, "My friend."

"It's nice to meet you both." I tip my head. "It's unfortunate that it's under these circumstances."

"Yes." She smiles. "But I'd love to get back to the part about you bein' in love with my son."

"I would too," Gentry grunts .

Then, as if he can't help himself, Hollis says, "Me three."

Remi chuckles, only laughing harder when I direct a scowl his way. Holding his hands up, he says, "Hey, don't look at me. This is your business, not mine."

Hollis is wearing a shit-eating grin, and him putting me on the spot like this should irritate me, but be it that I'm just happy he's alive and okay or that I'm glad to get this out in the open, and have him know how I feel, I don't mind.

Even if it feels like we're missing at least half a dozen steps before ending up here.

Clearing my throat, I look at June, then at Gentry, holding his gaze. "Hollis and I have been seeing each other, quietly, for some time now."

"According to Chandler, there ain't nothin' quiet about them," Remi blurts out, causing Hollis to giggle.

June clicks her tongue to her teeth, her hand on her hip as she directs her attention to Remi. "We certainly could've lived without knowing that, Remington, but thank you."

That makes Hollis giggle some more. And I mean actually giggling. He must be pretty damn high right now.

"Anyway, as I was saying," I go on. "We've been seein' each other, and we've kept it pretty casual, but it's not casual anymore. At least, not for me."

"You hear that, guys?" Hollis's eyes are squinted from how hard he's smiling, and he's cupping his face with his hands. What I would give to take a picture of him. "Fire Daddy is in love with meee !"

"Alright, then." June claps her hands together, brows clear up to her forehead, while Kelly Ann chuckles behind her.

"Clearly, I could've picked a better time and place to say all this," I murmur, bringing my gaze back to his parents .

“No, I think this is great,” Remi says. “Top-tier entertainment.”

“Knock it off, Remi,” Gentry growls, turning every head in his direction.

The room falls silent before Hollis says, “Oh my, grumpy Gentry.”

Some of the tension dissipates as we laugh—well, everyone except Gentry, but I swear, I see the faintest of smiles tug on the corner of his mouth.

The door opens a moment later, in walking Finn...

and Ash, and Tucker. Finn waves, scanning the faces in the room before walking over and giving his mom a hug.

“Tucker wouldn’t go to bed until he saw you were okay,” he drawls to Hollis. “How ya feelin’, brother?”

“High as a kite.”

He snorts. “Well, that’s good.

“Also, Ford’s in love with me.”

Finn’s gaze drags over to me, a crooked grin spreading on his face. “Is that right?”

I run my fingers through my hair, wondering how many times tonight he’s going to say that, while also wondering if him repeating it to everybody who walks is a good thing.

“He probably won’t remember this entire conversation tomorrow, but yes.”

“Well, would ya look at that.” Slapping me on the arm, Finn says, “’Bout time you two called this for what it was.”

“Who all knew about this?” Gentry asks, his brows furrowed.

“Everybody,” Ash says before gesturing between me and Hollis. “Well, except these two. They’re more oblivious than Finn was when I came around.”

And just like that, the mood lightens, and everybody rests a little easier knowing Hollis is going to be okay.

Relief floods my system. I have no clue what the future holds, or if Hollis even feels the same way about me, but even if he doesn’t, I’m just glad he’s alive and that I got it all off my chest.

Though, it would be a bonus if he was in love with me too.

Twenty-Seven

Hollis

“ I ’m plenty capable of walkin’ on my own,” I mutter as my dad wheels me out of the hospital.

“Quit your bitchin’ ,” he says, his tone gruff and leaving no room for argument.

He hasn’t left my side since he got here, and he insisted on being the one to take me home when I found out I was being discharged today.

Ford and Remi have been with me too, but they both left this morning to go into the station.

My mom and Kelly Ann are at my dad’s house right now, and I already know without having to ask that she’s busy in the kitchen, making all kinds of ready-to-bake meals for me for the week.

My mother has always been a stress chef.

You’d think I was coming home after having brain surgery or something, with how everyone’s acting.

I can’t say I don’t appreciate it, though, and I do feel bad for worrying everyone.

I still can’t believe I wrecked my bike.

All these years I've had it, never once have I even come close to getting into an accident.

Granted, I typically make it a point to not ride in bad weather, but I wasn't exactly expecting a torrential downpour to hit while on my way home.

I don't know yet if the bike is totaled, but I have a feeling it is, which sucks.

Honestly, it could've been a lot worse than it was, and I can't stop thinking about what could've happened had I not been wearing a helmet, or had I been going any faster.

After my dad insists on helping me into the truck and buckling my seatbelt for me, he climbs in behind the wheel and sets off toward home.

It's late morning on a weekday; he probably has a hundred different things he needs to tend to on the ranch.

It's not like him to take time off like this.

Sure, I can't drive for the next six weeks, but I could've called a cab or something.

Are cabs even still a thing? Fuck if I know.

"So, you and Ford, huh?" Dad says as he turns onto the main road.

The inside of the cab is silent, not even the radio on.

His question somehow brings me back to my teenage years, when he'd grill me about something he heard I'd done around town.

Like I'm in trouble... Even though I know I'm not.

Maybe it's because I've never talked to either of my parents about people I've been with.

Sure, they knew about my high school girlfriend, and she came over for dinner sometimes, but I never discussed our relationship with either of them.

"Me and Ford," I say. "Think it's weird?"

He breathes out a small chuckle, grip tightening on the steering wheel. "No, not weird, but I can't say I ain't surprised."

"Nobody's more surprised than me." I snort, glancing out the window.

"How's Remi feel 'bout all this?"

"He's...okay with it?" I don't know why I phrase it like a question, but it makes me laugh to myself, thinking about how long we kept it from him under the fear that he wouldn't accept it.

Although, maybe deep down, I always knew that.

Maybe Remi was simply the excuse I gave myself to keep from falling for Ford, because even from the beginning, I could tell he was different.

"I think he just wants to see me happy."

"And you are?" he asks, turning his head toward me for a moment. "Happy?"

I huff a breath through my nose. "I mean, I'm not happy about my bike, and that my

arm and leg are out of commission for a while, but yeah... I think I am.”

“Never thought I’d see the day,” he says teasingly.

“Me neither.” Jabbing him in the arm with my elbow, I add, “Now, it’s your turn.”

“My turn?” His furrowed gaze finds me.

“You heard me.” I chuckle. “Find you a...person to spend your life with.”

“Oh, lord,” he grumbles. “Who are you, and what have you done with my son?”

I laugh, and he does too, but deep down, I do hope he finds that soon.

Gentry Moore has spent so much of his life caring for others, putting the needs of others before his own.

He spent most of his adult life in a marriage meant to appease other people.

It’s about damn time he does some things for himself.

As he pulls into my driveway, my gaze fixes on the truck parked next to mine. My head snaps toward my dad as he parks behind it. “What’s Ford doin’ here?” I ask, confusion furrowing my brows as I undo my seatbelt and reach for the door.

“Don’t you get out on your own, Hollis,” he growls as he climbs out, ignoring the question altogether. After he grabs my crutch out of the back, he comes around to my side and helps me out.

“I can do this myself,” I grumble.

Before we reach the stairs, the front door opens, out walking Ford. He's wearing a plain t-shirt and jeans, but there's a navy-blue baseball cap on his head flipped around, and it makes my stomach flutter. I don't think I've ever seen him in a hat before... And I'm digging it.

"Howdy, Cap," I drawl as we reach the top step. "Ain't you supposed to be at the station?"

Ford takes the crutch from my dad, as well as the duffle bag he brought to the hospital for me, before we step inside the house. The air conditioning is cool as it washes over me; it feels nice compared to the already blazing sun beating down on us outside.

"I was," he offers, but gives me nothing else.

Alrighty then.

After my dad gets me settled on the couch, he strolls into the kitchen and comes back with a bottle of water for me, setting it on the coffee table. "Need anything else while I'm here?" he asks, flicking his gaze from me to Ford.

I shake my head. "Nah, I'm good. Thanks, Dad."

Giving me a terse nod, he says, "Your mom's runnin' up to the pharmacy to get your prescription soon, and then she'll be by this afternoon to drop it off and bring you some food."

Ha! I knew it.

"She didn't need to do all that."

He huffs a breath through his nose. "Try tellin' her that." Then he looks at Ford. "Give me a holler if you need anything, or you gotta go. Finn or I will run on down here."

"Will do, sir. "

My dad extends his hand for Ford to shake before patting me on the back, then he leaves. What the hell was that?

"Why aren't you at work?" I ask Ford the moment the front door clicks shut.

He shrugs, sitting down beside me on the couch. "Took the week off."

"You did?" My brows pinch, head rearing back. "Why?"

"Why do you think?" Leaning in, Ford presses his mouth gently to mine. My body immediately lights up, and I part my lips, allowing his tongue to sweep inside. He tastes like coffee, and his rich scent fills my nostrils as I kiss him back.

When he pulls back, a smile spreads across my lips as I look into his eyes. "Because you love me?" I ask, my voice raspy, remembering how it felt waking up in the hospital the other day and hearing him say that.

He chuckles, the deep sound settling over my tired, achy body. "Guess we're talkin' about this now, huh?"

"Yeah, think we probably should." I chuckle as he gently lifts my injured leg, laying it across his lap as I relax into the back of the couch. "I, for one, would love to hear it again since I was a bit out of it the first time. You know...just to be sure I heard it right."

“Right, of course.” Ford nods, and a smile curls his lips that leads to a deep, rumbling laugh that I know I could, without a doubt, listen to every day for the rest of my life and never tire of it. “Gotta make sure you heard it right,” he teases, squeezing either side of my knee playfully.

Then, in the blink of an eye, something shifts. The air in the room is suddenly thicker.

The humor in his gaze turns into something...

different. Something heady. My pulse spikes, the beating in my chest rapid and wild, knowing what's to come.

Which is silly... He's already said it; it's already out in the open.

But for whatever reason, this feels like the first time.

And well, I guess in a way, it kind of is.

It'll be the first time he'll say it directly to me.

I don't feel ready, but at the same time, I do.

But that's how it's always been with Ford, right?

Nothing ever makes sense, while somehow also feeling completely right every single time.

It's a paradox.

We're a paradox.

Clearing his throat, Ford rests a warm, steady hand on my thigh.

“Well, in case there’s any doubt about what was said in that hospital room, or about where I stand when it comes to you...

” He pauses, dragging in a deep breath. I watch his Adam’s apple roll as he swallows.

“You were... You were somethin’ I never saw comin’.

When I found your profile on that app, I didn’t understand this...

this urge I felt to match with you despite all signs pointin’ to it bein’ a terrible idea.

I was fresh out of a failed marriage, I felt broken, and very unsure of myself, and you...

Well, you’re twenty years younger than me, a well-known playboy, and the best friend of somebody I work very closely with.

On paper, you and I make no sense. On paper, we never should’ve happened—or, at the very least, been over long before now.

And yet, the more time I spent with you, the more I got to know you—the real you—and the more I let you see me too, the deeper I fell. ”

Ford’s stormy eyes soften while they hold mine, and the tiniest bit of color splashes across his cheeks.

Time stands still. All that remains in focus is him.

It’s a rush and a stillness all at once, the way my heart races, but my soul sinks into

place.

A paradox. The hair on my arms stands up, and my skin tingles.

There's this ache in my chest—not a painful one, but one that's tender and tells me everything I need to know.

What Ford's about to say, again... I feel it too .

And once that realization hits me, it's damn near impossible to sit still, or keep quiet. Suddenly, I'm bursting at the seams, but somehow, I'm able to keep it inside long enough for him to finish.

“When I arrived on scene and saw you, my heart stopped.” The emotion weaved through his words makes my chest tight.

“I couldn't breathe; it felt like a piece of me shattered.

Never in my life have I felt fear like I did in those first few moments, when I didn't know the severity of your injuries, or even if you were goin' to be okay.

Seein' you like that, it was...gut wrenchin', and all I kept thinkin' was how I never got to tell you how I feel.

How I could lose you, and you'd never know what you mean to me. ”

His voice cracks, and a piece of me does too.

“This started as something casual, and I know it was meant to be fun and nothing more, but it's more than that for me.

And honestly, it has been for a while. I love you, Hollis.

” My heart skips a beat, pressure building behind my eyes.

“I love the man, the brother, the friend, and the son you are. I love how much family means to you, and the capacity of love you hold for those closest to you. I love how hard you work, but I also love how you never take life too seriously; somethin’ I could learn from you. ”

I breathe out a laugh, smiling through misty eyes while he does the same.

“And I love the way you make me feel,” he goes on.

“I love the way you came into my life at a time I needed you the most. You were a bright sun shinin’ through years of dark clouds.

Hollis, you gave me warmth, and you reminded me what it’s like to be seen.

But more than that, you gave me hope, and I don’t think you’ll ever truly know what that means to me. ”

Swallowing thickly, I blink through the tears, feeling like my heart is about to explode in my chest. “Wow,” I rasp, wiping the moisture from under my eyes. “This was way better than the hospital room.”

Ford breathes out a laugh, tears spilling over and rushing down his cheeks, while I do the same. There’s a ringing in my ears, and every inch of my skin tingles. Everything is heightened, and there’s so much I want to say, but none of it feels like enough.

“I already know that nothin’ I’m about to say will come out nearly as put together as what you said,” I say with a small chuckle.

“But this ain’t casual for me either. I was really content with my life, never felt like I was missin’ out on anythin’ by being alone.

But now... I want more. I want you . And I don’t know when the hell it happened, but I’m in love with you, Ford. ”

The smile that curls his lips makes the wrinkles around his wet, bloodshot eyes deepen. “Called me by my actual name and everything,” he drawls before clearing his throat. “You must really mean it.”

I throw my head back as laughter bubbles out of me. “I guess I really do.”

We stare at each other for a beat longer, but before either of us can say anything, there’s a knock at the door. I glance at Ford, lifting my brow questioningly.

“Probably your mom,” he offers, reminding me about what my dad said before he left.

I nod and huff a small chuckle. “Leave it to her to pick right now to show up.”

Carefully moving my leg off his lap, Ford stands.

“I’ll let her in,” he says, but before he does, he meets my gaze.

Placing one hand on the back of the couch, his other comes to the arm behind me as he leans in and drops his forehead to mine.

For a moment, nothing is said as we lock eyes and breathe each other in.

It’s Ford that speaks first. “Say it again.”

Smirking, a bolt of electricity shoots through my veins as I tip my head back, bringing my lips right up against his as I whisper, “I love you.”

A groan sounds from deep in his chest as his eyelids flutter closed, and he exhales a sharp breath through his nose. “Fuck, that sounds good.” Pressing a kiss to my lips, he pulls back and says, “I love you.”

There’s another knock, this time harder. “Hollis, it’s Mom,” she shouts, her voice muffled through the door. “I know you’re in there. Open up!”

We both chuckle before Ford pads over to the front door and lets her in.

In typical mom fashion, she ends up staying, but I don’t mind.

Once she gives me my meds, things get a bit hazy, then they go black, and when I wake up, there’s a blanket covering me, the whole house is clean, whatever’s in the oven smells delicious, and Ford’s sitting beside me with my legs pulled over his lap again while my mom tells him all about the new property she bought.

I may not have a clue what I’m doing, or know what the future holds for me and Ford, but one thing I do know is, I could get used to this.

Who knew being in love could be so warm and fuzzy?

Twenty-Eight

Ford, Three Months Later

It's well past nine o'clock, any light left in the sky has long since faded, and yet, I still half expect to see Finn come around the corner, or worse, Remi randomly pull up next to me, as I hop out of my truck.

Other than the flicker coming from Hollis's porch, the only light to be seen is the glow from the fireflies dancing around as the crickets chirp in the distance.

We're alone out here—I know we're alone—but that doesn't stop my eyes from darting all around as I take the three short steps up to the porch before pounding my fist against the tall, wooden door.

"Wolf Creek Fire Department," I call out, placing the helmet on my head as I ignore how ridiculous this feels.

The door swings open a moment later, and my heart thrashes as I almost choke on my own tongue when Hollis comes into view.

"Well, howdy, Captain," he drawls, tipping his hat while standing before me in nothing more than a tight pair of unbuttoned Wranglers that show off the thick, stiff ridge pressed against his thigh, and the old, worn boots they're tucked into.

Shamelessly running his gaze over the length of me, he lifts a thick, dark brow and flashes me a smirk that's dripping with sex. "You come all this way to help me?"

“Got a call about a possible house fire.”

The corner of Hollis’s mouth twitches, and there’s a humorous glint in his eye as he takes a step closer and drags his finger from my chest down to my belt buckle.

“Oh, I’ve got a fire you can put out, alright, but it’s a big one.

” Working the buckle open and never taking his eyes off mine, he practically purrs, “Think you can handle it, Captain?”

My nostrils flare as I huff out a breath, feeling absolutely ridiculous, yet oddly turned on. “Can we just go inside?” I grit out.

Hollis snorts, using his grip on my belt to pull me into him. “You’re no fun,” he grumbles before pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses to the center of my chest. A zap of arousal shoots down my spine, spreading into my balls as my pulse races.

Shoving him back, I follow him into the house before kicking the door shut behind me.

“You’re lucky you got what you did,” I growl, leaning in and nuzzling my face in the crook of his neck.

I inhale deeply, dragging in his musky, intoxicating scent until I’m dizzy.

My teeth nip at his flesh, my thickening cock more than appreciating the yelp that flies out of him.

Moaning as I hook an arm around his waist, and forcefully shove my hand down the back of his jeans, grabbing a fistful of his tight ass, he says, “Didn’t think I’d get you in the gear.”

Tugging his earlobe between my teeth, I say, “You almost didn’t.”

Hollis lets his head fall back as I pepper his neck and shoulder with kisses while his fingers work open my pants.

“I’m so fuckin’ glad you wore ’em, though,” he rasps, reaching in and pulling me out.

His rough, calloused hand strokes me up and down, slowly causing me to rip at the seams. “The coat, the pants, the suspenders...no shirt.” He groans. “So fuckin’ sexy, daddy.”

Turning his head, our mouths crash together in a rough, hungry fury as I walk him farther into the house and down the hall.

Continuing to stroke my cock, Hollis brings his other hand to the back of my neck, nearly knocking off the helmet as his fingers dig into the flesh.

Stepping into the bedroom, we both fumble with our boots, somehow kicking them off without falling on our asses.

The second we’re free of those, I’m shoving his pants down to his ankles, barely giving him time to step out of them before I palm his bare ass with both hands, hoisting him into my arms before tossing him onto the bed.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” he gasps, his dark, hungry gaze watching as I shake out of my coat before climbing on the bed after him.

There’s a bottle of lube already waiting for me, and without even checking, I know Hollis is already prepped and ready for me.

We’re both frantic and desperate to fall into each other after going the last almost two

weeks without barely getting any time together.

I've temporarily been on B-shift at work, which puts our schedules totally opposite.

When Hollis is waking up and starting his day, I'm falling into bed, and vice versa.

It's been torture, but I'm back on my regular shift as of today.

The tension and the anticipation have been building since the moment we woke up.

It started with the flirting...the teasing all day long while we were working.

The pictures, and the messages, painting a very salacious image of what we both want tonight—what we both need .

And what we need is rough, sweaty, and fast.

Swiping the bottle off the bed, I slather the cool gel all over my dick while Hollis gets himself into position.

With one hand on the headboard, he uses the other to spread himself open for me, and when he meets my gaze over his shoulder, I nearly combust. A growl thunders from my chest at the sight of him, ready and just as desperate for this as I am.

I pour some lube on my fingers, bringing them to his hole.

He's already slick and ready to go, but I add a little more for good measure.

A shiver wracks through his body at the touch, and his back arches, like he's silently begging me to hurry.

Bringing my body flush with his, I stroke from base to tip, and back down, before lining myself up.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about sinkin’ into this perfect fuckin’ ass for too damn long,” I husk, my lips against the shell of his ear as I press forward, feeling Hollis bear down as I slowly sink into his tight, hot channel.

The groan that comes from Hollis is deep and guttural...primal. “Fuck, me too. I’ve missed your big, fat cock, and the way you give it to me so fuckin’ good, daddy.”

I chuckle darkly as I ease in the rest of the way, my hips connecting with his ass.

My heart beats against my ribs as arousal swims through my veins, making my head feel light and dizzy.

“I know you have,” I rasp as I kiss along the back of his neck, giving us both a minute.

“I’ve missed this too. Thought I was going to end up coming in my pants before the day was over after that last one you sent. ”

Hollis turns and looks at me over his shoulder, his eyes looking impossibly darker as a smirk tugs on his lips. “Is that right?” he asks, and I don’t miss the excitement in his tone.

“Maybe...”

I swallow thickly, breathing through my nose as I pull all the way out, only to sink back in, only rougher this time. Hollis gasps, the sound quickly transforming into a moan as he pushes back, meeting me thrust for thrust, like he just can’t get enough.

“So, is that a yes?” he asks, letting his head fall onto my shoulder as I bring my hand to the front of his throat, holding him while my other wraps around his hot, throbbing cock, pumping him in time with my hips.

I don’t have to think about what the message says, because after the half a dozen times I read it, the words are now burned into memory: Maybe after you fuck me and make a mess out of my ass, I can do the same to yours...

The suggestion was loud and clear, and it coursed through my veins like molten lava.

Hollis and I have been together for a while now, and while he plays with my ass quite a bit these days, we still haven’t done that.

But I want to, and clearly, he does too.

“It’s a yes,” I growl in his ear as I pick up the pace. My skin tingles just under the surface, pressure building near the base of my spine. Even agreeing to it out loud has me close to coming already.

Hollis brings his hand around, fingers threading through the strands of hair on my nape, tugging on them as I slowly unravel.

“I’ve been dying for a chance to fuck you,” he rasps.

“To feel this perfect ass wrap around me, hear you fall apart as my cock gives you exactly what you need.” Moaning, he says, “And then seeing my cum drip out of you when I’m done...

Fuck, I’m ready for that. Hurry up before I bust too quickly, daddy. ”

“I’m close,” I grit out, slamming into him as I feel my release start to climb.

“Yeah, I bet you are,” he purrs. “Thinkin’ about my cock slidin’ into your tight little hole gets you all fuckin’ hot, doesn’t it? ”

Nothing more than grunts and groans flies out of me as it hits me all at once.

It’s all-consuming, and I feel it everywhere as I empty myself deep inside of Hollis.

His muscles are tense, and his eyes are slammed shut, like he’s trying not to come at the same time.

As soon as I finish, I pull out, and we switch positions.

Only instead of sitting on my knees against the headboard, I’m flat on my back, with Hollis in between my thighs, with the bottle of lube already open.

Knowing I wanted to do this tonight, I snuck away before leaving work to lay a little of the groundwork, and I’m glad I did because it doesn’t take long for Hollis to get me ready enough that I feel comfortable.

Both of our chests are heaving as my legs wrap around his waist, and once he lubes himself up, he gets into position, giving me a minute to breathe before continuing.

His eyes are soft as they find mine. “If you need me to stop, or slow down, just tell me, and I will.”

“I know, I’m good,” I assure him, and that seems to be all that he needs to hear.

Hollis eases past the tight muscle, giving me only the tip.

Clenching my jaw, I breathe through the burn as he sinks in a little more.

It's overwhelming, but I want more. I want this.

I've had all of Hollis, and I want him to have all of me.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually, he's all the way in.

Leaning down, Hollis presses his lips to mine, flicking his tongue inside as he slowly begins to move.

It doesn't take long for the burn from the stretch to shift into pleasure.

He sits back, hands gripping my thighs as he really gets into it.

His eyes are nothing more than black pools as they look into mine.

His messy brown strands are drenched in sweat, and the sight of him on top of me as my ass takes his cock has my body heating all over again despite having just finished.

"Fuck, your ass is perfect," he growls, pushing my legs back as he fucks me harder. "You feel so good."

I reach up and pinch his nipples between my fingers, making him whimper. "Yeah, you like fuckin' me while my cum drips out of you?"

"Fuck!" He drops his head onto his shoulders, and I can tell he's close already. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

It doesn't take long for his release, and goddamn, if it's not a beautiful sight.

The raw, carnal sound that erupts from his chest right before it hits him.

The way his cock throbs as he empties inside of me.

And the way his body collapses on top of mine when he's spent.

His slick, sweaty skin presses against mine, his ragged breathing in my ear as we both fight to catch our breath.

We lie like that for a while before Hollis rolls onto the bed beside me. Turning his head, a smirk spreads across his face that's contagious. "I fuckin' love you."

Chuckling, I roll onto my side and steal a kiss before lying back down and pulling him against me. "I love you, baby."

His breathing evens out a few minutes later, and for a while, I stay just like this and listen to him sleep.

It's comforting and relaxing, especially since we haven't been able to do this in almost two weeks.

We haven't officially moved in together, but we're basically already there.

Maybe that's a little fast, given that my divorce wasn't finalized that long ago, but I don't bother questioning it because it feels right.

It's crazy how a person can spend so many years with someone, only to realize it's never going to work, then have someone new walk into their life—someone who arguably seems all wrong for them—and suddenly, everything's right again. It feels easy .

Being with Hollis is easy.

Loving him feels right.

And even though I never saw myself here, there's no other place I'd rather be.

The End.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:39 am

Take a trip to the rodeo in Copper Lake, Wyoming...

Eight Seconds to Ride

Prologue, Shooter Graham

The announcer's voice booms over the loudspeaker, rumbling as the crowd goes wild. "Here all the way from Copper Lake, Wyoming, a two-time bareback world champ, coming from a long line of rodeo champions. Give it up for Shooter Graham, ladies and gentlemen!"

This is it.

The arena is booming, the crowd roaring. Energy is so high, every single body in here can feel it. Feel the win about to be mine.

My body is buzzing as I lower myself onto the bronco, making sure everything is just so—wrapping and then re-wrapping the rope around my glove until it feels right, adjusting the placement of my hand's grip—preparing for them to open the chute.

For it to be my time to shine. This is the last rodeo of the year, the National Finals Rodeo.

What I've worked for all season. That buckle, that prize money...

it's mine. I can feel it. The low vibration coursing through my bloodstream.

The heavy pounding of my heart against my ribs.

The thrum of energy spreading its way through my body—from my head, along my limbs, down to the tips of my toes.

It's everywhere. I can't taste it. Taste the victory like a sweet treat on the back of my tongue.

This. Is. It.

"You and me, Miss Ellie," I murmur to the beast beneath me. She's anticipating this as much as I am, her body practically vibrating with the need to buck and jump. I've ridden her before. She's feisty, and I fucking love it. "Let's fucking do this, girl."

The announcer continues, but honestly, the rest of what he says falls on deaf ears as the bucking chute opens.

Eight seconds... that's all I have to do—make it eight seconds.

Bronc riding is something I've been doing since I was knee high to a grasshopper.

My father was a bareback bronc rider, my grandpa, my uncles. It's in my veins. The talent.

A score of eighty-five takes the title.

The seconds tick on.

Eight... My bronc bucks, her legs kicking, my body jolting.

Seven... Adrenaline pumps through my blood, making me feel invincible. Making me feel on top of the world.

Six... The high is unlike anything I've ever experienced before.

Five... She jerks to the left, and I follow.

Four... I'm so close, I can fucking taste it .

Three... two... one, and when the buzzer sounds, I feel fucking good. Like a champion.

I don't bother waiting for the pick-up man as I jump off the horse.

My chest heaves as I throw my hands in the air, shouting to the audience while they cheer me on.

The crowd in here is wild, their excitement palpable.

Every seat taken. Tens of thousands of people travel from around the world every year to watch this event, find out who the next world champ is, and for the past two years, it's been me.

And when the guy over the loudspeaker announces a score of eighty-six, I know I've just become the world champ for a third year in a row.

Everyone rises from their seats as the arena erupts into cheers. Cameras flash, and reporters surround me as my team closes in. Interviews, photographs, and other general PR shit I hate doing has the next few hours passing by in a blur.

The NFR is held in Las Vegas, which is the perfect place to celebrate a victory like this.

After I finish with the mandatory press to keep my agent off my back, me and a couple of the guys who flew in with me from back home decide to go out.

Picking a place off the strip to avoid massive crowds, we wind up at a small hole-in-the-wall called Juno's.

The space is dimly lit, music way too loud for small talk, and the best part is that there're hardly any patrons in here.

My buddy, Copeland, another bronc rider who competed tonight, heads to the bar to get us all a round of drinks while the rest of us set up the pool table.

We're thrumming from the wins tonight—and it wasn't just me who won either out of our group.

We toss back drink after drink while we play a couple of rounds of pool, shooting the shit and overall, just being rowdy as hell, the tipsier we all become.

A bunch of cowboys who hardly ever make it out of their small town.

We're used to causing trouble on tour and leaving the aftermath in the dust on the way to our next stop—which, in this case, would be home.

When we're working the circuit, we're like a pack of outlaws on the loose.

When it's my turn to get the next round, I meander to the bar, waving the bartender over. It's gotten busier in here since we arrived, but not by much.

"You were great tonight," someone says, and when I turn my head to the left, my gaze collides with a smoldering set of honey brown eyes attached to a very attractive guy.

"I know," I reply with a smirk.

The hot stranger with dimples and the dark brown curly hair chuckles, scrubbing a

hand over his mouth. “And incredibly modest, I see.”

“What can I say? It’s been quite a night, riding that winning high, you know?”

Just then, the bartender drops off the round of shots I ordered. Taking one off the tray, I hand it to Dimples on my left before grabbing one for myself. Holding it in the air, I toast, “To me, a three-time world fucking champion.”

He laughs, clanking his shot glass to mine before we both toss back the liquor.

Slamming them down on the counter, we hold eye contact for a moment, the air thickening as he practically eye-fucks me, the desire and the want clear as day in his gaze.

I take a single step toward him, closing the distance.

Sandalwood and something delectably rich fill my nostrils as I lean in, mouth right beside his ear as I whisper brazenly, “What do you say you help me celebrate that win?”

He pulls back, eyes smoldering as they take me in.

As they contemplate my offer. I arch a questioning brow as I run my gaze over him once more, shamelessly, a grin tugging on my lips as arousal stirs low in my groin.

In a simple plain black t-shirt, a pair of straight-legged Wranglers, and a black and gray baseball cap that looks well worn, he’s absolutely my type.

Spending time getting to know him a whole lot better wouldn’t be the worst way to celebrate tonight, that’s for damn sure.

Instead of waiting for a verbal response, I turn and make my way toward the

bathroom at the back of the bar.

I don't need to look behind me to see if he's following me.

I know he is.

With a quick glance toward the pool table, my eyes connect with Cope's before he drags his gaze behind me. A knowing smirk pulls on his lips as he returns his attention to me, shaking his head. I wink before he's out of sight.

The chatter of the patrons and the music dulls as soon as we're behind the closed door of the bathroom.

I let him walk past me into the confined space before locking the door, resting with my back against it.

A flash of what can only be described as nerves passes over his features, but it's gone just as fast. Stepping closer, he crowds me, our bodies flush and already heated.

He hesitates only for a moment before he flips his baseball cap backward and crashes his mouth into mine.

Full, soft lips are greedy and hungry for me, and when I run the tip of my tongue along the seam, he parts them, letting me slip inside and take from him. Taste him.

His hands come up, cupping my face as his hips press into mine, a thickening erection rubbing against my own. He groans into my mouth, the sound choked and desperate, sending a bolt of arousal down my spine until it nuzzles deep in my balls.

Our lips break apart, and he takes a step back, eyes dark and wild, lips slick and swollen as he watches me.

Fingers going to my belt buckle, I work it open before flicking the button and sliding the zipper down on my jeans.

His eyes drop, tracking the movement, Adam's apple rolling in his throat as he swallows.

I shove the material down until it bunches on my thighs, pulling myself out and stroking nice and slow while he watches, my dick thick and throbbing in my palm.

It's not unusual for me to hook up on the road, especially after a win like tonight. The guys I find underneath me range from timid to absolutely feral. Dimples is dancing on the line of timid with the coy look he's giving me.

His eyes scream uncertainty, but the way he drags his tongue along his lips as he watches me contradicts that, telling me just how eager he is for this.

"Well, what are you waiting for, baby?" His gaze jumps, meeting mine as I smirk. "It's not gonna suck itself."

He fumbles a bit before dropping to his knees.

Hands coming up to rest on my thighs, he peers up at me, and the look in his eyes has my length hardening to steel.

Even under the shitty fluorescent lighting, his eyes practically shimmer as they watch me, like pools of honey, lashes long and curly, lips so full, I know they're going to look like a dream wrapped around my dick.

A shaky hand grabs my cock at the base as he flicks his tongue tentatively across the tip. A groan sounds from him before he takes me in his mouth. Just the head at first. He sucks and licks and sucks some more, and I let my head fall against the door, hitting with a loud thud of relief.

“That’s it, baby...” My voice is rumbling, growing desire intertwined with each syllable. “Work that pretty mouth of yours. Take me deeper.”

My hands come up, fingers gripping his head atop his hat as I ease into his mouth a little more. He gags, backing off as he looks up at me, eyes filling with moisture. Such a glorious sight. My pulse races when his cheeks flush and the corner of his lip tilts into a barely there smirk.

As he starts sucking me again, someone tries to open the door. When they realize it’s locked and they can’t get in, they pound their fist. He freezes, trying to pull away, but with the grip I have on the back of his head, I don’t let him.

“Keep going,” I whisper to him before shouting to the person on the other side of the door who just banged on it again, “It’s occupied, asshole! Come back later.”

Returning my attention to the man on his knees, I rock my hips, working more of my cock into his mouth.

Honey-colored eyes stare up at me, watery and bloodshot, as my dick disappears inch by inch into his hot, wet mouth.

Sparks of pleasure swim through my veins watching him struggle to take it all.

His body is stiff like he’s unsure of what he’s doing, despite it being more than clear in his facial expressions and the noises he’s making around my cock that he’s enjoying it.

Hell, maybe the nerves are because it’s me he’s sucking off. It’s clear he knows exactly who I am. Maybe he’s never had this caliber of cock fed to him. Either way, it’s a turn-on, and my body pulses with a salacious type of energy at his abashed presence.

His erection is thick and straining against his light denim jeans—another dead giveaway for his want. I’m dying to see it. “Pull yourself out,” I instruct him on a growl. “Play with it for me.”

Hands leaving my thighs and falling into his lap, he quickly does just that, like he was simply waiting for my permission, letting out the sexiest groan as soon as his hand makes contact.

The faster his fist flies up and down his length, the more he relaxes his jaw enough for me to fuck his face deeper.

It takes no time at all for me to get there, my balls tightening as my body tingles, a warmth spreading and taking over.

“I’m gonna come,” I warn.

He hums, slamming his eyes shut seconds before I spill into his mouth.

A groan rumbles from my chest as I empty every last drop onto his tongue.

Glancing down at his lap, I watch as he works himself over.

I can tell he’s getting close by how jerky his movements are.

Taking my cock out of his mouth, he plants his hand on the tile floor behind him, holding his weight up as he pumps himself, flicking his wrist in a twisting motion on the upstroke.

With his glossy, hooded eyes locked on mine, puffy, red lips parted, he lets out a long, low moan as his dick explodes, thick spurts of cum covering his hand and somehow managing to miss his clothes altogether. Kind of impressive, actually. And hot as fuck.

Chest heaving, he reaches up to grab a paper towel.

Presumably to wipe the mess off his hand, but before he can, I lean down, wrapping my fingers around his wrist and bringing the cum-covered fist up to my mouth.

He watches with wide eyes as I drag the flat of my tongue along his hand, gathering his release and cleaning him off.

His salty flavor is strong and heady, exploding on my taste buds as I make sure to get every last drop, never taking my eyes off him.

“Fuck, that was so hot,” he rasps once I’m done. Standing, we both tuck ourselves back into our jeans, but when my hand reaches for the door, he grabs my arm, spinning me around.

Arching a questioning brow at him, I’m unable to get any words out before his lips crash into mine for the second time tonight.

It’s jerky and messy, his teeth clanking against mine as his tongue thrusts into my mouth.

A groan rumbles in my chest, my spent cock twitching all over again as the hot, slick muscle rolls against mine while the taste of my own release fills my senses.

Making me dizzy and hot all at once. When he pulls back, his cheeks are flushed, and he smiles, looking awkward and uncomfortable.

“Uh, thanks,” he mumbles.

Chuckling, I unlock the door, pulling it open. Meeting his gaze one last time, I nod and smirk. “You too.”

Exiting the restroom, I find my friends right where I left them at the pool table. I watch out of the corner of my eye as the stranger with the dimples who just sucked my dick leaves the bar a moment later, but not before throwing me one last glance over his shoulder.

That was...interesting.