



# Saddle Studs (Rainbow Ranch #3)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Sam Fisher's life is a certified disaster.

After losing his girlfriend and his career all in one fell swoop, he finds himself the confused new owner of Dennis, a miniature horse and with him, a small patch of land back home at Rainbow Ranch.

But returning to Oklahoma also means facing Benny Adams, the charming cowboy Sam hurt years ago and whose heart hes never truly forgotten.

For Benny, life at Rainbow Ranch has settled into a predictable routine of horse chores and hopeless Grindr dates.

Comfortable, maybe, but lately hes been stuck, missing the spark that once made him feel alive.

When Sam suddenly reappears, old wounds and buried desires resurface, throwing Bennys carefully constructed peace into chaos.

Forced together for ninety days by the strangest inheritance ever, Sam and Benny soon discover that unresolved feelings don't fade with time—they simmer, heat up, and boil over.

With tension and undeniable attraction crackling between them, they'll both have to decide if confronting the past is worth risking their hearts and if love, no matter how messy, might be worth one more chance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

SAM

“Yeah, so, I guess I own a horse now.”

My therapist’s face cracked the tiniest amount as he swallowed down the surprised “huh” that tried to force its way out of his mouth.

I internally gave myself a pat on the back. I couldn’t surprise him often, so I’d take whatever small win I could get.

Especially these days.

“A horse? Like, an actual horse, or is this some kind of new slang I’m not aware of?”

I nodded, stretched out my legs and rubbed my stiff thighs, trying to get blood flow back in my lower extremities before my dick fell off. “An actual horse. Well, a mini-horse. So . . . half of a horse, I guess? I don’t know. I’m not a horse specialist.”

I could tell Zack was working overtime to try to understand this sudden diversion in the session.

We’d spent nearly the entire hour discussing ways I could reframe my thoughts and combat the ever-present cloud of depression that clung to me like cigarette smoke inside a classic yellow cab.

I only decided in the last five minutes to drop the bomb of my surprise (and relatively useless) inheritance.

“My good family friend, Frankie—he was like an uncle to me. Was around when my parents weren’t.

Anyway, he apparently owned some kind of stake in Rainbow Ranch, but it had to be a joke or just a symbolic thing.

They gave him a fifteen-by-fifteen-foot patch of land near the pasture along with Dennis, the ranch’s mini-horse.

” I pulled out the wrinkled piece of paper I’d found in my mailbox earlier that morning.

“And he, subsequently, left his pile of riches to me.” I leaned forward and handed Zack the letter, trying to keep as much of the sarcastic bite out of my tone as I could.

Zack scanned the letter while I looked out the window toward the always beautiful, incredibly toxic Hudson River.

The Empire State Building rose like a concrete-and-glass giant amid its smaller and possibly rat-infested neighbors.

A few other buildings reached nearly its height, but none possessed the same kind of regality as the Empire State.

“I’m going to miss it.”

“Hmm?”

“The city.”

“So, you’ve decided then?”

I nodded, looking back out the window. A stipulation had been written into the contract. If I wanted to either sell, own, or transfer any of my inheritance, then I'd have to live and work on the ranch for a total of ninety days.

The inheritance may have been silly, but the timing of it was surreal. After the shit show of the last few months, I felt like this was Frankie's way of saying he still had my back even when he was gone. "I've got nothing left here."

Zack placed the letter on his lap and steeped his fingers in a way that had to have been taught in therapy school. Probably first semester material. "Let's not use absolutes like nothing. We can always find something."

"Fine, I've got near -nothing left here."

"That's... right, let's run with that."

I took the paper back from Zack and folded it along the lines, stuffing it into my shorts pocket.

"My career is pretty much in a death spiral, my girlfriend left me for the man I thought was my best friend, my favorite barber shop got shut down for money laundering—and did I mention the whole girlfriend thing? That actually happened twice."

Zack couldn't keep the surprise from coloring his expression this time. His brows knitted and his eyes widened before he caught himself. His face went neutral, back snapping straight, shoulders stiff as a board.

Nice, I thought, rewarding myself with another mental pat. Twice in one session

"With the same?—"

“Different girls, same friend. Yeah.”

Zack blinked a couple of times and—very much to his credit, and likely the reason behind his glowing reviews on [therapygarden.com](http://therapygarden.com)—withheld any judgement, or shock, or “holy fuck, that’s bad” from showing on his face.

He leaned back in his tall leather wingback chair and smiled at me.

“Separating yourself physically from all of this could help you heal. But I know you have some avoidance tendencies, and I don’t want those kicking in either.

Have you had time to digest all of this? How leaving New Jersey and going to...”

“Oklahoma.”

“Oklahoma,” he said as if he were trying to pronounce an alien pronoun. “Are you okay with that?”

Now there was the million-dollar question.

Was I okay with going back to the small town I’d grown up in, constantly feeling like an outsider, like my heart and soul and destiny were all being pulled in a different direction, tugging me farther and farther away from Johnson Springs?

Was I okay with going back there? It was the place I had wanted so desperately to leave, only because being there made me confront parts of myself I refused to even acknowledge.

Because he made me confront those parts of myself...

Would he still be there?

There was no way. Benny always had such a light inside him.

That guy was set to save the world. He was smart, charismatic, kind, funny, good-looking—Benny had it all.

There was no way he was frozen in time, traveling down the same dirt roads and eating at the same greasy diner spot we'd frequent as kids. No way...

"I don't really know if I'm okay with it." And then I smiled in that unhinged way that I'm sure no therapist liked to see. "But I guess we'll find out."

My entire apartment was packed up in boxes.

Tomorrow, I'd bring them all to storage and dump them behind a heavy metal door, locking it up and leaving my current life to collect dust while I went back to my old one.

Such a weird fucking feeling. I'd left Johnson Springs right out of high school.

That time was nothing but terrible memories.

Life got better once I was in college at Boston University, where I worked toward my degree in public relations.

I went from living in a small town of a couple thousand to sending out press releases to a hundred thousand.

I enjoyed the fast-paced and cutthroat life that the city brought, the flock of faceless people walking past, each on their own individual little missions.

NPCs completed side quests I'd never find out about, all of them feeling like heroes

of their own stories.

But that same enjoyment soured over the last few months.

The city started to feel more and more like an empty facade.

Nothing about anyone felt real. Most of the people I met drifted into my life like dust bunnies whipped up by a breeze and carried away, never to be seen or heard from again.

Work was even worse, with stressful long hours and entitled clients, I was tiptoeing toward burnout before I made it to my thirtieth birthday.

There were only four months left of my twenties, and I was barreling straight toward an early onset mid-life crisis.

Great, just fucking great.

I walked around a stack of boxes labeled “living room” and went for a beer from the fridge.

“Alexa, set the AC to seventy-two.”

Every single light in my apartment turned up to maximum brightness.

“That’s... that’s not what I asked. Alexa, ” I said, with the added emphasis of an annoyed parent scolding a (digital) child. “Set the AC to seventy-two.”

The speaker dinged and the air conditioning turned off.

Good—that would warm things up. It was always chilly in my place, and it didn’t

exactly help that I liked to be naked. At least it kept my electricity bill down.

Shit.

I was going to have to start wearing clothes now that I'd be sharing a space with other human beings.

I considered getting a hotel for at least half of my ninety-day stay requirement, but there wasn't anything close to Rainbow Ranch that seemed worth it.

I'd already spoken with Pris, who managed the property, and was told there'd be a room for me.

I had the urge to ask her if it was the guest room near the back of the house or the one toward the front, but decided to find out when I arrived.

I also nearly asked her if Benny was still around. A curious, almost throwaway question that would have helped me decide whether I should have backed out of this crazy situation.

Benny...

He was the youngest of the Adams family, and had often acted like it.

He basked in the feeling of being babied and enjoyed people taking care of him.

A little spoiled, very-much loved—and could sometimes be a big-ass fucking brat.

He loved horses and had a way around them that felt almost supernatural, like he could speak a secret language only he and the horse could understand.



He was also my first kiss.

A kiss that completely wrecked me. Annihilated our relationship. Threw my life into chaos.

Basically: it fucked everything up.

It was just two guys experimenting. We were horny, fooling around, comfortable around each other.

But I wasn't ready. I'd already been trying to sort out my emotions, which—spoiler alert—were all hormones.

Never happened again. Nothing to see here.

I'm totally straight—and the second our lips touched, I knew I'd made a huge mistake.

I unfortunately reacted in a way that shocked us both.

I pushed him off me so hard he fell backward and scratched up his hands on the concrete, nearly hurting his wrists with the impact.

His eyes—full of visceral pain and raw betrayal—still haunted me.

If Benny was at the ranch? Fuck. I'd have to back out. I'd forfeit the land and the horse. Whatever. I was reconnecting with my past to disconnect from the present.

But that didn't mean I wanted to reconnect with Benny.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

I popped open the tab of my IPA, the compressed air fizzing out.

I took a drink as I wandered back to my living room, dropped onto the couch, and propped my feet up onto a box full of kitchen utensils.

I set the beer down on the side table and replaced it with my phone.

I used one hand to lazily scroll through social media and the other hand to lazily fondle my balls.

Damn, living with other people was going to be an interesting adjustment.

Maybe it's also something I needed. The closest relationship I had over the last few years was Macy Hernandez, my girlfriend that lasted seven months before she slept with my best friend.

Clearly, I don't talk to either of them anymore.

But I couldn't deny that it was nice having someone around, someone who made it easy to just exist in the space. A girl who could volley inside jokes and random shit back at you like they were pro pickleball players.

An email notification flashed across the top of the screen. It was from Isha, one of my colleagues and someone I considered a good friend. The subject line simply read: "Are you OK?"

I swiped the notification off my screen. It was way too fresh. I didn't even want to

think about what happened at work. I'd simply use it as fuel to propel me the fuck out of here. Zack would most definitely raise the avoidance alarm, but I'd deal with that later.

Ironically, I know.

Maybe instead of stressing over the nuclear meltdown that had occurred last week, I could distract myself with some investigative work...

I let go of my balls and focused on my phone. This was a two-handed job.

The first stop was social media, where I did a preliminary search for Benny's name.

Two accounts popped up, neither of them belonging to the guy I was hunting down.

I went to Google next, wondering if he maybe had a blog or an article written about him over the years.

Maybe he'd won some horse competition and was a world-famous equestrian.

But nothing came up. Hmm...

I went back to social media, and this time searched for Rainbow Ranch. I found one account that may as well have had cobwebs and skeletons displayed around the page for how often it was used. There were three photos that appeared to have been taken with a potato, all posted nearly two years ago.

My inner publicist let out a banshee-like screech at the missed opportunity.

From what I remembered, Rainbow Ranch was the perfect candidate to make it big on social media. They were leaving bags of money on the table by not having a solid,

targeted presence—money that could be reinvested into the ranch.

My goal wasn't to draw up a business plan for them, though. I was on a mission. I clicked on the “tagged” tab of their profile and found a few more photos, but none that— wait! There he was. Holy fucking shit.

It was a photo of a couple volunteers plucking weeds.

Boone was there, leaning on a shovel, smiling at the camera while his twin, Beau, was caught mid-sneeze.

But my attention had been yanked behind them, to where Benny leaned against a fence post, wearing a sweaty white tank top and a muddy pair of jeans.

Shit, was this taken recently?

I checked the timestamp and breathed a sigh of relief. Three years ago.

Next, I went to the profile of the volunteer.

Fuck yes! I'd hit the jackpot. There was another photo from that same day, with Benny prominently featured—his freshly cut jet-black hair slightly messed up from the cowboy hat he held against his chest.

I ignored the warmth that tickled my ribs. Must be that the AC turned off. I clicked on the tags and found a profile that belonged to Benny. And it wasn't set to private.

I just kept winning tonight, didn't I?

He didn't have many photos up, but the ones he did have all appeared to have palm trees and sunshine in the background.

There was one that showed Benny on the beach, lying back on a bright pink towel.

He wore a small white Speedo which didn't leave much to the imagination.

I scrolled past it before I paused. And scrolled back up.

Damn, he must have been going to the gym. His chest had filled in and his abs glistened in the summer sunlight. A cooler full of beers and hard seltzers sat open next to him. Sand dusted his—big—feet. If I was being specific, everything about him was big.

And... fuck... my dick twitched. I sat up on the couch, moving my feet off the cardboard box and planting them firmly on the hardwood floors. I had eyes, I could see that people—certain men—were aesthetically pleasing. Didn't mean anything.

I ignored the throb between my legs and scrolled to the next photo. It was Benny at a beachside bar, the caption calling it his new “home away from hom’,” the geotag placing him in Wilton Manors, Florida.

Ah. Good. So he had moved. He wasn't at Rainbow Ranch anymore. That meant it was safe to go back. I wouldn't have to face him again, wouldn't have to question anything or apologize for anything or deal with anything.

No... but I had something else I had to deal with. My cock was not going down, the throbbing only growing more persistent. I was about to exit out of social media and troll through some porn sites, but I decided to scroll back up instead.

Back to that photo of Benny in a Speedo. Looking happy, relaxed, so much like the man I knew he'd become. A dark happy trail drew my eyes downward, toward that impressive bulge of his.

Well, since I'm never seeing the guy again, maybe I can jerk off to him one last time...

I'd sort out what that meant after I came, when my thoughts weren't clouded by misguided lust and primal urges.

Yeah. I'd figure it out then. But for now, I leaned back and started to stroke, using my free hand to zoom in on Benny's clearly-visible dick print.

This is all just for investigative—oh fuuuck—purposes.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

BENNY

“Seriously? Frankie left Dennis to him ?”

“And a tiny strip of land near the barn,” Boone, my older and oddly smug brother, kindly pointed out.

“To Sam Fisher ?” I emphasized the last name as if that would clear things up and they’d say there was a big mistake.

“To Sam Fisher.” Billie, our sister and sibling-wrangler, cleared her throat. “I spoke with him on the phone. I don’t think he has any intention of selling Dennis or running off with him, but I do think he wants to stay the full ninety days then transfer full ownership back to us.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and sighed.

Sam buck-fuckin’-wild Fisher. I thought Robin Hood—the pot-bellied pig out back—would grow wings and take flight before I ever saw Sam again.

“Is this real? Like, is this legal?” Beau asked. He was Boone’s twin, and our masked rodeo star.

He was also asking the important questions. “Yeah,” I said, jumping in. “How did this even happen?”

“Frankie was ranch manager for eleven years before he stepped down. I’m surprised

that's all he had, if I'm being honest," Billie said.

She tended to be a little blunter than my brothers and me.

She rolled up the sleeves of her blue plaid shirt.

"But maybe we should have a lawyer look over everything."

"Have we not already done that?" Boone asked.

"I had Rachel's husband's cousin take a look at it. He has a firm in Philly," Billie said.

I rubbed a hand over my face. This morning had turned out wilder than a rodeo full of coked-out clowns.

I didn't have the bandwidth to deal with this pile of cow manure right now.

I had barns to muck, horses to reshoe, a new video game I wanted to play the hell out of, and—maybe most importantly—I had a date to get ready for tonight.

Dates were difficult to come by in Johnson Springs, Oklahoma.

Especially dates with someone who had all the same parts as me.

Our small town was surprisingly progressive for being hundreds of miles away from the nearest drag show, but the Grindr grid was as wide open as the field out back.

There were the handful of usual profiles I didn't have much interest in interacting with, and then there were the few that would sprinkle in—either visiting family, traveling for work, or just driving through.



The particular gentleman caller I had connected with fell under the “visiting family” label.

He was a hot Latino guy who normally lived in Tampa, but had an uncle who owned the ranch on the other side of town from ours.

We had really good chemistry in our messages which was always a good sign.

It was also refreshing, being able to connect with another guy like this.

I tended to avoid any actual relationships, enjoying a quick pump-and-dump when I could get it and moving on, but this guy surprised me.

I found myself waking up and being excited to talk to him, which was...

weird. He was supposed to be here for a week—just long enough for me to get my fun in, and then figure out if we wanted to keep chatting even with the distance.

Plus, he had a thick and juicy and uncu?—

“Well? Benny?”

“Huh, what?” My sister rolled her eyes and pushed off the kitchen counter. Bacon grease still sizzled on the pan. The armadillo clock on the wall said it was well past eight. I’d have to rush cleaning the kitchen so I could get to the barns to feed the horses before they all started to riot.

“Are you okay with him staying at the ranch? I know you two have a past.”

“Pfft, of course I’m fine with it,” I said, trying to keep my expression as cool and neutral as possible.

My siblings saw right through it. Boone called me out first. “You can tell us the truth, Benny.”

“Seriously,” Beau added. “He can stay at an Airbnb. Or better yet, he can go kick rocks and leave us the hell alone.”

“You know that all of us here just want to look out for you,” Billie said, walking to where I sat and placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

The warm glow of familial love filled the kitchen, mixing with the golden ambiance provided by the morning sunshine.

The melodic sounds of sparrows and robins and cardinals floated in through the open window.

For many, that’d be a relaxing soundtrack—but for me, it was slightly unnerving.

Birds scared the ever-living tits off me.

“I do know that. Thank y’all. I’d say something if it’d really bother me, but I’m over it. It was dumb teenage drama that I barely ever think about. I’ve had worse hangovers that’ve affected me more than Sam has.”

Alright, so maybe that part wasn’t exactly true, but somehow, I managed to slip it past my siblings’ “lying his balls off” radar.

Boone cocked his head to the side. “What ever happened between you two, anyway?” His beard was growing in, his smile worn a little more easily than ever before.

It was nice to see the change in him after Wylie entered his life—like he’d been a plant surviving on the bare minimum amount of water, when suddenly a weeks-long

rainstorm quenched his thirst and made him bloom.

Yeah. Had to have been a nice feeling.

I stood up from my seat, and collected the empty plates at the table.

“Like I said, we were dumb boys. I was just coming to terms with my sexuality, and he was cementing his. One night we realized our friendship wasn’t really working and decided to stop talking.

He was leaving for college anyway, so it was easy.”

If I were making a dish with this conversation, the ingredients would have been: two ounces of lies, three tablespoons of oversimplification, and an entire cup of Catholic guilt. Garnish with a dash of regret and make sure to spice to your liking.

Boone offered me a “hmm” but didn’t dig any further. I was scared Beau would use his twin senses and pick up where Boone left off, but was saved by a honk from out front.

“Ah shit, that must be Pris and Sky. They had supplies they needed to deliver. You two want to help me unload it?” Billie asked, glancing at my brothers while I busied myself with washing the dishes.

“Let’s get ’er done,” Boone said with a clap of his hands.

“Yeah. Benny, you good in here?” Beau asked.

“I’m good. I’ll clean up. Go feed the horses, maybe go for a ride into town.”

Beau gave me a brotherly elbow nudge as he walked past, following his twin into the

hall. Billie leaned on the doorframe, arms crossed, big sister mode activated. “I’m being honest. If this Sam thing makes you the slightest bit uncomfortable, you tell me, okay? I’ll get it sorted.”

“Thanks, Billie,” I said. “But I think it’ll be fine.”

She rapped a knuckle on the pale wood doorframe and disappeared, shouting after my brothers about being careful with the vase.

I finished cleaning up the kitchen, the warm and soapy water on my hands a welcome, grounding sensation.

I wasn’t sure what it was about cleaning that really spoke to me, but I always enjoyed doing it.

Sometimes I wondered if things would be different if I were obsessed with, say, playing the stock market or coding apps that would make me millions instead of spending entire mornings making countertops shine.

But hey, I had to play the cards I’d been dealt.

My phone buzzed as I finished wiping down the sink, the scent of lemon and mint strong in the air. It was a message from my date. We still hadn’t taken our chats off the app, so I battled with three different glitches before I could actually read his message.

VisitingTop8: I’m excited for later.

He had sent a picture with his message. In it, he stood in front of a foggy bathroom mirror. The area around his crotch had been wiped clear, framing the massive cock jutting out between his thighs.

Cornfedbeef: Goddamn that's a weapon of ASS destruction.

Hmm. That probably wasn't what he was looking for. My sense of humor was sometimes a little too much—and admittedly a little basic—but I didn't hide that from anyone, even hung and handsome men who could potentially become my boyfriend.

Cornfedbeef: Can't wait to play with it later.

There. That was a little better.

Fuck, why was I so bad at this?

VisitingTop8—or Carlos, the name he gave me when I asked—read my message but didn't reply. Probably busy getting ready. Or maybe he got caught up in something else. I closed out of our message chain before reopening it seconds later.

Cornfedbeef: I can host by the way. Just let me know.

VisitingTop8: Ok, I will.

Well, he wasn't exactly a man of many words, but at least he was a man of many inches. I scrolled back up to the picture he sent. Damn, it was going to be difficult waiting until later to meet with him.

I rushed through the rest of my morning routine, trying to ignore the semi that wouldn't go down.

I was just wrapping up when my phone buzzed again.

I pulled it out, expecting an ad for a new pair of underwear—you buy one jockstrap

online, and suddenly you're inundated with sexy men in colorful and heavily-discounted jocks—and instead saw a notification from Grindr.

I opened it and went directly to Carlos' message.

VisitingTop8: Shit, man. I'm sorry but I have to leave town tonight. Work emergency. Flight leaves in an hour.

Fuuuuuuck. Fuck, fuck, fuckity, fuck fuck.

I let my head fall back onto the rough wooden door of the barn. I shut my eyes, blotting out the bright afternoon sunlight. I rubbed the bridge of my nose and clicked into problem solving mode.

Chores were done.

Truck had gas.

Traffic was a mythical creature in Johnson Springs.

Cornfedbeef: Drop your pin. Maybe I can get to you and we can meet before you leave. Just to say hi ;)

I was already walking—speed-walking, jogging... okay, flat-out running—to my truck, keys already in my pocket. If I only had half an hour at most with him, then you best believe I was going to try and make every second count.

VisitingTop8: Location Received.

VisitingTop8: Can you make it here in fifteen?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

I jumped into the driver's seat of my car. Part of me couldn't believe I was racing so hard to get some dick. The other part of me was a feral and ravenous creature, deprived of some good dick for way too fucking long.

It wasn't difficult to guess which side had the most influence.

Cornfedbeef: I can get there in twenty.

VisitingTop8: Hurry. I still have to go to the airport. And I want you to fill me with your load before my flight.

I peeled down the dirt driveway, kicking up a cloud of dust. This man was going to be the damn end of me. He was so hot. And he wanted me, was asking for me to come inside him. My blood sizzled with heat, skin flushing, jeans feeling extra tight.

Why did he have to leave tonight? And would he come back? What if I visited him?

Also—did I recently suffer from a traumatic fucking brain injury that I wasn't aware of?

Why was I acting like I'd just found love in one of the most hopeless places on the internet?

Yes, I may have secretly just been a sappy romantic who enjoyed listening to slow pop ballads and day dreaming about the perfect life with the white-picket fence and golden retriever included—but I always made sure to keep that side of me under control, managed by the realistic and jaded side.

Whatever. This was all just for fun. If something came— ha, ha —from it, then I wouldn't be upset.

I turned down a side road, gravel and rocks clunking and bouncing off the bottom of my truck, the suspension causing me to bounce in my seat and adding to the already building pressure between my thighs.

As much as I wanted to speed my ass toward this dick appointment, I also had respect for the law and lives of my neighbors, who sometimes jogged up and down these exact roads.

I was going slow enough to spot an odd, shiny black shape twitching on a smooth boulder.

At first, I thought it was a trash bag stuck to the rock and fluttering in the breeze, but then I saw the beak and the weak flutter of a wing and I realized it wasn't a bag at all.

“Oh no,” I said, slowing to a complete stop. I looked out the window. It was a crow, preening at a bloody wing. By the way it took two shaky hops away from the car, I could see that there might have been something wrong with its leg, too.

My heart went out to it. I looked in my back seat and reached for a T-shirt I had left there, and glanced back out the window.

God, that beak seemed so freakin' sharp.

Like a little stabby sword. And its eyes—just tiny black orbs.

It looked at me, and maybe this was all in my head, but I could've sworn there was a plea for help in them.



Oh Lordy, please don't peck my eyeballs out.

I slowly opened the door and hopped out of my truck. The crow paused from its preening and gave a weak caw . It stretched its good wing up and flapped it back down with a fluff of feathers. The movement startled me. I yelped and took a step back. The crow cawed again.

"It's okay, bud. You don't have to apologize.

" I held the shirt up and approached the bird like a lion-tamer would approach a lion.

The crow didn't appear to be frightened of me, nor did it appear like it was hungry for my flesh and blood.

In fact, it allowed me to wrap my shirt around it and pick it up.

Which was good, but the second I felt it struggle I'd probably freak out and run.

I quickly ran around the front of my truck and opened the door, holding the crow against my side, extremely aware of how close its beak was to my heart. Was there ever a case of death by crow? Probably not, but I didn't want to be the first.

I gently placed the crow on the passenger seat then ran back around to the driver's side. It was still wrapped in the shirt. It lifted its head and looked up at me, clicking its beak.

"Shit, what does that mean? You aren't going to attack me, right, bud?"

I threw the truck into drive and started back down the road. That's when I realized. Fuuuuuck. Doc Evans' office was on the opposite side of town from my date. I looked to the passenger seat, where the crow's head started to droop. He gave a weak

caw that made me press on the gas a little harder.

Fuck it. I wasn't about to choose a hookup over saving this poor thing's life.

I hit a stop sign and grabbed my phone so I could shoot a quick message.

Cornfedbeef: Sorry. You're not going to believe this but I'm rescuing a crow right now. Found him on the side of the road. I'll message you once I drop him off at the vet. Maybe I can meet you at the airport and help you check your luggage ;) I heard you're flying with an oversized package.

I hit send. I was disappointed, sure. But what was I supposed to do?

"How ya doing, bud?"

The crow appeared to know I was speaking to it because it started to try to flutter a wing. I flinched. "No, no, it's okay, relax. Here, do you like music? Pop, maybe?"

Ariana Grande started to play on the speakers. The bird appeared agitated.

"No? Gotcha, alright, how about some rock?"

I played a Linkin Park song and was greeted by a loud and unsettling cackle.

"Not rock either. Country?"

I switched to a Zack Bryan song and the crow immediately calmed down.

"Right, shoulda guessed." I chuckled to myself and slowed to a stop at another intersection. I grabbed my phone and decided to send Carlos one more message. Maybe a picture of the bulge he gave me every time he crossed my mind.

I opened the app and went to click on his message, except—no.

There was no fucking way... holy fuck.

Our chat chain wasn't there. The profile photo of his tanned and muscular chest had disappeared. Vanished.

Poof.

He blocked me.

That mother fucking tractor-faced bitch blocked me.

What a joke. What a goddamned joke this all was. I closed out of the app and went a step further, holding down on the screen until the apps did their little tap-dance of death. I deleted Grindr from my phone and tossed it onto the back seat.

Fuck men. Fuck games. Fuck it all.

It was me and my new crow sidekick from here on—"ah!"

I hadn't realized the crow was on the move. It hopped over the center console and onto my lap. It pecked weakly at my thigh, which made me tense so fucking hard I thought I was about to snap the steering wheel in half. I didn't want it thinking there was a worm around for it to eat.

God, birds are so fucking creepy.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

SAM

Rainbow Ranch was just how I remembered it and completely different at the same time.

The tree I'd always used as a base for freeze tag was still there, but everything else around it seemed to have been cleared by a tornado.

The main home was still the same, too, just with a fresh coat of white paint, a new black door with a fancy glass window, and a relaxing porch that still smelled like the fresh wood they had used to build it.

Planters full of pastel-colored lilies hung off the pristine white rail.

Damn, did I have some memories around here. Most of them great memories, some of them the complete opposite.

“Sam!”

Beau was the first to greet me. He came bounding out of the front door like a lab running toward a soldier returning home from war.

I wrapped him in a tight hug. Aside from Benny, Beau was the closest Adams sibling to me.

He always felt like the big brother I never had.

We liked the same music, enjoyed the same sports—basketball and football—and shared a similar sense of humor.

There was a bit of an age gap and a general distaste of texting from both of us that made keeping in touch difficult, but seeing him today felt like no time at all had passed.

“How’s it going, bro?”

“Great,” Beau answered with a beaming smile. “Wasn’t expecting any of this to happen, though.”

“Neither was I.”

“Sorry about Frankie,” Beau said, reaching out and giving my elbow a squeeze. “I remember you two were close.”

“We were. He kept the whole mini-horse and parcel of land a secret, though.” I chuckled and shot a quick glance up toward the pearly blue sky. “I’m not here to take any of it, just so you know.”

“I know,” Beau said, “Although if I’m being honest, maybe you can take Dennis. He’s a mean little bugger.”

Another peel of laughter rolled from my chest. “Is he? Well, I doubt I could take him back with me to Jersey, but maybe I can rehabilitate him while I’m here.”

“You know much about horses?”

“Not a damn thing,” I said.

Beau smiled wide at that. He reached around me and grabbed my suitcase before I could brush him off.

I didn't want this to feel like a hotel stay.

I came back here to work, to connect with my roots, and to let go of all the bullshit (and failure) that haunted me back in the city.

"I got it," I said, grabbing a sliver of the handle.

"Don't worry about it, I'll take it to your room."

"Seriously, I can take it."

"You're our guest."

"A guest who can carry his suitcase."

Beau looked like he was going to let go.

I gave a gentle tug and pulled the suitcase away from his grip.

The wheel hit a crack in the driveway and wobbled.

A loud cracking sound followed as the handle snapped off.

I tried to grab the suitcase but managed to grab the zipper instead.

It opened as it fell upside down, spilling most of my clothes onto the ground.

Beau looked horrified. I didn't want to make a big deal about it, so I waved it all off.

“This piece of shit was one trip away from breaking anyway,” I reassured him.

“Always making an entrance, huh?” The voice—one I instantly recognized—came from behind Beau.

No, there’s no way. He can’t be here. He’s off in Florida.

Beau turned and stepped to the side, revealing the exact man I’d been wanting to avoid. Benny Adams. The youngest and sassiest and most annoying and kindest and funniest (and did I mention the most annoying?) brother.

Fucker didn’t even have a tan. So much for him living by a beach.

“Benny...”

“I’m, uh, going to head back inside.” Beau must have been reeling in secondhand (and likely firsthand) embarrassment from the events of the last three minutes. He awkwardly dipped his head, as if he were bowing to royalty, then bolted back inside.

Benny’s eyebrows scrunched together. “A bow? Where the hell did that come from.”

A fluttering series of laughs escaped my chest, breaking some of the thick ice that had formed and solidified between us.

He looked... different. He was taller now, a little scruffier, his shoulders broader and chest more defined.

He wore a tan cowboy hat that accentuated his dark features.

He had a pair of thighs that looked about ready to burst through his bootcut blue jeans.

Those damn amber pools of his caught the sunlight and glittered as he looked at me.

I should have asked someone if Benny was still around before coming to the ranch.

Then I could have avoided this entire situation.

Now I had to pick up my socks and underwear off the ground, stuff it into my busted suitcase, and take my happy ass back to the airport.

Fuck this. Going along with this wild inheritance thing was a mistake.

I'd email a lawyer once my plane touched down to figure out how I could transfer ownership without completing the ninety-day stay.

"It's good to see you again, Sam." He shot a glance down at my clothes. "And good to see you still wear the same kind of old man boxers."

An irrational flush of embarrassment warmed my face. I crouched down and flipped my suitcase right side up. "Don't worry, I barely wear any underwear nowadays."

Why did I just say that? Why did I just say that?

"Oh really?" Benny asked, slightly more curious and suddenly less prickly. "Guess that's more economical." He lifted up a pair of oversized plaid boxers, eyebrow arched. "God, you're so straight."

I snatched the boxers out of his grip and stuffed them into the suitcase. I collected the last couple of stragglers, zipped it up, and stood it on its wheels. Seconds later, and the suitcase flopped over with an audible thud, as if it were giving up entirely.

Same.



Benny chuckled. He quickly bent down and put the suitcase upright again.

I grabbed the broken handle and then pulled out my phone, opening the Uber app.

I could order a car and get to the airport in an hour.

I wasn't sure if there were even any flights I could take, but I figured I could hang out there or get a room at the hotel next to the airport.

Anything to get me out of this awkward—and painful—blast of memories.

Shouting. Crying. Pushing. I'll never love you the way you deserve. You broke me. More crying.

Fuck.

I need to go.

"Sorry," I said as I ordered my ride. "I think this is all a sign. I should be back home, dealing with the bullshit I'm trying to put behind me."

"What are you doing?" Benny asked with his arms crossed and a pointed stare aimed at my phone.

"Ordering a ride back to the airport."

"Cancel that right now. You're not going anywhere. Especially not after I found out you like to go commando." Benny cocked his head. "Kidding, kidding. But not about cancelling the ride. I'm serious as a heart attack with that one."

"I just... I wasn't expecting to see you."

“You weren’t expecting to see me at my family’s ranch, where I’ve lived all of my life and have zero intentions of ever leaving? That’s where you weren’t expecting to see me?”

“Right. Yeah. I mean, I saw you on Instagram and you were posting at a beach. I thought you moved.”

“Thank God you went into PR and not detective work. I haven’t posted on Instagram in like three years. Those pictures are from a trip I took to Florida for a horse show.”

Shit, I hadn’t checked the dates on his posts. I was so focused on, um, the scenery and framing of the photos—and certainly not the fact that he was shirtless and wearing a speedo in most of them—to even check the date. That would have saved me quite a bit of trouble.

“Come on, Herlock Sholmes, cancel your ride and follow me to your room so you can get set up. Then I’ll show you around the ranch. You can meet your new buddy, Dennis.”

There was a brief moment where time seemed to have frozen.

My options were laid out in front of me: cancel my ride and succumb to whatever twisted fate was in store for me at Rainbow Ranch, or tell Benny it was nice seeing him, hop in the Uber, and drive off into the horizon, sure I’d never come back.

“Well?” Benny asked. He wore an easy grin on his face. A memory of that grin twisting into a tear-streaked grimace slashed across my mind.

I’d hurt him.

I’d hurt him and hurt myself.

I ran away.

I couldn't stay and face him.

But maybe I could still make it right somehow. At least I could apologize for what a fucking asshole I'd been.

"Fine," I said, cancelling the ride and accepting the five dollar fee. "Where am I going to be staying?"

It could have all been in my head, but I couldn't help but notice a subtle shift in Benny the second I confirmed I'd be staying. His smile grew wider—so wide that his singular dimple on his left cheek decided to make an appearance.

It was enough of a reaction to confirm I was making the right choice. Maybe I'd leave Rainbow Ranch not just feeling refreshed, but also reconnected with an old friend. That'd be nice.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

BENNY

I genuinely thought I wouldn't feel a thing seeing Sam for the first time in about a hundred and seventy-five years. I wrongly assumed that the time between him leaving and coming back would be enough to ice over any pools of acidic emotion I had left.

But seeing him—seeing that dumb sexy face and that dumb sexy smile, and that dumb sexy ass—thawed right through any icy barriers I had thought were permanent.

A torrent of emotions came rushing in all at once.

I was happy to be rekindling a connection that had meant so much to me, sad that it had ever fractured in the first place, and confused at the intense physical attraction I still felt for him—even after he'd made it very clear that he would never feel the same way.

Somehow, I managed to keep the wild flood of emotions in check as I led Sam into the house and gave him a quick tour, even though he'd walked through these rooms a hundred times before.

"I like what you guys did to the bathroom," he said, leaning in and admiring the dark blue walls and eclectic collection of framed art.

"Thanks, that was my idea. I got heavy into Pinterest a year ago."

Sam chuckled at that. "You always liked design, though. I remember your bedroom

was always so clean and cool, and mine was a shitshow.”

“That ... is true. Very true.”

“And clearly your sense of design only got better.”

I tried to ignore the rosebud of warmth that bloomed under both my cheeks. “Thanks. It’s honestly my second love, after the horses.”

“How’s that been going? Is Pickles still here?”

A prickle of sadness replaced the warmth.

“She’s not,” I said. Pickles was my first horse, and taught me all I knew about taking care of those beautiful animals.

She was older when she arrived at the ranch, already retired from racing, and had the kindest and most patient temperament.

A chestnut mare who had quite a few first-place trophies under her belt and the largest heart beating inside her chest. “She passed last year. Around this time, actually.”

“Oh, Benny, I’m so sorry.”

Sam reached out and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. He squeezed. The warmth returned, this time spreading outward, down my back. God. Sam hadn’t touched me since...

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.

“Thanks,” I said. His hand remained on my shoulder. I chose to stay put, even though I knew that taking a step back and breaking the connection was the smarter thing to do. Sam’s touch was dangerous. Intoxicating. And something I had to consider forbidden.

Unless...

Could things have changed? It had been eight years since I last saw him.

A lot could have happened during that time.

A couple of dicks could have found their way between Sam’s lips and helped him come out of the closet.

I glanced down at his left hand, not seeing a ring. At least he was still single.

Not that it mattered.

Forbidden. Off-limits.

“Your room is going to be this one,” I said, finally finding the willpower to step away from his touch. I moved down the hall toward a closed door. Directly next to it was another, this one with a saddle hanging on the front. Each of the siblings had something on their bedroom doors.

A saddle was mine.

“Next to yours, huh?” Sam said.

“You remembered.” Not that I should have been surprised, we had spent many summer afternoons in my room playing video games, board games, talking shit, and

hanging out.

“I didn’t just wake up from a coma, you know.”

“So, the glassy look in your eyes is just because?”

“Shut up, I don’t have glassy eyes.” Sam craned his neck and looked at his reflection in the glass of a framed painting of a rainbow-bright field of wildflowers. “Do I?”

I laughed, glad I could still get a little rise out of Sam. That was always fun. He could take a joke just as well as he could volley them back. “No,” I reassured him. “Your eyes are as bright blue and sharp as always.”

“Bright blue, huh?”

“Sorry, I meant cloudy blue.”

“That’s...” He narrowed those beautiful golden-brown orbs of his. “I’m going with bright blue. You said that first.”

I chuckled and opened the door to his bedroom. Of course it would be the one directly next to mine, so that only a thin wall would separate us. What could possibly go wrong?

“Cozy,” Sam said. He pushed his busted suitcase into the room. “I love it.”

“I also decorated this room. Chose the paint and bed frame. That lamp is an antique, used to belong to a famous French artist. I know that because there was a note written by his lover and kept in that little pull-out piece at the base. Oh, and those two ottomans are custom made.”

“Damn, Benny, you really do have a talent for design. I’m going to have to hire you to redo my apartment back in the city.

” He walked to the window and spread the white curtains.

Sunlight dappled the bedroom, filtered by the leaves of a tall oak tree that provided near-permanent shade.

Sam took a moment to look out the window, hands resting on the scuffed windowsill.

His blue jeans cupped his ass just right, making my mouth water.

Fucking hell. Why did it have to be the straight guys who always had the biggest asses?

“Where are you living now?” I asked, pulling my attention from his peaches as he turned to face me.

“I’m in Jersey. Moved there after college. I got a job in New York— had a job in New York.” He shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. I cocked my head, sensing something heavy settle into the room.

I sat at the edge of the bed, the fluffy white comforter sinking underneath my weight. “What happened?”.

“I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

Damn. Whatever it was had clearly rocked him.

I flashed back to being in high school together, to having this protective instinct over Sam.



I was usually the one who was more confrontational, more ready to tussle if it meant putting some jackass bully in their place.

It was a way of protecting myself. I always knew I was gay, and I did little to hide that fact once I actually accepted it.

It wasn't an easy road, and there were a few fist fights and meetings with parents to sort things out at school, but it taught me how to fight for myself.

And fight for others, too.

That same protective instinct from years ago flared up inside me. Who hurt him? And why did I still care so fucking much? Years ago, it was Sam who'd hurt me, and no one else was around to protect my heart. Why was I so eager to jump into the fray and fight for Sam?

Because I'm not a damned asshole.

And because I still care about him.

"Totally fine," I said. I slapped my thighs and stood back up on my feet.

I wasn't about to push anything. If Sam wasn't ready to tell me what he was running from, then I'd give him the space and time to come to me.

And if he didn't, that'd be fine too. Not like we were still best friends or anything.

Sam was here for a finite amount of time before he'd be gone again, to go live his big city-boy life miles and miles away from me.

Hopefully this departure would include fewer tears and less angst than the last one.

“Let’s keep going with the tour, then?”

“Sounds good to me.” Sam took another long look out the window before turning and walking out of the bedroom.

I followed behind him, needing to squeeze past him in the hall.

It put us close enough together that I got a strong whiff of his cologne.

It was a little fruity and flowery, and hit some kind of neurological button that pushed me over into caveman territory.

“So, where’s the rest of the fam?” Sam asked as we walked out the back door and onto a smooth path that led toward the stables. Midnight Dream, a raven black mare who recently joined the ranch, grazed closest to the fence, her long inky-dark mane falling like silk down her neck.

“Boone went into town for some supplies with Wylie, his new boo. You’ll meet him when they get back. You also have to meet Sky, they’re Beau and Pris’ partner. I’m not sure where Billie ran off to.”

“Oh wow, so I take it everyone’s been doing good?”

Yes, and you would have known that if you stuck around.

I swallowed my bitter little quip. “Yup,” I said. “Everyone’s been good.”

“And how about you?”

Gravel crunched underneath my boots. My cowboy hat helped shade my eyes from some of the sun, but it also helped me avoid Sam’s gaze.

“I’ve been doing alright,” I answered honestly.

“Been stuck in a bit of a rut lately. Feel like it’s the same routine every day.

Wake up, make breakfast, muck stables, feed horses, lunch, nap, clean the ranch, make dinner, go to bed. Rinse and repeat.”

“I thought you always enjoyed the routine?”

“I did, and I do. I just need something to work toward, and I feel like I’ve kind of lost that.”

“Are you still racing?”

I shook my head, that dream and passion having fizzled out over the years. “Nope, not recently. I dunno, I think the spark just kinda vanished for me.”

“Really? Any particular reason why?”

“No,” I said, glancing at Sam before I forced myself to look away. “Can’t think of any one reason.”

I could actually think of a few different reasons. My anxiety over losing a race for one, my lack of drive to get things done for two. And my aversion to taking risks, which seemed to have developed after getting my heart broken and crushed by none other than?—

“Sam!” It was my sister, Billie. She popped up at just the right time. I needed someone to come and rescue me from this awkward situation.

With Billie joining us, I continued our tour of the ranch, introducing Sam to all the

horses and the crow I had rescued.

By the end of the tour, the awkwardness had started to diminish, but that only left room for other thoughts. And these thoughts were ones I couldn't entertain. Not if I wanted to keep my sanity or my heart intact.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

SAM

God, it felt weird being back.

It also felt like I never left, and a lot of that had to do with how easy it was to fall back into a friendship with Benny.

From the jump, we slipped into the comfortable and silly banter that had always existed between us.

I'd been genuinely worried that our friendship was irreparably ruined—by me, nonetheless.

But what Benny and I had, whatever it was, appeared to be made out of solid iron.

“How was your trip here?” Benny asked as I followed him out of the house and into the fields out back. The kitchen window was wide open, which allowed the mouth-watering scents of Boone's sweet buns to drift out on the gentle breeze.

“It was pretty chill. Flight wasn't bad. My Uber driver here was very talkative, though. Had a lot of thoughts about the new mayor.”

“Good thoughts?”

“Not really, no. And the things he was complaining about were pretty wild. He didn't realize where he was taking me and got real quiet once he saw the different flags out front.”

“Damn, sorry.” Benny shook his head, hands in his pockets of his tight jeans.

“We actually had a big campaign event here at the ranch to help Mayor Cortez get elected. She’s hosted a couple town halls here, too.

Huge supporter and advocate. Johnson Springs has come a long way since you’ve been here last, but we clearly have some more work to do. ”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. It hurt to think that Benny was still being put through bullshit simply because he was gay and chose to live his life in a small town.

What kind of society were we where some people still clung to ancient prejudices and unfounded hatred toward someone simply for being different?

So fucked up. It didn’t make any sense to me. Made me angry.

Thankfully, the rolling green pastures dotted with daises and grazing horses helped throw some water on the flickering flames of my temper.

“So you’ve felt okay? Staying here? Being gay?” Maybe it was a probing question, and maybe I shouldn’t have asked, but this was Benny. If there was anyone I could ask weird questions to, it was him.

“I have, I have. Don’t get me wrong, it isn’t the easiest thing I’ve ever done, but compared to some of the horror stories I heard, I’ve had it pretty good.

I think a lot of that really has to do with Rainbow Ranch.

Our energy—it just sort of spreads outward.

Not only that, but we tend to attract a lot of other people like us.

So suddenly, a small town that may have had three gay people, tops, is flooded with all the colors of the rainbow.

People became more tolerant, so much so that there's even a pride parade in town.

Makes me feel like staying here made a difference. ”

“Yeah, I can see that... Also, three gay tops? Is three too many?”

Benny gave a series of deep belly laughs.

Damn.

I really missed that sound, hadn't I?

“Is that what you picked up on? No, I don't think that's too much at all. Then again, I wouldn't know. I'm not a bottom.”

I looked to my side, eyebrows jerking halfway up my forehead.

The smug little smile on Benny's face told me he wasn't joking.

Goddamn, he was handsome, and his blunt confidence only made him even more attractive.

Benny was one of those guys that anyone could confidently say was good-looking, whether they were straight, gay, bi—wherever they fell on the queer spectrum.

Even me, a straight guy with curious (and avoidant) tendencies, could admit that Benny was a looker.

I was too busy silently admiring the hard planes of his face, the fullness of his lips, and the dark scruff of his beard to pay any attention to what was in front of me.

And that's when it happened. That's when my sneaker rolled over the top of a rock. I let out a surprised yelp. The ground gave way underneath me. The sky was above me one second, and below me the next. I rolled forward on the soft dirt, not even fighting the momentum.

"Holy cow!" Benny crouched down, looping a hand under my arm. He helped me back up onto my feet. I started to laugh. Couldn't help myself.

"I must have looked so dumb just now."

Benny shrugged. "Maybe a little," he said with a teasing grin. "I didn't know your limbs could stretch that way. You looked like one of those car salesman inflatable wacky tube men but caught in the dryer."

My turn to belly laugh. He no longer had a hand under my arm, instead it was loosely floating over my hip, barely touching me.

So then why did I get the feeling that I could trace out the individual lines of his palm against my skin?

"You okay? Anything sprained, broken, loose?" He asked when my laughter died down.

Don't focus on his hand placement. Don't focus on his hand placement.

"Maybe my hip," I said. "Feels a little sore."

"It does? Here?" Benny pushed his hand forward, placing it directly against my hip.



He gave a gentle squeeze. Firecrackers of sparkles and diamonds erupted inside my core. Heat flushed through my body, pooling between my thighs and spreading upward on a mission to paint my cheeks bright red.

Holy fucking shit.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Just a little sore.”

“This helpin’?” Benny asked as he began to gently massage my hip, his fingers applying the perfect amount of pressure, digging right into the V shaped muscle I worked so damn hard at the gym to make show.

I dropped my head back, eyes shut. “Damn, yeah, that’s incredible.”

“Weird, I thought you fell on your other side.”

I peeped at him with one eye. “That’s because I did. I’m just sore as fuck from the flight.”

Benny tsked and stopped massaging me, playfully slapping my chest with the back of his hand instead. “I don’t give these out for free.”

“Oh, so if I pay you, I can get a massage?”

Benny narrowed his gaze. His lashes were so damn long.

I remember all the girls in high school always wanting to put mascara on him just to see how long they could get them.

“No,” he said flatly. I laughed as he started to walk again, leading us toward the large barn.

The doors were already open, hay forming a clean, crisp layer on the floor as we entered.

A rake and a shovel were resting against the wall, next to shelves full of brushes and neatly rolled up towels.

All of the stalls were empty. There was an earthy scent in the air.

Nothing unpleasant, especially since I knew Benny kept these spaces spotless.

“Is it weird that I miss this barn smell? And that I prefer it over the subway during the summer?”

Benny chuckled at that. “Maybe some other people would think that’s weird, but I definitely don’t. I think you’re right, even though I’ve never ridden the subway. What’s it smell like?”

“Like ripe ass mixed with bottled up ball sweat and old gym socks.”

Benny’s face twisted into a grimace. “Gross. I can see why you’d like this more.”

We exited the barn and strolled out into a large grazing pasture where four different horses milled about, all of them living the absolute life.

Their manes were shining, their coats glowing, their temperaments were chill.

I could tell these horses weren’t just cared for, they were loved and doted on, and that was all thanks to Benny.

The moment he stepped out onto the pasture, the horses all perked up and started to make their way toward us.

Benny handed me a carrot he had grabbed out of a nearby bucket.

The sound of a happy trot made me look to the left, but I didn't see anything— bump

.

I dropped my gaze. There was a horse at my side who only reached up to about mid-thigh.

It greedily grabbed at the carrot in my hand and yanked it out of my grip.

The mini-horse took a couple of embellished steps backwards, tossed its white mane in the air, and munched down on the carrot, throwing us what I could only describe as a side-eye.

“That would be Dennis,” Benny said, flashing his pearly white teeth in a big grin. “He’s the troublemaker of the ranch. He’s also the heart of it.”

“I think he gave me a bruise.” I rubbed at the spot on my thigh where he’d headbutted me.

“It’s his way of saying howdy... Sam, I’m being real here: you aren’t going to take him, are you?”

The genuine concern and worry in Benny’s tone made my heart clench.

“Absolutely not. I swear on my life, Dennis isn’t going anywhere.

I’m honestly not sure why Frankie did what he did.

I think leaving it all to you or one of your siblings would have been the easiest thing to do, but he always had an interesting sense of humor. ”

“He was such a great guy. Heart of gold. And he always had the best words of advice. If he wasn’t a ranch manager, I always told him he could have been a killer therapist.”

“A killer therapist actually sounds like a pretty bomb TV show. Therapist by day, serial killer by night.”

“I’d watch it.”

I chuckled, bracing myself as Dennis finished his carrot and looked as though he was going to headbutt me for more. “Frankie had that air about him, too. You could just trust him. Like he knew what you needed to tell him before you ever said a word.”

“I agree,” Benny said. He smiled and offered me another carrot just in time, because Dennis looked like he was about to break into a run at any second.

The worry that had flashed across his face was nowhere to be found.

A mirage that shimmered away into nothingness.

He was back to his relaxed, calm, peaceful self.

The Benny I’d always known.

The Benny I’d really fucking missed.

“Come,” he said, bending down and giving Dennis a kiss on the forehead.

His shirt tipped forward and revealed a sliver of the tanned, slightly furry skin of his lower back.

A thick white band peaked out from underneath his jeans.

“Let’s finish up the tour so you can get settled in. I’m sure you’re tired.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

You don't realize just how awake I am right now.

"Yeah," I replied. "I could use a bed."

Fuck, the exhaustion crept up on me sometime after meeting the last horse.

I only spent about ten minutes in the shower before I felt the siren call of my bed reaching out through the thick steam.

I dried off and put on my sleeping shorts, which would be coming off the second I got back into the bedroom.

I brushed my teeth and washed my face and took a moment to look in the fog-streaked mirror.

I cocked my head and smiled.

Life could be so damn weird, couldn't it?

Just last week I was doing the same thing, except I was staring at a puffy-eyed and depressed-as-fuck reflection, smile nowhere to be found.

It was a moment that resembled something close to rock bottom for me.

I realized that the light and life I normally exuded had been snuffed out somewhere between my relationship troubles and my career issues.

I had felt like used gum, chewed up and spit out and desiccated in the dry air. Lonely and sad and drifting.

One day at Rainbow Ranch seemed to have cured all of that.

Maybe it was the distance, or maybe it was my avoidant tendencies (sorry, Zack), but something—and I don't want to be overly dramatic here— healed inside me the second I stepped out of my Uber and onto the ranch.

Like my inner child had been waiting for this very moment to burst through the doors of my subconscious and fill me up with joy again.

Or maybe it was just being around Benny that did all the healing heavy lifting?

Benny, Benny, Benny. Ohhhhh Benny.

Seeing him brought back so many memories and stirred up some residual emotions I thought were long, long gone.

Benny had been the one who made me question everything when we were younger.

I'd grown up with the same heterosexual rulebook he'd been raised with: Tonka trucks for Christmas, water guns for birthday parties, enrolled in baseball and basketball, always asked about possible girlfriends by every extended family member at every large gathering possible.

And yet, somehow, someday, Benny broke out of the mold and realized he was made for a different set of rules.

He came out to me when we were freshman in high school, and I immediately remember feeling the need to protect him.

The second emotion I felt was pride.

The third? It was jealousy.

That was the most subtle, but also the most toxic. I couldn't parse it. Didn't want to face it.

But that was so long ago. I moved on from those questions. Discovered that what I felt for Benny was an anomaly. A blip in the radar.

A yawn made me drop my head forward and stretch out my jaw. I finished up and walked out of the bathroom wearing a cloak of steam.

I liked boiling hot showers.

I walked down the hall and into my room, becoming acutely aware of the fact that the door to Benny's room was only a couple feet away.

There was a guest house that I could have taken up in, maybe I could ask to be moved there?

I didn't want to impose on the family. I also didn't want to fuel my fantasies any further.

Inside the room, I shut the door and locked it.

Seconds later, I was completely naked again.

I tossed my shorts on a comfortable-looking navy blue chair and draped my towel across the back.



Then I flopped onto the bed, my face sinking into the cloud-like pillow.

I couldn't help but groan. The sheets were so soft they should have been illegal, and they smelled like lavender and vanilla.

I rolled onto my back and splayed out like a starfish.

Fuck, this bed was comfortable.

And this room felt so cozy and homey, but also elevated. Benny really did have a great eye for design.

Then, as if he had known I was thinking of him, Benny coughed, sounding almost as if he were in the room with me. His bed must have been pushed directly against the wall behind me.

Damn these walls are thin.

I lazily rubbed my chest, wondering what Benny was doing right now. Was he reading something? Browsing YouTube? Was he doing something else?

My thoughts trailed, desire painting the path.

Damn. I hadn't jerked off in like a week.

I'd been feeling down on myself, but that didn't stop the sexual urges from building up, my balls feeling more and more full.

It didn't help that I already had an overactive sex drive.

I could fuck multiple times a day, going for sessions long enough to leave me and my

partners sweaty and brainless messes by the end of it.

So not jerking off in a week was already asking a lot of me.

My cock started to swell. I didn't want to keep imagining Benny—my therapist would likely have something to say about that—so I leaned over and grabbed my phone off the nightstand. I grabbed my headphones next, popping them in and connecting them to my phone.

I cupped my balls as I opened up one of my go-to porn sites. The front page already had a couple videos that caught my attention. I opened one of them: a man lying down on a milking table with his wife underneath, working his lubed-up cock.

Fuck, that was hot. I stroked myself with one hand and scrubbed through the video with the other. I went to a gang bang scene next, where the girl had at least fifteen guys lined up behind her.

Underneath that video was another, featuring one of the guys in the last clip. It was him and another man, the preview showing them kissing passionately inside a locker room. They looked like they had just finished playing soccer.

I tapped the video. Made it full screen.

Leaned back. Something dinged, but I ignored it.

Probably a spam text. I spread my legs and gripped my rock-hard cock.

The video started with them congratulating each other on their win.

I skipped all the small talk, dragging the slider to where they started kissing.

Fuck. What was it about two men—all muscles and hair and firmness—kissing and rubbing that really set me off? Was it just that I didn't see it very often? I rarely jerked off to gay porn, not going to say it never happened, but it wasn't a frequent thing. Maybe that's what made it so hot?

Whatever. Didn't matter. Dick. All I cared about was dick. My dick. Stroking it, feeling the pressure build in my core, picturing Benn—no, not that.

The two men on the screen were naked, their cocks battling for space between them as their lips locked, hands roaming and squeezing and cupping.

I jerked off harder, hyper-aware to not make the bed shake with my movements so the headboard didn't hit the wall.

The last thing I wanted was for Benny to know what I was doing.

One of the men dropped down, taking the other's cock down his throat. My eyes rolled to the back of my head. A clear stream of pre-cum leaked from my tip, sliding down the shaft. I used it as lube, spreading it up and down, watching as the guy deep throated the other.

“Yeah, boy, suck that big cock. Take it. Take it down to my balls. That's it, oh fuck yeah.”

Maybe it was my paranoia talking, but that sounded way too loud. Even though I wore headphones, I didn't want any noise leaking through. I lowered the volume on my phone so I didn't have to worry about Benny picking up on what I was doing.

There, now I could blow my load in peace.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

BENNY

I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Sam Carter was currently lying down in the bedroom next to mine.

Greeting him, seeing him again, giving him a tour of the ranch—that all went smoother than expected. Slightly awkward, sure. But it didn't take us long at all to fall back into that easy camaraderie we always had together.

Which, considering what we'd been through, that was a blessing in and of itself.

I sat propped up against the headboard, endlessly scrolling on my iPad for something to watch for a grand total of five minutes before I fell asleep.

I wondered what Sam's nightly routine consisted of.

Did he like to read? Listen to a mind-numbing self-help podcast or a riveting fantasy series?

Was he into meditation? Did he just jerk off and go to sleep?

What did it even matter?

I was losing my marbles. I decided I'd take the day tomorrow to ride Juniper June.

She was my absolute favorite horse. A seven-year-old Appaloosa with a shiny white coat speckled with black spots, making her look like a horse cosplaying as a

Dalmatian.

We had her the ranch since she was a foal and had instantly bonded with me.

She came around when Sam had moved away, pulling me out of that shitty time.

Perfect temperament, perfect stride, perfect everything. I knew I could saddle her up and trust that she'd take the metaphorical reins while I handled the literal ones.

That would clear my head.

I set my iPad down and looked over at the large incubator sitting on two chairs, up against the wall farthest from my bed.

Still close enough for me to see that the crow was sleeping peacefully on his warm, fluffy, rolled-up towel bed.

After the trip to Doc Evans' office—which was being renovated and had little room to board patients—it was decided that the best thing for the bird's future was for me to take it home and help rehab it.

I decided to keep my intense and nearly debilitating fear of beaked creatures to myself, biting my tongue as Doc Evans so nonchalantly handed me back my slightly sedated new roommate.

I called Beau to set up the incubator somewhere at the ranch where I'd never see it again, maybe in the administrative office. I rarely ever stepped foot in there. Paperwork made me break out in hives.

So, color me surprised when I got back to Rainbow Ranch and found the incubator set up in my bedroom.

Beau blamed it on the bad cell reception at the ranch, but the smirk he wore as he left my room said otherwise.

I had to admit, the crow was growing on me. I enjoyed seeing him already starting feel better. He appeared to understand I was trying to help, too. He wouldn't try to fly away when I'd open the incubator, and he didn't try to peck my hand off whenever I dropped fresh water and food in there.

I was still deathly scared of birds, don't get me wrong, but at least I didn't sleep with the lights on last night.

Progress.

A yawn made me cover my mouth. I stretched my arms and legs before reaching over to my table lamp and turning it off. The bright iPad screen became the only source of light in my room. I sighed and got under the covers, getting comfortable so I could continue aimlessly scroll?—

“Yeah, boy, suck that big cock. Take it. Take it down to my balls. That's it, oh fuck yeah.”

Umm...

What the fuck was that?

I locked my iPad screen. Had that come from some website I didn't close out of?

“Yeah, how's that taste? All that man down your throat? Good? Yeah?”

No, that wasn't coming from my iPad, that was coming through the wall behind me.

It was coming from Sam's bedroom.

My eyes went wide as my heart began to pound. He was watching porn.

Not just any typical MILF or straight amateur video either. He was watching gay porn. Two men. Going at it hard , from what I could hear.

Shit. I had to tell him. But also... fuck. I was getting hard, my dick poking through the open slit of my boxers. I couldn't just walk over and knock on his door now.

Did he know I could hear? There was no way. This had to be some kind of accident.

A really hot, fantasy-fueling accident that needed to stop. What if my siblings walked by? I think he could survive the embarrassment from me telling him I could hear, but I had full confidence that Sam would self-combust if it were any of my siblings asking him to turn his deep throat scene down.

I quickly grabbed my phone off the nightstand and sent him a text.

BENNY: Howdy, um I can hear what you're watching right now. Might want to turn it down.

Mere seconds after I sent the text, I heard a muffled "shit" from behind the wall and then the sounds of a guy gagging on cock disappeared. I could see that he was typing a response, then stopped, then started typing again, then stopped again.

BENNY: Next time ask me for recs ;)

There, that should maybe make it less awkward.

SAM: Sorry. Headphones died.

BENNY: Totally fine. Don't worry about it.

I didn't want to push it any farther. I could use this moment to pry a little deeper, maybe ask about his particular preferences in adult skin ema, but digging felt way too invasive.

If Sam really wasn't straight, then I'd let him tell me that on his own terms. Either way, I wasn't going to get my hopes up.

I saw how that went last time.

SAM: And yeah, maybe next time I'll ask for some links.

I grinned like a goofball, surprised he was still texting about this and not Googling ways to expedite a move out of this country.

BENNY: Oh I've got lots. Depends on what you're into.

That was an open invitation. He didn't need to take it, but the suggestion was clearly there.

Keep this going. Let's keep playing.

I started getting hard again. I wondered if Sam was still hard. He clearly wasn't watching porn for research purposes or for the storyline. He'd been jerking off minutes earlier.

Did he still need to stroke?

My judgement was clearly fried. But could you really blame me? Sam was my first crush, the first guy I fantasized about, the guy who gave me my first butterflies and



my first heartbreak.

Emphasis on that list bit. Heartbreak. Sam had really made things difficult for me, making me question everything I thought I knew about my best friend, reconsidering what it meant to love someone.

I had to not only untangle what it meant to be gay in a small and primarily conservative town, but I also had to sort out what it meant to fall in love with your very straight best friend.

It made my coming out process more turbulent than a plane flying through a damn hurricane.

But... well, fuck. I was a horny guy currently turned on by the fact that there was also another horny guy only a couple feet away from me, one who happened to be incredibly attractive and off-limits.

My phone dinged. My heart stopped.

SAM: I think I'm in my exploring phase.

Interesting. Very, very interesting.

BENNY: Want to explore together?

Nope, way too forward.

I deleted that message and retyped a new one.

BENNY: I always pegged you as an adventurer ;)

There. That had humor and also a slick double entendre.

Also... fucking hell, the idea of getting behind him, holding his hips while I guided my cock inside, seeing his head drop and muscles relax as I fucked him senseless...

it was an image that immediately got me hard as a boulder.

I tossed off the comforter and spread my legs, my cock jutting out from my boxers.

He started to type and then stopped. This continued for a little bit longer. I chuckled.

SAM: I'm sure you did lol.

SAM: Maybe you can just, I dunno, entertain me here.

Holy shit. Code red, code red. He wasn't just playing along, he was initiating now. He wanted me to entertain him, which was code for sext with me. My pulse quickened. This was wrong, we still had so much to unpack from how things ended.

And yet...

BENNY: I'd love to entertain you. Especially in the way that daddy was entertaining his boy in the video you were watching. Sounded really hot. devilish face

SAM: What would you do?

BENNY: I'd start by massaging you, relaxing you. You've had a long day. I'll work out the knots in your shoulders and back. Then I'd move lower, massage your ass, your thighs. I'll push my bulge up against your hand, encouraging you to grab it, to play with me.

I hit send before I could overthink things. Control of my body had been handed over to the caveman that lived inside me.

SAM: Fuck, Benny... that's really hot.

BENNY: You have me stroking right now.

SAM: I'm jerking too.

Holy shit. I briefly considered inviting him over. Not like he'd have to deal with any traffic on his way, but the caveman ceased his ugga uggas long enough for me to hold back. This didn't need to be rushed.

BENNY: Close your eyes. Imagine it's my hand around your cock. Spit on it. Stroke faster.

My breaths came in faster bursts. I fisted my full balls, cock leaking what seemed like a river of precum. I don't think I'd ever gotten this fucking wet before. What was Sam doing to me?

SAM: I'm honestly getting close.

BENNY: Good, so am I. Keep jerking yourself off.

SAM: I am. I'm so fucking hard.

God damnnnn, he wants me to melt.

BENNY: Me too. I'm using my precum as lube, you've got me dripping.

SAM: Oh fuck, Benny, you're gonna make me bust.

I jerked off harder, feeling the precipice slam into me as I read his words. My toes curled and my legs stretched out, cum shooting out of my cock, hitting my chin and chest. Just behind me, I heard the muffled moans of someone experiencing the same exact pleasure I'd just been given.

Then, without me asking for anything, Sam sent a picture. It showed his flushed pink chest covered in cum.

SAM: You made me make a mess.

His photo was enough to keep me hard. I sent him a picture showing him just how messy he made me.

BENNY: We're even then.

SAM: Haha guess so.

SAM: Thanks for keeping me entertained. Maybe coming back wasn't such a bad idea after all ;)

I huffed out a laugh.

BENNY: Clearly it wasn't. Alright, get some sleep. You have to be up at six with the rest of us.

SAM: Six?! I haven't woken up that early in years.

BENNY: Well then welcome back, buddy.

SAM: Right. Six it is. Night.

I locked my phone and laid in bed for a while, both basking in the afterglow of such a great orgasm and questioning what the hell I was doing with my life.

I'd been feeling like I was in a rut for a while now.

Was this just me trying any way I could to break out of that?

Was I asking to get hurt again? Or was this something entirely different?

Could this be the beginning of something new?

Whatever it was, I wasn't going to figure it out tonight.

SAM

I wiped the sweat off my brow with a corner of my already drenched T-shirt. Thankfully it was black, so I didn't look like a splotchy and melting mess.

Since when did it get so damn hot in Oklahoma? I couldn't remember ever feeling like I was in the second circle of hell when I lived here, but maybe that was nostalgia talking. Or possibly climate change.

One or the other.

“How ya doing out here, Sam?”

I looked up from the food trough I'd been cleaning out.

Sky walked toward me with a beaming smile, their bright green hair matching a wrist full of green bracelets in all different shades.

They were pretty new to the ranch, having practically stumbled onto it after chasing a storm—or, I guess in Sky's case, after being chased by a storm.

It was likely one of their luckiest days yet, considering that tornado led them directly into the arms of Beau and Pris. The trio were nearly inseparable, their connection as clear as day.

It was nice to see. That's something I loved about Rainbow Ranch.

It served as a haven—not just for the animals that lived on the property or the teens who came seeking purpose, but also as a safe space for expressing yourself and live free from judgment.

Maybe that’s why I loved living in the city, too.

It was a different kind of safe space. The multitude of people and personalities and cultures made it easier to blend into the crowd.

But at Rainbow Ranch, there was no blending in, and no need to, either. Everyone’s individuality was celebrated equally.

“I’m doing alright,” I said, feeling beads of sweat drip down my shoulders. “Hot as balls out here, though.”

“Want some water?”

“Nah, I was just about to head inside for lunch anyway.”

“Oh, you might want to hurry. Benny made some killer mac and cheese bites. His cooking is trouble.” They rubbed their belly, grinning.

“Trust me, I know. He’s always been a great chef. Even in high school. He’d cook up the wildest, tastiest dishes. It was impressive. Especially at that age, when microwaving a Hot Pocket was already difficult enough.”

Sky laughed at that. They leaned against the barn door, sunlight painting the red wood slats behind them in bold strokes of gold. They wore a red and white plaid shirt half-tucked into their torn jeans. “You two have known each other since high school?”

“Since like fourth grade, yeah. My dad moved us here after my mom passed. He was born and raised in Johnson Springs, so he wanted to come back. It was just me and him. Then I met Benny—and by met I mean I nearly ran away with him after we concocted a whole scheme during snack time, where he was going to teach me to ride a horse.”

“Whoa. Talk about a meet cute.”

“A what cute?”

“A meet cute. It’s like the special moment in romance books where the two characters meet for the first time.”

“Huh,” I said. “Never heard of that one before.”

“Not that I’m comparing you two to a romance novel or anything. Just saying. But also, the puppy eyes you guys throw each other are cute.”

I could feel my cheeks redden. Thankfully, they were likely already pretty flushed from the heat and exertion, so Sky didn’t seem to notice.

It had been a week since I arrived at Rainbow Ranch and reunited with Benny.

A whole ass week since I accidentally played porn loud enough for Benny to hear.

Seven full days since I had sexted with Benny for the first time ever.

And I’d been jerking off to the photo of him covered in cum every day since.

Talk about a state of fucking confusion. Neither of us brought it up after it happened. I wasn’t sure if that was because Benny wanted to bury it and never speak of it again



or if he was just giving me space to talk about it first.

It was a lot for me to think about. Thoughts that weren't new to me, not at all. Especially not when they pertained to Benny.

Dennis bolted into the barn, neighing happily as he body slammed one of the gates, spooking a peacefully resting Princess.

She huffed out her annoyance and kicked at the wall of her stall.

Behind him trailed a smiling Benny, looking like a Western film star.

He wore a simple white tank top that showed off strong biceps, one of them artfully highlighted by dark black tattoos made of strong lines and sharp edges, looking almost like an alien script.

His light jeans were tucked into his coffee-colored leather cowboy boots, an intricate and delicate floral pattern etched into the sides.

He had a plate in his hand, fat and crispy mac and cheese balls resting in the center.

"Howdy, I thought you'd might want some," Benny said as he handed me the plate. It smelled heavenly. My mouth started to water.

"Those were sooo good, Benny."

"Thanks, they're one of my go-tos."

Sky pushed off the wall. They gave Dennis a couple of head scratches before clapping their hands and waving. "I gotta go, I think Pris needed help in the garden."

“See ya,” I said.

“If you want more, there’s plenty!” Benny pointed at the plate. “Left a bowl full of ‘em in the kitchen.”

Sky shouted another thanks over their shoulder and walked out of the barn, leaving me and Benny alone.

I grabbed one of the mac and cheese balls and took a bite.

Warm, sharp cheddar cheese melted together with a softer kind of cheese, coating a delicious mouthful of perfectly cooked noodles.

The crisp of the breaded and spiced shell was the perfect way to balance and enhance an already perfect recipe.

“Damn,” I said, nodding, covering my mouth with a fist as I finished chewing my bite. “That’s really fucking good.”

“Thank ya, thank ya. I’m all done in the kitchen so I’m free to help you with whatever chores you’ve got left.”

“I’m done cleaning and mucking the stalls.

Was just giving that extra food trough a good deep clean before we start using it again.

” That wasn’t something that had been on my list of things to do but being here kicked off a drive to work around the ranch.

I already offered to pay for my stay, but everyone refused to accept my money.

I hated to be seen as a freeloader of any kind and so I wanted to make sure everyone knew I would at least work in exchange for a bed.

“Nice, thank you. You didn’t have to do that.”

I shrugged, swallowing another gooey, cheesy, crunchy bite. “Eh, I’ve got nothing else to do,” I said, and then, without overthinking it, I added, “unless you have those video recs for me.”

Benny cocked his head, smile curling the corner of his lips.

Fuck it. I wasn’t going to pretend like nothing had happened between us. We weren’t skittish teenagers figuring shit out anymore. We were both grown men, with plenty of experience and confidence in our own actions.

And in our own desires.

“I wasn’t sure you still needed them.” He crossed his arms, which made his biceps bulge even more.

Shit. Was I an arms guy? I hadn’t really thought much of it. I knew I always found a woman’s ass to be the most attractive part of their body, did that change when it came to men? I wasn’t entirely sure. I mean, I also really fucking liked Benny’s ass, too, so... maybe not?

And what did any of this even mean in the first place?

I wasn’t running from or fearful of the emotions Benny stirred in me—not I had the first time I felt these visceral sensations—but I still didn’t know how to deal with them.

Did I surrender to the wave? Just lean into the connection? And what about our past?

A blade made of pure guilt stabbed through my chest. I had to apologize to him.

Benny's dark eyes narrowed. "Honestly, the picture you sent has kept me pretty entertained."

I chuckled at that, trying to hide the way my body really wanted to react to the mention of the photos we swapped—with a moan. "That was hot."

"It was. I didn't think... I guess I shouldn't assume things are just like they used to be."

"It's weird. Nothing's how it used to be, but it also feels like everything's how it used to be. I can't really explain it."

"You don't have to," Benny said. "I get it."

Of course he did. Benny always got it. He always understood me.

I set the plate down on the ledge of the empty stall next to me.

"You know, Benny, I've been meaning to talk to you...

about how I left. How I said things I never should have said.

Acted in ways I really fucking regret. To this day, I still regret ever pushing you away.

Seeing you fall backward, it's a reoccurring nightmare of mine.

Sometimes there's nothing but empty space behind you.

Those are the worst." A swell of emotion lodged in my throat.

I'd come a long way from the repressed and selfish kid I'd once been, but it scared me that I'd been capable of that to begin with.

"I'm so sorry. I should have just respectfully explained why I couldn't kiss you.

Why I couldn't be with you the way you wanted me to, the way you deserved.

I was just so scared of—of bullshit, honestly.

Of disappointing my parents, of turning toward sin.

I was religious to a point of toxicity back then.

It shaped some of my reactions. I'm sorry. "

Each word I spoke felt like applying soothing balm to a blistering sunburn.

I couldn't stay a day longer at Rainbow Ranch without getting this apology out.

Especially not when I was flirting with the one person I'd been so terrified to even bat an eyelash toward when I was younger.

We'd been best friends, always together, and that had made me extra alert to try and avoid any tiny action that could be misconstrued and kick up a whirlwind of nasty rumors.

What I should have been terrified of was losing the one person who I could fully be

myself around.

Benny blinked in surprise. He clearly wasn't expecting this, and if he was, what I said still caught him off guard.

He smiled, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"I really appreciate that, Sam, and I accept it. Seeing you wasn't easy, I ain't gonna lie.

It brought up a whole lot of feelings I thought were buried.

Some of those feelings were negative, just from how we left things.

But you apologizing to me... it means a lot.

And it makes those negative emotions kinda just... fade away."

"Good," I said. The space between us was shrinking. Was I moving toward him, or him moving toward me? I couldn't quite tell. It was as though we'd both been caught inside each other's orbit, being pulled closer and closer together.

"So, I guess what I'm wondering is—forget it, not my place to ask."

"Ask," I said. "You can ask me anything."

His eyes locked with mine. He was thinking about it. I knew what he wanted to ask, and I was scared I wouldn't have the answer for him.

But that didn't matter. I knew I was in a place that was safe enough for me to figure it out.

My Apple Watch buzzed with a notification. Out of instinct—and because service out here was so bad, the random buzz scared me—I checked the alert. An email appeared on the screen, sent from my boss's account, simply titled: Termination Effective Immediately.

My mood, buoyed by the flirty tension between Benny and I, immediately plummeted down to the very core of the earth. It was as if my boss personally reached through my phone and slapped me across the face after she'd just gotten a new set of nails installed.

Well, I guess no place is safe from a pink slip.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

BENNY

I cleared my throat. The earthy scent of hay and horse feed filled the air. Dennis was nearby, his entire head stuffed in a bucket of apples. The wet and greedy sounds of his crunches were louder than the sound of my pounding heart.

Where was this conversation headed? Was I hallucinating this?

Dreaming? Had Sam actually brought up the sexting incident from last week?

I truly thought that'd never be talked about again.

I assumed he regretted ever opening up that horny can of worms with me.

That thought had me pretty bummed, but I wasn't going to blow up about it or go out of my way to make him think differently.

So, color me absolutely surprised when Sam joked about that night.

Surprised, intrigued, and also turned on. I could kiss him right now. Not that I would, nor that I should, but... damn, did I want to. His lips were curled into a smile that made me wonder if he was thinking something similar.

What were we doing here? Should I just break through whatever barriers were left between us?

His heartfelt and sincere apology effectively healed the wound across my heart that



never got a chance to close.

He didn't even need to say sorry. I wasn't exactly expecting it, nor did I think he owed it to me, but boy was it nice to hear.

It also put a lot of his actions into perspective.

I'd been the one to initiate the kiss back then.

I always felt like there were a few seconds where he leaned into it, his hand cupping my elbow, right before his entire body tensed and his hand clamped down.

I remember him pushing me back. It wasn't a hard push at all, but it caught me off guard and made me trip on a rock.

The fall was definitely more dramatic than it needed to be, but the damage had been done.

He didn't even help me back up. He turned and ran, likely horrified at himself for what he'd done.

Meanwhile, I was horrified at myself for what I'd done.

I felt like I'd let my urges drive me and ruined one of the best relationships in my life.

I considered Sam to be as close to me as my siblings were, his shoulder was the one I collapsed into when I found out my parents were gone. We'd been through so much together.

And I ruined it. I kissed him and I messed it all up, thinking he was straight, thinking that he'd become disgusted by me.

That was never the case, though. He was running from himself, and I was caught in the consequences that came with him trying to figure things out.

Now, though, I could ask the question that had been burning on the tip of my tongue since Sam stepped back onto the grounds of Rainbow Ranch.

“I’m just wondering, are you—“ I paused.

Sam had briefly checked an alert on his watch and his entire expression dropped.

It was a night-and-day shift from the smirking and relaxed Sam that had been standing in front of me.

My eyebrows inched together. Even though it had been six years since the last time we were ever really close, I could still pick up on the mood changes radiating off my ex-best friend. “What happened? Everything okay?”

Sam dropped his head back and sighed. His Adam’s apple bobbed, his neck having been freshly shaved. “No. No it’s not.”

“Want to talk about it?” I asked.

He looked at me, his hazel eyes swirling with worry.

He bit his lip, hands stuffed in the pocket of his dark blue shorts, a sweaty bandana he’d been using to mop his forehead was tied through the belt loop.

He wore a pair of heavy-duty brown boots I helped him pick out from the shop in town, since he only brought a pair of Converse, and they weren’t going to cut it on the ranch.

He'd only been here a week, but his transformation from city boy to cowboy was already beginning.

"Come on," I said, digging in my pocket and making sure I had my keys. "Let's go for a ride. I have some things to pick up in town. We can get some fresh air, and you can tell me what's going on."

Sam swallowed and let go of the breath he'd been holding. As if he'd just broken the surface of the water he'd been swimming under. "That sounds good."

I offered him a genuine smile and walked with him to where I parked my truck. Gravel and rocks crunched under my boots as I sped up before reaching the passenger side. I opened the door for Sam, who shook his head, almost bashfully. "Just like old times."

"Yup," I replied as Sam hopped into the seat.

I shut the door and walked over to the driver's side.

I wasn't sure exactly when it started—sometime early in Freshman year, I think—but I had gotten into the habit of always opening the car door for Sam, or at least trying to race him before he could open it himself.

It started off as a fun little game but then just kinda became habit.

Guess the habit stuck.

"Smells good in here," Sam said. "Like vanilla."

"Thanks. Got her cleaned yesterday. Picked up that air freshener after." I lowered the windows, letting in the fresh afternoon breeze, and turned on the radio but kept the

music low.

I started down the driveway, waving at Wylie and Boone who were just getting back to the ranch from a picnic, one I helped get the food ready for. I hoped they liked the strawberry jam.

I glanced over at Sam. He sat with an arm propped out the open window, his wavy brown hair picked up by the wind as I sped up on the main road.

I really didn't have any errands to run but I could tell Sam needed the distraction.

He always liked going for rides around town when we were kids, especially when he had to clear his mind of something.

There were nights we'd ride through the open fields with nothing but some music playing, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

Maybe we don't have to go to town...

I took a left down a dirt road, open green pastures on either side of us.

"I got fired from my job today." Sam kept his attention on the wide, vast horizon. "I knew it was coming, but it doesn't stop it from sucking major donkey balls."

"Fuck, Sam, I'm sorry." I moved to lower the music some more. It was at the same moment Sam was going to adjust it, our fingers touching. Briefly, so briefly.

Yet it was enough to kick off a chain reaction of sparks exploding through my body.

How could such a simple touch, such a quick moment, lead to such a profound reaction?

Sam raised the volume on the country song playing on the radio. I brought my hands back to the wheel, the sparks still coursing through me. “Is that what brought you to the ranch? Besides Dennis?”

He nodded, sighing. “I haven’t talked to anyone about this. Not even my mom, and you know I tell her everything. But, well, I fucked up, big time. I had the biggest client of my entire career—a mega pop star you’ve most likely heard of and danced to before. I thought I was set. Completely made.

Then she ends up getting into a social media fight with the Duchess of Essex. Yes, you heard that right. She picked a fight with royalty. And did you know the Duchess has a very active, and very vicious , fandom? I didn’t, until they doxed my client and started stalking her at her home.”

“That’s terrible, what the hell?”

“It’s not even the craziest part. So as her PR guy, I’m working overtime trying to fix this, coming up with ways I could mend the bridge and make the public either just back off or flip into sympathy mode.

It was a challenge, and I was loving it.

Putting out such big fires in that pressure-cooker environment just—I don’t know, makes me horny. ”

I laughed even though I almost drove us off the road and into a ditch. “I can see that. You were always a high-stakes kind of guy.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I can’t handle the pressure even though I like it.

I was running on empty when I came up with an idea.

Stupid, but I figured why not. I created a couple fake accounts and seeded them around viral videos, commenting about my client's innocence and their personal interactions with her.

I'd then buy likes and drive those comments up. Sneaky, but I thought it was working.

Until last week, when I went around making my positive comment trail, not realizing I'd been logged into my client's account the entire time.

It immediately blew up. The narrative shifted from my client's petty fight to now her sociopathic tendencies of creating puppet accounts and commenting about herself.

"Sam dropped his head back against the head rest and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Oh fuck."

"Exactly. My client was rightfully furious. It was such a rookie mistake, right when I was about to go prime time."

"People make mistakes."

"Yes, and people get fired for those mistakes."

I shook my head, wishing I could do something to fix this for him. There wasn't much I could do, though.

"It's okay," Sam said, reassuring me when it was likely him who needed comforting.

"I've got enough in savings to cushion me for a while.

When I got the letter from Frankie about this Rainbow Ranch thing, I figured the timing meant something.

Like I just needed the break. Time to reset.

So, once I'm done here, I'll reach out to whatever connections I've got and see if I can get a second chance somewhere. ”

Talking about being done at Rainbow Ranch left a bitter taste in the back of my mouth.

I ignored it. “Everyone deserves a second chance. Sometimes the first go-around is meant to be a stepping stone for the final shape of things. We need those first times, the messy lessons, so we could thrive once another chance to shine comes around.”

“Look at you, being all philosophical and shit.”

I chuckled at that. “I've been listening to lots of podcasts about things like that.”

“Might need to start listening to those.”

“I'll send some recommendations along with my porn ones.”

“Ah, perfect,” Sam said. “It'll give me something to listen to while I clean up.”

Again, I nearly jerked the steering wheel to the side. “You're ridiculous,” I said, the both of us laughing, the tension of the moment easing.

Maybe I did have something I could offer to fix this. Laughter. Happiness. An escape.

There was also something else in my arsenal. Instead of taking us to town, I decided

to drive somewhere else, somewhere much more remote and out of the way.

Sam looked around as I slowed the truck to a stop. “No way, you brought us here?”

Shit, was he angry? Had I miscalculated his nostalgia for places we used to hang out at? Did I make a mistake?

“Uh... yeah. Sorry?”.



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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

SAM

Benny's truck rolled to a stop in a very familiar spot. I hadn't even been paying attention to where Benny had been taking us. I'd been so wrapped up in telling him what happened that I completely missed the dirt roads leading us directly to one of our old haunts.

"No way, you brought us here?" I asked with surprise, looking out the window at the shaded trail cutting through a copse of cottonwood trees.

A streak of red paint on one of the trees marked the entrance to Bennam Creek—the only combination of our names that sounded good.

It was the most creative energy two fourteen-year-old boys could muster when they stumbled upon their own private little oasis.

"Uh... yeah. Sorry?"

I chuckled, unbuckled my seatbelt, and threw open the door. "Sorry about what? This is perfect."

"Oh good," he said, sounding relieved.

I stepped out into the warm air and sucked in a deep breath, filling my lungs. It smelled like wet grass and cedar and bushels of wildflowers. It smelled like the past.

"I haven't been back here since you left," Benny confessed. He stood at my side. The

path trailed forward, curving into the trees and disappearing from sight.

Damn. He hadn't been back since then? Benny used to love spending time here. I enjoyed it, and maybe even enjoyed it more because of how much Benny loved it, but I wasn't as much of an outdoorsman as Benny was. After a while, the buzzing bugs and lack of a proper bathroom usually got to me.

"What if the creek's dried up or something?" Benny asked.

"It'd better not be. I was hoping I could take a dip. Clean up after the sweaty morning."

Benny shot me a look before he started walking forward. "Did you bring a bathing suit?"

"No, but I brought my birthday suit."

Benny nearly tripped on... well, nothing. I glanced down to see that there wasn't a single rock, twig, or hole near his foot.

I grinned and sped up so I could match Benny's pace.

I was exhausted from the week but was finding a second wind hanging out with Benny.

The trail snaked toward the left and opened up, sunlight transforming the dirt trail into a gold-speckled road.

"So, you were going to ask me something," I said. "Before I stole the show with my career failures."

“Not failures, Sam, just road bumps.”

“More like road closures, but sure.” I chuckled and winked to reassure him that this was all in self-deprecating fun.

Talking to Benny on the drive here helped alleviate a lot of the bullshit that had been weighing me down, not just from the email, but from the entire situation.

I needed to vocalize how wild it all was, and how I could still turn things around after a few months to reset.

I didn’t kill anyone, I didn’t steal anything, I didn’t punch someone’s fragile old grandma.

I did deserve a second chance. I’d probably have to eat shit on the way back up to the top, but that was fine, so long as there was a chance for me to get over this mess.

“I don’t even remember my question,” Benny said. He sported a dark shadow of scruff around his jaw, a golden chain shining around his tan neck.

“You were going to ask me if I was... something?”

Benny chewed his bottom lip. “Oh yeah, now I remember.”

“And?” I asked as we continued down the trail. We were getting close to the creek. I could already hear the lazy babbling of the tranquil water.

“It was nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Really? Because with how red you’re getting, I don’t think it was nothing.”

“I’m not getting red.” He wasn’t. “Ugh, fine.” Before he could ask his question, we turned another corner and found ourselves at the famous and hidden Bennam Creek.

It was narrow, barely ten feet across, but it curved in a soft horseshoe bend where the water pooled even deeper—about waist high around that part, from what I remembered.

The current was lazy and silver in the late afternoon light, sprinkled with the fluttering wings of dozens of dragonflies.

Just before the creek was a fallen tree that leaned partway into the water.

It was covered in thick green moss and had a spot that appeared to be carved out to make the perfect bench.

It’s where Benny and I sat for hours on end, talking shit and fishing.

One weekend, later in high school, I’d gotten us a little baggy of weed that we took out here and smoked together.

“Just like old times,” Benny said, moving toward the fallen tree. I followed him. He sat on the cut-out groove, his feet still touching the ground. I remember when we’d first found this spot, when our feet dangled above the dirt.

“Your question?” I asked, now way more intrigued with whatever was on Benny’s mind. He wasn’t getting off my hook that easily.

“Right, question. I was just going to ask—and again, don’t answer if it’s invasive or anything—if you still consider yourself straight, or have you discovered other parts of yourself?”

Discovered other parts of myself... what a good way of putting it.

I leaned against the tree, looking at the ripples of light reflected on the slow-moving stream.

“Sorry. Like I said, you don’t have to answer.”

I shook my head, straightened my shoulders.

“Don’t apologize. It’s not that I don’t want to answer you.

It’s just that, I don’t know. I guess I can’t answer you.

Not right now.” A woodpecker drilled into a nearby tree, its beak carving out a rhythmic beat against the trunk.

“I guess, yes, I do consider myself straight. I’ve only ever had girlfriends, I not only enjoy them physically, but emotionally as well.

I’ve never felt the need to really explore anything else. ”

“Totally fair. I was just wondering.”

I looked up and spotted the woodpecker, its bright red hood flashing like a determined little hammer. “But that has been changing.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe not even changing. I can’t put it into words, but I think what you just said, exploring parts of myself, really makes sense to me.

Because there's pieces of my being, of my wants and desires, that I've worked really fucking hard to ignore.

Like a map covered in fog. It's not that I'm changing, or that I'm turning into someone different, but I'm discovering the unexplored parts of me. ”

Benny kicked a rock at his feet. It made a splash in the creek. “Exactly. I think a lot of people are scared to even acknowledge certain things. They just leave the map covered in fog. But how sad of a life is that? How much of life are those people missing out on?”

“I'm thinking quite a lot.”

“A hundred percent. Even me, who decided to stay here and make my life in Oklahoma, I'm still going to be damn sure I explore every inch of the map inside me.”

“Every inch, huh?” I asked, teasing him.

“Every single inch.” He shot me a wink. A lick of flame lapped at the base of my spine.

“I think coming back to Rainbow Ranch is going to help me with my own exploration,” I said. “This really all does feel like it was meant to be.”

“The ranch does have that kind of magic to it, doesn't it?”

I nodded, smiling at the warmth blooming in my chest. “It always did. I thought I had to run away to find myself, but maybe all I had to do was come back home.”

Benny turned his head and looked at me. The sun made his skin glow.

God, I wanted to kiss that cowboy.

I broke the silence with words before I did it with actions. “Thanks for letting me talk through things with you today. It feels good. I’ve missed having your advice.”

Benny waved a dismissive hand in the air. “It’s nothing. I’ll send you an invoice later tonight.”

“Can you just dock it from my paycheck?”

“Oh, bless your heart. You’re not getting paid.”

My jaw dropped. “I’ve been working for free this entire week?!”

“Well, food and board.”

I arched a brow. “Do I get anything else?” My tone was suggestive.

Benny narrowed his gaze. He was trying to figure out where I was headed with this. Good. I loved keeping him on his toes. He cocked his head and smirked.

“Not even healthcare benefits.”

I blinked a couple of times before cracking up.

“Damn, it’s rough out here.” I turned and looked at the crystal-clear water flowing over a bed of multicolored rocks.

It looked so peaceful, but beyond that, it also looked refreshing as fuck.

I realized how dirty my pants were, how damp my shirt was, how rough my hands

looked.

Maybe it was time for a little break...

I grabbed the hem of my shirt and started to pull it up over my head.

“What are ya doing?” Benny asked.

I hung my shirt off a branch from the fallen tree. “Going for a dip,” I said, undoing the button on my shorts and pulling down the zipper. “You joining or just watching?”



BENNY

Sam was down to a sexy pair of black Armani briefs—damn him— before I could even blink. He hooked a thumb into the waistband of his briefs, head cocked as he looked inquisitively at me.

“Why are you still dressed?”

“Are we really doing this?” I asked, hesitant about going skinny dipping with the man I’ve been secretly drooling over for, well, years now.

“We don’t have to,” Sam said. His briefs were still on. Good. “It’s up to you.”

I looked behind him at the tranquil water reflecting diamond sparkles of sunlight. We’d waded into the creek hundreds of times before, but we always had our clothes on or had changed into swim trunks.

Then again, wouldn’t it be like going into a gym locker room? Just because I was sexually attracted to Sam didn’t make it impossible for us to hang out naked together... right? I didn’t expect to catch sight of his dick and transform into a cock-hungry monster.

Mainly because I was already a cock-hungry monster. So what could skinny dipping really hurt?

I glanced at my watch. “Fine,” I said. “But I’ve got to be back at the ranch in half an hour, so we can’t stay too long.” There, at least I put a time limit on our little naked

shenanigans.

“Good with me.” Sam shot me a wink and dropped his briefs down to his ankles.

Holy shit, holy shit. Nope, this wasn’t a good idea.

Sam was hung like a fucking horse, and he was soft too.

Clearly he was a shower and not a grower, like I was.

He had the sexiest pair of legs that led up to that mouthful of his, crowned by a neatly trimmed bush of dark brown pubes.

The rest of him was equally mouthwatering.

He had a defined chest, a sexy stomach, a delicious looking happy trail.

Sam cleared his throat. He grinned at me before turning around, giving me a view of his perfectly round and juicy ass.

Jesus on a tractor trailer Almighty.

I tried to keep it cool and focus on undressing myself, but hit a road bump as my body started reacting to the sight of Sam’s naked form. I leaned on the tree and took my time taking off my boots, trying to will my dick to stop growing.

Think of cow manure. Think of grandmas. Think of pineapple on pizza.

Nothing worked. My dick was rock hard. How the hell was I going to take off my underwear and walk to the creek while I swung left and right at full-mast?

“You okay there?” Sam asked. He looked over his shoulder, already walking into the deeper part of the creek. The water lapped up at the back of his calves. For someone who had so many questions about himself, he was damn comfortable in his own skin.

That only made him even more attractive.

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine. Just have to, uh, take this quick call.” I dug for my phone in my discarded jeans.

“You get cell service out here?”

Fuck. I was such a bad liar.

And my dick was still so damn hard.

“Hmm,” I said, looking perplexed at my phone as I flexed my thighs. I’d read somewhere once that it redirected blood flow away from my traitorous penis and would help with any unwanted erections. “Yeah, guess I was hearing things. No one’s calling.”

Sam had waded into the waist-deep section of the creek, but the crystal clear water did nothing to hide the tantalizing view.

Miraculously—and likely thanks to the thigh trick—my overly-excited dick started to soften.

After carefully folding my jeans and placing them on the tree, I felt comfortable enough to strip naked.

I pulled off my briefs without overthinking it and turned toward the creek.

Sam didn't hide his... admiration? Felt weird to say about my straight ish friend, but he was definitely gawking, his eyes wide and thick brows raised as he looked me up and down.

Shit, I was about to start getting hard again.

I went straight for the water, nearly breaking out into a run.

I splashed into the fresh stream, the smooth rocks massaging the soles of my feet.

Sam managed to pry his eyes off me and leaned forward in the water so he could wet his hair.

He lifted and shook a trail of water just as I waded in front of him.

"Oh, sorry," he said as I wiped my face.

"That's fine." I grinned at him. "Just means I have to get even." I paid him back with a surprise splash.

He dodged backward, slipping and falling into the creek.

He got back up with a laugh and reared his arm back, sending it forward with what felt like a tidal wave.

I flopped to the side to try and dodge it but ended up completely submerging myself.

Water encased me. The sound of Sam's laughter was muted, filtered, backed by the constant murmur of moving water. It was so peaceful.

And, beyond that, it was also the perfect way to get a good view of Sam from below

the waist. Good thing my dad had taught me how to keep my eyes open underwater, although I'm sure he'd never thought I'd be using his lessons for this.

I broke the surface of the water. Sam wore a mischievous smirk as he took a wrestler's stance—legs wide, arms out. Guess the games weren't over.

“Remember when we had that water wrestling phase?” Sam said. He didn't have to ask the question, I'd already been remembering that weekend we spent wrestling each other in this very creek.

“I can't believe you made us both think water wrestling was the next big sport,” I said.

“Blame it on Kevin from geometry class. His dad worked in the WWE, of course I believed him.”

I rolled my eyes at that. “Kevin was a pathological liar, and his dad worked in WWE, as in Waste Water Engineering . He had nothing to do with the wrestling organization and everything to do with the pipes that carried all the bullshit Kevin spewed.”

Sam's eyes narrowed. “Damn, really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Oh... well, we're still going to water wrestle. For old times.”

I didn't even get a chance to protest. Sam launched forward, his powerful legs driving him up out of the water. His arms were encasing me, playfully pushing us both back into the water. I let myself fall, the two of us breaking the glass-like surface.

I rolled us under the water, a move I'd learned to do back when we were in high

school and training for the non-existent WWE water wrestling Olympics. Sam's hand reached for my leg but grabbed my ass instead. I—gently—pushed my leg between his and lifted us up out of the water.

His balls are on my thigh, holy crap, code red. Code fucking red.

He sucked in a breath of air, same as me, before he wrapped an arm around my neck and brought us both back under the water.

It was roughhousing like we'd done dozens of times before, except this time we were completely naked.

One of Sam's maneuvers had him straddling my side, pushing his (absolutely huge and... holy shit, rock hard) dick against me.

Sam rolled me over under the water so that he was beneath me, his legs wrapped around mine and his arms locked around my chest. There was no hiding my erection now as the back of his leg brushed against it.

He let go. We got back onto our feet, slightly flushed, dripping wet, and clearly excited about the match.

This was... an interesting turn of events. "I think you win that round," I said, proud I didn't sound as flustered as I felt. The water licked at my stomach. Ripples from our match still echoed across the surface.

"Should we go for a second round?" Sam asked. But his eyes weren't looking at my lips for an answer. They'd migrated south. And so had his hand.

This was moving fast.

Was it too fast?

I knew that by saying yes, a second round of wrestling likely wasn't what was in the cards for us. But... fuck. I'd fallen down this rabbit hole before, and had gotten myself hurt once I smacked onto the bottom. It had taken me a long time to climb back up to the surface and dust myself off.

All it took was a grinning and naked Sam to present himself for me to dive head-first back into the same rabbit hole.

Would my fall be cushioned this time? Or was I fixin' to slam back into the hard, cold, loveless ground?

Only one way to find out.

"Yeehaw," I said before launching myself forward.

SAM

Benny fell onto me in a tangle of long limbs and hearty laughs.

We playfully splashed back into the water.

I put a hand out and braced myself against the rocky floor of the creek.

The crystalline water was refreshingly cool.

I tussled with Benny for a moment, pushing him back, our splashes and laughter scaring away a large cardinal that had dropped by for a drink.

It streaked away like a bright red comet flying back toward the sky.

The wrestling between Benny and I turned more relaxed. At one point we were simply embracing. Neither of us were trying to hide the effect this kind of physical contact had on us. Part of me wondered if I should be embarrassed by this, but that part was quickly silenced.

Benny was my friend. He used to be my best friend. If there was anyone on this earth I could explore this part of my map with, it'd be him.

Benny looked up at me. He grinned and kicked a leg between mine, twisting his foot around my ankle and dropping us both sideways into the water. His hard cock pressed against mine. Thunderous bolts of electricity shot through me.



I swam backward and put some distance between Benny and me.

He rose up out of the water, his black hair dripping wet, his chest rising and falling with his breath.

He ran a hand through his hair and shook it out.

The moment slowed, as if a film editor had pressed a button on their keyboard to make sure the audience took in all of Benny's majesty.

That's the only way I could describe him—majestic.

The motherfucker was absolutely dreamy. All that time riding horses and working around the ranch made sure his muscles were ready to be featured on the cover of Men's Health for any month of the year.

He had big biceps made even sexier by his tattoos, strong and rounded shoulders, a chest that I wanted to suck on, abs that should have been illegal, and that thick cock of his I found myself wanting to play with for hours.

Slowly but surely, the map inside of my soul began to defog.

I didn't want to wrestle anymore. I'd done enough of that with myself.

That didn't mean I wanted this to stop, though.

I licked my lips. Instead of going for another water tackle, I steeled myself and pushed forward in the water, grabbing Benny's head in my hands and slamming our lips together. I could hear—fuck, I could taste —Benny's surprise as his mouth opened and let me in.

The reaction was instant. A chemical explosion that rivaled a nuclear meltdown. My body came undone. My world split in half, and all I wanted to do was keep falling into the cool waters of Benny Adams and his perfect kiss.

For years, I'd allow myself, very briefly, to wonder how this moment would feel.

These thoughts would sneak in, creeping through the backdoor of my psyche when my defenses were at their lowest—just before bed, while I was drunk, after I smoked a blunt.

How would kissing another man feel? Would I enjoy it?

Would it turn me off? I'd think back to the time Benny and I had first kissed, how he had initiated that and how I had fucked it all up.

All because I was scared. Absolutely fucking terrified... and of what?

Of being myself. Of being happy.

Of this.

“Fuck, Benny.” I still held his head in my hands, resting my forehead against his.

I shut my eyes. Allowed myself to drift in the pure bliss of this moment.

Our bodies pressed together, the water creating a silky soft blanket that hid nothing.

If I were thinking with the correct head, I'd probably worry that someone else had decided today was the perfect day for a dip in the creek.

Years ago—hell, weeks ago—that idea may have scared the absolute living shit out

of me.

Now? I couldn't care less. All I could focus on was Benny's hard, wet, perfect body against mine. I focused on what I wanted to do to him, and what I wanted him to do to me.

"I take it this means I win the wrestling match?" Benny teasingly asked.

I chuckled, kissing him soft and slow, just lips and no tongue.

Over and over again. "Yes." I loved his taste.

Loved his lips. Fucking hell, I couldn't stop kissing him.

There was a difference for sure, kissing him as opposed to kissing a girl, but it wasn't a bad difference at all.

A little scratchier with the beard, a lot more carnal with our stiff cocks rubbing together. "You win."

"Good," Benny answered in between more kisses, his smile growing wider and wider. "What do I win then?"

"A ticket to doing whatever it is you want."

"Hmm, really?"

"Yup," I said, kissing him. How could this feel so natural when I'd been so apprehensive about it in the first place?

His hands slipped down to my hips. He was warm against my skin, a contrast to the

cooler waters. “Anything?” He moved between us, his fingers ghosting over my sensitive cock.

“Anything,” I affirmed before moving in for another kiss.

He listened, his fingers wrapping around my length.

I groaned into the kiss, letting every muscle in my body relax.

He gripped my cock just right, gently stroking it, rubbing my tip against his.

He matched my moan with another. I felt like I’d caught fire, an impossibility given how we were surrounded by water.

Yet that’s who Benny was. An infinite expanse of possibilities, each one sweeter than the last. No matter which way our conversation drifted or how our day ended, I’d be assured I’d be a happy man. That’s the effect Benny had on me.

Unexplainable. Infinite. Blissful.

Benny broke from our kiss, his hand gripping the base of my cock. I ran a thumb along his jaw line. Had I ever been so close to my best friend?

Could I call him that? Did I have to earn that title again?

“God, Sam, you’re hard as an iron rod.”

“So are you,” I said, looking down at Benny’s stiff dick. It aimed upward, breaking the surface of the water, creating ripples with his movements. He was so sexy. The definition of man .

I'd seen dicks before—locker rooms, rated-R movies—and of course, enjoyed porn when dicks were all that was featured, but I'd never been this up close and personal with one.

Especially not one that was rock hard and pulsing, attached to someone giving me the neediest puppy eyes I'd ever fucking seen.

“Touch it,” Benny said. “Jerk me off.”

I didn't need any more encouragement. Another large land mass of my internal map became clear through the fog. I reached under the water and wrapped my hand around another dick for the first time in my life.

Benny's eyes fluttered shut. He loosed a pleased breath as I stroked him, biting my bottom lip hard enough to make it sting.

Fuck. I was already about to bust. This was so damn hot.

Benny felt insanely good in my hand. I couldn't explain it.

Closest I could get to describing the moment was slipping a key into a locked door, throwing it open and getting your first breath of fresh air and blast of warm sunlight, realizing you'd been trapped inside a windowless room for far too long.

Basically, jerking Benny off while he jerked me felt like fucking heaven.

I never wanted it to end. But, likely due to my inexperience, it was unfortunately about to end very, very soon. “Fuck, Benny, this is really hot.”

“It is,” Benny said, leaning forward and biting at my neck.

I could feel my core tighten. It wasn't much longer now.

I moaned, tilting my head back, giving Benny even more access to my neck.

I stroked him harder, picking up my pace.

Water splashed between us, mixing with the sounds of nature and passion.

"I'm already close," I warned. There was no holding this back.

"Same." Benny's eyes locked with mine, his grip tighter around my shaft. "Do it. Come for me, Sam. Let it go."

"Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. Come for me. Make me come."

Each word that fell from Benny's lips served to pull at a separate thread of my being until I completely unraveled.

My entire body shuddered, and my eyes snapped shut as the orgasm washed through me, my feet pushing into the rocky ground.

Benny shouted out that he was coming at the same time, his cock shooting a couple shots of cum out of the water and hitting me in the stomach with it.

I leaned forward, taking deep breaths, trying to keep myself from floating up into space. That's how weightless I felt. "Holy fuck."

"Yeah," Benny said, face flushed, eyes drunk with... with something. "Yeehaw." He chuckled and ran a thumb across his bottom lip.

“That was really fucking hot,” I said. “I’m glad you ended up winning the wrestling match. I might need a rematch, though.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah,” I said before playfully splashing at him. He splashed back, laughter taking the place of the sexy grunts that filled the air just moments earlier.

Today brought with it a lot to think about. But one thing was for sure—the friendship between Benny and I had never been stronger. We’d gone through some shit together, but clearly that only cemented our bond and not broken it.

I had full confidence that it would only keep getting stronger.

“Alrighty, you’ve distracted me long enough,” Benny said, “I have to get back to the ranch and start prep for dinner. I’m thinking smash burgers”

“What if I just pick up take-out on the way home, and we can replate it and secretly present it like you made it.”

Benny’s eyes opened wide as a hand flew to his chest. “Sam, that’s wild... Let’s do it.”

I laughed as I followed Benny out of the creek. He had a towel in a duffel bag inside his truck that we used to dry off. It took everything I had in me not to start kissing him again. Hell, I had to force myself to stop looking at him as he got dressed.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Full of relaxed smiles and lazy laughter.

Hours later, when I was getting under the covers and splaying out in bed, I realized that I felt like I’d been given the best massage of my life.

I wasn't sore or tense or tired at all from the day's chores.

On top of that, not only was my body relaxed, but I realized I hadn't thought at all about being fired.

Not since I got the email and talked to Benny about it.

Being with him had completely shielded me from all the bullshit stressors I normally would have been dealing with.

Yeah, my map was coming together, and it seemed like Benny was my compass.



BENNY

Pa used to say, “Regrets are like cold sores. Sometimes they don’t appear until months after you’ve acquired them.” That saying of his usually got a raised brow and a playful chest slap from Ma. I always thought it was a funny comparison to make, and a pretty damn accurate one.

Except Pa was wrong. Regret often hit me much faster. In fact, the regret I was feeling over hooking up with Sam only took about a week to appear.

It hit me as I brushed out Juniper June’s silky black mane.

I stood out on the pasture, basking under the spring sunlight, trying my hardest to ignore a shirtless Sam working across the field.

He looked so damn sexy, even though he was currently using a hand harrow to break up the horse manure scattered around the pasture.

Likely one of the most unattractive jobs in the world, and yet he had me sneaking glances his way every chance I got.

It was in that moment that I realized I was truly and utterly fucked.

I was back to secretly drooling over my good (and presumably straight until proven otherwise) friend. Just like old times.

You know, back when I got my heart crushed and curbstomped and shredded and

incinerated. Yeah, those old times.

This was the definition of déjà vu. The universe was raising the alarms deep down in my subconscious, telling me Hun, you've lived through this before. Don't fall into the same trap .

Sam's back was to me, his shoulders rippling as he hacked away at the dung piles. His jeans sat low on his hips. A dusting of dark brown hair trailed down underneath the waistband.

Yeah. I needed to get back inside and drink a tall glass of ice-cold water.

This was a bad road to travel down. Sam, bless his heart, had been open as hell with me, telling me how he was still on a journey of discovery.

That was leaps and leagues beyond how teenage Sam would have reacted if I asked him the same question then.

It showed clear growth and maturity, all good signs.

But the fact of the matter was he still hadn't figured things out. And that was dangerous territory to tread, considering our history. The afternoon we spent in Bennam Creek had been an afternoon made of gold and honey, pure heaven, and that scared the absolute tits off me.

I finished brushing the last bit of Juniper's mane and fed her an apple.

She crunched greedily on the treat and gave me an appreciative whinny.

I gave her a kiss on the side of her head, her white and black speckled coat shining in the sunlight.

Juniper was one of my favorite horses, the one I'd ride during our rodeos and would take out to barrel races.

She was the sweetest powerhouse, and had been Ma's favorite horse on the ranch.

"I'll be back later, girl." I gave her shoulder a rub and turned before Sam's sweat-beaded back could hypnotize me even further.

I walked down the daisy-lined trail, back to the house.

The teenage volunteers spent last weekend going around and beautifying the ranch, planting new flowers that would bloom and thrive during the upcoming summer months.

I could see movement in the kitchen. It seemed like Billie was munching down on something, her back turned to the window.

I got back into the house, taking off my hat and hanging it on the hook next to the door. I kicked off my boots and lined them up neatly beneath it.

"Howdy, Bills," I said as I entered the kitchen. Billie took the last few bites of her yogurt, licking the spoon and waving it at me.

"Benns, how's the day been treating you?"

"Alright. Finished most of what I needed to get done, so that's good.

Still want to try and work on some desensitization things with Noodles.

Wylie's done such a great job with him already, but he's still skittish around random things.

Don't let Noodles see you with a hose, because he'll lose his fucking mind. ”

Billie chuckled. She threw away her yogurt and took the spoon to the sink where she washed it. “Are you going to be line dancing later?”

“Oh, dang. That's today, ain't it?”

“Sure is. Beau's really excited about it. He wants to open up the lessons every Wednesday for anyone who wants to come.”

“That'd be nice. And it'd bring more people to the ranch.”

“Plus, line dancing is always fun.”

“It is,” I said, going over to one of the cupboards and grabbing a clean glass. The loud clatter of ice clinking into my cup briefly cut off our conversation.

“Think Sam's going to join?” Billie asked innocently enough.

“He mentioned wanting to learn when I brought it up to him last week. So probably?”

My sister had a Spidey sense for topics that were difficult for me to bring up but necessary to talk about. “How's it going between you two, anyway? It doesn't seem like it's been awkward. I reckon it seems like it's been quite the opposite.”

I chugged an icy cold gulp of water.

“Bills...” I sighed, setting the cup down. “It's going well. Which is the problem.”

Billie leaned her elbows against the counter, head tilted like she was watching a particularly slow, particularly stupid horse try to jump a fence. “You like him.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

I groaned and rubbed my face with both hands. “It’s not that simple.”

“Because he broke your heart in high school?”

I glared at her through my fingers. “Because he doesn’t even know who he is yet. Or what he wants. And I’m not in the mood to be someone’s experiment again. Not with Sam.”

“Fair enough.” She nodded slowly. “But you do like him.”

“Shut up.”

Billie laughed and gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Just don’t assume the worst before he even gets a chance to prove otherwise. You’re not the same person you were back then. Neither is he.”

“Yeah, well. Feelings don’t exactly come with safety nets.”

“No, but what if these feelings come with someone to catch you?”

I rolled my eyes. “You and your meaningful words.”

“Just be open to all possibilities. And know that I’ll be here to beat his ass if he breaks your heart again.”

“Thanks, Bills,” I said. She gave me a bump with her shoulder and left.

I washed my cup and left it in the drying rack, then headed to my room to relax a bit before tonight.

Line dancing night wasn't mandatory, but around here, it was pretty close.

Plus, if Beau was hyped about it, there'd be snacks.

And music. And a strong chance of at least one surprise glitter cannon.

I stepped back outside just as the sun was starting to dip behind the tree line.

Boone had dragged the big portable speaker out onto the patio and had already started blasting country remixes—mostly boot-scootin' classics with a bass drop.

He held a pitcher of what looked like lemonade but smelled suspiciously stronger.

“Benny!” he called, lifting the pitcher. “You want some of this? I call it Pink Lightning in a Bottle.”

“I swear, if you put tequila in there again...”

He grinned like the devil himself.

I grabbed a cup anyway.

The whole family was there. Boone and Beau were doing a dramatic two-step demo in their matching cowhide boots, while Billie and Wylie assembled a snack table loaded with chips, dips, and fruit cut in the shape of little cowboy hats.

Pris had shown up with her hands full of glowing headbands, which she started handing out to everyone without a word.

Sky followed behind, handing out colorful rainbow bandanas.

And then there was Sam.

He stood near the edge of the patio, talking to Benny #2 (the goat, not me). He was wearing light blue jeans that hugged his thighs in all the right places and a crisp, clean blue T-shirt. His hair was a little messy, cheeks pink from the sun.

I hated how good he looked. I hated how much I wanted to walk over there and pull him into a slow dance just to see what it felt like.

“Are you going to ask him to dance or should I do it for you?” Billie said, appearing at my side with a red Solo cup and a knowing smirk.

“Are you ever going to mind your business?”

“Not when it’s this interesting.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled anyway.

The song changed, something a little slower, still upbeat, a little flirty.

Beau whooped and grabbed Pris for a partner, swinging her in a tight circle that made her laugh.

“Alright my Rainbow Rancher line dancers, let’s get this party started.

Sam, we’ll start off with the first few steps.

Typically line dancing is a solo sport, but with today’s choreography, you’re going to need a partner. ”

Sam caught my eye.

And for a second—just a breath—it felt like we were back in high school, standing in the same shared air, trying to pretend we weren't looking at each other every time someone turned our way. Trying to hide the intense attraction that had been starting to develop between us.

I stepped forward, tilting the edge of my Stetson down as a greeting.

“You wanna dance?” I asked.

His eyebrows lifted, surprised. Then a soft smile curved his mouth. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

SAM

I hadn't line danced a day in my life. Even though I was born and raised in Oklahoma, where line dancing was a constant at nearly every party, I somehow managed to avoid it.

Not because I didn't like it or because I thought it was silly or anything like that.

I just had the absolute worst dancing skills known to mankind.

My feet functioned only to carry me from one place to another, preferably in a linear direction.

The second any kind of rhythm or beat was thrown in, I turned into a newborn foal finding their legs for the first time.

I almost didn't even come to this line dancing night.

I strongly considered coming up with some kind of excuse, except I couldn't think of anything.

I didn't want to be an asshole either. Beau had been really excited about kicking off the first official line dancing nights at the ranch, and he had said it only made sense to have a beginner there so they could all start from the basics.

Besides, the opportunity to spend more time with Benny was something I wasn't about to turn down, which was exactly why I agreed when he came up and asked me

to dance with him.

“Okay,” Beau said, using his announcer voice to project to the group.

He wore a black fringe mask over the upper half of his face.

“Now that everyone’s paired up, we can start.

Line dancing isn’t one-size-fits-all, and every song has different steps.

I’m going to start with a pretty common song, one I’ll play a lot at our big events, but it’ll also cover the basics. Everyone ready?”

The gathered group gave a resounding hoot.

I tried hard not to focus on the feeling of Benny’s palms against mine, of his hand on my hip.

There was already enough to focus on with the steps, which I was getting wrong right from the start.

I moved backward when I was meant to move forward, right when I was supposed to go left, stood still when I was meant to spin.

At one point we used the bandanas as a way to teach us how to keep tension with our partners, but I had ended up accidentally letting go of the bandana which sent Benny tumbling backward.

I had helped him back up to his feet, embarrassed as fuck even though Benny assured me it was all fine.

“Sorry,” I said during a water break. “I’m not making it easy on you, am I?”

“When have you ever made it easy for me?” Benny asked, arms crossed, that handsome face of his cracking into a smile. “You’re doing just fine. Trust me.”

“Beau’s a good teacher,” I said, turning to spot Beau, one arm around Sky’s shoulder who had their arm looped around Pris’ waist.

“Yeah, he knows what he’s doing. And he’s patient, too, which is nice.”

“It’s nice just being back here, seeing your family, seeing how it’s grown.

” There was a rosy spread of warmth that curled outward from my chest. I’d always been as jealous of Benny’s close-knit family as I was appreciative.

My family was small, only me and my mom and dad.

Didn’t even have cousins and my grandparents were either far off in Costa Rica or dead.

Our holidays were always small, and there was never a party or a large dinner to be had.

Benny and the Adams family were the complete opposite.

They had large gatherings and celebrations for everything, and even when there wasn’t a big group gathering happening, it still felt like the Adams ranch home was always full of action and love.

There was never any negative energy or reason to feel like an outcast. I had felt accepted by them from the very first time I came over to hang out with Benny.

He'd just gotten the new Pokémon game after saving up his allowance for a year.

That weekend was absolutely epic.

"Alright my star pupils, time to get back in formation!" Beau took his place back at the front of the group. I followed Benny to our spot, where he took my hand in his and we went back to teaching me how to line dance. It was mission impossible... or mission limb-possible?

"You were getting it there toward the end," Benny said, smiling as he opened his beer, the can hissing out into the night air. Colorful rainbow glitter sparkled on Benny's forehead. It must have itched, because he wiped it off before I could mention it.

"Thanks," I said, brushing off some glitter from my shirt. "Where did Beau get that glitter cannon from?"

"Amazon, probably. He's got a whole stash of party supplies in his closet. Last I checked there were three different confetti launchers and something labeled 'foam party grade only.'"

"That tracks," I said, laughing. "That thing scared me. It was so loud."

"Pris ducked so fast, she knocked over the lemonade."

We both laughed and took a beat to sip our drinks.

The line dancing group had mostly trickled off, some heading to clean up, others back to their rooms. The music still played softly from the speaker on the back patio, now just background noise.

Fireflies blinked lazily near the field, and a few stars had pushed their way out into the purple evening sky.

“You feel like walking?” Benny asked, voice casual but quiet.

“Sure.”

We started toward the pasture trail, crunching along the gravel in comfortable silence.

The air was warm, but not heavy. Just the right kind of breeze that made you think about summer coming in full.

Benny wore his Stetson cowboy hat, the brim casting a soft shadow over his face.

It suited him. He always looked good in hats. Good in general, really.

We reached the main fence line and climbed up to sit on the top rail, legs dangling over.

The wood was worn smooth from years of use, cool under my palms. From here, you could see a lot of the ranch—the freshly painted paddocks, the barn lit with a low amber glow, the hills rolling out like a folded green quilt under the twinkling stars.

“I used to come out here a lot,” Benny said. “Especially at night. After my parents died.”

“I’m so sorry, Benny. I still think about them every day. I can’t imagine the pain you must feel.”

“The pain’s gotten easier to deal with, but it doesn’t go away. Don’t think it ever will.”

“Just know that you must be making them so damn proud. They really raised a good soul in you. In all of your siblings.”

Benny smiled at me, gentle and soft. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“And it’s the truth.”

We slipped back into a comfortable silence as he took my words in. He leaned forward slightly, his elbows resting on his thighs, beer can cradled between his hands. His profile was lit by starlight and a spill of porchlight, sharp and soft all at once.

“Ya know, I’ve been thinking about entering the barrel race at the festival next month,” he said, eyes fixed out in the dark. “Haven’t done one in years.”

I turned toward him. “You should. You one hundred percent should.”

He shrugged. “I always want to. Then I start thinking about how many people would be there. How I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing, or that I’m scared I’m just going to blank out. And the nerves hit. I end up talking myself out of it.”

“You’d kill it,” I said honestly. “You’d take Juniper, right? She’s fast as hell. And you... You ride like it’s instinct. You just look right in a saddle.”

Benny huffed a soft laugh and tipped his head toward me. “Careful, you’re flirting.”

“No, I’m not.” I paused. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“You’re also not wrong.”

We both smiled, and for a second, the moment stretched out in that special kind of way. Not tense. Not awkward. Just soft. Warm. Safe.

I looked over at him again and couldn't help it. I reached out and slipped my hand into his. His skin was warm, a little rough from work. He didn't pull away.

Instead, he shifted his fingers just slightly, enough that they laced through mine.

My heart did this annoying little flip. My chest felt full. Not tight. Not scared. Just full.

"You know," I said, my voice low, "I think this is the most comfortable I've felt in years."

Benny glanced sideways at me. His eyes flicked down to our hands, then back up. "Same."

I leaned in.

He didn't move.

His head tilted just a little.

And then, just as our lips were about to brush?—

SNORT.

A sharp wheeze broke the stillness.

I jumped. Benny did too. We turned simultaneously to see Dennis standing three feet away, staring at us like we'd interrupted his evening. He was backlit by the porch light, making him seem way more sinister than a miniature horse had any reason for being.

“Mother—“ Benny hissed.

Dennis blinked. Then sneezed, loudly, and trotted away.

“I swear to God,” I muttered, rubbing my face.

Benny was laughing, his shoulders shaking, the kind of snort-laugh that meant he was done for.

“I was having a moment,” I grumbled, but I couldn’t help laughing too.

“You’re lucky I didn’t fall off the fence,” Benny said through his laughter. “Maybe you should end up taking him after these ninety days are up.”

“No, no way. He’s all yours.”

We let the moment die down naturally, and then I rested my head lightly against Benny’s shoulder. He didn’t move away.

Ninety days... what if I don’t want it to end with these ninety days?

We sat like that until the music faded and the stars had fully claimed the sky, that singular question ringing in my head until my head hit the pillow.



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

BENNY

An email dinged on my phone, fighting through the bad cell service at the ranch.

It was an email reminding me that there were only a couple days left to register for the big barrel race that was happening soon.

My finger hovered over the link for a moment before I swiped out of it entirely and locked my phone.

As much as I loved riding and racing, I didn't enjoy losing and feeling less than. Why even risk it?

I got back to the fence I was painting. It was already early evening, we'd already had dinner and most of the family was calling it a day and hunkering down for bed.

But I had gotten a spurt of energy and didn't feel like burning it off in bed.

I grabbed my paint bucket and my brush and walked out to the perimeter fence, sitting down in the grass and pouring some of the white paint into a smaller container.

I dipped the brush in and got to work. The sun had finished her shift but there was still plenty of natural light offered up by the blanket of stars above me.

It'd been a nice day, very productive, and even exciting since Dusty—named after the dusty road I found him on—graduated from the incubator in my room to his own private nest in the barn.

Not only was I happy for my new feathered friend, but I was also extremely excited to not have him in my bedroom anymore.

My focus narrowed on the brush strokes. I enjoyed painting. It was meditative for me. I liked seeing the wet paint streak across a canvas—whether that’s an old wooden fence or a freshly built wall. I liked seeing the contrast between a worn-down surface and a newly painted one.

It was nice to have these moments, especially lately, when it felt like my mind was constantly running at a hundred miles a minute, ever since Sam arrived at the ranch.

Back when the news first broke that he’d be coming, I remember being worried that I’d get in a fight with him, or that it’d be unbearably awkward and it would ruin the vibes of the entire ranch.

None of that happened, though. I should have been worried about the complete opposite—falling for him all over again.

I hadn’t prepared myself for that possibility. Didn’t even think it was possible, not after how intense a heartbreak I suffered the first time around. I typically was someone who learned from their mistakes.

Apparently not this time. At least not when Sam is my first thought in the morning and my last thought before bed. I couldn’t shake him. Couldn’t shake his kiss, his touch, his laugh, his jokes, his ass, his smile, his dick, his?—

“Benny?”

“Ah!!” I launched my paint brush up into the air. As gravity is wont to do, it pulled the brush right back down, white paint streaking the side of my face.

I blinked and turned around.

Sam stood behind the fence, lit up by moonlight, mouth slightly open like he wasn't sure if he should laugh or apologize.

"Sorry," he said, eyes wide. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you."

I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand. "You didn't sneak up. I was just... distracted."

He climbed through the fence and walked over, squatting next to me in the grass. "You've got some right—" He reached out and brushed my cheekbone with his thumb, catching a streak of paint.

His fingers lingered.

My heart kicked against my ribs. He must have just showered. He smelled like clean soap and soft lavender, his hair still a little wet.

"You're lucky that didn't land in your eye," he said, still touching me. His voice was soft. Lower than usual.

I gave a snort. "I'm lucky it didn't land on my dick."

He laughed. "Would've had to help you clean it off if it did."

The air between us dropped. Thickened. Shifted from playful to primal in a single heartbeat.

I looked at him. Really looked at him. There were parts of him I still recognized from our youth and others that had shifted and morphed into the man he was today.

He wore a slightly oversized black T-shirt and black shorts, his lean legs on full display.

Legs he had no idea how to use when it came to dancing, but that was totally fine with me.

I enjoyed our line dancing sessions. We had four under our belt already, and I could see the improvement happening.

“You don’t have much left, do you?” Sam asked as he broke whatever spell had been cast between us by looking away.

“Just this part of the fence.”

“Nice, nice.” Sam sat crossed-legged in the grass. A barn owl gave a couple of hoots that echoed out into the quiet night sky. Our knees touched, my body reacting by becoming as taut as a high wire. “You know, I can’t stop thinking about that day in the creek.”

I swallowed audibly. “Oh, really?” This peaceful painting session had taken quite an interesting turn.

Sam spread his hands out in the grass behind him and leaned back, looking up at the stars.

“It was really fucking hot. But also... it felt right . That was the first time I’d ever done anything like that with another guy and, I dunno, I wasn’t nervous or anxious.

I didn’t feel ashamed or bad about it. I just... I wanted more. Is that bad?”

Flames licked at the base of my spine. Not just at the fresh memory of what we’d

done, but at the fact that Sam admitted to liking it so much.

I'd been worried that maybe he'd done it once and "gotten it out of his system"—even though deep down I knew that wasn't how any of this worked.

"It isn't bad at all." I've been wanting more for years now.

"Society's bullshit hang-ups teach us what to feel bad about, but sometimes those lessons are built on pure lies and self-hating bigotry.

If your heart, if your body, if your soul feels happy about it, then there's no shame to be had.

Even if others try their damndest to project it onto you. "

Sam nodded at that, head still tilted up at the stars, but I noticed his eyes were closed.

As if taking in my words was more important than taking in the vast expanse of the universe.

"You're so right. Why do I feel shame about being attracted to you in the first place?

Is it not everyone's goal in life to share their love with someone they can call their best friend?

It's like I have the winning lottery ticket and instead of claiming it, I ask if I can return it. How fucking insane is that?"

Is that really what he thought about us? That our relationship had been like winning the lotto?

My heart performed gymnastic routines between my ribs.

“It’s the sad reality of this world, and it’s what keeps so many people miserable and locked up in their closets.

I’m lucky that I was able to get rid of that ‘give a fuck’ muscle early on.

If there are no fucks to give, then there’s no shame either. ”

Sam opened his eyes and found mine. He smiled, the grin crinkling the corners of his eyes. “You need to start writing self-help books or something.”

“Pfft, I can barely sit at the computer long enough to do my taxes, no way I’m finishing a book.”

“Well think about it. I’d definitely read it, so you’ll have at least one sale.”

“Ah, perfect, I could get a venti green tea lemonade with that.”

“Don’t go too crazy. Stick with a grande.”

That got a hearty laugh out of me. Sam was right about this. Us. How it felt so easy. It’s something I’d felt from the moment I met him. Unfortunately, it took Sam a little longer than me to come to that realization, but hey, better late than never.

The moment of comfortable silence stretched between us, interrupted by another cluster of scattered hoots. Sam’s gaze flicked down to my lips. I felt it. Felt that shift inside him. That “do I lean in for the kiss or do I run for the hills?” tension.

I leaned.

So did he.

We met in the middle, mouths crashing together in a kiss that tasted like mouthwash and sugar and every unsaid word that'd built up over the last few weeks.

His hand slid to the back of my neck, fingers tightening in my hair.

I growled into his mouth, pressing forward, crowding him until he was on his knees, back against the fence post.

My thigh pushed between his legs.

He was hard. Thick. Hot. His cock twitched against the zipper of his jeans.

I kissed down his jaw, biting at the hinge where his neck met bone. Sam gasped, rutting up against my leg like he couldn't stop himself. Like I had flipped a switch and turned him feral.

"Fuck," he whispered against my lips, his grip tight against my neck. My body was lit up like the stars, a furiously bright heat spreading out through my veins. "Fuck, Benny."

"Yeah?" I slid my hand down his chest, over his stomach, to where his jeans were starting to strain.

I gave him a squeeze, a rub. He tilted his head back and moaned into the night.

I leaned in and kissed his Adam's apple.

We were toward the back of the fence, where a large oak tree blocked the view from the house. No one could see us here.

I flicked my tongue against his skin, tasting salt. I was hungry. Famished. I wanted to taste every inch of him. He pulsed against my palm, driving me absolutely fucking wild. A warm, wet spot touched my palm.

I looked down and saw that his cock was leaking through the fabric of his jeans. I palmed him once, slow and hard, and he shivered. “Look at that.”

“Yeah, sorry, I pre-cum a lot.”

“Sorry? Fucking hell, Sam, that’s the hottest thing ever.”

“Really?”

I licked my lips, nodding, kissing him again. “I wanna taste you,” I growled, and his hips bucked against my hand. “But not out here. Too many eyes. Too many goats.”

He snorted, but it came out breathless.

I leaned in, lips brushing his ear. “You wanna take this to my room?”

He stilled.

That hesitation hit like a speed bump. Just for a second. His hands were still on me, gripping my shirt like he couldn’t let go.

“I want to,” he said. Quiet. Rough. Honest.

I waited.

He licked his lips. “I just... I want to be sure. I don’t wanna mess this up.”



“You think this would mess it up?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s the problem. I want you. I want this. I’m just... not used to doing things that feel this real.”

His cock was still pressing into my hand, twitching with every word. But even with the primal heat scorching the ground underneath us, I couldn’t help and think: holy shit, is this fucker going to turn me away? Again? .

SAM

There was nothing in the world that would make me push Benny away in this moment.

I was done running. Finished denying myself the truth. I had thrown so much dirt on this piece of myself, trying to bury it alive. But I was finally, finally able to suck in my first deep, rattling breath, sweet as heaven.

That's how I felt being out here underneath the open sky, Benny's hand between my legs and the taste of his kiss still on my lips. It was freeing. And I wanted more of it.

I wanted it all tonight.

"And I don't want this to stop," I said, leaning in for another kiss. My cock pushed against Benny's palm. "This feeling. Am I ready to march on a pride parade? I'm not sure. But am I ready to march behind you to your bedroom and play with you all night? Abso-fucking-lutely."

Benny's face flashed with relief. I hadn't even realized how tense he'd been getting. A thorn of sorrow pricked at my heart. It was my fault he was so damn anxious, considering the way I reacted the very first time we kissed.

I had to make it up to him. And it started tonight.

"To the bedroom then?"

“I’ll follow you, cowboy.”

He leaned in again, kissing me with years of pent-up want behind it. I matched his energy, our tongues lashing together. He nipped at my bottom lip. His teeth applied firm, delicious pressure. I tilted back and groaned out into the night.

Yeah. We had to get inside and behind closed doors soon. “Alright, let’s go, I feel like I was turning into a cock-hungry werewolf.”

“That’d be a show I’d watch. Someone has to suck a dick every night to keep their transformations from taking control.”

I snorted, amazed at how comfortable and turned on I felt, both at the same time.

“Hurry, then,” I said, twitching my head to the left.

“I’m starting to... starting to... want... coooock .

” I said it in a low howl, pushing forward and gently dropping us onto the grass where we laughed and kissed and rubbed some more before we untangled and got back to our feet.

Thankfully the walk to Benny’s room was quick and sibling-free. There were no awkward excuses to make or pleasantries to put on. We just power walked our horny little asses directly into Benny’s bedroom, where he shut the door and we were back on each other in seconds.

Benny stumbled backward toward the bed, neither of us wanting to break the kiss.

I frantically tugged at his shirt, wanting to get him completely naked as quickly as possible.

He appeared to have the same goal for me because his fingers were deftly working the zipper of my jeans.

I wasn't joking about the fact that I leaked quite a bit.

It was never really something the people I dated said they found attractive, and on a couple different occasions, their reactions had even made me slightly self-conscious about it.

But the way Benny's eyes clouded over with lust when he saw the stain... fuck.

I dropped my jeans to the floor. I wasn't wearing anything underneath, which Benny appeared to appreciate.

"Hold on," he said, hurrying over to the nightstand.

He was shirtless, in just a pair of tighty-whities, the fabric straining to contain his dick.

"What kind of music do you want to listen to?"

I got onto the bed, spreading my legs, enjoying the soft embrace of the plush navy blue comforter.

There were four gold trophies standing tall next to an ancient television set.

It was the same TV he'd gotten back in high school.

Shit, did that thing even get any color or was it still in black and white?

"I'm good with whatever you're good with. "

Benny shot me a look before turning on the speaker. He palmed himself with one hand and worked his phone with the other. “An NPR podcast on the migratory habits of yellow-crested Alaskan finches it is.”

“Right, like the one terrified of birds would be listening to that.”

Benny laughed as a mindless pop song filled the room.

Good. That would hide any uncontrolled moans that would give us away.

“You remembered my fear,” Benny said as he got onto the bed with a smile.

As if I’d forget anything about you.

He straddled my lap and rubbed at my chest, squeezing my nipples. My toes curled and I rut myself against him, relishing the weight. Benny’s firm, muscular body on top of mine—that was a vision worth tattooing. My cock throbbed up against his ass.

“Mm-hmm,” Benny said, leaning down and kissing me. He scooted himself backward so that both our cocks rubbed together. I almost came from how good that felt. “You’re so hard,” Benny whispered into my ear before sucking on my earlobe.

“It feels so good having you against me like this. I could lay here forever.”

“Me too.” Benny pushed back up. “But you know what’s even better? This.” He grabbed both of our hard lengths and stroked. I bit my bottom lip to try and stop myself from moaning.

“Holy shit that feels good,” I said, putting my hands behind my head and watching as Benny worked us both.

He spit in his hand and brought it back down.

The extra lubrication made the new sensation feel even more electric.

I laid back and let Benny jerk us off. He gave these little chesty groans that were clearly trying to be controlled, but the more he stroked, the louder he got.

“God, Sam, this is so fucking hot. You don’t know how long I’ve been dreaming about doing this.”

“I think I’ve got an idea,” I said. I was surprised at my ability to still put functioning sentences together. “I wish it hadn’t taken me so long—oh fuck, that feels good—so long to let it happen.”

“Better late than never,” Benny said. “Speaking of, there’s something else I’ve been meaning to do.

” Benny licked his lips. He pushed back so that he laid down, his feet dangling off the bed.

He got between my legs, hands on my thighs, and looked up at me, lips curling into a smile. “Is it alright?”

“Benny, suck my dick right fucking now.”

He laughed at that. He grabbed the base of my dick and looked at it, almost like a jeweler appraising a watch. “You’ve got such a nice dick,” Benny said, his hand running up and down the length of it, cupping my tightening balls.

“Thank you,” I said. “It’d be even nicer in your mouth.” I gave him a wink.

His smile turned wicked as he leaned in and wrapped his warm, wet lips around me for the first time ever.

I fisted the sheets, my legs involuntarily tensing. The pleasure was... intense. His tongue worked magic, and he wasn't shy at all about having my dick in his mouth.

It was like having buckets of technicolor paint thrown at the canvas of my life. I'd only been seeing in hues of grays and whites, but now? Now I could see the entire spectrum.

"Fuck yeah," I said with a growl in my voice. "Fuck that feels good."

Benny responded by taking me in deeper, greedily gobbling me up. He stopped for air a few times but otherwise he worked my dick like it was his full-time job and he was up for a promotion.

At one point during a break for air, Benny grinned at me as he flipped around on the bed so that his ass rubbed against my cock. Desire nearly made me come undone. I wanted to fuck him, I did. I wanted to bury my cock balls deep inside him and make his ass mine.

But that wasn't all I wanted to do tonight. My body cried out for something different. My pleasure and focus traveled to my needy hole.

I leaned forward, decided to ask for what I wanted. Being here with Benny made me feel safe enough to make my needs known. I kissed the back of his neck and put a hand on his shoulder, gently directing him to turn around.

He sat down on the bed, chest flushed and cock hard. God, he looked so good. He also looked massive. His dick was girthy and about an inch or two longer than mine. He had one of those perfect dicks I thought only existed in porn.

So fucking hot but also... how the hell was that going to fit inside me?

Just say it before you back out.

“Benny, I was thinking, I want you to fuck me tonight.”

His eyebrows shot upward in surprise. “Oh, I didn’t think you’d be ready for all that.”

“I’m really taking that famous phrase to heart: ‘Save a horse, ride a cowboy.’”

Benny chuckled, his (huge) cock bouncing with the movement.

“I don’t know if I can handle it,” I wanted him. “But I’m showered and clean, and I’ve been thinking a lot about it. Craving it.”

“Have you ever played with yourself before? Back there?”

I nodded. “I tried it with a cucumber once.” That’s how I knew I was sharing this moment with someone special. There was likely no one else in this world I’d be so open talking to about my first time with a vegetable.

“Oh damn. Was it like, one of those big individually wrapped ones?”

I chuckled at that. “It was. Took a lot of work getting it in.”

“Started at the advanced level, I see. Nice. And?” Benny asked. He casually smiled as he reached over and gently gripped my cock in his hand. “How was it?”

“Great,” I said. “Came buckets. Almost passed out from how good it felt.”

“Interesting... For some reason I didn’t peg you as a bottom?”



“Is that what you think I am?” I asked as Benny ran his thumb along the head of my leaking dick. I shuddered in pleasure as he brought his thumb up to his mouth and sucked.

“I think we’re gonna need to do some investigating,” Benny replied, bringing his hand down for some more.

I moaned, pushing my hips forward. Looking down, I could see that the level of arousal Benny drew out of me made me drip like a broken faucet.

The comforter underneath me had grown dark from my precum.

He then took his wet fingers and slid them underneath me.

My eyes shut and my chest tightened as his fingers circled my hole.

He did this motion for a little bit, circling and rubbing.

I started to jerk myself off, the pleasure inside me turning into an all-consuming beast.

He applied pressure, the slickness from my precum helping his finger push inside me.

Thank fucking God the music was playing, because I couldn’t hold back my moan.

“How’s that feel?”

“Like I’m turning into a big hungry bottom.”

“Good,” Benny said, eye flickering with flames. “Lean back and relax then.”

BENNY

Sam's body turned to clay in my hands. He melted into the bed as I played with his ass, fingering him, watching his eyes roll back. His mouth formed an O, his leaky dick letting me know just how much he liked what I was doing.

He wasn't lying about his transformation into a hungry bottom. Sam took one finger, then two of my fingers, like a pro.

But I knew he wanted more. And so did I.

"One second," I said, slowly pulling out of him. I went over to my bathroom and grabbed a plush navy blue towel. "Here, let's put this underneath us. Lube stains are a bitch to clean."

Sam laughed and shifted over so I could place the towel down.

He lay on top of it and looked up at me, his eyes glassy with want and something else.

Trust. That knocked the wind out of me more than anything.

He looked wrecked already, and I hadn't even...

fuck. This was bad. I was falling... no. I'd fallen for this man.

Years ago, I'd fallen hard for this man, and it was happening all over again.

I grabbed some lube from the nightstand and slicked up my fingers before I leaned down and kissed the inside of his thigh. Soft. Slow. A promise.

“You okay?” I asked, voice low.

He nodded. “Better than okay.”

I kissed a little higher, then higher still. My tongue traced the crease of his leg while my fingers worked into him again, slow and steady. His legs trembled slightly as I pressed in deeper.

“You feel so good,” I whispered. “Like you were made for this.”

His hips rolled up. “Benny, I... Oh fuck.”

I moved up his body, kissing a trail along his stomach, his chest, over his collarbone. I paused to press my lips to the spot just beneath his ear, then across his jaw. He turned into the kiss, our mouths catching—messy, deep, warm. We kissed like we’d been waiting years for this.

Because we had.

“I’ve thought about this so many times,” Sam murmured, thumb stroking the side of my neck. “Thought about you. Wondered what it’d feel like to have you like this. Inside me.”

I smiled against his lips. “Me too. Are you ready for more?”

“Yes, please.” His breathy tone nearly knocked me out.

I leaned over and opened the nightstand again, grabbing the condom. I opened it and

rolled it on, then kissed him again. He watched me as I stroked some lube along my length, his eyes lit with a burning red-hot fire. I lined myself up.

“Go slow,” he said, voice shaking just a little.

I nodded, lifted his legs to give me more access.

When I pushed in, we both let out a hissing exhale.

I went slow enough to feel every inch of him take me, his body clenching around me, drawing me deeper.

I had to stop halfway through to breathe.

He felt too good. Too much. I held myself there, allowing him to get accustomed to having me inside him.

The way his body gripped me, welcomed me, it made something in my chest seize. I was buried inside the boy I used to lie awake dreaming about, and somehow it felt both brand new and like coming home all at the same time.

“You’re okay?” I asked again, even though I already knew the answer.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Hurt a bit at first, but not anymore. I want all of it.”

I pushed the rest of the way in and buried myself there, just holding still, feeling us connect in a way that was so much more than physical. The velvet hot heat that encased me was intense. I wanted to be tangled up in Sam like this for the rest of eternity.

Then I started to thrust, pull back and thrust, pull back and thrust. Rocking into him.

Earning full body shudders with every push.

“Oh fuck, Benny. Fuck yeah. Holy fuck.”

“You like how that feels? Having a hard dick in your ass?”

“I fucking love it. Fuck yeah, give it to me.”

We moved like we had all the time in the world, like the stars outside the window were standing still just for us. I rocked into him slowly, leaning down and brushing our foreheads together, murmuring how good he felt, how beautiful he looked like this, spread open and flushed and mine.

He kissed me between gasps, his legs around my waist, his cock throbbing between us. I slid a hand down to stroke him in rhythm with our bodies, slick and firm, timed to every roll of my hips.

Eventually, the pace picked up. His moans turned to desperate little whimpers, and I could feel him getting close.

“Benny,” he gasped, eyes fluttering. “Don’t stop. Please?—”

I didn’t.

We switched once, him on top, riding me with shaky thighs and pink cheeks, his hair falling over his eyes. He looked like every fantasy I ever had.

Then I flipped us again, pushing deep, our mouths barely breaking apart as we built and built and built.

“Oh fuck, Benny, I’m going to come!”

He came first, pulsing between us, biting a knuckle to stop himself from shouting any louder. And the way he looked right then—eyes wide, body trembling—I came too, losing it with a groan into his shoulder as I held him so tight I thought we might fuse together.

“Holy shittttt ,” I said into the dark crevice of his neck.

We stayed like that for a long time, catching our breath, pressed heart-to-heart.

After what felt like a blissful eternity, I pried myself off him and grabbed us a clean pair of hand towels to clean up.

Sam was a giggling mess, his cheeks still flushed when I flopped back onto the bed next to him.

The room glowed in a kind of surreal golden light.

I wasn’t even sure where it was coming from or if I was hallucinating it...

I was most likely hallucinating it. Fucking Sam—making love to him—it had completely rewired my brain.

I felt like a superhero. Like I could fly across the globe, rescuing people from burning buildings and stopping robberies and curing cancer.

I felt like I could see new colors and hear new sounds and smell new scents.

“Goddamn,” I said, still breathless. “Your ass has magical powers.”

“That so?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. I feel like I’m on top of the world right now.”

“Well, you were definitely on top of something.” Sam chuckled at that.

We were laying on our backs, legs crossed over each other, music still playing through my speaker.

I looked over, unable to really process the fact that my childhood best friend and first true love was now resting naked next to me, my dick still chubby from our sex.

“How do you feel?” I asked. As wild and new as this all was for me, it must have been a hundred times more intense for Sam.

“I feel like a big piece of my map was chartered tonight.”

That made me smile wide. “Was it the gay valley that was mapped out? Or maybe the bi ravine?”

Sam took a moment to consider that. I could see the thoughts swirling inside those dreamy hazel eyes of his.

I thought back to my coming out experience, how it was something I always knew about myself.

The trick for me was getting other people to know it, too.

But I could see how that process became infinitely more complicated if I wasn’t entirely sure of my identity to begin with.

I propped myself up on an elbow. “It’s okay if you don’t know yet,” I reassured him. I put a hand on his chest. His heart thumped and pumped.

“I think I do know. I mean, I guess I do know? I don’t know... I really did like being with the girls I dated, and I enjoyed the sex too. I also really fucking enjoyed sex with you. And, if I’m being honest, I’ve been watching more and more gay porn lately. I just really like dick.”

“The good news is that whether you’re bi, gay, or pan, it doesn’t matter, because no matter which one of those you are, you’ll still be inducted into the alphabet mafia .”

“Is that really a thing?”

“It is. We have a secret handshake and everything.” I mimed jerking off an invisible dick and having it spray cum all over my face before wiping off that invisible cum and holding my hand out for a handshake. I lifted my eyebrows and pointedly looked down at my empty hand.

Sam laughed some more and then mimicked my handshake, jerking off an air dick and having it come all over his face. He wiped it off and shook my hand.

“There you go,” I said, laughing along with Sam. “Now you’re an official member.”

“So having you balls deep in my ass wasn’t enough?”

“Nope, you needed the handshake. Congrats.” I rubbed my hand up and down Sam’s chest, feeling the soft hair he kept trimmed.

“Any advice on coming out? Insider tips?”

I huffed out a breath of air. “I wish I had some tips or tricks. Truth is, coming out is different for everyone, every time. And I mean every time. Sometimes people think coming out is one big moment and that’s it, you’re done.



But it's not. It's not like a baby shower or a graduation.

People don't get shirts made or have confetti canons...

although they should. That'd make it a whole lot better.

Coming out is something that happens over and over again.

With the new barber you meet or with a cousin you haven't seen in years or with a nosy neighbor.

Does it get easier? Yes, it does. It becomes less of a statement, less of a thing.

And as you get more comfortable with your identity, then other people pick up on the subtle clues you start to project and just figure things out themselves.

Maybe you mention a boyfriend or a partner in a passing conversation, or maybe there's a certain swish of your hip when you move across a room, or a little rainbow pin attached to your book bag.

Coming out doesn't have to always be a big dramatic thing, but—often times—the first couple coming outs are big dramatic things. ”

“Huh, I hadn't really thought of it like that.”

“How, um... how are your parents? Do you think they have any idea?” I asked because I could recall how night-and-day different Sam's parents were compared to mine.

Sam's parents, while very nice and caring, were much more introverted, rarely ever coming to the ranch even when there was an event going on or a dinner happening.

His dad was a plumber, and his mom was a florist. They were also both extremely religious.

I remember there being framed bible verses all throughout their house when we were younger, although we rarely ever hung out at Sam's place. We'd always just hang out at the ranch.

"I don't think they do. I don't think I've given them any reason to think otherwise. My mom's usually asking about who I'm going to be bringing around next. Telling them is going to be the hardest. I think it's what's stopped me."

"How do you think they're going to take it?"

"I think my dad will be okay. One of his best friend's is gay, actually. But he lives in Spain, and they rarely ever see each other, but I know my dad loves him. I think my mom may be more difficult. She's still heavily involved in the church, and she's said some questionable things around me."

"I'm sorry," I said. "If it's worth anything, I think that, knowing Gina, she'll totally come around. You're her only child, and you're a huge momma's boy. She'll understand. But I do get it. Religion does weird things to people. For some, it works as an antidote. And for others it's a poison."

"Ain't that right," Sam said. "I just don't want to disappoint either of them, you know? Or have them look at me differently."

"No matter what, you're their son, that takes precedence over anything else. Your parents are good people. I think they may be shocked at first, but don't mistake their processing for anger or hurt."

Sam nodded at that. He closed his eyes, lips curled into a relaxed smile. "God, life is

so weird, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, matching his smile. "Very weird."

"I'll see if I talk to them soon. I'm done hiding, I'm done running. I just want to live the way I want to live. Why is that so difficult?"

"It shouldn't be, and hopefully one day it won't be difficult at all."

"Hopefully," Sam said. He gave a yawn and a long, drawn-out stretch before he curled back in, rolling on his side and pulling me into his arms. I wore the goofiest grin on my face. I was glad he couldn't see me.

Wow, did this ever make me happy. Made me feel like the embodiment of a bubbly pop song that kept me dancing somewhere high up above the clouds.

I'd wished for this moment since I was a teen, hanging out with Sam and trying my damndest to not let my attraction be known.

And now here we were, cuddling naked together, the night stretching out before us.

We didn't get much sleep that night, or the next seven that followed, Sam sleeping over every one of those nights.

It wasn't until a week later that things went to shit. History loves to repeat itself, or whatever the bullshit saying is.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

SAM

Life was different after you've been fucked in the ass.

It's like the breeze itself whispered a different tune. People's jokes were way funnier than normal. So much so that I was cracking up to the point of tears at Beau's joke about line dancing being square dancing's gay cousin with better branding.

Yeah... I was definitely bisexual.

I sat across from Beau in the kitchen. Dinner was wrapped up and we stuck around at the table.

We'd been chatting about how to best promote the Rainbow Ranch Line Dance Night.

It had been an idea that hit me in the middle of the night.

I woke up with my arms wrapped around a sleeping Benny, the idea lighting up the bedroom like a hundred-watt bulb.

I may have been fired from my job, but that didn't mean I had to stop working.

I had a deep wealth of knowledge when it came to public relations and marketing.

I could step in and help manage the ranch's presence, not just in Johnson Springs, but in the surrounding areas too.

I could help make this ranch a beacon of safety and acceptance for anyone in the country.

If anything, it was a mission with a much grander purpose than hey, I need this actress to get a hundred thousand new Instagram followers by the end of the month , or can you help divert attention from this terrible scandal this superstar won't get cancelled?

"I think we definitely need to update the website," I said as I flicked at the iPad on the table.

"And I'll find someone to help manage all the socials.

If we can throw some money at advertising, I think that would be beneficial, too.

Are there any collab opportunities you can think of off the top of your head? "

"Collab?" Beau asked as if I were speaking a foreign language.

"Collaboration. Maybe a horse feed brand? Or another nearby ranch that wants to team up and help sponsor the event?"

"I can reach out to the Walters. They have the poultry farm down the road and are friendly folks. Terry, he owns the hardware store in town, and he mentioned wanting to help the ranch out. Maybe he can be a sponsor."

"Perfect." I jotted down the names on a bright pink sticky note next to the iPad. "You know, I may suck ass at line dancing, but at least this way I can contribute something."

"First, you've been getting much better. You only trip a couple of times a lesson now.

And second, you've contributed more than enough. Benny has been finishing all his chores hours early, that's how energized he's been."

That got a laugh out of me. "I'm glad I can get that lazy butt off the couch," I joked, the two of us knowing damn well Benny was one of the hardest workers around.

My phone buzzed across the table, surprising me that a call got through the shitty cell service out here. I flipped it over and looked at the screen. "It's my mom."

Beau raised an eyebrow. "Does Ms. Fisher want to join in on the planning?"

I snorted at that. "Absolutely not, she hates this kind of stuff. I'll take it outside just in case she gets chatty."

He chuckled and nodded and turned back to the iPad as I stood and slipped through the sliding door, out onto the porch and down the side steps.

The air had cooled, that late spring kind of breeze that always carried just a whisper of wildflower and dirt.

The sun was finishing up her descent behind the hills, casting everything in burnt gold.

The landscape of Rainbow Ranch was at its best during this hour.

Like a painting that belonged in some museum, framed with gold and admired by thousands.

I answered the call. "Hey, Mom."

"Sammy," she said brightly. "You busy?"

“Just finishing up dinner. We were going over some ideas for an event at the ranch.”

“Oh, fun! You always were good at planning things.” There was a smile in her voice, but it softened.

“Listen, I just wanted to catch up. Things have been busy on this end. We had a big prayer service on Sunday. Real beautiful. You should’ve seen the choir—gave me goosebumps.

And Pastor Rob did a whole sermon about loving people where they are, even if you don’t always understand them. ”

I felt my chest tighten... not quite in pain, but it wasn’t comfortable either.

Really? Of all of the things to talk about? Now?

“That’s nice,” I said, trying to keep my tone even.

“Yeah... and well, something happened that made me think of you.”

I froze, my heart skipping a bit. My mom often had things happen in her life that made her think of me. It was a running joke at this point. “What do you mean?”

She sighed. “One of the families at church, their son came out. As gay. Poor thing, only seventeen. I can’t imagine how scared he must’ve been.”

There was a pause. My stomach twisted. What the absolute fuck? Really? This had to be happening now ?

And then she added, “It’s been hard for his family. Not because he’s gay, but because his dad just got laid off. Everything hit at once.”

I didn't breathe. It was as if an invisible hand smacked itself over my nose and mouth, clamping my airways shut.

"Oh," I said, voice thin. "That's... a lot."

"It is. It's just—these kids today, they go through so much. I told your father, 'Thank goodness Sammy never gave us any of that kind of stress.' It made me so grateful to have you as a son. The love of my life."

And there it was.

The sentence landed like a punch in the sternum, cracking the tough bone into a hundred different pieces. I didn't even know what to say. The air felt colder all of a sudden, like the sun had taken warmth with her on the way out. Suddenly winter had come months ahead of schedule.

"Right," I said. "Of course."

"I just... can't imagine how hard it must be for those parents, trying to adjust to something like that. And with everything else going on." Then static burst through the phone before my mom's voice cut back in. "—Gay, of course."

"Right, of course," I said. I stared out toward the pasture, where a familiar silhouette moved near the far side of the fence.

Benny.

He was helping Pris carry a bag of fertilizer toward the barn, laughing about something, his voice carrying faintly in the stillness. He looked so comfortable. Like he belonged here. Like he was building a life full of things that mattered. Free to be free, not to feel like a burden.



And for a second, I thought that I could belong too.

But that sentence echoed again. Like the shockwaves of a massive bomb.

Thank goodness Sammy never gave us any of that kind of stress.

I winced, sucking in a breath. This was a reminder that life was never easy. “Listen, I should go. Give Dad a hug for me.”

“Of course, sweetheart. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hung up and stared at the screen for a few seconds before tucking the phone into my back pocket.

My stomach felt hollow. Like someone had scooped out all the joy I’d collected in the past week and left nothing but a dull and gray void in its place. Empty space. White noise.

I’d been so foolish. Leaving the city and coming to Rainbow Ranch had made me feel like I was living in a bubble. But the world didn’t function like that. No one lived in a bubble.

I turned back toward the fence line, just as Benny looked up and spotted me.

He waved. I waved back, weakly, trying to gather my breath, trying to pull the panic back down from the edges of my chest. This was fucked up. I’d made a mistake.

He’d felt so good inside me.

I wanted him again.

I couldn't have him.

I fucked up.

And then he started walking toward me. I wanted to run.

He reached me fast, his hands still dirty with flecks of dirt and fertilizer. "Hey," he said. "You good? You kinda looked like you saw a ghost."

"I'm fine," I lied through my damn teeth.

He frowned, his dark eyes searching my face.

His dark black beard was perfectly shaved.

He wore a white tank top and a worn pair of blue jeans.

I wanted to hold his chin in my hands, aim those lips toward mine, kiss him until I felt like everything would be alright.

"Something's up, I can feel it," he said, head cocked.

Of course my best friend would know when something was up. "You wanna talk about it?"

"No," I said too quickly.

He didn't flinch. Just stepped a little closer. "Okay. Not now. But later, maybe?"

I nodded.

And then he reached up and brushed a strand of hair from my forehead. His palm lingered against my cheek. It was soft. Natural.

And absolutely fucking terrifying.

Because just like that, I pictured my mom seeing it. I heard her voice again. Thank goodness Sammy never gave us that kind of stress.

I stepped back.

He blinked. “What’s wrong?”

“I said I’m fine.” It came out so much more tense than I meant it to. Fuck.

His brows knit together. “Okay, but?—”

“I don’t want you to touch me right now,” I snapped.

That did it. Like dumping a bucket of ice directly onto his head. Benny looked shocked. He stepped back, arms falling to his sides, a hurt expression cracking across his face before he could catch it.

“Sam...”

“I just—I need some air,” I muttered. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Do what?”

Be seen. Be known. Be vulnerable.

Be his.

I turned and walked away, heart hammering against my ribs, breath lodging in my throat like it didn't belong there. A splinter I couldn't get out. This was so fucked. So fucking fucked. I wasn't sure if Benny followed me or not. I just kept walking, the world cracking with every step I took.

I didn't stop until I reached the barn. I sank down behind the tool shed, tucked between sacks of feed and spare fence posts, and buried my face in my hands.

I wasn't ready for this. I'd been fooling myself.

I wasn't ready to come out. To be held. To be loved like this—not when I didn't even know how to love myself in the open.

And Benny deserved better.

I had to make sure he got that.

BENNY

It was happening again.

I knew it. I knew history would repeat itself.

As sure as the sun would rise on the horizon, Sam would come around to break my heart again.

I was stupid to ever think things would be different this time.

Why would they? Because we were older? No.

That didn't matter much when he was absolutely determined to keep his true self locked away, withering in the cold and lonely darkness of shame.

"So fucking stupid," I said to the stars watching me above. Sam had left with a wake of shock trailing behind him. But I wasn't going to get caught in the riptide. Not anymore. I would swim my way back to shore and be done fawning over men who would never be with me in the first place.

"What a waste of fucking time." I walked in the opposite direction as the barn, toward the grazing field where a few horses were still out. I thought it had spontaneously started to rain, but the salty taste against my lips confirmed nothing was falling from the sky.

Except maybe the sky itself was falling.

I swung open the gate to the pasture, the hinges creaking loudly into the night.

Juniper lifted her head and twitched her ears.

I didn't even have to start walking toward her before she turned and made her way to me.

Her coat had an almost ethereal shine to it underneath the moonlight.

I ran a hand through her mane. She gave me a curious whinny and bumped her snout into my side.

I wrapped my arms around her neck, burying my face in her hair, and started to cry. The sound was stifled by Juniper, thank God. I didn't want this display of weakness to be witnessed by anyone, especially not by Sam.

He caused this. He wrapped me up in his arms only to push me off a ledge.

Right when I started to feel comfortable— hopeful —about what was taking root between us.

It was the same thing that happened back when we were kids trying to figure it all out.

Except that time, he had quite literally pushed me, so I guess there were some signs of growth after all?

Juniper whinnied some more, huffing in concern.

She didn't move, though. She knew that what I needed most in that moment was a shoulder—or horse—to cry on.

That's what I loved most about these animals.

They were the most intuitive beings I'd ever been around, knowing when someone was fearful, happy, angry, or absolutely and totally fucking heartbroken.

Horses understood emotions more than some people understood their ABCs.

Magical creatures. We didn't deserve them.

Why did I deserve this?

Why did Sam break my heart?

Why couldn't he love me? Why couldn't he love himself?

A particularly lung-twisting sob escaped. Juniper must have gotten worried because she took a couple steps back so she could look at me, her saucer-like honey brown eyes searching mine. I rested my forehead against hers. "It's okay. I'm alright, girl. At least I will be."

"Of course you will be."

"Ah! Oh, fuck!" I almost launched myself into space from the fright Boone had given me. He stopped right where he stood, eyes wide, scared at my reaction.

"Sorry," Boone said. "Shoulda announced myself."

"No, that's fine. I shouldn't have let my guard down."

"Ah, right. You shouldn't have let your guard down at your family ranch surrounded by people you love and animals you care for."

“Sometimes it’s the people you love who can do the most damage.” The words sound like they came from someone else’s mouth. Was I disassociating? Was this the moment I snapped, packed a bag, and turned into a burly forest man living far away from society?

Maybe. But probably not, I liked having electricity too much.

“Whoa,” Boone said. His gaze filled with concern as his eyebrows knit together. He put a hand on my elbow. “What happened?” He must have just realized the tears streaking down my face weren’t from sweat.

“I stubbed my toe,” I said.

“Right, and I’ve got the pope kissing my ass.”

I chuckled at that. A saying our dad loved to use whenever something was unbelievable to him.

“It’s nothing.” Of course, that was another lie, and my brother damn well knew it.

He could always see through whatever fabrications I was creating in order to throw him off the trail of the truth.

He crossed his arms, covering the flour that dusted the front of his plaid shirt.

He must have been making a fresh batch of buns for tomorrow.

“It’s Sam,” I relented. I knew this would be going nowhere.

“What happened? Is he okay?”



I shrugged. I wish I knew. I wanted to know. I wanted to run after him and tell him it'd be alright, to soothe him, to hold his hand and comfort him. To kiss him.

Fuck, I really, really liked kissing him. But he pushed me away again.

“He’s fine. I just... I started to fall for him again, Boone.

Or maybe I’d never stopped falling for him.

But he never even started falling for me.

He basically told me the same thing he said to me back when we were seventeen, that he’ll never be able to give me what I want.

He’s straight, or at least he won’t come out, and it’s dragging us both under. ”

“Oh Benny, that is not the story I wanted to hear about the two of you.”

“Same,” I replied. Juniper still stood by my side, flicking her ears. Her attention was pinned on me. “I knew him coming back here was a bad idea.”

Boone sighed, his lips pursed. He chewed on his thoughts for a moment. Likely parsing through the nicest ways to tell me to just move on already. To learn from my mistakes and not let something like this happen ever again.

“You two deserve a chance.” Leave it to my big brother to know how to surprise me.

“It breaks my heart to hear that you’re hurting.

And if it were anyone else, I’d be more wary of telling you this.

But I've seen how you and Sam look at each other.

It's similar to how Wylie used to look at me, with that silent but also loud kind of want.

Where it's obvious to everyone but us. Not only that, but I've sensed such a shift in you since he got here. ”

“I've felt it, too. And that's what makes this even worse. I can't drag him out of the closet. I don't want to do that to him, but I also don't want to be collateral anymore.”

“And I don't want that for you, either. Could this be maybe this last step on his way to coming out?”

I shook my head. I could see the barn over Boone's shoulder, the light on and shining against the dark sky. Was Sam still there? Should I go and look for him?

I'll never love you.

The memory slashed through me. It was blurred at the edges but still sharp enough to cut through skin. He'd said that the first time this ever happened, when he pushed me so I fell flat on my ass.

He'd been telling the truth back then.

I should have believed him.

I dried my cheeks with my palm. Sadness was beginning to be replaced with an ember of anger. I'd been played a fool. I fucked up by letting my guard down. “No,” I said. “I don't think it is. If he can't feel safe coming out here, at Rainbow Ranch, then he isn't going to feel safe ever coming out.”

“That’s not necessarily true. Maybe you were the one helping him step closer to his true self.”

“But is it my responsibility to walk him to the rainbow?”

“Of course not,” Boone said. “Your responsibility is to simply be there as a friend. As a support system. Do you think you can do that?”

I dropped my gaze. The weight on my chest was heavy. “I don’t think I can. We’ve already blurred too many lines. I can’t see him as just a friend.”

Boone nodded. “What does your heart tell you, Benny?”

“That I need to get on my Delta app and book the first flight out of here.”

Boone’s soft gaze sharpened. “Running away from this isn’t going to solve it.”

Juniper gave a grunt of agreement. Great, now they were ganging up on me.

“Then what do I do?”

“Give it the night,” Boone said. “Let everyone sleep on what happened. Then, when the day is new, you two get together and have a deep heart-to-heart. Talk through everything. And I mean everything . Let him feel safe and let him know that you’ll help him, but you also won’t hurt for him.

He needs to be respectful of you, too. He can’t string you along.

He has to face it with you, and then he can slowly come out to everyone else. ”

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. As if it were some kind of pressure valve that

would release all this built-up anxiety inside me. “What if he can’t? What if he can’t ever come out?”

“Do you remember when you came out?”

“Of course I do. I sent a text message to the family group chat saying I was going to marry Tom Cruise, and no one was going to stop me.”

Boone chuckled at that. “Your obsession with Mission Impossible was slightly concerning.”

“Yeah, that was weird. Now Tom gives me the ick.”

“Same,” Boone said with a wink. “But your experience, that ease with which you came out, it’s a blessing not everyone experiences.

Sometimes we live in this perfect little gay bubble here and we forget that people on the outside are still living under the shadow of absolute queer shame.

We were lucky that Ma and Pa kept all of that shit away from us.

They helped us grow, find ourselves, they encouraged us to be true. ”

“They were the best.”

“They really, really were. But they were also rare. Not everyone is lucky enough to have that kind of support, and some people have the complete opposite. I don’t know Sam’s situation, but I have to assume that his family may have something to do with it.

At least from what I remember when you both were younger.

Just give Sam a little more grace, a little more time. Talk to him tomorrow.”

I filled my lungs with the fresh night air.

From here I could see Sam’s bedroom window, the curtains drawn and the lights on.

He must have gone back inside. The anger in my chest flickered away, unable to take hold.

Boone was right. I had to understand that Sam was fighting a battle I could hardly understand.

He struggled between his family values, society’s judgmental glare, and his own ingrained prejudices.

“Thanks, Boone-dawg. You’re right. I think we just need to get some sleep and tackle this tomorrow.”

Juniper gave another grunt and a stomp of her foot. We both looked at her for a silent moment before laughter filled the air. She flicked her tail and held her head up high as if saying, duh, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you .

“Be kind to yourself, Benny. You’re a catch and Sam is lucky to have you in his life. Give him the space to see that.”

I offered my brother a genuine smile, covering the worry that still gnawed away at my rib cage. “I just hope he doesn’t run away before he gets a chance to see it.”

SAM

The entire house was quiet. It was past breakfast time, so the family was likely out managing their morning duties. I could hear the faint ticktock of the armadillo clock in the kitchen.

It was the perfect time for me to order a car and get the hell out of here.

My bag was packed. My soul felt heavy. My heart hurt with every beat.

I should never have come here. The past was a demon you could never outrun. It sunk its wicked claws into the nape of your neck and grabbed hold, yanking you back when you least expected it.

I wasn't ready for this. I'd never be ready for it.

Coming here, back to Rainbow Ranch, back into Benny's stratosphere, made me confront parts of myself I'd long since buried.

I thought my feelings toward him were a blip on the radar, a kink in the chain.

I didn't realize they made up the twisting strands of my very DNA. It's why I could never run from it.

But I was sure as hell going to try.

The whole thing with Dennis could be sorted out later. I'd get a lawyer involved if

needed, although I doubt it would ever even get to that. Then there was that tiny strip of land that I technically owned. I hadn't even gone to see it. Didn't care to. Not anymore.

I couldn't linger. The longer I stayed, the more chances there were of running into Benny. I couldn't look him in the eyes. It was a cowardly move, and he deserved more. But then again, that was the exact reason why I had to leave. Benny Adams was a golden man in a world made of bronze figurines.

I opened my app. The car would take over thirty minutes to get to the ranch.

Apparently, not many rideshare drivers worked around Johnson Springs.

I looked out the window, seeing nothing but bright blue skies and verdant green grass.

My room was toward the back of the house and faced away from the stables and pastures.

There was the regal and lone oak tree that marked a spot Benny and I would often hang out at as kids.

It was also the small piece of land Frankie had left me.

Which was... odd. Why would Frankie have done that?

Why would he have done any of this? He always had a reason for his actions.

He was a big jokester, always pulling pranks on people, but he was also a by-the-book kind of guy. He liked order, and he liked reason.

So where was the order and reason in all of this? All I could see was chaos and pain.

I checked the rideshare app again. The driver canceled and their replacement was even further away. Great.

I sighed and rolled my luggage across the dirt. The wheels clacked and clicked over small stones and broken branches. I froze, thinking I heard Benny and Boone's voices coming in my direction. That's the last thing I needed. To have to confront the very guy I was running away from.

Then again... maybe it wasn't Benny I was running from?

I reached the ancient oak tree. On its scarred bark were two lone carved letters , a little below eyeline.

The letters B and S. Didn't stand for bullshit as one would likely assume at first glance.

I traced the small, shaky letters with my finger.

This had been one of our spots. Frankie had actually called it the Boys' Tree because he said it never failed to find us two sitting in its shade, laughing and talking about nothing and everything.

Guess he wanted me to own the little slice of land that brought me so much happiness when I was younger?

I turned and pressed my back against the tree.

A current of sadness flowed through me, weighing me down.



My chest felt heavy, lungs full of cement.

I hadn't expected to come back and feel everything I used to feel when I was a kid.

I also didn't expect to feel so fucking happy being back in Benny's orbit.

And the things we'd done... They were fantasies come true.

It had felt better than any fading dream could make me feel.

Kissing Benny, lying with him, it was like slipping a key into a cobweb-encrusted lock.

But the door was broken, the hinges stuck.

Even with the key it wouldn't open. I couldn't allow it.

I sank down to the ground. I pulled my legs up and rested my arms on my knees.

It created a small, light-filled cave. I rested my forehead against my arms and closed my eyes.

Rainbow Ranch had provided me a safe space to figure out I was a huge fucking coward.

Benny didn't deserve me. He deserved someone who was out and proud.

Who could hold his hand in public and not care about the judgmental glares or bigoted comments.

That wasn't me. I cared. Way too much. I gave power to the shame that people

projected onto me.

It was the equivalent of taking away a spoon from a yelling psychopath and handing them an AK-47.

Other people's opinions were completely harmless until you sharpened their weapons by simply caring about what they said.

I sucked in a deep breath. The air carried with it the scent of wet dirt from last night's rain. Beneath my feet I noticed a particularly clean square patch of dirt, the grass not having taken hold after the dig. It looked fresh.

Huh.

I shifted so that I sat on my hip and I started to dig. It didn't take me long at all to find a small wooden box, its finish smooth and polished after I blew off some of the dirt. There was a tiny name etched near one of the rounded corners.

Frankie Newman.

Weird, what was a box belonging to Frankie doing in the exact spot he had left me in his will?

There was a clasp where a lock likely fit. I opened the lid and found a neatly folded and crisp piece of paper on a flat bed of red velvet. A name was scrawled across the paper in a shaky handwriting.

My name.

"What the..." My eyebrows drew together. I unfolded the paper and leaned back on the tree. Somewhere nearby, a rooster let out a loud crow. I barely registered it past

the sound of my beating heart.

To Sammy,

Sucks I have to be writing this, huh? I didn't want to go but I guess clocking out in your early eighties ain't all that bad. And we all have to do it eventually. I've lived a lot, and a lot of my life was spent around you, watching you grow, gaining the confidence to become who you are today.

But I feel like there's more left for you to learn about yourself.

I speak with you every other month and I don't think the city has treated you fairly.

I think the doctor would prescribe a trip back to your roots and back to a certain Rainbow Rancher.

Your eyes always lit up around him, same as your smile.

I hope coming back home can help you find your truth and own your happiness. Life's far too short, even at eighty. It feels like a flickering flame. So shine yours bright.

Ok, enough with my poetics. I've been reading quite a bit of Shakespeare from bed. Can you tell?

With love, Frankie

P.S. Don't worry about the whole Dennis and land thing. My will was completely fabricated and has no legal standing. I just couldn't think of a better way to get you here.

P.P.S. Tell Benny and the family I say howdy.

P.P.P.S. Don't let him go again.

A rain drop fell and wet the corner of the letter. Another drop. And another.

I sniffed. Realized there wasn't a cloud in the bright blue sky.

How had Frankie known? And what was I supposed to do with this information?

With this flood of emotion? I couldn't contain it.

I was sad I was leaving, sad Frankie was gone, sad my past with Benny had been scarred.

Angry at the system that held me down, made me hide.

Angry at the fear that kept me locked in the closet.

A flash of my time at the ranch crossed my mind. Benny and I in the river. Benny teaching me how to care for his horses. Benny teaching me how good sex with another man could feel.

Benny making me feel complete.

My phone vibrated against the ground, stirring up some tiny rocks. A notification appeared on my screen.

My driver had arrived. It was time for me to go.

BENNY

I don't want you to touch me right now.

Those words had cut their shape into my skin. The scars of it were sore, still fresh.

He may as well have pushed me. That would have really driven his point home.

The sun was relentless today. It stung at the back of my neck, my cowboy hat having trouble shielding it. I considered confronting him before breakfast today but decided to just let it be. He was a grown man—he could talk to me or choose to run away.

When I overheard the zippers of a bag and the shuffling of clothes, I knew Sam had made his decision. But seeing him come out of the house that really made it feel real.

I spotted Sam rolling out his suitcase as I was brushing Juniper's mane.

He was far off in the distance, but I felt like I could make out every little detail, from the scuff on his white sneakers to the freckle on his wrist to the expression of regret and sadness twisting his features.

It was the same set of emotions that burned into me like a sizzling hot brand.

I winced, trying to stop the unwanted tears before they escaped.

No use.

It was happening again. Sam was going to run. He was going to leave me behind. At least this time I hadn't fallen hard on my ass. Could that be considered growth?

Everything was going so well. Why, Sam? Why not just give in?

My heart turned into one of those pincushions Ma would use whenever she was sewing.

The fluffy, bright red strawberry covered in dozens of sharp needles.

Every beat pushed the pins in deeper. How could loving someone be this painful?

Because there was no denying it, I loved Sam.

I always loved Sam, and now I'd have to watch Sam leave.

All.

Over.

Again.

Wait... why was Sam coming closer? The pasture was on the other side of the driveway. If he was waiting for a ride, he should be walking the opposite direction.

Shit. Crap. Donkey dick. He was going to see me crying.

I turned away and made myself extremely interested in whatever Dennis seemed to be rooting around for.

Was he coming to say goodbye? Was he trying to make this moment as difficult as

possible?

I'd broken in horses from abusive situations that had better sense of what was right and wrong.

Why couldn't he just vanish into the night and never be heard from again?

Would that make this easier? Probably not.

But then again, what fucking would? If he wanted to leave, then that's what he had to do.

Go. Just go, Sam.

"Benny..."

His somber voice cut through the air. Sounded like a distant cousin coming up from behind me at my parents' funeral, wishing to pay respects but not knowing exactly how.

I didn't turn around. I was sure that my eyes were still glossy from the tears. Juniper must have sensed something was up, because she gave a huff and walked away—but not far, and still kept me in her line of sight. "Weren't you supposed to be leaving?"

"I am... I was." A hand on my elbow made me jump. I moved forward and turned around. Sam looked like he'd just touched an oven. He held his hand against his chest as if it were burnt.

"Don't touch me," I said in a low voice, my gaze breaking for the ground.

"I don't want you to touch me right now."

” I parroted the same words he had said to me.

They were empty on my end, but they seemed to have hit hard with Sam.

His big blue eyes opened wide, his lips following the same shape as he tried searching for words.

“That’s not... I didn’t mean... Fuck, Benny.

Fuck.” Sam let go of his suitcase and rubbed his face.

The suitcase tipped over and fell on its side with a heavy thump.

Sam didn’t make a move to pick it up. “I regret ever saying that. I do. I was wrong. I’d always been wrong.

Pushing you away was wrong . And I’ve known the right answer all this time, I just refused to see it.

I was too scared because then it’d mean I have to accept a part of myself that used to scare me. ”

I crossed my arms, absorbing every word he said, even though a veil of shock was making it a little difficult. He was speaking in the past tense. As if he’d changed his mind about us. Could that really be the case? This wasn’t some messed up joke, or a sick fever dream?

I decided to test it. “What did we do for my thirteenth birthday?”

Sam paused, cocked his head. Ha. If he didn’t know the answer, then I’d have to assume this was either a dream— or reality had been by some kind of romance-loving



alien that took over Sam's body.

"We had our first solo camping trip. Felt like adults until I saw a massive, hairy-ass spider in my sleeping bag and refused to stay."

"Good thing the walk back to the ranch was only five minutes."

"Then we were in the living room having leftover cake and watching South Park on a low volume so your parents wouldn't hear."

I laughed at that warm memory. "You know, it's the small spiders you should worry about, right? Their venom has to be strong to kill the bigger prey."

"Yeah, well... spiders big enough to hold guns also scare the shit out of me."

That got a deep belly laugh from me, which surprised me. I hadn't expected this goodbye to turn into a laugh-fest.

Sam cocked his head. "Why are you asking about your thirteenth birthday?"

"Because you sound like an android. Wanted to make sure you were really you."

Sam narrowed his eyes. It was his turn to laugh. "You've been watching too many sci-fi shows. I'm definitely real. And everything I'm saying, everything I'm feeling, that's also real."

"What are you feeling?" I ventured, still unsure of where this conversation was truly headed. I felt like I was wrangling cattle, my lasso circling above my head as I lined up my throw.

"I'm feeling regret for treating you the way I had. Sad that I've been living only a

half-truth. Upset that I wasted so much time being scared and running away when all I needed to do was come back home to be happy.” He reached for my hand. I didn’t move away this time. “So that I could do this.”

And before I could even realize what was happening, Sam’s lips were on mine.

The suddenness—the rawness—of the kiss made it messy, my hat falling off my head.

I stepped back for balance before I leaned in.

I grabbed Sam’s hips as our tongues swirled.

So many questions swirled with them, but I ignored that.

Sam had initiated this kiss. He had wanted it, same way I wanted it.

My body was a firework, one of those you only see at Disney World.

Massive, multi-colored, magical. The explosions sizzled through me, the ground underneath my feet disappearing as we floated up toward the cloudless night sky.

We broke for air. The moment was heavy, silent.

Sam rested his forehead against mine. His eyes were shut, his lips shining.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “For everything. I was going to leave today. I had a ride coming to pick me up, but I cancelled it. I don’t want to run anymore.

I want you. And I don’t care who knows it.

I want to hold your hand at dinner, want to kiss you goodnight, want to skinny dip with you in the creek.

I want to take you to the city, want you to take me to a race. I want to do it all with you.”

How could this not be a dream? This was too perfect. It was a moment I’d wanted ever since I’d fallen in love with Sam all those years ago. Except it had always felt like a fantasy I needed to let go of. Far too good to ever become true.

“I found this letter,” Sam said, reaching into his pocket, one hand still holding mine. “It’s from Frankie.”

He handed the folded paper to me. “Can I read it?”

Sam nodded, his eyes focused on my lips. There was a glow behind them that I don’t remember being there before. I unfolded the letter and read it. My jaw dropped once I reached the end.

“It was all fake?”

“Leave it to Frankie.”

I shook my head. The only thing I could do was laugh. “Leave it to Frankie.” I could hardly believe it. This had all been orchestrated from beyond the grave, by someone who had seen the real truth of who Sam was, and wanted Sam to see it too before it was too late.

“It’s something I was realizing over time, but his letter really kinda pushed me over the edge.

I'm bi, Benny. I was happy with the women I was with, I find the female form beautiful and attractive.

I also find men equally as attractive. You also showed me that the physical chemistry is there, and it's powerful.

Beyond that, though, I can see myself with a man. I can see myself with you, Benny."

I blinked through the haze of shock. Sam had done it. He'd finally come out of the closet. The internalized fear and anger he harbored for himself was nowhere to be found.

I realized the glow he radiated was pure joy. His eyes crinkled at the corners, his smile beaming like the high beams on my F150.

"Wow," he said. "I feel so free saying that."

"That's amazing, Sam. You deserve to feel free.

Everyone does. Love is the most basic and purest emotion and, for reasons I can never fully understand, it also comes with societal conditions.

You must be in love with someone of the opposite sex, or if not, you might make me uncomfortable.

Or you may force me to have a five-minute conversation with my curious child.

Or you may hold up a mirror in my direction, showing me a reflection I hate to see.

All those reasons to step on someone else's happiness, and what's the common denominator there?

The other person. It's always the other person, never you. ”

Sam nodded at that. Both my hands were in his now. My boots were planted firmly on the ground, and yet it felt like we floated on puffy white clouds.

“You forgive me, right, Benny?”

I looked up into those shining blue eyes. “I never blamed you, Sam.”

We kissed again, holding each other. For the first time ever, Sam and I embraced in public. Neither of us cared who saw. I pressed my body against his. We fit together perfectly. He smelled like he'd recently showered, like strawberries. I kissed him, feeling something twitch between us.

He was getting hard. I gave my hips a little wiggle, rubbing my own growing dick against his. He smiled as we kissed, the curve of his lips matching mine. Well, well, well. Maybe it was time to move this coming out party somewhere a little more private—preferably somewhere with a bed.

“Should we head inside?”

“Yes,” Sam said, his cock fully hard now. “But maybe we should take the long way around. Let things cool off.”

I rolled my eyes and gave him one more playful wiggle. “Tuck yourself into your waistband.

“You mean like this?” Sam reached down and rearranged himself so that his hard cock poked out the top of his shorts. The head was pink and already wet with precum. I swallowed down a moan before I ran my thumb over his dick. He shivered. I lifted my wet thumb up to my lips and got myself a taste.

“Just like that,” I said, grinning.

He licked his lips and appeared like he was seconds from melting into a puddle at my feet. He fixed his shirt so that it covered the head of his hard dick.

“Fuckin’ hell, Sam. I want you to ride me so hard my saddle catches fire.”

“Let’s do it, stud. Break me in.”

We couldn’t get back to my bedroom fast enough.

SAM

I'd never felt so sure in a decision than I felt in my choice to stay.

Benny's reaction only solidified that choice further. Like sunshine blasting on a freshly laid square of cement, drying it, creating a foundation for something much larger, much more grand.

His kisses, his touch, his hard dick pushing against mine... It was all too much. It unraveled me. Melted my brain and filled my heart with golden sparks.

"So now can I get those porn recs?" I teased as we entered Benny's bedroom, quickly shutting the door behind us.

"Yes, I'll send those right over," Benny said with a wink as he worked to undo the button on my shorts. "I've got a good one where one guy is in assless chaps."

"Really?" I said. I helped Benny with unzipping my shorts and dropped them to my ankles, my already sticky and wet briefs following immediately after. Benny whispered a fuck under his breath as he wrapped his fingers around my shaft. "Assless chaps are kind of a fantasy of mine."

"Interesting..." Benny said, smiling as he stroked me.

I shut my eyes and stood there, resting my back on the wooden door, falling into the bliss.

“Sit down on the bed, keep your eyes closed.” Benny led me to the edge of his bed where I sat down.

I took off my shirt, keeping my eyes shut.

I heard Benny open the closet door. Heard him undressing, clothes falling to the floor.

I held my hard dick in a loose fist, my heart racing as I tried to imagine what Benny was doing. This was so fucking hot.

“Okay, open.”

Holy fuck. And it only got hotter.

Benny stood in front of me wearing a pair of assless chaps and nothing else beside a cowboy hat and a red bandana tied around his neck. My eyes nearly popped out of my skull. I started drooling.

“Goddamn. You’re so fucking hot, Benny.”

“You like this, huh?”

My eyes dropped to his sexy dick, stiff and pink, throbbing in the air.

The chaps were made out of black leather with fringe down the sides.

He looked like a superhero in a Western porn flick.

Not even sure there was such a thing. But if there wasn’t, Benny needed to get on it, because he sat on a gold mine.



Speaking of sitting...

Seeing him like this, standing there with his full masculinity on display, it flipped a switch inside me.

A desperate urge to have him underneath me took over.

I could feel my hole twitching, my body responding to the urgent need that tightened my balls and licked flames through my core.

There was only one way to put out this fire.

“God, Benny, I want you to fuck me. So fucking bad.” My words were a plea. I was simply a worshipper approaching Benny’s alter, ready to fall to my knees and beg for what I wanted.

What I needed.

“And I will,” Benny said as he approached the bed.

He rubbed a hand over his abs, up to his defined chest. The primal tattoos on his bicep looked like they’d been enchanted to move.

“But first I want you to make this cowboy come undone,” Benny said, his voice low and hot and crackling like fire on dry brush.

He stepped closer, and I didn’t hesitate. I slid off the bed and I dropped to my knees like gravity had decided for me.

His cock was right there, thick and leaking at the tip, the bandana around his neck a flare of red at the edge of my vision as I leaned in and licked him from base to head.

His fingers threaded through my curls, breath hitching as I swirled my tongue around the tip, tasting that first bead of precum. Licking it up.

Fuck, I loved this part.

I loved the salt, the heat, the weight of him on my tongue. I loved how my jaw ached just enough when I took him deeper. And I especially loved the sounds Benny made when I hollowed my cheeks and moaned softly around his cock. A string of curses left his mouth, each one rougher than the last.

“God, baby,” he grunted. “You’re so fucking good at this.”

I pulled off just long enough to say, “And you taste so fucking good,” then went back down, sucking him slow and wet and steady, letting my spit coat him until it dripped down to his thighs.

I used one hand to stroke what I couldn’t take, the other hand gripping his hip like I could anchor myself there forever.

Being here, on my knees, servicing Benny, it was nearly too hot for me to handle.

I looked up, seeing a towering body made of pure muscle, his eyes rolling to the back of his skull as his lips curled into a blissed-out smile.

Benny bucked just slightly into my mouth, and I let him. I wanted it. Wanted to be used and fucked and loved all at once. I wanted to give Benny all the pleasure he deserved. Wanted to worship him like the god he was.

His hand left my head and then I heard the slick sound of spit hitting skin.

He bent down, his cock still stuffed in my mouth but his hand moving down my back.

I shivered before I even felt his fingers at my hole.

His slicked-up fingertips circled me, teasing, pressing just enough to make me gasp against the base of his cock.

I arched back, allowing him a better angle to play with me.

“Look at that. You’re so fucking hungry for it, aren’t you,” he murmured. “You’d let me fuck you right here on the floor, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded, cock throbbing untouched between my legs. A strong breeze in that moment would have had me blow my load.

He slid one finger inside me, slow but firm, and I whimpered around his dick. My whole body clenched around the intrusion and begged for more.

I didn’t stop sucking him as he started fucking me with his fingers. First one, then two, scissoring me open while I tried not to come just from that alone. I moaned around his length as he hit that spot, that secret, electric place that made my eyes roll back and my thighs shake.

“Fuck, Sam,” he groaned, thrusting into my mouth a little deeper. “You’re dripping. Look at you.”

“I need you,” I said, pulling off with spit dripping down my chin. “Benny, please, give me more.”

He reached down, grabbed me by the jaw, and pulled me up to my feet. He kissed me deep. It was like he wanted to pour every filthy, dirty thought into me through his mouth. Claiming me with his kiss. Our hard cocks rubbed together, sending a flurry of electrical shocks through my body.

“On the bed,” he said, voice gravel-thick, teeth nipping at my bottom lip. My knees trembled. “And hold your legs up in the air. Show me that tight hole of yours.”

I scrambled up and got on the mattress, pulling my legs up and spreading myself wide, doing as I was told. I was raw and desperate and wide open for him.

“Jesus Christ,” Benny whispered, crawling over me, his cock dragging along my thigh as he kissed my chest and reached between us. He slicked up his fingers again and slid in a third, stretching me wide, making me groan as I threw my head back against the pillow.

“You’re taking it so good,” he whispered against my neck. “Taking me so good.”

My whole body was on fire. Every nerve ending was tuned to him.

“Benny,” I gasped. “I need your cock. I need it now.”

“Yeah? My fingers not enough?”

“No, Benny. I need you to fuck me.”

“Mm-hmm, your body’s begging for it. Fuck.” Benny pulled his fingers out. He leaned over and grabbed the lube out of the nightstand. He squirted a generous amount onto his palm and spread it over his thick cock.

He lined himself up, eyes locked on mine. “I’ve got you, baby.”

And then he pushed in.

Slow. Controlled. Fucking decadent.

My mouth dropped open, but no sound came out at first, just breath. Just feeling. He slid in deeper, inch by inch, stretching me open until his hips met the backs of my thighs and his cock was buried balls-deep inside me.

I'd never felt so full. So wanted.

So completely fucking his.

We didn't move at first.

We just breathed together, sinking into the ocean of pleasure that surrounded us.

Benny's hand brushed my cheek as his other arm braced beside my head, and in his eyes I didn't see lust. I saw everything. Trust and wonder and passion. A kind of aching, powerful connection that made my heart trip over itself.

"You okay?" he whispered, voice ragged.

I nodded, overwhelmed. "Don't stop."

And with that, he started to thrust.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:23 am*

BENNY

Time slowed to a stop when I buried myself inside of Sam.

Birds froze in midair, rivers ceased flowing, the earth quit its spinning.

It was heavenly. Seeing Sam's O-shaped lips, seeing his eyebrows dip with pleasure. He didn't need to say how much he wanted this, his body did all the talking. His hole tightened around me. As if pulling me in deeper, deeper, deeper.

I wanted to become one with this man. I'd been so scared of losing him again only an hour ago. And now I had him on his back with his legs up in the air, his ass open and his cock leaking for me.

This was how he should be.

This was how we were meant to be.

I slowly pulled back and thrust back in.

The world and all its inhabitants were jump-started back to moving.

Like everything shifted into an accelerated motion to try and catch up with the lost time.

I became carried away by the pleasure, rocking into Sam, wanting to get lost inside him.

The music I'd put on thankfully covered the moans I couldn't hold back and the sound of skin slapping against skin.

He fisted the sheets as I grabbed his legs and hoisted them on my shoulders.

I slowed my thrusts. Looked down so I could see myself work him with every inch of my big, uncut cock. I kissed his ankle as I pushed back inside him. Slowly, this time. Fucking him, over and over, rolling my hips in a way that I knew would have me hitting his spot.

"Goddamn, Benny. That feels so fucking good. You've got me so fucking hard."

"I can see that," I said with a grin. I grabbed his stiff dick in my hand. Damn. He wasn't lying. Sam was as solid as a brick.

It was giving me ideas...

"What are your thoughts on flipping?"

Sam paused for a moment, head cocked to the side, my dick still inside him. "I never thought about it. I don't think I've got what it takes, though."

I arched a brow and stroked him. "You clearly have what it takes. Want to try?"

"Now?" Sam asked with an extra confused look on his face. A bead of clear precum dripped out from his tip.

"Yes," I said with a growl, pulling out of him. He instantly looked disappointed.

"Ok..." Sam lowered his legs off my shoulders.

He awkwardly rolled off the bed, stood up and went over to the shorts he discarded.

Was he getting a condom? He knew that we were good playing without one, right?

We already had the PrEP and STI talk... “What are you doing?” I sat on the edge of my bed, my lubed-up cock shining like a wet steel rod.

“I’m guessing you’ll need my information. Driver’s license and bank account?”

I twisted my face into that expression that belonged in a cartoon. Head pushed forward, eyebrows slamming together, lips slanted and tight, eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“What are you talking about?” Sam asked with his wallet still in hand and dick still rock hard.

“Flip fucking. Like I fuck you, now you fuck me.”

His eyes went wide. Then he started cracking up, his dick bouncing with every wave of laughter. “Holy shit. Okay,” he said, catching his breath. His laughter had spread to me. “I thought you meant flipping houses , not positions. That makes so much more sense.”

That had me clutching my stomach from the laughter. When I could finally breathe again, I said, “Dang, I forgot you were so new to all of this.”

Sam put his wallet back and walked over to me.

He licked his lips. His smile could light up an entire city block.

He was so damn handsome, so sexy, so free.



I loved it. Loved this. I grabbed Sam's hips and pulled him closer, kissing the head of his dick before he leaned down to kiss me, a hand wrapping loosely around my throat.

"Yes, I'm down to fuck you. Bounce on this dick. "

"Mm-hmm," I said. I leaned forward and kissed the hair on Sam's chest. He stroked himself before getting onto the bed. I grabbed the lube and spread some on his stiff dick.

"Fuck," Sam said, the laughter having simmered away to leave behind a lust-filled passion. "You're so sexy in those chaps and cowboy hat."

"Let's see if I can keep this hat on."

"It's a challenge, then."

I got onto the bed and straddled Sam's lap. My thighs felt so good against his. Sparks erupted from the contact.

"First, I want you to sit on my face," Sam said, surprising me. I arched a brow, smirking devilishly. He matched my grin as he grabbed his balls and tugged.

I did just as he asked, moving so that I positioned myself in a squat above his face.

I grabbed onto the headboard and lowered myself slowly.

Sam's tongue didn't waste any time with working my hole.

I gasped at the pleasure that coursed through me, centered around the way Sam lapped at me.

He used both hands to spread me open, his nose pushing against my tight sac, the sounds of his hunger filling the room.

I was scared to touch myself, just in case I came too early.

“Holy fuck, that feels so fucking good.”

Sam responded with a nonverbal grunt against my hole, the vibrations mixing with the tickle of his scruff nearly sending me into orbit. I white-knuckled the headboard and rocked my hips, riding his face.

“I can’t,” I said, lifting up. “I need you, Sam. Need that dick.”

“Have it. Use me like a sex toy.”

I could have melted into a puddle of cum and sweat right there.

Thankfully I held my corporeal form and shifted down so that I lined myself up with Sam’s needy cock.

He reached between us and held it up, slapping his thick meat against my ass.

I leaned down for a kiss which simultaneously spread me open.

Sam took no time at all, slipping in his slick cock with only a slight burn.

Nothing I couldn’t handle. My body was ready for him, aching for him. The burn quickly gave way to pleasure.

And then the true rodeo show began.

I did exactly as he asked. I rode him like he was some kind of human dildo.

Rocking forward, bouncing up and down, angling him so he hit my swollen prostate, stars exploding in my vision.

The cowboy hat started to slip with all the bucking.

I grabbed the rim and held on as I bent forward so that Sam could take the reins.

His hands found purchase on my hips as he started to rail me. My eyes rolled back, and my entire body tensed with the approaching orgasm. I knew I wouldn't last much longer.

"That's it, Sam. Fuck me. Fuck my ass. Make it yours, baby. That's it, right there."

"Yeah, take that dick. God, it feels so good."

"Keep going," I said, trying my damndest to stop myself from shouting. The music was loud but not that loud. "Keep fucking me. Come inside me —please —fuck yeah."

Sam tensed and gave one final thrust, his dick pushing up into my guts as he gave me his load. I rocked my hips once and leaned back. My orgasm nearly knocked me out. Ropes of cum shot through the air as every inch of my body flooded with ecstasy.

The cowboy hat fell off. I sucked in a deep breath and looked down at a cum-covered Sam. He had it dripping off his chin, covering his smiling lips, coating his chest.

Probably one of the hottest damn things I'd ever seen.

"Wow," Sam said, slightly breathless. His tongue licked up some of the cum off his

upper lip. “That’s a lot.”

I chuckled and used a finger to spread some over his nipple. “I have a feeling you gave me just as much.”

“Probably, if not more. I haven’t come in like five days.”

I smiled as I leaned down, his cock still inside me. I kissed him. Didn’t give a fuck I’d get cum mixed in with the kiss. That only made it hotter.

“So, are you into flipping now?” I teased.

“Yes. Yes, very much so.” His blue eyes caught some of the sunlight that beamed through my bedroom window, through the white curtains.

“And you’re not leaving? Right?”

Sam’s face turned to stone. “Never.”

“Good,” I answered. My heart felt like it’d been filled with sunshine and glitter.

We stayed encased in that moment a while longer, my head resting on his shoulder, both of us still connected, still one.

A knock on my door startled me so bad I jerked upward, Sam’s dick flopping out of me.

“Benny?”

It was Boone, speaking loud enough to be heard over the pop song playing through the speaker. “You in there?”

“Yeah, Boone-dog,” I said. “Just waking up from a nap, I’ll be right out.”

“Okay. Just wanted to let you know Dennis got into someone’s suitcase outside. There’s Hanes boxer briefs all over. He had one on his head.”

I laughed at that image while Sam mouthed oh shit and started blushing.

“Alright, we’ll be right out.”

“We’ll... okay. Right! Gotcha.”

My turn to mouth oh shit . Sam smiled as he grabbed my hips and rolled me over onto my back. He leaned down and kissed me, his naked body fitting so perfectly with mine. “Sorry,” I said. “I think I just outed us.”

Sam smiled and kissed me again. “That’s fine. No more hiding for me, cowboy. You’re who I’ve wanted all along, and I want everyone to know it.”

The sunshine and glitter in my heart overflowed. “Yeehaw, then.”

SAM

We woke up tangled together, like we'd been starting our mornings for the past couple of weeks. Ever since I decided to stay, to be myself, to be with Benny.

Ever since I decided to stop hiding.

Normally, we'd spend time waking each other up. With a kiss, a stroke, a suck. Sometimes even a fuck.

This morning was a little more rushed, though. I woke Benny up with a trail of kisses toward his morning wood. He stretched and yawned and moaned when I started to suck him. But his alarm went off and his expression went from relaxed to slightly tense.

"Babe, I have to get ready for today."

"I know," I said, kissing the tip of his hard dick before moving back up to kiss his lips. "Go shower and get ready."

"You have to get ready too, sir. Don't you have to clock in soon?"

I grinned.

Today was the day. Benny had his big race. A race I had poked and prodded him into registering for. He'd been hesitant about it, but I knew that it was something he really wanted to do. He was just letting his fear and anxiety dictate his decisions.

Today was also another very important day: my first day on the job as Rainbow Ranch's marketing and PR manager.

It had been a lightbulb moment. We were all sitting around the dining room table, finishing up an incredible meal cooked by none other than Benny himself, when Beau brought up the idea. It was almost a side thought. Something that would have gotten carried away with the flow of conversation.

"I wish more people knew about the ranch."

That one single sentence filled me with a sudden burst of purpose.

So there I was, about an hour later—showered, dressed, and sipping coffee—typing up a welcome post for the new Rainbow Ranch Instagram feed. I was using all my PR tricks, but this time, it wasn't to save someone's image or launch a scandal diversion campaign. Now it was real and honest.

It was worthwhile.

Still, before we left for the race, I found myself pacing the side porch, phone in hand. My thumb hovered over my mom's name.

There was something else I had to do today. I'd been thinking about it for weeks now and I couldn't keep putting this off. Not with how quickly things were moving with Benny and me.

Well, quickly only if you don't count the years and years it took us to get to this point.

I thought back to when my mom and I spoke about her friend's gay son, she'd rattled me. Bad. I'd taken her words— Thank goodness Sam never gave us any of that kind of stress —and twisted them into a rope that had wrapped tight around my chest,

making it difficult to take a full breath.

But now I had clarity. And, most importantly, I had Benny. With him by my side I felt like I could do anything.

Even coming out to my mom.

I pressed the call button.

She picked up on the second ring. “Sammy!”

“Hey, Mom. You busy?”

“Nope, just cutting up some veggies for the garden club lunch. What’s going on?”

My mouth dried. I swallowed. Had to rip it off like a Band-Aid. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“You’re okay, right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I just... I need to tell you something. And I want you to hear me all the way through, okay?”

Her silence felt like a small inhale. “Of course, honey.”

I sat down on the porch steps, heart thudding.

“I’m bi, Mom. I’m with—I’m in love with—someone and you know them.

I’m with Benny, mom. He’s... everything. He always has been.

Being back at the ranch with him, it opened my eyes.



I've accepted myself and my feelings for him...

And I've been scared to tell you, because I didn't want to disappoint you.

But I can't live like that anymore. I don't want to. ”

A pause. And then:

“Oh, Sammy.” Her voice cracked with emotion. “I even said when we talked on the phone, and I said to your father after, ‘I wouldn't care if Sam was gay, of course. I'd just want him to tell me.’”

“You did?” I replayed that phone call back in my head. The line had cut when she was speaking.

“Yes, hun. I was just speaking more along the lines of the fact that you never gave us any trouble. You were great in school, worked hard at your job, had good friends. That's what I was saying.

I do hate how being gay was an obstacle for that boy at church.

And... it's made me really think a lot about my relationship with the church, if I'm being honest. I still have some searching to do, but please, Sammy, know this: I would never reject you.

Never judge you. I will always love you.

You are my son, my heart, my love. You will always be my son.

And I will fight anyone who gives you any trouble. ”

I didn't realize I was crying until I wiped a tear from my jaw.

“Thank you,” I said, voice small but steady. “That means everything to me, Mom. Also please don’t fight anyone.”

“You know me and your dad have been doing Pilates together. I’m in fighting shape!”

That got a chuckle out of me. “Still, no fighting. Let whatever bigots and hateful trolls say what they want. I’ve already got all the support, validation, and love I need.”

“And you’ll always have it. Don’t be nervous about your father, either. When I spoke to him that last time, he even said he’d be proud to have a gay—or bi—son. And you know he is nowhere near as involved with the church as me.”

That lifted an unseen weight off my shoulders. I’d been more nervous coming out to my mom than my dad, who’d always had a “go with the flow, love everyone” kind of attitude.

“Thank you, Mom. I love you with all my heart.”

“And I love you too, Sammy. With all?—“

Then, like some cruel punctuation mark, the call dropped. Damn Johnson Springs service.

Still, I didn’t need her to say anything else. I heard it and I felt it. She loved me and she accepted me.

That’s all I needed.

By the time Benny came out to the porch in his boots and hat, looking hot as ever and ready for the race, I was smiling so wide it hurt.

“Everything good?” he asked.

I nodded. “Everything’s great.” I walked up to him and kissed him full on the mouth, out in the open. Not caring who saw.

“I just came out to my mom.”

“You did?! Holy cow, congratulations! It is a congratulations, right?”

“It is. She was amazing, I don’t know why I was ever scared in the first place.”

Benny cocked his head, eyes radiating joy.

“Because coming out is a scary process. It’s revealing a part of yourself that could easily get skewered by the people you love the most. It shouldn’t even be a thing , obviously.

There shouldn’t be a need to say ‘Hey, these are the kinds of people I like to be with.’ It just be accepted point-blank.

You bring a girl to family event, ‘Cool, what’s her name?

’ You bring a guy to family events, ‘Cool, what’s his name?

’ It’s that simple, but this world—it runs on complications.

And maybe Dunkin’.” Benny gave me a wink and another kiss, filling my heart and lungs with a flurry of butterflies.

That’s when the words drifted out of me, carried on the wings of those very same glittery butterflies. Words that weren’t complicated or difficult to say at all. “I love you, Benny. I’m so happy I came back to Rainbow Ranch. I’m so happy I got this

second chance. I'm so happy I got my cowboy."

Benny blinked a couple times, as if his processor had malfunctioned and he was restarting his system.

"Sam... I love you, too. I've never stopped loving you. And I'm so glad I can keep loving you."

This, this was the definition of true happiness. Of rainbow-hued freedom. My future went from being miserable and stormy to a rolling green field of daisies and tulips.

Pure fucking happiness.

"Hey, you two, get a room!" It was Pris. She rolled a cooler behind her, toward Benny's truck. "But at least wait until after the race is done."

Benny and I both laughed. I felt my cheeks warming. I went to help Pris load up the truck. It didn't take us much longer before everything was packed up.

On the way to the race, another bomb was dropped. This one coming from Boone, who sat in the back seat with an arm around Wylie. "You know, I'm really glad you stayed, Sam. You being around has made Benny's cooking out of this world. He's going to give me competition for my buns."

"Your buns are in a league of their own," Wylie said in his gruff, lumberjack voice.

"Seriously, though, I'm happy we never told you that will was fake. You may have run off."

I whipped around in my seat. Benny huffed in surprise but kept his eyes on the road. "Hold up, you knew all this time?"

Boone scratched the back of his head. “Yeah. We found out a month ago. Spoke to the lawyer,” Beau added. “The whole inheritance thing was... not real.”

“Then why...”

“Because you both were as happy as two pigs in a very warm and cuddly blanket,” Boone cut in. “You were smiling. You were finally starting to breathe again. We didn’t want to scare you away by saying it didn’t count.”

I looked at all of them. My heart swelled.

“I didn’t stay because of the inheritance,” I said. “I stayed because of you. All of you. This place. The people. Heck, even Dennis.”

“Damn straight,” Boone said with a smirk. “That horse’s got charisma.”

Beau chuckled underneath his mask. “Along with uniqueness, nerve, and talent.”

We laughed, the air light and easy. There was zero tension, zero anxiety. The truck was filled with love and family, the open road stretching out before us, full of new possibilities and memories.

I reached across the central console and grabbed Benny’s hand, no longer worried that his family was around to see us touch. “Come on, let’s go get you a first-place trophy.”

“Don’t worry. No matter what happens at the race today, I already won.” Benny lifted my hand to his lips and kissed.

In that moment, I knew that Benny hadn’t just come out a winner.

So had I.

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