



Stick Around,

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: It was meant to be a distraction after my failed engagement. Something to laugh about later with my best friend over matching hangovers and yard-long margaritas. But apparently, if you commit hard enough to prancing around on a hobby horse, people give you prizes.

Like a week-long stay at an actual ranch. Did I mention I'm scared of horses?

I figured I'd try something new. Breathe some fresh air. Maybe pet a goat. What I didn't expect was three annoyingly attractive cowboys to come with the deal.

There's Enzo, grumpy and silent, always watching like he's waiting for me to mess up. Kellan, flirty and infuriatingly confident, with a smile that should come with a warning label. And Reid, the quiet horse whisperer with a gentle voice and the kind of calm that's hard to resist.

Now I'm living with all three men, catching feelings I didn't plan for, and keeping quiet about a competition that's coming up.

This was supposed to be temporary. A break. A detour. A hilarious story for my friends back home.

But sometimes, the best plans are the ones you don't stick to.

Stick Around is a spicy reverse harem contemporary rom com with animal chaos, shirtless cowboys, and plenty of heat. It is a standalone with a happily ever after.

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Chapter 1

Sparklehoof

Quinn

I'd never thought my life would hit rock bottom at a hobby horse competition, but here I was.

"It's right through here!" April squealed, pulling me by my hand through the hallway of a Las Vegas hotel's basement-level convention center. "This is going to be the most amazing thing ever. Trust me."

Those words should have been my warning sign.

Post-breakup decisions rarely made sense, but accepting this adventure with my best friend might have been the worst in my twenty-eight years on this earth.

And that was saying a lot considering I'd been engaged to a man who'd been sleeping with various women on a hookup app.

The thought of my ex made my jaw tighten at the memory of his parting speech after I'd confronted him about cheating on me. He'd had the audacity to look wounded while explaining how I didn't understand his needs and how he was wired differently. As if infidelity were some sort of evolutionary advantage he'd developed.

Three years together, and apparently, I was the unreasonable one for expecting basic

decency. To make matters worse, he'd also claimed I had no professional drive while I was still in my teaching clothes with glitter stuck to my sweater from an art project.

Did teaching pay a six-figure salary? Of course not. But to say I had no drive because I'd chosen to go into teaching? It had taken everything in me not to drive my foot where he'd really understand just how driven teachers were.

Before I could continue down a thought path that helped no one, we were stopped at a table where a woman handed me a clipboard and pointed to two X's on an official-looking form. Her glittery eyeshadow matched the sparkly unicorn plastered across her T-shirt. "Sign here and here."

"Oh, absolutely not." I tried to hand April the clipboard, giving her my best teacher stare. "I thought we were going to the buffet and then going to the spa for manis and pedis!"

April's eyes sparkled with the distinct glee of someone who had orchestrated chaos and was now watching it unfold. "This is better than a nap or a spa! This is immersion therapy."

"Immersion into what? Delusion? I can live without riding a stick with a stuffed horse head, thanks."

April sighed dramatically. "Quinn, you've spent weeks crying in your apartment. You've watched *The Notebook* three times, and you hate that movie. You even ordered a custom voodoo doll on Etsy."

The woman who'd handed me the clipboard gasped. "Who hates *The Notebook*?"

I shifted uncomfortably under her accusatory stare. "I only hate it because love like that doesn't exist in real life. It's false advertising wrapped in attractive

cinematography. Nobody rowsboats through swan-filled lakes without being brutally attacked or stands in the rain declaring undying devotion without catching pneumonia.” Romance was officially dead, buried, and decomposing at this point. “And don’t act like the voodoo doll was my rock bottom. You were the one who suggested adding his actual hair to it for maximum effect.”

“Look.” April grabbed my shoulders, her expression softening. “This is silly and ridiculous, and that’s exactly what you need right now. You’ll bounce around on a stick, we’ll laugh our asses off, and then go get those yard-long margaritas you wanted.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Are you entering too?” The clipboard felt heavier in my hands with each passing second, like it was slowly transforming into a contract with the devil who was wearing glitter eyeshadow and promising emotional healing through public humiliation.

“I’m your coach and photographer. Someone needs to cheer you on from the sidelines.” She grabbed a pen from the table. “You can have the rest of my rum from my purse flask, and I’ll pay your entrance fee and for anything you need to compete.”

“I’ve never even ridden a horse.” I snatched the pen from her. “You’re paying for the margarita, the buffet, and my mani and pedi too.”

I signed the form because apparently my dignity had been buried somewhere beneath my hangover and the hollow ache that had taken up residence where my future plans used to live.

After handing the clipboard back to the woman and getting a participant bib, April grabbed my hand and pulled me into the convention hall before I could protest further. The scene inside could only be described as what would happen if a six-year-old girl’s birthday party collided with a competitive sport.

Actual grown humans with full-time jobs and presumably mortgages were prancing around on stick horses like they were actual horses. Some wore riding boots and breeches. Others had gone full fantasy with unicorn horns and rainbow manes attached to their stick horses.

April looked like she might explode with excitement as she pulled me toward a booth draped in pink tulle and fairy lights at the far end of the hall.

“What fresh hell is this?” I groaned, rubbing my temples where a headache threatened to bloom. I’d expected Vegas to be weird, but this brand of weird felt like it was specifically engineered to test my already paper-thin emotional resilience.

“Embrace the chaos, Quinn. It’s cheaper than therapy, and there are probably snacks.” April stopped at the booth where a woman stood with a T-shirt that read “Stick With It.”

She beamed at us. “Welcome to Hoofin’ It Designs! Are you looking to rent or buy? We offer both options.”

April rubbed her hands together in glee. “My friend here needs to rent a mighty steed.”

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I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Can I rent some dignity instead?”

The woman behind the booth laughed like I’d told the funniest joke. “Everyone feels that way at first.”

I grimaced. “I’m only here because I’m emotionally compromised and easily manipulated by promises of alcohol, food, and pampering.”

The lady smiled, completely unfazed by my distress. “It’s seventy-five dollars for the premium rental.”

“Seventy-five dollars?” My voice hit a pitch only dogs could hear. “For a stick with a stuffed head?”

“It’s not just any stick.” The woman looked offended as she turned to a display of stick horses and grabbed one. “This is Sparklehoof.”

It appeared to be the Rolls Royce of hobby horses, with a white plush head adorned with rainbow streaks in its mane and rhinestones on its bridle. I stared at the craftsmanship that had gone into this ridiculous creation. The eyes were realistic glass ones and seemed to stare into my soul.

April squealed. “It’s perfect!”

I’m glad one of us was enthusiastic. “Why don’t you enter the competition instead of me?”

“I’m afraid of horses, real or stick,” April said, because that made perfect sense.

“So am I!” I threw my hands in the air. “This whole trip was supposed to be a breakup recovery, not a mental breakdown accelerator.”

Ignoring me, April handed her credit card over and gleefully paid. She was officially the worst best friend ever.

The rental lady handed me Sparklehoof. “Don’t worry, the competition is beginner-friendly. Clear the jumps in order and try to maintain good form.”

“Good form? On a stick?” I gaped at her.

“And remember to keep your eyes up and a smile on your face!” she cheerfully called after us as April dragged me away.

“You can’t possibly expect me to?—”

“Here.” April pulled a silver flask from her purse. “Liquid courage.”

I took the flask without hesitation, checking to make sure no one was watching before taking a generous swig. The rum burned going down my throat. “There’s not enough alcohol in the world to make this okay.”

April took the flask back and tucked it into her purse. “Look at it this way: no one knows you here, and what happens in Vegas?—”

“If you finish that phrase, I’ll beat you with this horse.” I waved Sparklehoof for emphasis.

“Save that energy for the competition.” She guided me toward a staging area where

other competitors were stretching like they were preparing for the Olympics. “There are prizes.”

“Prizes?” That caught my attention, but before I could ask her more, a voice came over the loudspeaker.

“The novice division begins in five minutes. Competitors, please check in at the starting gate.”

I took another drink from April’s flask while she was busy adjusting the participant number on my shirt. The rum was starting to work its magic, the edges of my mortification softening just enough to make this seem marginally less catastrophic.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, our novice competitors!” the announcer’s voice boomed across the hall.

I stood next to a man in his fifties wearing rainbow knee socks and a tweed coat. He turned and nodded to me with complete seriousness, like we were about to participate in an actual equestrian event. “First time?”

“First and only.” I wondered if it was too late to fake a medical emergency.

“I said that my first time too. Lost my fantasy football league and had to do an event. That was a few months ago.” He smiled and petted his horse like it was a living, breathing creature. “Good luck out there.”

I watched others go before me, the crowd cheering them on with unsettling enthusiasm. Half of these people were moving their feet in a way that mimicked actual horses by lifting their knees high, pawing at the ground before takeoff, even making little whinnying noises.

Was this an actual competitive sport or a mass delusion I'd been dragged into?

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I bit the inside of my cheek hard to stop myself from laughing hysterically or bursting into tears. At this point, either reaction seemed equally likely.

A young woman ahead of me misjudged a jump, face-planting onto the ground. She popped right back up with a cheerful wave and finished her round while the crowd roared their approval.

Somehow, the possibility of falling hadn't even crossed my mind until now. My stomach lurched as the announcer called my name.

“Number thirty-seven, Quinn Porter!”

April gave me a thumbs-up from the sidelines. “Channel your inner Black Beauty!” she shouted, taking a video with her phone.

I glared at her, silently promising revenge involving her makeup collection and possibly superglue.

I stepped to the starting line, clutching Sparklehoof, feeling ridiculous beyond words. Too many eyes were on me to quit now. All I had to do was jump the hurdles, and then I'd go get drunk at the buffet while eating a mountain of crab legs.

A bell rang, signaling me to start my run.

I didn't know if it was the rum, the absurdity of the situation, or the accumulated pressure of the past few weeks of heartbreak finally finding a productive emotional outlet, but something inside me snapped. Not in a bad way, but in the most liberating

way possible.

With a battle cry that startled even myself, I charged forward, Sparklehoof between my legs, galloping with more commitment than I'd given to anything in a long time. My hair flew behind me as I approached the first jump, and instead of the timid hop I'd planned, I launched myself over it with what felt like grace and height.

The crowd erupted in cheers.

The rush was immediate and intoxicating. I attacked the second jump with even more ferocity, adding a flourish with my free hand. My knees were pumping, my form was impeccable, and for the first time since my breakup, I wasn't thinking about anything except the ridiculous joy of the moment.

"Look at number thirty-seven go!" the announcer shouted. "We've got a natural!"

I cleared the third jump with a technique that seemed to come from some hidden part of my brain I didn't know existed. Someone started a "Thir-ty-sev-en!" chant.

I flew over the final jump, adding a totally unnecessary but dramatically satisfying twist in midair, and galloped triumphantly to the finish line. The crowd erupted, and April was screaming like I'd won a gold medal instead of making a fool of myself.

Panting and flushed, I clutched Sparklehoof to my chest, suddenly aware I was grinning from ear to ear. The last minute had been the most fully present I'd been since seeing the app notifications on my ex's phone.

"That was incredible!" April threw her arms around me, nearly knocking us both over. "You're like the Michael Phelps of hobby horsing!"

"I think I'm more like the person who tries paddle boarding once and doesn't fall

off.”

But that wasn’t true. Because I didn’t just kill it with the jumping event, but soon after, I also did well in freestyle.

There was something to be said about not knowing what the hell I was doing and about emptying April’s flask.

The novice division was complete, and I was standing with the other competitors, nervous and staring at the floor. I wasn’t even sure why I cared how I did. An hour ago, I was contemplating making a run for it. Now, my heart hammered against my ribs with actual anticipation.

The announcer’s voice boomed through the convention space as he announced second and third places. “And now, the winner of the novice division... number thirty-seven, Quinn Porter!”

The crowd erupted in cheers. April’s scream nearly shattered my eardrums as she shoved me forward.

How had I gone from a respectable elementary school teacher to a woman winning a hobby horse competition while strangers cheered for me?

A woman in riding pants and boots handed me a trophy that had a fake gold horse perched on top. “Congratulations, Ms. Porter.” She draped a sparkly blue ribbon around my neck like I’d won the Kentucky Derby. “Your form and performance were exceptional for a first-timer.”

“In addition to this trophy, we’re pleased to present you with this.” A man with a Stetson hat, cowboy boots, and a weathered face handed me a certificate. “This is a fully paid stipend for a week-long horse experience at a ranch. You get to embrace

your inner horse goddess and hone those skills for your next competition.”

I bit my tongue to avoid blurting out that there would be no other competitions. “A ranch? With real horses?”

“Absolutely.” The cowboy nodded. “Got to nurture that natural talent. You’ve got a real gift.”

As I stepped back into the sea of competitors, my arms full of my unexpected winnings, April pounced. “This is fate! A fully paid vacation at a ranch with actual cowboys? This is the universe giving you a second chance at happiness! Imagine the Hallmark movie that will be made!”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just a random prize.”

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“Oh, come on! Where’s your sense of adventure from college? I’m not even into dicks, and I’d be down for a tumble in the hay with a rough-around-the-edges cowboy.”

My sense of adventure had gone out the window with adult responsibilities. “Or there will be old, grumpy cowboys.”

She nudged me with her elbow as we walked toward the booth to return Sparklehoof. “Even better. A silver fox who knows how to treat a lady. At the very least, one of us—meaning you—can get over our irrational fear of horses.”

I tried to look annoyed, but the truth was, for the first time since finding out that someone I loved and trusted was cheating on me, I felt a tiny spark of excitement.

Who would’ve thought that a stick horse named Sparklehoof and a blue ribbon would put a smile on my face?

Chapter 2

Farmyard Standoff

Reid

I woke up with Walter sprawled across my chest like a furry paperweight, his little body rising and falling with each of my breaths. He’d fallen asleep next to me, but somehow he always ended up using me as a dog bed.

“Morning, buddy.” I scratched behind his ears, earning a sleepy tail thump against my ribs. “Time to get up.”

Walter responded by burrowing deeper against my neck, clearly voting to extend our time in bed. Hard to argue with that logic, but the ranch waited for no man or chihuahua.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, careful to cradle Walter as I stood. He gave me a look of betrayal, all big eyes and an accusatory glare that somehow made me feel guilty despite the fact that he’d get to nap again approximately fifteen minutes after breakfast.

“Don’t give me that look. It’s a privilege to sleep on the bed.” I set him on the floor, where he immediately shook himself awake and stared up at me like I’d hung the moon.

Who was I kidding? Ever since I’d adopted him from the shelter three years ago, he’d had me wrapped around his paw. I could never make him sleep on the floor or in his actual dog bed.

After changing into jeans and a T-shirt, I headed downstairs with Walter trotting at my heels.

I entered the kitchen to find Enzo plating eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes. He looked up from where he was meticulously arranging bacon strips, his face as serious as if he were defusing a bomb. “Horses are already turned out. Got up early to check the north pasture fence line.”

“Again?” I filled Walter’s bowl with kibble before pouring myself a cup of coffee. “Didn’t we fix that section last month?”

“Wild pigs.” He said it like he was naming his archnemesis. “Found tracks all along it.”

I leaned against the counter and took a long sip of coffee. “Want me to reinforce it this afternoon?”

“Already ordered materials.” He slid a plate my way, loaded with enough food to feed a small militia. “Kellan’s handling the pickup after the... event.”

The way he said “event” made it sound like we were hosting an exorcism instead of a hobby horse competition winner. I couldn’t blame him. When Kellan had first pitched the idea, I thought he was joking. There was an entire subculture that pranced around on stick horses, and apparently, we were about to welcome one of them to La Cuesta Ranch with open arms.

I took my plate to the table. “Do we have any idea if this woman has been around actual horses before?”

Enzo’s jaw clenched almost imperceptibly. “Kellan’s been emailing with her and said she was scared of them.”

I nearly choked on the bacon I’d popped in my mouth. “And she’s coming here?”

We had twenty-six horses on the property currently if you counted Eggatha, who thought she was a horse. Even if this hobby horse chick did just practice on her stick, there was no avoiding the horses.

The sound of the back door closing announced Kellan’s arrival before his voice boomed through the kitchen. “Good morning!” He swept in with white teeth and energy that had no business existing before the sun rose fully. “How are my favorite grumpy cowboys on this beautiful day?”

Walter abandoned his food bowl to dance excitedly at Kellan's feet, his nails making the cute little tapping sound I adored. Kellan scooped him up, planting a kiss on his head before setting him back down.

"I'm not grumpy." Enzo put a plate in Kellan's spot at the table.

"Your scowl says otherwise." Kellan plopped down in his seat and grabbed a piece of bacon. "Our champion arrives around noon." He pulled out his phone, scrolling through something with obvious glee. "Wait until you see the footage from Vegas. This woman is incredible. Our social follows spiked overnight from the announcement post."

We'd been dancing around the reality of the decrease in business over the last six months, and I couldn't deny that increased exposure would be good. From what I knew about hobby horsing, there was a certain level of horsemanship that was needed, even if they didn't use real horses. This was an opportunity to appeal to a broader niche.

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“I know y’all aren’t thrilled about gimmicky stuff, but this is perfect timing. This woman went viral two weeks ago, and she’s got this whole following now. We’ll capitalize on the trend and start doing some specialty workshops...”

“Workshops,” Enzo repeated flatly. “For stick horses.”

Kellan pointed his fork at Enzo. “People pay good money for this stuff. Plus, she’s adorable. Wait ‘til you see her.”

Something in his tone made me stop with a forkful of scrambled egg halfway to my mouth. There was a gleam in Kellan’s eye I recognized all too well. It was the same look he got right before doing something impulsively and dragging us along for the ride.

“You think she’s hot,” Enzo said, voicing my exact thought.

Kellan placed a hand over his heart, the picture of wounded innocence. “I’m offended by that accusation. I’ll be completely professional.” He paused, a smirk tugging at his lips. “The fact that she happens to be attractive is merely a happy coincidence.”

I exchanged a look with Enzo, who rolled his eyes so hard I was surprised they stayed in his head. “We need to make sure this doesn’t interfere with the actual ranch operations. The boarding clients won’t appreciate their horses being spooked by someone galloping around on a stick.”

Kellan shoveled eggs into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “I posted about her being here on social media, and we’ll section off any areas for any training she wants

to do. She'll be far enough from the stables that our boarders won't even know she's here."

"And Debra?" I thought of our notoriously cantankerous donkey, who took personal offense to any change.

Kellan snorted. "Our little darlin' will be safely tucked away in her paddock, where she can't terrorize our guest or develop another unhealthy crush."

I threw a piece of toast at his head, which he let hit his forehead and fall onto his plate. "She doesn't have a crush on me." Debra did have an unsettling habit of positioning herself between me and anyone who approached, but I'd hardly call that a crush. "She's protective."

"She tried to bite off Enzo's belt loop last week when he stopped to talk to you in the barn."

"That's because he was wearing a new hat." I put my fork down, remembering how Debra's ears had pinned back the moment Enzo approached me. The donkey had sidled between us with surprising stealth for a creature her size. It had taken a few apple slices to coax her away from Enzo while he muttered Spanish curses I pretended not to understand.

Enzo snorted. "She's a menace, and you enable her."

Walter, sensing the conversation had turned to another four-legged resident, whined at my feet. I absently dropped a small piece of egg down for him, ignoring Enzo's disapproving look. Sue me for spoiling my dog.

"Anyway, my point is, everything is under control. This guest could bring a lot of fresh eyes to the place, new clientele, some extra cash flow..." He gave us both a

pointed look. “Unless either of you has come up with a better idea to fund our expansion?”

The silence that followed was answer enough.

I leaned back against the fence post, squinting against the afternoon sun as sweat trickled down my temple. We might have been on the Central California coast, but with four miles and hills between us and the water, we lost some of the breeze. Plus, doing manual labor in the sun always made me feel like it was ten degrees hotter than it was.

Walter lay in the shade nearby, his eyes never leaving me as if I might leave without him. The little black chihuahua had attached himself to me since the moment I’d first held him at the shelter. His whole body had been trembling with fear until I’d tucked him against my chest, where he’d immediately calmed.

I gave the gate I’d been repairing an experimental swing. It moved smoothly now, with no signs of the awful squeak that had been on my last nerve. In the distance, I heard the sound of tires on gravel. A quick glance at my watch told me it was just past one.

Our newest guest was arriving.

I gathered my tools, wiped my hands on my jeans, and took a moment to survey the property from where I stood. La Cuesta Ranch sprawled in all directions, the hills rolling away from the main buildings, dotted with grazing horses. It wasn’t the biggest ranch in the area, but I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.

Walter’s ears perked up as the car approached, his tiny body vibrating with excitement. He let out a high-pitched yap before darting toward the parking lot.

“Walter, wait!” I jogged after him, not wanting our guest’s first impression to involve running over my dog.

A silver sedan pulled up to the parking area, dust billowing around it as it came to a stop. Walter reached it before I did, barking enthusiastically as the driver’s side door opened.

I was about twenty feet away when I noticed movement from the corner of my eye. A flash of tan and white, accompanied by an unmistakable bleat.

“Ah, shit.” I picked up my pace.

Butters, our geriatric goat, was making a beeline for the car, which could only mean one thing—he’d escaped. Again. And if Butters was out...

Sure enough, Debra’s angular head appeared around the barn corner, her eyes locked on the intruder with single-minded determination. The donkey moved with surprising speed, her ears flat against her skull.

I had seconds to intercept before chaos erupted.

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A woman emerged from the car, and my steps faltered. She wasn't at all what I'd been expecting. Based on Kellan's breathless descriptions and the whole hobby horse thing, I'd half-imagined someone in full riding gear with glitter somewhere on her person.

Instead, she wore simple denim shorts that showcased long, tanned legs, a light blue tank top, and flip-flops. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail that swung as she turned toward Walter's enthusiastic greeting.

The sight of that ponytail sent an unexpected jolt through me, my mind unhelpfully providing an image of my fist wrapped in that hair, guiding her head as she knelt in front of me. The visceral thought blindsided me so completely that I nearly tripped over my own feet.

I shook my head to clear it, embarrassed by the direction of my thoughts. This woman was a guest, and here I was having inappropriate fantasies within five seconds of seeing her.

Walter was now dancing in circles around her feet as she crouched down to pet him, completely unaware of the danger headed her way.

"Well, aren't you the cutest little welcoming committee?" Her voice carried, light with amusement.

I opened my mouth to call out a warning about the approaching goat and donkey duo when Butters bleated loudly, announcing his presence.

The woman's head snapped up, her eyes widening as she spotted the goat charging toward her. She froze, her hand still extended toward Walter.

"Why is it running at me? Do goats attack people? Is this how I die?" She was completely unaware of my presence, and I bit back a laugh.

I lunged forward, positioning myself between her and Butters just as the goat skidded to a stop, his hooves kicking up dust. "Whoa there, troublemaker." I firmly grabbed his collar. "How'd you get out this time?"

Butters bleated innocently, as if surprised to find himself outside his enclosure.

The woman had scrambled backward until she was pressed against her car, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Does... does that happen often? The charging?"

Before I could answer, Debra came around the car, her head high and ears forward now that she'd spotted me. She walked right in between me and the woman.

"Debra, stand down." The donkey turned her head to look at me, her expression somehow both innocent and stubborn. The woman looked like she was contemplating climbing onto the roof of her car for safety. "I'm really sorry about this... I'm Reid Dawson, one of the owners of this fine establishment."

"I'm Quinn Porter..." Her hazel eyes darted between Debra and Butters. "Should I... do something? Are they friendly? Because that donkey is looking at me the way my students look at the last chocolate cupcake at the class party when there are only vanilla left. With pure, unfiltered hostility." She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear with a trembling hand. "Is staring back a challenge? Should I play dead? I didn't exactly prepare for a farmyard standoff when I packed for this trip."

"Debra's harmless. Mostly. She needs to get used to you."

“Mostly harmless is not the same as harmless.” Quinn’s voice rose slightly. She took a small step forward to test the waters, and Debra immediately snorted and stomped a hoof. Quinn froze again. “See? Murder eyes.”

Walter, completely unfazed by the farm animal standoff, trotted over and sat at Quinn’s feet, looking up at her adoringly.

“Butters here is an escape artist.” I gave the goat’s collar a gentle tug and pushed him back in the direction of the paddock. “And Debra... well, Debra has boundary issues, especially when it comes to me. She won’t hurt you... probably.”

Quinn’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Are you making a joke right now? While I’m being held hostage by farm animals?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to hide my amusement. “No, ma’am.”

Quinn’s posture relaxed slightly, though she still kept a wary eye on Debra. “Please, call me Quinn.”

With Butters happily trotting back to where he was supposed to be, I could now focus on Debra. I tried to maneuver around her, but she simply adjusted her position to maintain the barrier she’d created.

“Does she not like women or something?” Quinn reached down and scooped up Walter, who looked like he was in heaven as she began stroking his head.

I took my hat off and ran a hand through my hair, embarrassed by the situation. “It’s not that. She, uh, she’s protective of me, even with Kellan and Enzo.”

Quinn’s eyebrows shot up, and a ghost of a smirk touched her lips. “Wait. Are you telling me the donkey is jealous?”

“The guys like to say she has a crush on me.” Heat crept up my neck. “But it’s not?—”

“It totally is!” Laughter slipped out of her, undeterred by the mess she was in. “She’s glaring at me like I’m trying to steal her man.”

I was saved from having to respond when Kellan came jogging out from the stables. His boots kicked up little clouds of dust as he approached, and Quinn’s attention shifted away from me.

“Quinn Porter!” Kellan’s Texas drawl seemed especially pronounced as he circled wide to avoid Debra’s zone of protection. “I see you’ve already met the welcoming committee.” His eyes flickered to me with amusement. “And Reid.”

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“Is this normal?” Quinn gestured at Debra, who was still standing her ground, ears flicking back and forth between us all. “Being held hostage by a jealous donkey within thirty seconds of arrival?”

Kellan’s laugh rolled out. “You’ve got no idea the kind of chaos these animals bring. But don’t worry...” He winked at her. “We’re worth the trouble.”

There was an unexpected twinge in my chest at the easy way Kellan slipped into flirtation mode. While he worked his charm, I gently took hold of Debra’s halter. “Come on, girl, let’s go.”

To my surprise, Debra allowed herself to be led away, though she tossed one last suspicious look over her shoulder. Walter yapped from Quinn’s arms as if saying goodbye.

As I walked the donkey back toward the paddock, I caught the sound of Quinn’s laughter.

Animals made sense to me. Their needs were straightforward, and their emotions honest and easy to read. People, though? I’d rather muck out twenty stalls than make small talk.

Behind me, I heard Kellan’s animated voice carrying across the yard, making Quinn laugh again. Words flowed from him like water, while I had to chisel each one out of stone, especially around someone I wasn’t familiar with.

I glanced back at them. Quinn was gesturing with her free hand while Walter

remained nestled in her arm, looking content.

Lucky dog.

Chapter 3

Cowboy Buffet

Quinn

I grabbed my suitcase from the trunk, still mentally recapping the last five minutes of my life. My welcome party had consisted of one tiny, vibrating chihuahua who clearly thought I was the second coming of doggie Jesus; a goat with goofy eyes who liked to escape; a donkey with serious relationship issues; and two hot cowboys.

Welcome to La Cuesta Ranch indeed.

“Let me take that for you.” Kellan swooped in, plucking my suitcase from my hand before I could protest. His fingers brushed against mine, and I felt a little flutter of something I immediately tried to smother.

“I can carry my own bags.” I straightened my spine and reached for my suitcase.

“I’m sure you can.” He grinned, holding it just out of reach. “But my mom raised me better than to let a lady lug her own luggage.”

“Your mom raised you to be a thief?” I quirked an eyebrow at him.

His laugh made me smile. “Only of the finest suitcases and hearts.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t make another grab for my bag. “Does that kind of line

usually work for you?”

“You tell me.” His grin widened as he gestured toward the property. “Come on, I’ll show you around before you get settled.”

I followed him past the main house and a large barn, taking in the ranch with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. I was not an outdoorsy person, and farm animals kind of scared me.

“This is our main lodge,” Kellan announced as we approached a large wooden building with a wraparound porch.

The interior was even more impressive than the outside. There were exposed wooden beams, a stone fireplace that dominated one wall, overstuffed leather furniture that looked sinfully comfortable, and a long dining table that could easily seat twelve.

“This is gorgeous.” I ran my fingers along a reclaimed wood shelf lined with books and horse figurines.

Kellan puffed up slightly. “People love it if your ranch looks like a Pottery Barn catalog threw up in it.”

I snorted. “Marketing genius.”

“Speaking of which...” He leaned against the doorframe, watching me explore. “Mind if I ask what you do for a living? When you’re not, you know, conquering the hobby horse circuit?”

“I teach elementary school.” I braced myself for the usual responses, which either included the ‘that’s so noble’ platitude or the ‘must be nice to have summers off’ dig.

Instead, Kellan's eyes lit up. "No wonder you handled Debra out there like a pro. Fifth graders, donkeys... same energy."

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I laughed because he wasn't entirely wrong. "Second grade, and trust me, I handled nothing out there. I was one angry snort away from climbing onto the roof of my car."

"Come on, I'll show you the rest." He nodded toward the door, and I followed him out onto a giant porch where he pointed to a cluster of cabins. "Your cabin is right over there, but I want to show you the stables first."

He left my suitcase on the porch, and we walked along a well-worn path. He kept up a running narrative about the property as we walked. The land had been in Enzo's family for generations, and when his uncle wanted to sell, the three of them swooped in and bought it.

"Over there is a vineyard that a local winemaker leases out." He pointed to rows of grapevines stretching across a gentle slope. "And there's the goat enclosure where Butters was supposed to be. Little rascal has a PhD in escape artistry."

"Why do you even have goats? It doesn't seem like they fit with horses and vineyards."

"Ask Reid that question when you're ready for a forty-five-minute lecture on sustainable land management." Kellan chuckled. "Short version: they eat the weeds, fertilize the soil, and provide comic relief. Plus, they've got personalities bigger than Texas."

We approached the stables, a large, well-maintained structure that smelled of hay, leather, and horses. Inside, the air was cooler, dust motes dancing in the shafts of

sunlight streaming through the windows.

“And here’s where the magic happens.” Kellan gestured grandly. “Home to twenty-five of the finest horses this side of the Mississippi and one chicken who was the queen of the horses in a previous life.”

“A reincarnated chicken?” My curiosity was piqued, even if chickens also scared me.

“Yup, and Enzo even gave Eggatha her own file. Don’t let his broody exterior fool you; the man has a sense of humor underneath all that stoicism.”

As if summoned, a tall figure without a shirt emerged from one of the stalls. He moved with an almost military precision, his demeanor no-nonsense as he carried a saddle to a stand and hefted it up.

“Speak of the devil,” Kellan called out. “Enzo, come meet our guest of honor.”

Enzo didn’t look up from whatever he was adjusting, offering a grunt that might charitably be interpreted as a hello.

“Enzo Perez, this is Quinn Porter, our hobby horse champion. Quinn, this is Enzo, one-third owner of this fine establishment.”

Enzo finally looked up, his blue eyes meeting mine with an intensity that made me want to check if I had something stuck in my teeth. He gave a brief nod. “Welcome.”

“Thanks for having me.” I oddly felt like I was being assessed. “Your ranch is beautiful.”

“Thanks.” He returned his attention to the saddle. His tall, tanned frame was all lean muscle, the kind that comes from actual work rather than gym sessions.

“Sorry, Quinn. Enzo’s idea of a warm greeting is not immediately asking you to leave.”

The corner of Enzo’s mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. “I could use some help mucking out some stalls.”

“Oh, look at the time!” Kellan placed his hand at the small of my back and steered me out of the stables. “Later, Enzo!”

I looked back over my shoulder to find Enzo watching us, his hands on his hips and an intense look in his eyes. The way he stood there assessing reminded me of a hawk. His expression wasn’t exactly unfriendly, but there was something evaluative in his gaze that made me wonder what conclusions he was drawing about me. I couldn’t help feeling like I’d just been measured against some invisible standard and wasn’t sure if I’d passed.

Outside, Kellan nudged my arm and gestured toward the lodge. “So, dinner with us tonight? Around seven? Nothing fancy, but we should probably talk about your goals for the week and what activities you want to try.”

“Goals?” I blinked, still replaying the brief interaction with Enzo. That man hadn’t said much but somehow made me feel like I was both intruding and failing a test.

“Yeah, you know, riding lessons, trail excursions, wine tasting.” Kellan’s eyes lit up with sudden enthusiasm. “We can document it all if you’re open to it. Your hobby horse moment has already caused a spike in our social accounts. Seems like you’ve got some viral appeal.”

I covered my face with my hands. The competition footage. Of course, he’d seen it. They’d all probably seen it. My cheeks burned so hot they could have cooked an egg. “I’m never living that down, am I?”

“Are you kidding? It’s marketing gold!” Kellan pulled his phone from his pocket and showed me the screen. “Look at these engagement numbers. We could have a mutually beneficial arrangement to help the ranch and grow your following even more.”

“I’m not an influencer.” I frowned, staring at the likes and comments on the video he had pulled up on one of the ranch’s socials. “I’m a broken-hearted teacher who got drunk and competed in a hobby horse competition because my best friend is an agent of chaos.”

Kellan tucked his phone away. “Authenticity sells. It could be fun, and you might get some sponsorships out of it.”

Sponsorships? He was talking like this hobby horse thing was going to be a permanent fixture in my life. While I’d had fun doing it, I couldn’t imagine doing another competition.

After grabbing my bag from the lodge, he led me to a cozy standalone cabin with a porch swing and set my suitcase inside. “This is you. Rest up, and we’ll see you at the lodge at seven.”

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“Seven. Right.” I nodded, watching him as he sauntered away.

The moment the door closed behind me, I dropped my purse, pulled out my phone, and frantically dialed April.

“Hello?” Her voice came through cheerfully.

“April, what the actual hell?” I hissed, pacing in front of the window that overlooked a pasture where horses grazed peacefully. “This place is like a Hallmark movie crossed with a calendar of hot ranch hands! There are three of them. Three! And they’re all attractive in completely different ways that attack different parts of my brain!”

“Score!” April’s delighted cackle made me pull the phone away from my ear. “Tell me everything. Details. Heights. Bicep measurements if possible.”

“This isn’t funny! I’m not emotionally equipped for this!” I collapsed onto the bed, which was incredibly comfortable. “There’s a flirty one with a slight country accent who wants me to be some kind of ranch influencer. There’s a broody shirtless one who looks at me like I’m nothing more than a bother. And the third one seems to be a donkey-whispering Disney prince!”

“This is the best thing I’ve ever heard.” April was practically cracking up now. “Your rebound options are a cowboy buffet!”

“I didn’t come here for a rebound! I came here to... to...” I trailed off, realizing I wasn’t entirely sure why I had come.

“To move on from Jason the Jackass by riding horses instead of moping,” April supplied helpfully. “The hot cowboys are a bonus feature. Well, unless you want to ride them too.”

I groaned into a pillow. “What have you gotten me into?”

“You can thank me with details and pictures. Lots of pictures.”

After hanging up, I sent her a picture, all right. A picture of my middle finger.

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My hair was brushed out and fell in a silky wave, my teeth were brushed, and deodorant was applied. The mirror reflected back a woman who looked considerably less frazzled than I felt.

It was just dinner, not a date. Not even adjacent to a date-like activity.

But yet, here I was, debating whether to wear mascara and lip tint like I was preparing for one. I’d changed outfits twice already, settling on dark jeans and a light blue sleeveless blouse.

I reached for my mascara, pulled my hand back, then immediately grabbed it again. I couldn’t show up looking like a cave troll, now, could I?

Two coats later, I slipped on my flip-flops and headed toward the main lodge, rehearsing potential conversation topics in my head. My phone buzzed with a text before I could contemplate whether they’d want to hear about the time I split my pants ten minutes before the morning bell rang.

April: Get pics of the cowboys or I’m reporting you.

Me: Reporting me for what? Not being stalker enough?

April: Gross negligence of best friend duties.

Me: Pretty sure that's not a thing.

April: Well, it is now, and after that rude picture from earlier, I deserve compensation.

Me: I'll see if they have any hot cowgirl sisters for you.

April: Have I told you lately that I love you?

I snorted and put my phone in my purse as I stepped through the door to the lodge, the scent of something delicious hitting me immediately. My stomach growled in response, reminding me I'd been too nervous to eat much at lunch.

Kellan appeared from what I assumed was the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "Quinn! Perfect timing."

"Do you need any help?" I offered, hovering uncertainly in the entryway.

"Nope, you're our guest of honor. Make yourself comfortable." He gestured toward the large table that was set for four.

I slid into a chair, suddenly feeling nervous. There didn't appear to be any other guests attending this dinner, so it would just be me and the three ranch owners.

Reid emerged from the kitchen carrying two plates, Walter trotting at his heels. The dog immediately abandoned him to greet me, sitting next to my chair in a lemur stance, staring up with soulful eyes.

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“Well, aren’t you the most adorable little man?” I gently scratched his little head.

“He’s working you.” Reid set the plates with mixed vegetables and potatoes on the table. “Don’t fall for it.”

Kellan brought over a pitcher of iced tea. “Would you like something besides tea to drink? We have pretty much everything you could imagine.”

“Tea is fine. I really shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach.” My stomach chose that moment to growl again. “See, it agrees.”

“Well, if you change your mind or you need a snack or drink later, the lodge is open twenty-four-seven. Your cabin key will open the door.” Kellan poured me a glass and sat down next to me.

Enzo was the last to appear, carrying a plate piled with roasted chicken. He nodded in my direction, the barest acknowledgment of my existence.

I smiled, trying to convey that I was totally fine, completely at ease, and not at all overwhelmed by being surrounded by three ridiculously attractive men. “Everything smells delicious.”

“A guest we had a few weeks ago said our cooking was better than the five-star place in town,” Reid said.

“Are we talking about the lady who also thought Debra was a majestic horse specimen?” Enzo took the seat across from me, showing the smallest hint that he had

a sense of humor.

I snorted, then immediately regretted it when all three pairs of eyes turned to me. “Sorry, majestic isn’t the first word that comes to mind.”

“What word would you use?” Reid put down another plate with dinner rolls and took his seat.

“I don’t want to offend your girlfriend.” I took a sip of my tea and was surprised at how good it was.

The food was served, and soon we settled into eating. I took a bite of chicken and had to stifle a moan. It was perfectly seasoned and juicy, and I was impressed they’d cooked it. Not once during my relationships with Jason or any of my other exes had they served me anything remotely as tasty.

Not that these three were anything other than acquaintances.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence where we all stuffed our faces, Kellan looked to me. “So, Quinn, what are your plans while you’re here?”

I nearly choked on a green bean. “Plans?”

“For the week... Any particular activities or training you want to do?”

“I, um...” I realized I had absolutely zero idea what I was meant to be doing here besides immersing myself in the world of horses. “What are my options?”

Kellan leaned forward, eyes lighting up. “We’ve got trail rides, horseback riding lessons?—”

“Do you even ride?” Enzo interrupted, his fork hovering halfway to his mouth, as if my answer was important enough to delay his next bite.

“Horses?” I immediately wanted to melt into the floor, possibly continuing straight through to the earth’s core where no one could witness my complete ignorance. “I mean, no. Never. The hobby horse competition was literally my first horse experience.” I fidgeted with my napkin, feeling like I’d shown up to a calculus exam after sleeping through every class.

“I could tell from your footwear.” Enzo went back to his food with a dismissive flick of his eyes under the table to my cute sandals that had seemed perfectly appropriate when packing but now felt like wearing clown shoes to a funeral. “You can’t be around the animals in open-toed shoes, let alone ride a horse.”

Kellan gave Enzo a pointed stare. “What my tactful colleague means is we’ll make sure you have the proper footwear before you get near any of our four-legged friends.”

“Why’d you enter a hobby horse competition if you’ve never been around real horses?” Reid sounded genuinely curious, and I couldn’t blame him. His brown eyes were soft with interest rather than judgment.

Heat crept up my neck as I pushed a potato around my plate, buying time. How did I explain that I’d been swept up in April’s post-breakup “yes to everything” recovery plan without sounding like a complete disaster? That I’d been so desperate to feel anything besides heartbreak that I’d pranced around on a stick horse in public?

“My friend April signed me up. I was going through a breakup, and she thought it would be... therapeutic?”

“A breakup?” Kellan’s expression shifted to one of sympathetic understanding.

“Those can be rough.”

“Well, it was more the betrayal part than the breakup itself,” I admitted, mentally kicking myself for bringing it up at all. The last thing I wanted was to be the sad, dumped girl at the table. “But honestly, the hobby horse competition was the first time I’d laughed in weeks. It was ridiculous, but also... freeing.”

Reid nodded, a small smile playing at his lips. “Sometimes the most absurd things can be exactly what we need.”

“Exactly!” I pointed my fork at him, grateful for the understanding. “And now I’m here on a ranch with actual horses, which is probably the universe’s idea of a joke, but I’m open to learning. How hard can it be, right?”

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Enzo's eyebrow raised slightly. "Depends on whether you value all your bones being intact."

"Ignore him." Kellan leaned in conspiratorially. "He acts tough, but he taught a group of five-year-olds last summer and was practically glowing by the end of it."

"I was sunburned," Enzo muttered.

The rest of dinner flowed more easily after that. The men told stories about ranch mishaps, like the time Debra escaped and ended up in the neighboring ranch's pool, and I shared some of my classroom adventures, including the Great Glitter Disaster of 2023 that resulted in my car still sparkling in certain lighting.

Soon our plates were empty, and Reid pushed back his chair, stacking his and Kellan's plates. "Thanks for the company, Quinn. I've got to go check on the horses before turning in."

"And I need to finish scheduling next week's trail rides." Kellan stood and stretched, his shirt lifting enough to reveal a tantalizing strip of skin and a smattering of hair leading into his pants, which I totally didn't notice. "Enzo's on dish duty tonight."

"Can I help?" I gathered my plate and silverware before Enzo could object. "It's the least I can do after you fed me."

Kellan and Reid exchanged a look I couldn't quite decipher before saying their goodnights and heading out, leaving me alone with the grumpiest of the three cowboys.

“You’re a guest; you don’t have to help.”

“I want to.” I followed him into the kitchen. “I promise I know how to dry dishes without breaking them. It’s one of my few adult skills.”

His lips twitched, almost a smile but not quite. “Wash or dry?”

“I’ll wash.” I took the dishrag he offered.

We fell into a surprisingly comfortable rhythm with me washing and him drying and putting away dishes. It was quiet, but the comfortable kind of quiet that was relaxing instead of tense.

“You’ve got...” Enzo motioned to my face, and I reached up, confused. His hand hesitated before he reached out and gently brushed a bit of soap from my cheek with his thumb. The brief contact left my skin tingling.

“Thanks.” I was suddenly very interested in washing the last fork.

When we finished, Enzo leaned against the counter, studying me for a moment. “I’ve got to drive into town tomorrow morning. If you want, I can take you to get some boots. You’ll need them.”

I blinked in surprise. “That would be great. Thank you.”

“Eight o’clock. Don’t be late.” And with that, he headed out the door.

I stood in the kitchen, clutching a damp dish towel, wondering if I had managed to crack the first layer of his stoic exterior or if he was just being polite.

Chapter 4

Lisa Frank and Dolly Parton Had a Boot Baby

Enzo

Ranger circled the pen at an easy trot, his dark coat already lathering where the muscle worked hardest. Most people would have been intimidated by his size and temperament, but I knew every flick of his ears, every subtle shift of his weight. I watched his back right leg, noting the slight hitch in his stride.

“Easy now,” I murmured as he transitioned from trot to canter. The slight hesitation confirmed what I’d suspected yesterday. Nothing serious, but enough to warrant the anti-inflammatory I needed to pick up from Dr. Mercer in town.

Ranger snorted, his dark mane flowing like ink across his midnight coat as we circled. He was everything I needed in a horse. He was focused, disciplined, and unfazed by nonsense. Unlike some people on this ranch.

I brought him down to a walk, letting him cool as the sun continued its climb. The morning was quiet; the only sounds were hooves on packed earth and my own thoughts.

Once his breathing settled, I led him into the stables. I didn’t want him out in the pasture with the other horses if I wasn’t around, and who knew how long I’d be boot shopping with Quinn.

I hadn’t realized until I’d walked out of the lodge the night before that I’d volunteered for at least a solid hour alone with her. What had I been thinking?

The answer was that I hadn’t been thinking. Something about the way she’d stood there in the kitchen, handling my silence without awkwardly trying to fill it, had made me forget myself for a moment.

Ranger nudged my shoulder, demanding attention. At least he had his priorities straight.

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I sighed, scratching him between the eyes. “What kind of person shows up to a ranch in flip-flops?”

Ranger huffed, completely uninterested in my human problems.

La Cuesta wasn't just a ranch to me; it was responsibility and legacy. When my uncle sold it to the three of us, it came with one condition: keep the horse side alive.

Reid and Kellan cared, but sometimes it felt like I was the only one who understood what was at stake. Kellan was too busy chasing viral moments, and Reid spent more time bonding with the animals or worrying about cabin bookings.

Meanwhile, I was the one keeping us from losing boarding and training clients while they treated the place like a playground. And now we had a hobby horse champion on-site, ready to turn the ranch into a circus and create a whole new list of complications.

I patted Ranger's neck and led him back to his stall, my mind already shifting to the day's obligations: vet stop, boot shopping, pasture inspection, hay delivery, training.

“Too much to do, not enough time,” I told Ranger as I locked his stall. His dark eyes watched me knowingly.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into the cabin parking area in front of the lodge. Quinn was sitting on the porch, two travel mugs balanced in her hands.

She spotted me and stood, making her way down the steps with a tentative smile.

Today, she wore shorts and tennis shoes, which were a definite improvement from flip-flops.

I got out and jogged around to open the passenger door. “Morning.”

“Good morning!” She slid into the seat.

I shut the door and returned to the driver’s side. “How was your first night?”

“Peaceful. I slept like a baby.” She held up the two mugs. “I made coffee. One has cream and sugar, and this one’s black. I wasn’t sure how you take it, but I drink it both ways.”

I accepted the black coffee with a nod of thanks, surprised by the gesture. Most guests expected to be waited on, not the other way around. “Ready for boots?”

“Beyond ready.” She buckled her seatbelt and settled in. “I’ve never owned real cowboy boots before. Do they hurt as bad to break in as everyone says?”

“Depends on the boots and your feet.” I backed out of the parking area, heading toward the main road. “But basically, yes.”

She let out a breathy laugh. “I appreciate the honesty. Kellan told me they’d feel like slippers crafted by angels.”

“Kellan would tell you anything to make a sale.”

“And you wouldn’t?” There was playfulness in her voice, not a challenge.

I shrugged. “Not my style.”

The road stretched ahead, and although I'd driven it too many times to count, it somehow felt different with Quinn beside me.

"I saw five goats this morning," she said after a comfortable silence. "They seem to have the run of the place."

"One of them does. Butters is the ringleader, and the oldest and dumbest of the five, but somehow the most successful at breaking out."

"What are the others' names?"

"Maple, Chip, Jack, and the baby is Pancake."

She nearly choked on her coffee. "Pancake? Please tell me there's a story there."

"Butters has always been at the ranch, but when we got the other three, Kellan named them in relation to pancakes. He wanted to name the baby Flap, but that just sounds wrong, and we don't know if the father is Jack or Chip."

"So, there's baby daddy drama with the goats?"

"They fight over Maple's attention constantly." I shook my head, knowing how absurd the whole thing sounded.

Quinn's eyes widened with delight. "It's like a goat soap opera! Does Butters get involved? Couldn't he be the father?"

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I snorted. “He has no interest in Maple, so it’s doubtful. We haven’t gotten them DNA tested because what would be the point?”

“That’s some serious tea. There should be a Maury Show for barnyard friends.” Her reaction made something warm unfurl in my chest.

We pulled into Dr. Mercer’s clinic, and I parked. “This won’t take long. I’m picking up some medicine for my horse.”

Quinn trailed behind me into the waiting room, which was busier than I’d expected for a weekday morning. As I approached the desk, Quinn made a beeline for a boy sitting alone in the corner, clutching a dog toy and crying softly.

She must have asked him if he was okay because he said, “My dad wouldn’t let me go in with them. My dog is sick.”

She sat down next to the boy. “What’s their name?”

“Sadie,” the boy stammered, taking the tissue Quinn had produced from her purse.

Quinn leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper that seemed to immediately capture the boy’s attention. “You want to know a secret? I once entered a competition where grown adults ride stick horses, and I won.”

The boy sniffled, looking skeptical but intrigued. “Like... toy horses?”

“Exactly like toy horses.” Quinn nodded enthusiastically. “I had to gallop around

while jumping over little fences. I almost fell three times and accidentally whacked a judge with my stick horse's head at one point."

A small smile tugged at the boy's lips. "Did you get in trouble?"

"Worse! He gave me extra points for enthusiasm, and now I'm at a real ranch learning about actual horses who are probably laughing at me behind my back." She stood and demonstrated her hobby horse technique right there in the waiting room, prancing in place and making a ridiculous whinnying sound.

The boy was fully grinning now, his worries forgotten. I smiled too, watching how effortlessly she'd transformed a tearful child into a giggling one.

It was like a pressure somewhere inside me let go that I hadn't been paying attention to. It threw me, and I turned away, suddenly uncomfortable with how intently I was watching her, and focused on waiting for the receptionist to grab Ranger's medicine instead.

After paying for the meds, I pocketed my receipt and gestured toward the door. "All done here."

Quinn gave the boy a final high-five before following me out of the clinic. "His dog sounded like she had a UTI. Poor kid was terrified she wasn't coming back."

"And your solution was to tell him about stick horses?"

"Distraction is the quickest way to regulate emotions." She shrugged, sliding back into the passenger seat. "Plus, my hobby horse humiliation is clearly good for something."

As I drove toward our next stop, I tried to ignore how her presence had somehow

made a routine errand feel... different. “You’re good with kids.”

“I would hope so since I’m a teacher.” She glanced out the window at the passing storefronts. “This is a cute little area. It’s the perfect distance from the beach and isn’t touristy at all.”

“Just the way I like it.” I pulled into the supply store’s parking lot. “We offer a trail ride to the beach if that’s something you’re interested in.”

Quinn’s face lit up. “Do you think a week is enough time to learn to ride a horse well enough to do it?”

“That’s really up to you and how comfortable you feel. You’ll be sore after your first few rides, but possibly by the end of the week you could ride there and, depending on how you feel, get a car ride back.” I didn’t want to overpromise when I hadn’t even gotten her on a horse yet.

She followed me into the store, which was a combination of farm supplies, tools, animal feed, and clothing. It wasn’t my preferred place to buy boots and riding gear, but the price was right for what Quinn needed.

Her eyes widened at the rows of boots lining the wall, the scent of leather and hay mixed with the faint strains of country music playing over the speakers.

“There are so many choices! How do I—” She stopped mid-sentence, her gaze fixed on the display at the end.

She headed straight for what had to be the most ridiculous pair of boots I’d ever seen: turquoise leather with pink embroidered flowers, silver accents, and a rhinestone trim.

“These are amazing.” She lifted one reverently, turning it to catch the light. “It’s like

Lisa Frank and Dolly Parton had a boot baby.”

I folded my arms. “Those aren’t ranch boots. Those are... statement pieces you’d wear to a Taylor Swift concert.”

“Yeah, and the statement is look at my awesome boots.” She sat down on a nearby bench and kicked off her tennis shoe, tugging the gaudy monstrosity onto her foot.

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After a minute of struggling, she managed to get her foot in but couldn't pull it up fully. She stood anyway, wobbling slightly as she put weight on it.

"Well?" She grinned, balancing with one hand on the display shelf.

"You look like you lost a bet with a bad country music video."

Her mouth dropped open, then she burst out laughing. "Wow, you really don't like these boots."

"You'll be worried the whole time about getting them dirty. Plus, they are twice the price of a regular pair." I didn't know what her financial situation was, but she was a teacher, so I doubted she wanted to spend a lot of money on boots she'd get horse crap on.

"You have a point, and honestly? They are a little loud." She sat back down, tugging uselessly at the half-on boot.

Without thinking, I crouched in front of her, one hand steadying her calf while the other gripped the heel of the boot. Her skin was warm under my palm, soft in a way that made something stir low in my stomach.

Quinn's breath caught, and our eyes met briefly before I looked down at the boot as I pulled it off. I was suddenly very conscious of my hand still on her leg.

I stood quickly, scanning the shelves. "Try these." I grabbed a pair of medium-brown boots with teal stitching details, basic riding heels, and good ankle support.

She accepted them with a dramatic sigh. “Fine, but only because you asked so nicely.”

I knelt again, guiding her foot into the boot. I let my fingers linger against her skin a fraction longer than necessary before releasing her and standing up.

She stood and took a few experimental steps. “They’re comfortable.” She seemed surprised.

“They’re meant for working.” I watched her walk a circle around the bench, her movements becoming more confident with each step.

“Shockingly not horrible.” She examined her reflection in the mirror. “Though they’re a far cry from my Lisa Frank dreams.”

“Your ankles will thank me later.”

She turned to face me, and the corner of her mouth lifted. “So you’re saving me from myself, is that it?”

“Someone has to.” The words slipped out quieter than I meant, and before I could stop it, a smile tugged at my mouth.

She stared at me for a moment, something unreadable crossing her face. “You should do that more often.”

“What?”

“Smile. It makes you look...” She trailed off, then quickly turned back to the mirror. “Less grumpy.”

While she checked the fit from different angles, I pretended to examine a display of leather belts, suddenly unsure what to do with my hands.

She decided to get the boots and packed them in the box before we headed out of the shoe section. As we got into line to pay, Quinn made a detour to a spinning display of novelty socks, letting out a delighted gasp when she found a ridiculous pair.

“Look!” She held them up triumphantly. “It’s a chicken riding a tractor!”

“Essential ranch wear,” I deadpanned.

“I’m getting them.” She tossed them onto the counter with her boots.

I took the bag once she’d paid, and we left the store and walked across the parking lot. Our hands brushed accidentally, and the brief contact sent an unexpected jolt up my arm. I shifted the bag to my other hand, creating distance between us.

Something had changed during this trip; some invisible boundary had shifted, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. I told myself it was just my relief that she hadn’t insisted on those ridiculous turquoise boots. All it was was an appreciation for a practical choice.

But as she climbed into my truck, I knew that wasn’t true. And that was a problem I wasn’t prepared to face.

La Cuesta came first. It had to. And Quinn Porter, with her chicken tractor socks and her ability to make me smile when I least expected it, was a complication I couldn’t afford.

Chapter 5

Tater Tot

Quinn

I closed the cabin door behind me and kicked off my tennis shoes, eager to try on my new purchases. The shopping trip with Enzo had left me with an unsettling flutter in my stomach that I wasn't quite ready to acknowledge.

"Just boots," I muttered to myself, pulling them from the shopping bag. "That's all it was."

But my skin still tingled where his fingers had brushed against my calf. The way he'd crouched in front of me, strong hands guiding my foot into the boot... it was nothing, really.

So why couldn't I stop thinking about it?

I quickly changed into jeans and then tugged off my socks and pulled on the ridiculous chicken-on-tractor ones instead, grinning at the repeating pattern. My boots were all business, but underneath would be a party.

The boots slid on more easily this time, and I paced the small cabin, breaking them in with each step.

Heading outside, I followed the path toward the indoor riding arena where Kellan had promised to meet me for my first lesson. We'd agreed on it during dinner the night before, and even though I was nervous, I was excited to try something new.

The sun beat down as I approached the arena, and I was glad they had some covered facilities. I hadn't even thought about grabbing a hat while shopping.

I spotted Kellan leading a small horse with a little girl perched on top. She couldn't have been more than six, her grin stretched from ear to ear as he guided the horse around in a circle.

I leaned against the railing, watching as he gently instructed her. His patience was palpable, and his smile encouraging.

"Sit up straight, Lily," he called, his drawl more pronounced. "That's it! You're a natural."

The little girl giggled, her smile marked with pride. A woman stood nearby, presumably her mother, clapping enthusiastically at every small victory.

When the lesson ended, Kellan helped Lily dismount before handing her the lead.

Kellan and Lily led the horse toward the exit into the stables, while she chattered nonstop about something that made Kellan throw his head back and laugh. His whole face transformed in a way that made me smile.

"First time at the ranch?"

I startled, not having noticed Lily's mom approach. She was the kind of put-together that made me second-guess my entire existence, with a perfect manicure, tasteful jewelry, and not a hair out of place.

"Yeah, I got here yesterday." I gestured vaguely toward the stables. "I'm having my first lesson."

“With Kellan? Lucky you.” She fanned herself dramatically. “If I weren’t happily married with two kids, I’d be climbing that man like a tree. The way he is with children?” She gave an exaggerated shudder of pleasure. “Absolute catnip.”

Something hot and uncomfortable flared in my chest and my fingers gripped the fence railing. “He seems professional.” The edge in my voice was impossible to miss.

Where the hell had that come from? I had no claim on Kellan. Yet there I was, bristling like a cat whose territory had been invaded because some random mom had stated the obvious: Kellan Brooks was attractive.

The woman gave me a knowing look that made my cheeks burn. “Honey, professional isn’t the word most women use for him.” She winked before walking away.

I was still scowling at her back when Kellan returned, leading a different horse that was huge compared to the other horse.

I stared at the horse in front of me, convinced Kellan had lost his mind. The animal was the equine equivalent of a tractor-trailer, with massive legs and a back so broad I’d need mountaineering equipment to summit it. “There is no way I’m getting on that thing.”

“This is not a thing. This is Tater Tot,” Kellan announced with a flourish.

“That’s a ‘tot’?” I squeaked. “What do you feed him? Other horses?”

Kellan laughed and stroked the horse’s neck. “He’s a Belgian draft horse and is basically a walking marshmallow. He’s perfect for newbies, and kids love him. He once stood perfectly still while a three-year-old sang the entirety of Let It Go in his ear.”

“Impressive patience.” I cautiously approached the railing. “He’s going to eat my face off.”

Tater Tot shifted his weight, and I took two giant steps backward.

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“He can smell fear,” I whispered, eyeing the giant beast.

Kellan’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s sharks. And even then, it’s blood, not fear.”

“Are you sure? Because he’s looking at me like I’m a snack.”

Tater Tot blinked slowly, his expression remarkably uninterested for something the size of a minivan. He lowered his head and let out a long, wheezing sigh that ended in a snort.

“He’s not going to hurt you.” Kellan unlatched the gate and beckoned me inside. When I hesitated, he added, “Trust me, Quinn. Would I put you on a dangerous animal your first time?”

“I don’t know your teaching ethics! For all I know, this is some kind of ‘sink or swim’ approach.”

Kellan grinned, reaching out his hand. “Come on. One step at a time.”

I took a deep breath and tentatively placed my hand in his. His palm was warm and calloused, fingers closing around mine with gentle pressure. The simple touch sent an electric current up my arm.

Great. Now I was dealing with irrational horse fear and inconvenient attraction.

Kellan guided me inside the ring, my boots dragging like I was walking to my execution. Tater Tot swished his tail, completely unbothered by my dramatic

entrance.

“We’re going to just stand here for a minute.” Kellan didn’t release my hand. “Feel how calm the energy is?”

“The only energy I’m feeling is my fight-or-flight response,” I muttered.

“Look at him, Quinn.” Kellan’s voice was soft but insistent. “Really look. His eyes aren’t rolling. His ears aren’t pinned back. He’s just... vibing.”

I couldn’t help the snort that escaped. “Horses don’t vibe.”

“Tater Tot does. He’s the Zen master of this ranch.”

As if on cue, the horse let out an enormous fart that echoed through the arena, followed by what looked like a goofy horse grin.

“Did he just—” I clapped a hand over my mouth, torn between horror and amusement.

“Oh, yeah.” Kellan nodded solemnly, though a smile threatened to break through his composure. “He’s notorious for it. We call them his ‘tater toots.’”

“Wow. Real professional operation you’ve got here.”

“Here.” He took my hand again. “Hold your palm flat, like this.” He demonstrated, then guided my hand toward Tater Tot’s enormous nose.

The horse’s whiskers tickled my skin as he sniffed delicately, his breath warm against my palm. I couldn’t help the giggle that slipped out.

“See? Not so scary.” Kellan moved my hand to the horse’s neck, his fingers still wrapped around mine in a way that made me forget about horse-related terror for approximately two point three seconds. “Pet him. He loves it.”

I let my palm rest against Tater Tot’s velvety coat. My hand looked comically small against the expanse of his massive neck. I gave a tentative stroke, and the giant beast leaned into the touch like an oversized puppy.

“Huh,” I whispered, mesmerized by the rhythmic brushing of my hand against his coat. “He’s soft. I thought he’d feel like a couch or something.”

As I continued petting him, a weird calm settled over me. All that irrational fear was being replaced by something approaching wonder, though I wasn’t about to admit that to Kellan just yet.

“Ready to saddle him?” Kellan patted Tater Tot’s broad back, and the giant horse made a contented little nickering sound that seemed impossibly small coming from such a massive animal.

“Yes and no.” I continued running my hand along Tater Tot’s neck, secretly delighted at how he leaned into my touch. “My brain needs processing time.”

Kellan’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he gave me that patient smile, the one that made me feel simultaneously soothed and slightly annoyed that he found my fear amusing. “You can process while I show you how to saddle him, and if you decide today isn’t the day, then no worries.”

He gently took the lead rope and guided Tater Tot across the arena to where a worn leather saddle waited on a rail. The horse plodded along with a slow, rolling gait. For something so enormous, he moved with surprising gentleness, occasionally glancing back as if checking whether I was following. I was, but with the cautious steps of

someone following an elephant they're still not entirely convinced won't suddenly decide to sit on them.

As Kellan began to explain the saddling process, I tried to focus as he demonstrated each step: blanket first, then saddle, checking for wrinkles, tightening the girth. But I was distracted by the way his forearms flexed with each movement.

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“You’re not paying attention.”

“I am!” I protested, heat climbing my neck. “Blanket, saddle, cinchy thing.”

“Girth.” His lips twitched.

I bit my lip to stop myself from making an inappropriate comment. It was a struggle because how does one not immediately have their brain go to something else when the word “girth” is brought up in any context? I certainly couldn’t.

“Ready to try? We can go as far as you’re comfortable with, even if that is just sitting on him for a few minutes.” When I nodded, he positioned Tater Tot next to a mounting block. “Left foot in the stirrup, swing your right leg over, and try not to kick him in the butt on your way up.”

I climbed the block, anxiety buzzing under my skin as I faced the enormous animal. “If I die, tell April she can have my collection of coffee mugs but not my plants. She kills everything.”

Kellan’s hand settled at the small of my back. “You won’t die. I’ve got you.”

Something about those words made my breath catch. I placed my left foot in the stirrup, grabbed the saddle as instructed, and awkwardly hauled myself up, landing with all the grace of a sack of potatoes.

“Holy shit.” I gasped as the ground suddenly seemed miles away, and my body tensed. “We’re so high up. Do you have oxygen masks? Should my ears be

popping?”

Kellan laughed, his hand still resting on my leg, steadying me. “Relax your hips. Let them move with him when we start walking.”

“Bold of you to assume I know how to move my hips.” I immediately regretted the choice of words when his eyes darkened.

“I’d be happy to give private lessons on that too.” He cleared his throat and smoothly pivoted back to instructor mode. “Heels down, back straight. There you go.”

Kellan led Tater Tot forward a few steps, and I clung to the saddle horn like I was about to fall to my death. “I’m riding a horse!”

“You are.” As Kellan led us in a slow circle around the arena, I gradually loosened my death grip on the saddle. Tater Tot’s rhythmic movement beneath me became less terrifying and more soothing.

Well, at least for the first few minutes before my inner thighs started to protest.

Tater Tot plodded along steadily, his massive hooves thumping against the arena’s sandy surface. After twentyminutes, my initial terror had transformed into something else entirely—pain. Pure, unadulterated agony in muscles I hadn’t even known existed.

“How are you doing?” Kellan’s voice carried that hint of amusement that told me he knew exactly how I was doing.

“Great,” I lied through gritted teeth. “Are my legs supposed to be slowly separating from my hip sockets? Because that’s what it feels like is happening.”

He patted Tater Tot's neck. "That means you're using the right muscles. Think you can go for another five minutes?"

"Five minutes?" I groaned. "My future grandchildren will feel this pain. It's going to be embedded in my genetic code. But yes, I can survive."

Kellan guided us through several more circles, occasionally instructing me to sit up straighter or sink my weight into my heels. By the end, I'd managed to navigate Tater Tot in a wobbly figure eight without Kellan holding the lead rope. It was hardly Olympic-level equestrian work, but the sense of accomplishment made me grin like I'd won gold.

"Ready to dismount?" Kellan positioned himself beside Tater Tot, his hands reaching up toward me.

I nodded enthusiastically. "More ready than I've ever been for anything in my life."

"Kick your right foot out of the stirrup, swing your leg over his back, and slide down. I'll catch you."

Dismounting went about as gracefully as expected. I swung my leg over, slid down the side of the mountain horse, and my knees buckled the instant my feet hit the ground. Kellan caught me by the elbows, steadying me as my legs trembled like a newborn foal's.

"Sweet mother of mercy," I moaned, dramatically staggering to the nearest bench and collapsing onto it. "This is it. This is how I die. Tell my story."

Kellan handed me a water bottle. "Most people aren't used to using those muscle groups. You'll be sore tomorrow."

“Tomorrow?” I took a long drink. “I’m sore right now. I think my thighs have been through a meat grinder. Is that normal? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you did pretty well for your first time.” He sat beside me, his knee lightly brushing against mine. “Good posture, you listened to instructions, and you didn’t panic when Tater decided to snort at that fly.”

“Only because I was too busy concentrating on not falling off to notice the dinosaur noises he was making.”

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Tater Tot chose that moment to let out a massive, rumbling fart, followed by a grin. Kellan and I looked at each other for a split second before bursting into laughter.

I stretched my legs out in front of me with a wince. “I would literally kill someone for access to a hot bath right now. My cabin only has a shower.”

Something shifted in Kellan’s expression, and it sent warmth crawling up my neck. “You know, the main house has a hot tub on the back deck. You’re welcome to use it anytime.”

“Right, I’ll just come barging into your house and commandeer your hot tub.” My amusement died when I realized he wasn’t smiling in a joking way. “Wait, are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” His eyes held mine a beat longer than necessary. “It’s got jets that would work wonders on sore muscles. And the view at sunset is something else... around eight.”

The suggestion hung in the air between us. It was friendly on the surface, but with currents running beneath that made my pulse quicken.

“That’s...” I swallowed, suddenly very aware of how close we were sitting and how his eyes seemed to darken as they studied my face. “That’s really nice of you to offer.”

“I’m a really nice guy.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile that wasn’t completely nice in intention.

I gave him a look that I hoped conveyed both my interest and my hesitation. “I bet you are.”

The moment stretched between us. His eyes dropped briefly to my lips before returning to meet my gaze, and I found myself leaning slightly toward him without consciously deciding to do so.

“Kellan!” Enzo’s voice called from across the arena, shattering the moment. “Phone call! It’s that reporter from Western Living Magazine!”

Kellan blinked, then sighed. “Be right there!” He turned back to me with a rueful smile. “Duty calls. Think about the hot tub, though. The offer stands.”

He stood, brushed invisible dust from his jeans, and gave me a look that suggested he very much hoped I would take him up on his invitation.

“I’ll see you later, Quinn.” The way my name rolled off his tongue sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

I watched him walk away, trying and failing not to notice how well he filled out his jeans. “See you,” I called belatedly, my voice embarrassingly breathless.

I forced myself to stand, wincing as my battered muscles protested. The walk back to my cabin was slow and painful, but my mind wasn’t on my physical discomfort. Instead, I was caught in a mental tug-of-war between the sensible part of me that knew getting involved with anyone right now was a terrible idea and the increasingly vocal part that wanted to see exactly what Kellan Brooks looked like in a hot tub at sunset.

“It’s just a hot tub,” I muttered to myself as I limped along the path. “For therapeutic purposes only.”

Even I didn't believe that for a second.

Chapter 6

Therapeutic Purposes

Kellan

I stepped back from my masterpiece, surveying the charcuterie board with the pride of a five-year-old presenting his mom with his handprint turkey.

The tiny salami roses had taken three YouTube tutorials and more patience than I typically applied to anything that wasn't horse-related, but damn if they didn't look professional. I'd arranged the cheeses in cascading order from mild to sharp, nestled fresh strawberries and grapes between artisan crackers, and added little pools of honey and fig jam in ceramic bowls I'd dug out from the back of a cabinet.

Was it excessive for someone I'd known less than forty-eight hours? Probably.

Did I care? Not particularly.

It would have been easy to just throw some crackers and cheese on a plate, but this was much more appealing and romantic. Not that I was going for romantic. She might not even show.

The back door creaked open, and Reid's boots scuffed against the entryway mat. Walter trotted in ahead of him, immediately heading for the water bowl in the corner.

Reid stopped short, blinking at my creation. "Did Martha Stewart stop by while I was outside?"

I flashed him a grin, adjusting a cracker. “Just thought I’d put something together. No big deal.”

Reid approached the island, circling it slowly like he was inspecting a crime scene. “Uh huh. And the occasion is...?”

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I busied myself wiping down the counter, avoiding his eyes. “Quinn might come by later. It was her first ride today, and I thought she might want to use the hot tub for therapeutic purposes.”

“Therapeutic purposes.” Reid nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Is that why you’ve got the wine glasses out too?”

I looked at them and fought the urge to shove them back in the cabinet. “What? Is she supposed to drink out of the bottle? I’m being a good host.”

Reid leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. “Look, man, be straight with me. Is this really just about being hospitable?”

“Of course it is.” The defensive edge in my voice surprised even me. “She’s only here for a week, Reid. I’m not planning a wedding.”

“Didn’t say you were.” His voice remained calm, which somehow made it worse. “Just making sure we’re all on the same page.”

The sound of boots on the hardwood interrupted whatever Reid was about to say next as Enzo strode in. “Same page about what?”

I did a double-take at his appearance. He’d swapped his usual work-worn jeans for a fresh dark pair and put on a pressed button-down, sleeves rolled to the elbows. His boots were still the same style—because heaven forbid Lorenzo Perez try something new—but these were clearly his non-shit-shoveling pair.

Both Reid and I stared at him like he'd grown a second head.

"What?" Enzo grunted, grabbing his keys from the hook.

"Nothing." I recovered first, gesturing vaguely at his outfit. "Just don't usually see you all cleaned up. At least not lately."

"Going dancing." Enzo's eyes flicked to the elaborate spread on the counter, one eyebrow arching. "What's all this?"

"Nothing." I moved to casually block his view, which was ridiculous. "Just making sure our guest feels welcome."

"Welcome." Enzo repeated the word like he was testing it for bullshit. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

Heat crawled up my neck. "It's called customer service, Enzo. You should try it sometime instead of glowering at people until they give you money."

"Right." His mouth twisted into something not quite a smile. "Well, don't strain yourself rolling out the welcome wagon. I'd hate for you to pull something."

"You're going line dancing?" Reid crossed the kitchen to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. "That's a surprise. What's the occasion?"

"It's been a while, and I need to blow off some steam." There was a flicker of something in his voice, but before I could place it, he was gone, the screen door slapping shut behind him.

The silence stretched for a beat too long before Reid cleared his throat. "Kellan, I know it's not really my business, but?—"

“You’re right, it’s not.” I cut him off, immediately regretting my sharpness. “It’s nothing, okay? She seemed interested, I’m interested, we’re both adults.”

“She’s a guest.”

“And?”

Reid ran a hand through his hair. “All I’m saying is, be careful.”

The truth was, despite tapping into every ounce of self-preservation I possessed, I kept thinking about her. It wasn’t just passing thoughts but full-blown mental dioramas featuring her smile, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear when she concentrated, and how her face softened when she talked about her students. I’d tried distracting myself, but nothing worked.

Quinn had somehow bypassed all my carefully constructed defenses I’d spent years reinforcing after watching my parents’ toxic cycle of make-up and break-up and settled right into the corners of my mind where I couldn’t reach to evict her.

Usually I didn’t go through the effort of making something as elaborate as a charcuterie board, but with Quinn, I wanted to. Even if it led nowhere, she was worth the effort.

Reid must have read something in my expression because he headed toward the hallway, pausing at the doorway. “For what it’s worth, that’s the fanciest damn charcuterie board I’ve ever seen. If she doesn’t appreciate it, she doesn’t deserve it.”

I didn’t bother asking him just how many boards he’d seen. His experience with fancy food arrangements began and ended with the premade veggie trays at the grocery store.

I glanced at the clock. Nearly eight.

It was possible Quinn wouldn't show up at all. It was possible I'd misread the signals, or she'd decided it wasn't worth the potential awkwardness. I would just eat the entire board myself while watching reruns of Yellowstone, wondering why I'd gone to all this trouble for someone who'd be gone in days.

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Then again, maybe she would show up, and we'd drink wine as the sun set and the stars came out.

When had I become such a... romantic?

I carried the wine and charcuterie board out to the back deck. The sun was starting to set, painting the horizon in dark blue and gold. I'd set up the hot tub earlier, but now I cranked the jets on.

I discarded my shirt and sank into the water, letting the heat and movement relax my muscles.

Every few seconds, my eyes drifted to the path that Quinn would take if she decided to come. It would be less complicated if she didn't show. I rarely read women wrong, but what if I'd misinterpreted her interest earlier? Was I about to embarrass myself and the ranch?

I'd just reached for the wine bottle when Quinn appeared on the path, wearing shorts and a loose tank top, a towel slung casually over one shoulder. Her steps were unhurried but had a hint of hesitation, like she was second-guessing with each footfall.

She paused at the edge of the deck, eyes flicking to mine, then to the wine, then back to me. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

With a sudden confidence that seemed to come from nowhere, she tugged her tank top over her head in one fluid motion. She dropped it onto a deck chair, fingers

moving to the button of her shorts. They joined her tank top.

Standing before me in nothing but black lace underwear and a bra, she met my gaze with a smirk that said she knew exactly what this was doing to me.

“Hope you’re not shy. I didn’t bring my bathing suit and didn’t have time to go buy one.” She walked up the hot tub steps and sat gingerly on the side before swinging her legs over.

My mouth had gone completely dry. “I’m not shy.”

She sank into the water with a contented sigh that I felt in my bones, submerging herself to her shoulders. I managed to collect myself enough to pour her a glass of wine, which she accepted with a grateful nod.

“This is exactly what I needed.” She tilted her head back against the edge. “I can’t believe I rode a horse today. I knew there would be some soreness, but not this much.”

For a while, we just soaked, sipping wine and picking from the charcuterie board balanced on the edge of the tub. The conversation came easier than it should have with someone I barely knew. It flowed from her teaching experiences to my most ridiculous guest stories, from her ex’s betrayal to my parents’ dysfunctional marriage.

The wine loosened our tongues, but there was something else at work too, something in the way the water bubbled around her shoulders and glinted off the droplets on her collarbones.

Our fingers brushed when I passed her a strawberry, and neither of us pulled away as quickly as we should have.

She took a bite of the berry, my eyes glued to the way her lips closed around it. “Do you always go to this much trouble for your guests?”

There it was; the question that would define whatever this was becoming... or wasn't becoming.

I met her eyes. “No.”

A beat of silence stretched between us, filled only by the bubbling of the jets and the distant chirp of crickets. Her eyes searched my face, as if looking for the punchline, the hint that I was just the charming guy who flirted with everyone who crossed the ranch's threshold.

I leaned in slowly, giving her every opportunity to pull away.

She didn't.

Our mouths met in a kiss that started tentatively, a question hanging between us, but whatever caution existed melted away. Her lips parted against mine with a soft, needy sound that vibrated through me, and everything accelerated. Her hand curled around the back of my neck, fingertips digging into my skin, while my fingers slid into her damp hair, cradling her head as if it were something precious.

The taste of wine and strawberries lingered on her tongue as it brushed against mine, sending electric currents racing down my spine. The jets hummed around us, but all I could hear was the catch in Quinn's breath, the quiet moan that escaped her when I pulled her closer, the water sloshing between our bodies as they gravitated toward each other with an urgency that had been building since she first stepped on the ranch.

When we finally pulled apart, both slightly breathless, I saw my own surprise

mirrored in her eyes. Like neither of us had expected this to feel quite so... inevitable.

“Huh,” she whispered, her fingers still light against my skin.

“Eloquent,” I teased, but my voice wasn’t quite steady.

She smiled and bit her lip. “I wasn’t planning on this, you know.”

“Me neither.” My thumb traced her bottom lip. “But I’m not complaining.”

Her eyes darkened. “Good.”

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And then she was kissing me again, her body shifting closer in the water, and I forgot about everything else: the ranch, Enzo and Reid, the fact that she'd be leaving in a week. Nothing mattered in that moment except the feel of her against me and the strange, sudden certainty that I might be in serious trouble here.

Chapter 7

Watching

Quinn

From the moment Kellan's lips met mine, a warm rush flooded through my body. His mouth was soft but insistent, tasting of wine and something distinctly male that made my head spin.

I kissed him again, more boldly this time. The jets pulsed around us as I shifted closer, my body moving of its own accord. My muscles protested, but I ignored them, drawn to Kellan like a magnet.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was straddling him in the hot tub, my legs bracketing his hips. The ache in my thighs seemed to melt away, replaced by a different kind of tension. His hands found my waist, steadying me as water sloshed around us.

"Are you okay enough for this?" His voice was rough and hopeful.

"More than okay," I breathed.

The strand lights strung overhead flickered to life as the last rays of sunlight disappeared beneath the horizon. In this light, Kellan looked like something from a dream, with water droplets clinging to his shoulders and his eyes dark with want.

His hands slid down to my thighs, kneading the sore muscles there with strong, sure fingers. I moaned softly, my head falling back.

“Still hurting?” He continued his gentle massage.

“Yes, but—” I inhaled sharply as his thumbs pressed into tense spots. “That feels amazing.”

He leaned forward to trail kisses down my neck. “I know other things that feel even better.”

His mouth worked against my pulse point as his hands continued their ministrations. The combination of his massage on my aching muscles and the heat of his lips on my skin had me melting against him.

“You’re so responsive,” he murmured against my collarbone. “I’ve been thinking about touching you like this since I saw you on that horse today.”

His words sent a thrill through me. “Have you now?”

“Mm-hmm.” His hands slid higher. “Watching you take instruction, seeing you bite your lip in concentration...” His fingers found the clasp of my bra. “May I?”

I nodded, suddenly breathless. With expert ease, he unhooked the clasp, and my bra loosened. Slowly, he slid the straps down my arms, his eyes never leaving mine. When my breasts were free, he tossed the bra casually onto the deck with a plop.

The night air kissed my exposed skin for only a moment before Kellan's hands replaced it, palming my breasts with an appreciative groan. "You're gorgeous." His thumbs circled my nipples until they hardened beneath his touch. "So fucking beautiful."

His mouth descended to capture one peak, tongue swirling in a way that made me arch into him, my fingers threading through his damp hair to hold him closer.

"Kellan," I gasped, rocking unconsciously against him.

I could feel him hard beneath me, even through the fabric of his swim trunks and my underwear. The evidence of his desire stoked my own higher.

"Want to know what I'm thinking right now?" He switched his attention to my other breast.

"Tell me."

"I'm thinking about how sweet you're going to taste." His hands slid to cup my ass. "How pretty you'll look coming apart on my tongue."

A whimper escaped me at his words. I'd never been with someone who talked like this, who verbalized their desires so bluntly. It was intoxicating.

In one smooth motion, he set me on the edge of the hot tub, the cool night air making me shiver as my lower half emerged from the water. He positioned himself between my legs, looking up at me with a question in his eyes.

"Yes," I breathed, answering before he could ask.

His smile was wolfish as he hooked his fingers in the waistband of my underwear.

“Lift up for me, sweetheart.”

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I raised my hips, allowing him to slide the soaked lace down my legs. The vulnerability of being so exposed outside should have made me nervous, but all I felt was a heady anticipation as Kellan's gaze raked over me.

"Just as perfect as I imagined." He gently pushed my thighs wider. "Fuuuuck. Look at this pussy glistening for me."

A movement in my peripheral caught my attention. My eyes darted to an upstairs window, where I thought I'd seen a shadow shift. The window was open, but I couldn't make out anything definitive in the darkness. Just an empty frame staring back at me.

I wondered momentarily who might be up there. It was either Reid or Enzo. The thought that one of them might be watching set off a flicker of heat I wasn't ready for.

Before I could dwell on it further, Kellan's mouth was on me, stealing my focus and my breath in one devastating move. His tongue traced me teasingly before finding the spot that made my hips jerk as I gripped his hair.

He hummed against me, the vibration adding to the sensation. "You taste even better than I imagined." He pulled back just enough to speak. "I'm going to make you come so hard, Quinn."

His fingers joined his mouth, one sliding inside me while his tongue continued its relentless attention on my clit. My pleasure built rapidly as he worked me with practiced skill.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, adding a second finger and curling them expertly. “Let me hear how much you want to come.”

I was trying to stay quiet, but it was impossible. Anytime a man said they were going to make a woman come, there was always that doubt that crept in. But with Kellan? He knew what he was doing, and he was good at it.

My eyes fluttered open briefly, my gaze drawn back to the upstairs window. This time, I saw a bearded face, partially hidden by the frame.

Reid.

He was watching us. Watching me.

Rather than feeling scandalized, a fresh wave of arousal washed over me. The knowledge that Reid was witnessing this, seeing me come undone beneath Kellan’s tongue and fingers, was unexpectedly erotic.

The combination of Kellan’s touch and the forbidden thrill of being observed pushed me rapidly toward the edge. My thighs began to tremble, and my breaths grew heavier. “Kellan, I’m close.”

“Give it to me.” His fingers pumped faster as his tongue circled my clit with renewed energy. “Let me feel you come all over my fingers and mouth.”

My eyes locked on the window one more time, catching Reid’s gaze directly. The connection was electric, his presence intensifying everything I was feeling. My orgasm crashed through me, my body clenching around Kellan’s fingers as pleasure pulsed outward.

I cried out, uncaring of who might hear, my back arching as Kellan worked me

through it, easing off only when I became too sensitive.

As I came down from the high, I noticed Kellan glancing over his shoulder toward the window. He'd seen Reid too. My cheeks heated with embarrassment. Not at what we'd done, but at being caught enjoying the audience.

Kellan turned back to me, a knowing but uncertain smile playing on his lips. "Does him watching bother you?"

I hesitated, my heart still racing. "No," I admitted, surprising myself with how true it was. "Does it bother you?"

"Not at all." His tone suggested this wasn't the first time something like this had happened. It made me wonder about the dynamics between the three men who ran this ranch, but before I could contemplate it further, Kellan stood.

Water cascaded down his chest, and the fabric of his swim trunks did nothing to hide his impressive erection. The sight made my mouth go dry. "Want to give Reid more of a show?"

I nodded as I glanced up at the window again. I couldn't see Reid anymore, but knowing he might still be watching—or might even be joining us—sent another pulse of need through my core.

Kellan helped me out of the hot tub, his hands steady as my legs threatened to give way beneath me. He guided me toward the railing at the edge of the deck, positioning me so I faced the breathtaking view of the stars twinkling against the dark hills.

"Hold onto the rail," he instructed, his chest pressing against my back as his lips found my ear. "Can I fuck you raw, Quinn? I've been tested."

Was it possible to come from just words? Because I was about to. I'd always used condoms, but even though I hadn't known this man for long, my intuition told me to trust him.

"Yes." My skin broke out in goosebumps, my body already anticipating him. "I'm on birth control and tested too."

I heard the rustle of fabric as he pushed his swim trunks down, then felt the hot, hard length of him pressing against me from behind. His hands gripped my hips firmly as he guided himself to my entrance.

"Let Reid see and hear how perfectly you take my cock." He slowly pushed forward.

The initial stretch made my breath catch, my body still sensitive from my earlier orgasm. He moved patiently, allowing me to adjust to his size until he was fully seated, his hips flush against my backside.

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“Fuck, you feel unreal,” he groaned, hands sliding up to cup my breasts as he began to move. “So tight and wet for me.”

His thrusts started slow but quickly increased in intensity, each one drawing a gasp from my lips. The railing provided leverage as I pushed back against him, meeting his movements with equal fervor.

“That’s it.” One of his hands slid down to where we were joined, pushing in beside his cock. “Take it all. Show Reid how good it feels.”

His touch and the pressure of his finger alongside his cock inside me sent sparks of pleasure radiating through every nerve. A desperate moan escaped my lips, my knuckles turning white as I gripped the railing harder.

The knowledge that Reid might be watching, and that Kellan wanted him to see me fall apart, twisted something primal inside me, unleashing a side of myself I hadn’t known was there before tonight.

“Kellan.” My voice cracked on his name as he hit a spot that made stars explode behind my eyelids.

“Look up, Quinn. Look at Reid’s window.”

I looked back over my shoulder. This time, Reid stood fully in view, his hand working beneath the waistband of his pants in an unmistakable motion. Our eyes met across the distance, and something electric passed between us.

“He’s touching himself,” Kellan whispered in my ear, his pace increasing. “Getting himself off watching me fuck you. Is that hot, Quinn? Knowing you’re turning him on so much he can’t help himself?”

“Yes,” I admitted as my pleasure swelled again.

Kellan’s movements became more urgent, his grip on my hip tightening as he drove into me harder. “I’m going to make you come again. This time all over my cock with Reid watching.”

His finger slid out and circled precisely where I needed it. Combined with the fullness of him inside me and the forbidden thrill of Reid’s gaze, it was too much to resist. My second orgasm hit with even greater intensity than the first, my inner walls fluttered around Kellan as I cried out.

“That’s it,” he groaned, his rhythm faltering. “I can feel you coming, so fucking tight—” His words dissolved into a guttural sound as he followed me over the edge, hips jerking as he found his own release.

For a long moment, we stayed like that, hearts racing, bodies connected, catching our breath as the stars danced in the darkening sky above us. My legs were wobbly and sore, but Kellan pulled me up, flush against his chest.

“You were so perfect.” He kissed down my neck, settling his lips against the curve of my shoulder.

I relaxed back against him, and when I glanced up at the window again, Reid was gone.

Chapter 8

A Break From Horse Shit

Reid

The morning sun beat down on my neck as I made my way toward the goat enclosure, Walter zipped securely into the baby carrier strapped to my chest. His tiny head swiveled back and forth, taking in the ranch's morning activities with all the intensity a five-pound chihuahua could muster.

"We've got a big day ahead, buddy. Goats, chickens, and whatever else decides to fall apart around here."

The rhythmic clip-clop of hooves behind me announced Debra's presence before I even needed to look. The donkey had been following me since dawn, maintaining exactly seven paces behind me no matter how I varied my speed.

I glanced back at her. "You planning on helping today, or just supervising?"

Debra's ears twitched, her eyes fixed on me with an unsettling intensity that made everyone else on the ranch give her a wide berth. Everyone except me.

"Didn't think so." I turned back to the path, fighting the smile that threatened to break across my face.

The goat enclosure came into view, and I immediately noticed the gate standing slightly ajar. A familiar sense of doom settled in my stomach.

"Butters," I muttered under my breath.

Walter yipped in agreement, his tiny body vibrating with excitement.

I approached the gate, counting the goats inside. Maple lounged in the shade, Pancake nestled against her side. Jack and Chip stood at opposite corners of the pen, each pretending the other didn't exist after yesterday's headbutting contest that had nearly taken out both of them.

No Butters.

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“Every damn day.” I secured the gate and scanned the property. “Where’d the old fool get to this time?”

The sound of indignant squawking from the direction of the chicken coop answered my question. I jogged toward the noise, Debra picking up her pace behind me.

The scene at the chicken coop stopped me in my tracks. Butters stood in the middle of scattered feed, looking enormously pleased with himself as a flurry of feathers and chicken panic erupted around him. And in the center of it all, standing atop the small feed shed with her wings extended like she was about to take flight, was Eggatha, the world’s most delusional chicken.

She fixed me with one beady eye, chest puffed out, making a noise that sounded kind of like a whinny.

I watching as she pawed at the shed roof with one foot. “You are not a horse.”

Eggatha disagreed, apparently, as she let out another imitation whinny and flapped her wings dramatically.

Walter barked encouragingly, which only seemed to bolster Eggatha’s confidence. She strutted along the edge of the roof like it was a stage, while Butters bleated excitedly from below.

“All right, that’s enough.” I moved forward to retrieve the wayward goat, but Debra surged past me, ears flat against her head as she charged toward Eggatha.

The chicken, spotting her nemesis, let out what could only be described as a battle cry and launched herself from the roof. But it wasn't in retreat, it was directly at Debra in a kamikaze attack of feathers and misplaced equine identity.

"For fuck's sake." I sprinted forward, managing to intercept Butters before he decided to join the barnyard drama.

The chaos took almost twenty minutes to sort out. By the time I had Butters back in his pen, Eggatha safely contained, and the rest of the chickens calmed, my shirt was sticking to my back with sweat, and Walter had fallen asleep in his carrier, somehow managing to snore through the entire disaster.

I made my way toward the feed storage to replenish what Butters had scattered, but my mind wasn't on my tasks. It kept circling back to last night and the view from my bedroom window that I hadn't meant to see but couldn't bring myself to turn away from.

Quinn, bathed in the golden glow of string lights, her head thrown back against Kellan as he feasted between her thighs. The graceful arch of her neck, the trembling of her thighs, the soft, broken sounds that had drifted up through the still night air.

I wasn't proud of watching. But I wasn't exactly sorry either.

It wasn't like I hadn't seen both Kellan and Enzo with women before and vice versa. Living in close quarters for years had eliminated most boundaries between us and made us more open sexually.

But this was different.

The raw, gut-level pull I'd felt watching Quinn had nothing to do with voyeuristic thrill and everything to do with how she looked wild and free in that moment. She

was beautiful in a way that went beyond the physical act itself.

She had looked seen. And something in me had recognized and responded to that with an intensity that still lingered beneath my skin nearly twelve hours later.

I was so lost in thought that I almost didn't notice her until I was at the stable entrance. Quinn stood inside, struggling with a half-full muck bucket, clearly trying to drag it toward the compost cart. She wore black leggings that hugged her curves, her new boots, and a loose shirt that had slipped off one shoulder, revealing something strappy underneath. Her hair was pulled up in a high ponytail, her face flushed from exertion.

Something pulled in me at the sight.

She startled when she saw me, nearly dropping the bucket. A too-bright smile flashed across her face, not reaching her eyes.

"Morning!" Her voice practically chirped with forced cheerfulness. "Enzo has me cleaning out the stalls of the horses already out to pasture. I think he called it character building when I complained it was hard manual labor."

Her eyes darted everywhere but directly at me.

Without a word, I crossed to her and took the bucket from her hands, my fingers brushing against hers briefly. The contact sent a jolt up my arm that I tried to ignore as I dumped the contents into the compost cart.

"Thanks. Next time I won't fill it up so full." She tucked an invisible loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Walter stirred in his carrier, drawing her attention. Her smile softened as she looked

at him. “How’s the world’s tiniest bodyguard today?”

“Sleeping through his shift. Didn’t even help me when Eggatha and Debra tried to kill each other.”

A small laugh escaped her, then faded as quickly as it came. The unspoken acknowledgment of the night before hung between us.

I didn’t have a damned clue what to say to fill the silence. I could read the subtle shifts in a horse’s stance from across a corral, could interpret Walter’s tiniest head tilt, but standing here with Quinn, her eyes skittering away from mine like a spooked colt’s, I felt completely out of my depth.

She pointed over her shoulder. “I’m going to get back to work.”

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“Yeah, of course.” I needed to do the same instead of staring at her and imagining her under me.

She headed back toward the empty stalls, and I busied myself with checking the bridles hanging on the wall. They needed oiling, and it was as good a task as any to keep my hands occupied while my thoughts refused to settle.

As Quinn moved around the stable, however, I noticed something that pulled me from my mental spiral. Her stride was relaxed and nothing like the stiff, cautious movements I’d expected after her first riding lesson. Most beginners could hardly walk the day after, their thighs and backs protesting with every step, but Quinn moved with surprising ease, bending and lifting without wincing.

“Looks like the hot tub helped,” I commented before I could think better of it.

Her bucket clattered against the concrete floor. When she turned to face me, her eyes were wide with surprise before she quickly schooled her expression.

“Oh, yeah, I guess it did.” The way she suddenly found the ground fascinating told me everything I needed to know. She wasn’t ready to talk about last night and whatever parts of it she thought I might be referencing.

The silence stretched between us, and I cleared my throat. “So, I haven’t seen you on your hobby horse yet.”

Her head snapped up, a different kind of embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “It’s, uh, hiding in my trunk. I haven’t even ridden it yet.” Her lips curved in a self-

deprecating smile. “April made me buy it. I’m still working up the courage to use the damn thing.”

I set down the bridle I’d been pretending to inspect. “What’s stopping you?”

“You mean besides the very real possibility of looking like a complete idiot? I’ve seen a few of the online comments about it. People can be... cruel.”

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. I’d seen the comments with grown adults mocking people for having fun in a way they deemed unworthy. “How does it make you feel when you do it?”

The question seemed to catch her off guard. She paused, considering, and something vulnerable flickered across her face. “Free and playful. Like I’m not overthinking everything for once.” Her eyes met mine briefly before darting away. “Unfiltered, I guess.”

I knew that feeling; it was why I’d started working with horses in the first place.

“Then that matters more than what anyone else thinks.” I stepped closer, closing some of the physical distance between us. “Look, if you want, we could work on your form or... I don’t know, getting more in touch with your horse side. As a break from cleaning horse shit.”

Her smile this time was real, lighting up her face in a way that made my pulse quicken. “I’m under no obligation to continue with using a stick horse,” she said, but the protest lacked conviction.

“At least give it a shot without alcohol in your system.” I couldn’t help the teasing grin that spread across my face. “Go get it out of your car.”

She hesitated, uncertainty warring with a spark of interest in her eyes. For a moment, I thought she might refuse. Then she straightened her shoulders, chin lifting slightly.

“Fine.” She turned toward the parking lot, a challenge in her step that hadn’t been there before. “But I reserve the right to never speak of this again if it’s a disaster.”

Walter lifted his head from where I’d put him in the carrier on a bale of hay. I scratched behind his ears as I watched Quinn walk away. “This should be interesting.”

Quinn returned a few minutes later with a brown stick horse with a blonde mane tucked under one arm and a sheepish look she tried to hide.

“So this is Thunderbolt.” She held up the hobby horse with a self-conscious laugh. “April named him for me.”

“Solid name.” I gestured toward an empty training area outside the stables. “Why don’t you warm up by walking a few laps? Get a feel for it.”

She hesitated, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “Do I just... hold it between my legs and walk?”

“Whatever feels natural.” I didn’t know the first thing about training with a stick horse.

Quinn stepped into the open area, tucking the stick between her legs. Her first steps were tentative, and her body was rigid with self-consciousness. She glanced back at me, clearly expecting to see judgment or mockery.

I leaned against the railing, keeping my face neutral and arms crossed. No different than how I’d observe any new rider getting the feel of their mount.

She took a deep breath and continued, her movements gradually loosening as she realized I wasn't about to criticize. After completing a full circle, her steps became more fluid and confident.

"Remember to breathe," I called out. "Your horse can sense when you're tense."

That got me a laugh, the sound warming something in my chest.

"Try adjusting your posture a bit." I uncrossed my arms and demonstrated, mimicking the balanced stance of an experienced rider. "Spine straight but not rigid. Shoulders relaxed."

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Quinn mirrored my position, and something shifted. Her movements smoothed out as she added a tentative trot, Thunderbolt bobbing between her legs.

Walter barked from next to me, his tail wagging in approval.

I watched how her body moved. “Bend your knees more, and keep your chin up. And loosen your grip; you’re strangling him.”

She followed each suggestion without hesitation, her face transforming with each adjustment. Her hesitation gradually melted away, replaced by pure, uninhibited joy.

On her next pass around the ring, she added a playful jump over an invisible obstacle, landing with surprising grace before continuing into a canter. Her laughter filled the morning air, making Walter’s ears perk up and my own lips curve into a smile I couldn’t suppress.

Then she was galloping, ponytail flying behind her, face flushed with exhilaration. She had morphed into someone who didn’t give a damn what anyone thought as she ran circles with a stick horse between her legs.

It was the most ridiculously captivating thing I’d ever seen.

She came to a stop in front of me, chest rising and falling rapidly, her eyes sparkling.

I didn’t say anything at first, just held her gaze and gave a single slow nod of approval. Something unspoken passed between us: an acknowledgment of the courage it had taken to be this vulnerable and unguarded.

Her smile widened, and for a second, I forgot about the ranch problems, the constant work, the complications of whatever was developing between her and my friends. None of it mattered in the face of that smile.

My eyes dropped to her lips, and then the sound of clapping shattered the moment.

Chapter 9

Three Shirtless Cowboys

Quinn

I jerked around at the sound of applause, clutching Thunderbolt like a shield. Kellan and Enzo stood at the edge of the training arena, both still dusty from working with the horses. Kellan's grin stretched ear to ear like he'd stumbled onto a private show, while Enzo's face remained impassive except for one raised eyebrow.

My face burned hotter than asphalt in August. "How long have you been standing there?" Mortification replaced the freedom I'd felt moments before.

"Long enough to see you've got more natural seat than most of our high school rodeo kids." Kellan hopped over the fence rail like it was second nature.

I braced myself for ridicule—I was a grown woman playing with what was essentially a toy—but Kellan circled me with an appraising eye.

"Thunderbolt's got good extension." He was completely serious but clearly fighting a smile. "Nice haunches. Strong jawline."

Enzo snorted, crossing his arms on the top of the fence. "Your posture's better than half our riders. You sure you've never been on a real horse before this week?"

I looked between them, waiting for the joke to land, but their faces held nothing but approval. My gaze drifted to Reid, still leaning against the fence, Walter now perched on his shoulder like a tiny, trembling gargoyle. His expression remained neutral, but I caught the almost imperceptible lift at one corner of his mouth.

“I was just messing around.” I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, still wanting to melt into the ground. “This is so embarrassing.”

“There’s no reason to be embarrassed. You looked comfortable out there. I see why you won the novice competition.” Enzo’s voice held a note of pride, and it made my face heat even more.

Kellan took Thunderbolt, examining the toy horse’s head with exaggerated seriousness. “He’s got spirit, this one. He needs a bridle with some sparkle, though.”

I laughed despite myself. “Are you seriously critiquing a stick?”

“I’m a professional.” Kellan handed Thunderbolt back, our fingers brushing in the exchange. My mind flashed to those same fingers gripping my hips last night.

“If you’re open to training more, it might help to see how real horses move with a rider on them. It will give you something to imitate.” Enzo was all seriousness, like he was suggesting we begin preparation for the Olympics.

“Excellent idea. I’ll grab Whisk and show her my world-class seat.” Kellan winked at me with such outrageous flirtation that I had to laugh.

“Your seat?” Enzo scoffed. “Please. You ride like a rodeo clown with better hair.”

“Sounds like a challenge to me.” Kellan grinned, already backing toward the stables.

“Five minutes. Main arena. Bring your A-game, Perez.”

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“We won’t let him fill your head with garbage technique, Quinn. There’s a reason we don’t let him teach the advanced students.” Enzo rolled his eyes but pushed away from the fence, following Kellan with determined strides.

“Because you’re jealous of my natural charisma!” Kellan’s voice drifted back.

“Because you teach showmanship, not horsemanship!” Enzo called after him.

I watched them disappear into the stables, bickering like brothers. “Is this normal?”

Reid shrugged, scratching Walter behind the ears. “They’re always looking for excuses to outdo each other... well, when Enzo isn’t stressing about the ranch.”

Why would Enzo be stressing about the ranch? From my viewpoint they had everything running smoothly. Then again, I wasn’t an expert on running a ranch.

I suddenly felt responsible for the impromptu competition and for distracting them from their jobs. “I’m sure you all have actual work?—”

“Do you want to see?” Reid interrupted, his eyes meeting mine directly. The question was simple but somehow felt weighted with something more.

I hesitated only a second before nodding. “Yes, I’d like that.”

He nodded, then pushed off from the fence. “Main arena’s this way.” He handed me Walter as he led me around the side of the stables.

The main arena was larger than the arena we had just been in, with seating along both sides. I settled onto a bench in the shade, Thunderbolt propped beside me and Walter on my lap, feeling like I was about to watch a private performance. In a way, I guess it was. No one else was currently at the ranch for lessons or to ride their boarded horses.

Less than five minutes later, the three men rode into the arena. Kellan sat atop Whisk, the bay gelding prancing with obvious pride, tossing his head as if aware he had an audience. Enzo rode a sleek dark brown horse with a white star on its forehead, his posture military straight.

But it was Reid who caught my eye the most, mounted on a small chestnut mare whose ears were pinned back at the sight of the other horses. She sidled nervously, but Reid's body remained calm, his hands steady on the reins.

It was the finicky mare they had rescued that they introduced me to the day before. "That's Junebug, right?"

Kellan grinned from atop Whisk. "The demon herself. Only Reid can ride her without losing a finger or going for too wild of a ride."

"She has a low bullshit tolerance." Reid stroked the mare's neck. Something about the way he looked at her with patience and understanding stirred something inside me.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kellan announced dramatically, spinning Whisk in a tight circle. "Welcome to the first annual La Cuesta demonstration of superior horsemanship, as judged by our esteemed visitor and hobby horse champion."

I settled more comfortably on the bench. "What am I looking for exactly?"

“Different styles,” Enzo replied before Kellan could turn the answer into another joke. “Different horses need different approaches. Watching will help you understand movement.”

As they began warming up their horses, I was struck by how uniquely each man rode. Kellan was all flash and flair, encouraging Whisk to show off with high steps and dramatic turns. Enzo moved with precise efficiency, every transition smooth.

And Reid... Reid seemed to melt into Junebug, their movements so synchronized it was hard to tell where the horse ended and the man began. When the mare shied at a shadow, his body absorbed the motion like it was his own startled reaction.

I found myself watching him the most, though I tried to be subtle about it. There was something mesmerizing about the quiet confidence in his every move.

I realized I was witnessing something magical. Not just horsemanship, but three very different men in their element, showing me a glimpse of their souls.

I absently stroked Walter’s head while trying not to stare too obviously at any one cowboy. Just as I was settling into a comfortable rhythm of dividing my attention equally between the three men, Kellan guided Whisk to the fence directly in front of me.

“Getting too hot out here.” He let out a dramatic sigh that seemed designed specifically to draw my attention.

I watched in growing disbelief as he removed his cowboy hat, placing it on the saddle horn. Then, with a slowness that could only be described as performative, he grabbed the back of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head in one fluid motion.

My mouth went dry.

I'd seen Kellan shirtless last night, but him sitting on a horse, bare-chested and grinning like he'd invented sex appeal, felt infinitely more scandalous.

"Better?" I managed to ask, proud that my voice didn't falter.

"Much." He winked, flashing that smile that probably made women and girls faint during his riding lessons. "Hard to demonstrate proper form with all that fabric in the way."

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I bit back a laugh. “Oh, of course. Very restrictive.”

“Exactly.” Kellan tossed his shirt over the fence rail right at me before replacing his hat. “A true cowboy needs freedom of movement.”

Apparently not to be outdone, Enzo circled around, his dark horse responding to invisible commands. He dismounted and unbuttoned his shirt before laying it on the fence. “It’s getting warm.”

I blinked rapidly, trying not to gawk at the sudden display of tanned muscle. Both men were all dense power, shoulders and arms sculpted from years of ranch work. If I thought about the way their jeans fit, I was sure I would combust.

“Is this... normal ranch protocol?” I tried to sound casual while my brain short-circuited.

“It’s in the handbook,” Enzo replied with a straight face, remounting his horse. “Heat regulation is the number one rule.”

My eyes betrayed me, drifting to Reid, still fully clothed atop Junebug. For a moment, I thought he might be the single voice of reason in this impromptu cowboy calendar shoot.

Then, with a resigned expression that almost made me laugh out loud, Reid slipped his T-shirt over his head and draped it over Junebug’s saddle. Unlike the others, he didn’t look my way or make a production of it. But somehow, that made it worse, or better, depending on your perspective.

Sweet mother of all things holy. This couldn't be happening. Three hot shirtless cowboys were now circling the arena like the world's most improbable audition for a romance novel cover, and I was their sole audience member.

"So, Quinn," Kellan called, breaking my trance. "Notice how Whisk picks up his feet? That's the movement you were trying to capture with Thunderbolt."

I nodded, pretending I was studying horse gaits rather than the way sunlight played across three very impressive male torsos.

"The way your weight shifts in the saddle affects how the horse moves," Enzo explained, demonstrating a perfect transition from walk to trot. His abs contracted with the motion, and I had to remind myself to breathe.

"Right. Horse movements. That's what I'm focusing on." I swallowed hard. I was for sure not wondering if I accidentally fell into some bizarre cowboy-themed dream.

For the next fifteen minutes, I was treated to a show of horsemanship that simultaneously felt like the most educational and most erotic experience of my adult life. Kellan demonstrated flashy, crowd-pleasing moves, occasionally calling out pointers that I should apply to my stick horse technique, which, under any other circumstances, would have been mortifying. Enzo showed precision and control, every movement calculated and refined. Reid and Junebug moved as one entity, quiet but mesmerizing in their harmony.

When they finally lined up in front of me, like contestants awaiting judgment, a bead of sweat worked its way down the small of my back.

"Well?" Kellan patted Whisk's neck. "Expert assessment time. Who wins the La Cuesta horsemanship trophy?"

I put Walter down and walked through the arena gate with mock seriousness. This was ridiculous, but I was committed now.

“Let me see...” I tapped my chin thoughtfully, approaching Kellan first. “Excellent... um... hoof liftage. Very impressive mane flippiness. The horse looks good too.”

Moving to Enzo, I continued my made-up evaluation. “Superior saddle sitting. Remarkable rein-holding abilities. Exceptional synchronized breathing with your equine partner.”

I approached Reid, careful to maintain enough distance from Junebug not to spook her. I studied them for a moment, suddenly at a loss for jokes. There was something about the way they existed together that defied my improvised nonsense.

“Perfect harmony,” I finally said, my voice softer. “Beautiful trust between horse and rider. Extraordinary patience and understanding.”

Reid’s eyes met mine, and for a moment, everything else seemed to fade away.

I took a small step back, breaking the spell between us. “The winner is clearly Reid and Junebug for their superior... everything.”

“Favoritism!” Kellan protested with theatrical outrage.

“The judge’s decision is final.”

What happened next shocked everyone. Junebug—temperamental, standoffish Junebug—stepped forward toward me. Reid’s hands tightened on the reins as his expression sharpened with concern.

“Quinn, step back,” he warned quietly. “She doesn’t like?—”

The words died on his lips as Junebug stretched her neck out and gently rested her head on my shoulder. I froze, hardly daring to breathe in case she changed her mind and decided to bite my face off.

“What the actual...” Kellan whispered.

Enzo’s eyebrows climbed toward his hairline. “I’ve never seen her do that with anyone... not even Reid.”

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I carefully raised my arms and wrapped them around Junebug's neck in a gentle hug. "Hi there," I whispered to her. "I guess we're friends now?"

The mare nickered softly, and I felt we were having a silent conversation.

The perfect moment lasted approximately six-point-nine seconds before chaos erupted in the form of Eggatha, who burst into the arena like she'd been shot from a cannon.

The chicken charged across the dirt, wings spread, squawking indignantly as if we'd been having this lovely moment without her express permission. Junebug's head snapped up, her body tensing beneath Reid's steady hands.

"Eggatha!" Kellan warned. "Don't you dare!"

But the chicken was already circling Junebug's hooves, clucking what I could only assume were chicken obscenities. Junebug backed away from me as Reid worked to keep her calm.

I stared at the ridiculous standoff between an irritated horse, a delusional chicken who thought she was a horse, and three shirtless cowboys trying to mediate between them, and suddenly couldn't contain my laughter.

It was one of the weirdest days of my life but also kind of the best.

Chapter 10

It's A Date

Enzo

The spreadsheet blurred as I squinted at the screen. I was three hours deep into reconciling boarding fees, and my mid-day coffee had gone cold an hour ago. Staring at numbers shouldn't have been this hard, but somehow every cell required double-checking today.

La Cuesta's boarding income was crucial and was where most of our income came from. My head throbbed as I added another note about a late payment for the fourth month in a row. And don't even get me started on the missing payments from summer camp enrollees.

The camps were a whole other logistical nightmare with liability waivers, snack budgets, activities, and emergency contacts. I rubbed my temples, reminding myself that the camps brought in good money and that my cousin handled most of the work once the camps were in session. All me and the guys had to do was show up on our assigned day to help.

A burst of female laughter cut through my concentration, followed by Kellan's deeper chuckle. I tried to ignore it, but she laughed again, ending with an unexpected snort.

"Focus," I muttered to myself, staring harder at the computer screen.

The next peal of laughter broke my resolve. I snapped my laptop closed and followed the sound to the indoor arena. Kellan was holding his phone up while Quinn pranced around on her stick horse.

"Okay, this time with more enthusiasm!" Kellan directed. "Like you're winning!"

Quinn backed up, then charged forward toward a hurdle. With surprising grace, she leapt over it, making exaggerated faces of concentration that dissolved into giggles as she landed.

“Perfect! This is going to break the internet.”

I leaned against the railing, arms crossed, watching their back-and-forth. There was an ease and flirtatiousness between them. While I hadn’t asked, I was sure lines had been crossed between them.

Kellan tucked a stray strand of hair behind Quinn’s ear. They had to be sleeping together. Not that it was my business. Or that I cared.

Kellan looked up and spotted me. “Enzo! Just the man we need.” He waved me over enthusiastically. “Come film this next part for us. I need to demonstrate proper stick horse form.”

“I’m in the middle of invoices and preparing for the camps to start next week.” I hoped the tone in my voice prompted him to help.

“On a Saturday?” Kellan raised an eyebrow and then checked his watch. “I need to prep for that trail ride in a bit.” He handed his phone to Quinn. “Record yourself doing a few more jumps and I’ll edit it all tonight.”

He jogged toward me, slapping my shoulder as he passed. “Don’t be such a killjoy, Perez. Social media is bringing in half our new clients these days and could bring in so many more.”

After he left, I lingered next to the arena, telling myself I was just taking a break before diving back into numbers. Quinn set the phone up against a bucket and hit record, backing up with her stick horse. Her face was flushed from exertion, hair

escaping her ponytail as she charged forward and leaped over the hurdle, letting out a victory whoop that echoed through the arena.

She circled back around, still galloping, and grabbed the phone, laughing to herself as she watched the playback. When she finally looked up, she caught me watching.

Her face lit up, and she waved me over. “I think I’ve really got this jumping form down.”

Against my better judgment, I walked toward her. There was something about being around her that both put me on edge and put me at ease. It was like my brain knew if I got too close there would be no hope for my heart and body.

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Her shoulder pressed against mine as we both watched the video. She smelled like she'd been rolling in sunshine, and I resisted the urge to bury my face in her neck and inhale deeply.

"It's like you're one with your inner horse." It was really the only way I could describe what she looked like prancing around.

She grinned up at me, and fuck if it didn't make me want to spend every day of my life making her smile. "Kellan's going to start a whole series on hobby horsing on the ranch's social media pages."

"Of course he is." I handed the phone back, careful not to accidentally brush her fingers.

She studied my face. "You look stressed. Like, more than your usual level of stressed."

"I have work to do." Even though I really wanted to stay right where I was with her.

She nudged me with her shoulder. "What do you like to do for fun?"

I blinked at the question, momentarily caught off guard. The concept of fun felt foreign. "I ride."

She shook her head, twirling Thunderbolt's reins between her fingers. "That's work. I mean for actual fun. The thing you do because it makes you happy, not because you need to do it."

“I have a ranch to run.” I crossed my arms, falling back on my standard defense. The statement usually ended conversations about leisure time or me working too much.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, undeterred by my closed-off stance. “Everyone does something just for themselves.”

“I go line dancing sometimes.” It felt like I was confessing a crime.

Her eyes widened, excitement spreading across her face in such a way that it made me feel excited. “No way! That’s perfect!”

“It’s not a big deal.” I shifted my weight, suddenly aware of how close we were standing. The way she looked at me made me feel transparent, like she could see straight through my bullshit.

“Can we go?” She bounced on her toes. “That’s exactly the energy I need for my training! Cowboys and line dancing!” She tried to do what looked like a little two-step in place, her boots scuffing semicircles in the arena dirt.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” The last thing I needed was to see her move her hips. The thought of it made my pulse quicken.

“Please?” She clasped her hands together, pressing them under her chin like a child begging for ice cream. “It’s for my development as an athlete.” She gave the stick horse a little pat, and I swear the inanimate object was somehow in on this conspiracy against me.

I should have said no and retreated to my office where spreadsheets didn’t smile at me with hopeful eyes. But something about Quinn’s earnestness chipped away at my resolve. “Fine. Be ready by seven. They have a beginner’s lesson beforehand.”

“Yes! It’s a date!” She froze, eyes widening. “I mean, not a date-date. Just two people going to the same place at the same time for educational purposes. Thunderbolt’s education, obviously.” She clutched the stick horse closer, using it like a shield.

“Technically, he has no brains to learn.” I gestured to Thunderbolt, trying not to laugh. “But there are a lot of people who walk around without using their brains, so sure, we can count him.”

“Right! Exactly.” She nervously tugged at her ponytail. “So it’s definitely not a date because there’s three of us, and dates traditionally have two people, unless it’s a double date, which this still wouldn’t be because Thunderbolt is a stick, not a person, and I wasn’t implying—” She took a deep breath. “I meant we have plans. That’s all I meant.”

Her face had turned red, and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling, which would only make her more flustered. The woman who’d been confidently jumping around with a practical broomstick between her legs minutes ago was now tripping over her words because of me.

“Seven o’clock, and don’t bring the horse.” I turned to leave before she saw the smile spreading across my face.

The Sand Dune Bar was packed as the DJ transitioned into a faster track. The crowd on the dance floor fell into perfect formation, boots stomping in unison, the synchronized movement rippling through the room like a wave.

Quinn had picked up the steps quickly during the beginner’s lesson, but watching her now as she executed a perfect grapevine, she looked like she’d been dancing for years. I’d stepped off the dance floor to grab a drink but ended up lingering by the bar, beer in hand, telling myself I was just making sure she was having a good time.

I tracked her movements, the way her lips formed the silent count, the flash of determination when she nailed a complicated turn after several attempts. She caught me watching and grinned, motioning for me to rejoin.

I shook my head, raising my beer in salute instead.

Quinn rolled her eyes and broke formation, weaving through dancers until she reached me. “Come on!” she shouted over the music, grabbing my forearm.

Before I could protest, she pulled me back onto the dance floor, while I hastily guzzled down my beer, and left the bottle on the nearest table.

The song changed, and cheers went up as a crowd favorite began to play. Quinn caught on to the new pattern quickly, mirroring my movements. When she stumbled on a turn, my hand shot out automatically, steadying her. I pulled back as soon as she found her footing, but my palm tingled where it had touched her.

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The song ended, and we found ourselves at the edge of the dance floor, both breathing hard. Quinn's cheeks were flushed, wisps of hair curling damply at her temples. Under the lights, her skin glowed.

"You've been holding out on me." She pressed a hand to her chest, catching her breath. "You can actually have fun."

"Don't tell anyone." I wiped sweat from my forehead with my sleeve. "I have a reputation to maintain."

Line dancing was the one activity besides riding where I could shut off the constant checklist running through my brain. Here, there was only the rhythm and the steps. I really did need to do it more often.

Quinn laughed, the sound barely audible over the noise but somehow cutting straight through to my core. She leaned closer, her breath warm against my ear.

"Your secret's safe with me, Spreadsheet King."

I raised an eyebrow. "Spreadsheet King?"

"Kellan showed me your chicken egg production chart. Color-coded tabs and everything." She bumped her shoulder against mine. "Very sexy."

My mouth went dry at the word "sexy" coming from her lips, and I swallowed hard. "Organization is underrated."

“So is letting loose once in a while.” She nodded toward the dance floor where a new line dance was starting. “Look at them having the time of their lives without a single Excel formula.”

“Bold assumption. That guy in the blue shirt could be a data analyst.”

Quinn squinted at the man doing an enthusiastic hip thrust. “Hmm. Accountant, maybe. Too much rhythm for data analysis.”

I grinned despite my best efforts not to. We watched as the dancers turned in perfect synchronization to a difficult line dance, and while I could have joined, I was content just standing there with Quinn, our arms occasionally brushing.

“What other hidden talents are you keeping from me?” Her eyes were still on the dance floor.

“If I told you, they wouldn’t be hidden.” It would be better if I showed her, and they definitely weren’t appropriate.

The song transitioned into a slower song that wasn’t a line dance, and the crowd shifted, couples forming while singles drifted toward the bar. The familiar opening notes of an old country ballad filled the room, and Quinn’s eyes met mine.

There were a lot of things I should have done when it came to this woman, but walking away when she looked at me like that wasn’t one of them.

I held out my hand. “Want to dance?”

She hesitated for half a heartbeat before placing her palm against mine. I gently tugged her closer until we stood chest to chest, aware of every point where our bodies connected.

Her free hand landed uncertainly on my shoulder, and I settled my palm against her lower back, careful to keep it respectfully high even though the thoughts running through my head were anything but respectful.

The scent of her shampoo wrapped around me as she rested her cheek against my shoulder. “You’re good at this.”

“Just counting beats.” I adjusted my grip slightly, drawing her imperceptibly closer.

“I didn’t mean dancing.” She pulled back enough to look at me, eyes bright with amusement and something else. My control frayed as her lips parted slightly.

“Quinn.” Her name slipped out, thick with a hunger I was trying damn hard to swallow.

“Hmm?” Her gaze dropped to my mouth, then back up.

I dipped my head, my lips hovering over hers. Waiting. Giving her every chance to pull away or to laugh it off.

Instead, she closed the gap between us.

The first touch of her lips was soft and tentative. My hand pressed firmly against her lower back, drawing her closer as I deepened the kiss. Everything and everyone around us faded except for the heat between us and the soft sound she made against my mouth.

My fingers trailed up her back to tangle in her hair, cradling the back of her head as I angled her face for better access. Her hands slid around my neck, and she pressed herself fully against me. The contact sent a jolt of electricity down my spine, and I broke the kiss, both of us breathing hard.

The song ended, the last notes fading as reality rushed back in. She was leaving soon, but she deserved more than a one-night stand. Not only that, but I was fairly certain Kellan's crush extended beyond the physical.

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But as she looked at me, all my reasons why this was a bad idea fell away. “Want to get some air?”

She nodded, slipping her hand into mine as we made our way toward the exit.

Chapter 11

Secret Spot

Quinn

The night air cooled my flushed cheeks as we stepped into the quiet parking lot, the echo of our kiss still pulsing in my chest. Enzo kept hold of my hand as he led me toward his truck.

“If you’re up for a quick drive, there’s a place I want to show you.” His voice carried a hint of hesitation as he opened the passenger door.

“Sure.” As I climbed in, his hand brushed along my lower back, a featherlight touch that somehow made me feel more than our kiss.

We drove with the windows halfway down, my hair whipping into tangles I’d regret later, but after dancing and that kiss, it felt good. It also momentarily distracted me from the man sitting next to me. Why was a man driving with one hand on top of the steering wheel looking relaxed, so damned sexy? The only thing that would have made it sexier was if he’d worn his hat.

Enzo shifted in his seat as if he could hear my thoughts. “Are you glad you came? To La Cuesta?”

I glanced over at him. “Yeah. It’s easy to forget places like this exist when you’re caught up in your own mess.”

His mouth twitched, almost a smile. “I know what you mean. I’ve been here so long I barely see it anymore. I love the ranch and working with the animals, but sometimes it feels like something is missing.”

“Sounds like teaching.” I exhaled, watching the lights spill across the dashboard. “Some days I’m buried in paperwork and behavior charts, and then a kid learns something they’ve been struggling with or says something completely profound that makes me remember why I love what I do. But then...”

“But then what?” The truck eased onto a narrow side road I would’ve missed completely if I were driving.

I shook my head, not wanting this to turn into a therapy session about my love-hate relationship with my career choice. “This looksverysketchy.”

He laughed but didn’t say anything as we bumped along for a minute before he parked and turned toward me. “We’re here.”

“Which is where, exactly?” I peered through the windshield but only saw darkness.

Enzo grinned a rare, full smile that transformed his entire face. I hoped it was an ‘I’m excited to show you’ grin and not a ‘you just made a grave mistake’ grin.

I followed him out of the truck, my boots crunching on gravel. He took my hand again, leading me along a narrow path. The breeze picked up, carrying the

unmistakable scent of the ocean.

We approached what I now realized was the edge of a bluff, and the view stole my breath. Below us, waves crashed against jagged rocks, their white foam visible even in the darkness. The moon cast a silver pathway across the water that seemed to lead straight to the horizon. Stars scattered across the sky, brighter than I'd ever seen them.

"This is my secret spot." He led me to a wooden railing. "I come here when I need to think."

I leaned forward slightly, feeling the spray of distant waves carried up by the wind. A shiver ran through me, partly from the chill and partly from the strange intimacy of being shown something so personal.

Enzo noticed immediately. "Cold?" Before I could answer, he moved behind me and wrapped me in his arms.

"You don't have to..." My protest died as the warmth of his front met my back. The solid wall of him was unexpectedly comforting, like sinking into a favorite chair you forgot was so perfect. His arms formed a protective circle around me, and I relaxed into the unfamiliar embrace with surprising ease.

"Better?" His voice had dropped to a low rumble, the vibration traveling from his chest into my shoulder blades. The single word tickled my ear and sent a tingle right between my legs where it shouldn't be going.

I nodded, leaning back into him. "Thank you." My fingers found the edge of his sleeve where it rested against my waist, and I absently ran my finger over his wrist.

The vastness of the ocean spread before us, but all I could focus on was how easily

and naturally I fit against him. I'd felt hollow for months, long before my engagement ended, but this simple connection filled something in me I hadn't realized was empty.

"I should probably apologize for the bar." Enzo rested his chin on my shoulder.

I turned my head to look at him, confused. "For what?"

"Kissing you." His eyes remained on the ocean. "It complicates things."

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“I’m a fan of complications.” I reached up and touched his cheek, forcing him to look at me. “And if you’re apologizing for the kiss, I should remind you I was a very willing participant.”

That was all it took. He captured my lips with an urgency that made my knees weak. This kiss was different from the one in the bar. It was deeper, wilder, and unrestricted by prying eyes.

He turned me so I was facing him, his hands sliding down to my hips, drawing me against him until I felt every hard plane of his body. My fingers tangled in his hair as his mouth trailed from my lips to my jaw, then down the sensitive column of my neck. The contrast between the cool night air and his hot mouth sent tingles cascading down my spine.

His hips were flush against mine, his erection evident against me. Something stirred inside me, and I reached for his belt buckle. He tensed against me, his breath catching as I undid his pants.

The sound of his zipper cutting through the night made a current hum just beneath my skin. I slipped my hand beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs, wrapping my fingers around him. He was hot and hard in my palm, his sharp intake of breath confirming the effect my touch had on him.

He started to reach for the button of my jeans, but I sank to my knees before he could, the rough gravel digging into my skin through my pants. I didn’t care. The discomfort was nothing compared to the rush of power I felt looking up at the stoic, controlled man coming completely undone.

“Fuck.” He stared down at me with intense eyes. “Are you sure?”

I answered by freeing him completely and stroking him slowly from base to tip. His hands found my hair, fingers tangling in the windblown strands. The moonlight highlighted the sculpted planes of his face as he watched me, his chest rising and falling with quickening breaths.

I dragged my tongue along the underside of his shaft. His grip tightened in my hair, guiding me into a rhythm that had him groaning above me.

“Fuck, your mouth.” His usual reserve crumbled with each slide of my lips. “You’re so beautiful on your knees for me.”

I hollowed my cheeks, taking him deeper, rewarded by the sight of his head falling back. A primal satisfaction coursed through me as this man completely surrendered to the pleasure I was giving him. His fingers flexed against my scalp, not directing but simply holding on.

“That’s it, take all of me.” His hips began to move, tentatively at first, until I gripped his thighs in silent permission. The feeling of him taking control, using my mouth for his pleasure, sent a rush of wet heat between my legs.

The sounds of the ocean faded into the background, replaced by his ragged breathing and muttered profanities. He held me in place as he moved faster and deeper.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

My eyes fluttered open to meet his, finding them blazing with an intensity that stole my breath. His expression was a mixture of restraint and abandon, his jaw clenched tight even as his parted lips betrayed his pleasure.

I dug my fingers into his thighs, urging him on. When he swelled against my tongue, I took him as deeply as I could, swallowing around him as he came with a strangled groan.

For a moment, there was only the sound of our heavy breathing and the crash of waves. His fingers massaged my scalp gently, and I considered staying on my knees so he'd take my mouth again.

Without a word, he pulled me to my feet and captured my mouth in a bruising kiss. My knees wobbled, still tender from the gravel, but his arm snaked around my waist, holding me steady.

He growled against my lips, and then he spun me around to face the ocean. He pressed himself against my back, warm and solid against me. He swept my hair to one side, exposing my neck to the cool night air. Goosebumps raced across my skin as he kissed and nipped the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder.

His fingers found the button of my jeans. "I want to make you fall apart." His voice dropped lower as he slowly pulled my zipper down. "I want to feel you trembling against me until you can't remember your own name." His fingertips skimmed beneath the waistband, igniting little fires across my skin.

I gripped the railing as his hand slipped into my underwear, fingers gliding through the wetness he found there. A whimper escaped me as he circled my clit.

"You're so fucking wet," he groaned, his free hand sliding under my shirt to cup my breast. "Don't close your eyes, I want you looking at the ocean."

I forced my gaze forward, watching the water as Enzo slid one finger inside me, then another, curling them in a way that made my breath catch.

“Yes,” I gasped as his thumb pressed my clit with just the right pressure.

He worked his fingers in and out of me in a steady rhythm as his lips traveled across my neck to my ear. “I want to feel you come around my fingers. Then I’m going to take you home and taste every inch of you.”

My knuckles turned white as I gripped the railing harder. I didn’t know what it was about railings, but apparently it was my new kink to get off while holding onto one for dear life.

“That’s it,” he encouraged as my breath quickened. “Let go for me. I want to hear you.”

The pressure built low in my belly as his fingers moved faster, his other hand pinching my nipple through my bra. The slight sting of pain pushed me closer to the edge.

“Enzo,” I moaned, my head falling back against his shoulder.

“Look at the ocean,” he reminded me. “I want you to remember this view every time you come.”

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I forced my eyes open, focusing on the waves crashing against the rocks below as the pleasure crested. My body shuddered against him as I came undone, my cries carried away by the wind and lost in the sound of the surf.

He worked me through it, his fingers slowing but not stopping until the aftershocks subsided. Only then did he withdraw his hand, turning me to face him as he lifted his fingers to his mouth.

In the moonlight, his eyes looked almost black, filled with a hunger that wasn't even close to being satisfied.

Chapter 12

More Than Sleep Happened Here

Kellan

I scratched Whisk's nose as I dumped the last of the feed into his trough. The big chocolate gelding nudged my shoulder in appreciation, nearly knocking me sideways.

"Easy, big guy. I know you've got the Sunday munchies."

I'd been up since five, handling the morning chores that Enzo and I usually split. Except today, there was no Enzo.

I glanced at my watch. It was eight o'clock. Definitely not like him.

“Any idea where your favorite human is?” Ranger snorted in reply and turned his back on me. “Rude.”

Enzo had taken Quinn line dancing, but even after a late night, he never skipped out on his chores, even if he was sick. The guy was like a machine. One time, I had to physically block the stables’ doors to make him go back to bed. Something wasn’t adding up here.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket, and my eyes widened when I saw the red notification dot on one of the social media apps.

Last night, I’d posted a green screen video with Quinn prancing around on her hobby horse, looking adorably serious while I provided extremely professional commentary. I’d captioned it: Who needs actual horses when you can master the majestic art of hobby horsing at La Cuesta Ranch? But we have real horses too, and cabins you can rent for the ultimate horse retreat only a few miles from the beach!

I tapped on the app and nearly dropped my phone when I saw it almost had a quarter of a million views. My thumb scrolled through the comments in disbelief. While there were a lot of mean comments about the hobby horsing, there were just as many people telling them to shut up and asking about the ranch.

And then I started to see comments saying they couldn’t book a cabin because there was no availability.

I fumbled to open our reservation app, fingers suddenly clumsy with adrenaline. The calendar that was usually a depressing sea of white empty space was now a solid block of color with reservations stretching weeks into the future.

“Holy fucking shit.” I spun in a circle, needing to tell someone but finding only unimpressed horses. “Holy. Fucking. Shit!”

I broke into a sprint across the ranch grounds towards Quinn's cabin, narrowly avoiding a collision with Butters, who had gotten out again. We really needed to start putting locks on all the gates even though it was annoying.

I bounded up the steps of Quinn's cabin and pounded on the door. "Quinn! Wake up! You're not going to believe this!" I banged harder with the flat of my hand.

Silence.

Maybe she was still asleep? I pulled out my phone to text her instead when the door swung open.

My prepared speech evaporated.

Quinn stood in the doorway, her hair tousled in that unmistakable way that screamed "definitely more than sleep happened here." It was artfully chaotic, sticking out in places that suggested fingers had been run through it repeatedly. Her lips were slightly swollen, with the telltale flush of someone who'd been thoroughly kissed not long ago.

And she was wearing Enzo's shirt.

It hung to mid-thigh, the sleeves rolled up several times, and there was approximately zero evidence of pants happening underneath it. Just smooth legs that I'd had wrapped around my head only a few days ago.

Words, excitement, and the viral video evaporated into a fog of "oh" and "wait" and "when did this happen?" My thoughts were going a mile a minute, leaving me standing there with my mouth slightly open, trying to process the scene in front of me while my excitement about the reservations receded into the background.

I'd noticed from the first day she was at the ranch that Enzo was attracted to her, but I never expected him to act on his feelings.

But where did that leave me?

I reminded myself she was leaving in a few days and lived three hours away. While it wouldn't be impossible to start seeing her, once she got busy with the school year again, it would be hard.

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“Is everything okay?” She tugged the shirt down a bit more like I hadn’t seen what was underneath. “You’re, uh, really enthusiastic this morning.”

“I... you...” I gestured helplessly at her attire.

Enzo appeared behind her, in only his boxer briefs, his dark hair sticking up just like hers. He froze when he saw me, his expression shifting from relaxed to guarded in a microsecond.

We stared at each other for a long, excruciating moment. His eyes narrowed slightly, daring me to make this awkward. Which, obviously, I immediately did.

“So this is why you weren’t up for horse duty. And here I thought you’d fallen into a spreadsheet and couldn’t get out. Instead, you fell between Quinn’s legs.” The words tumbled out before my brain could stop them.

Quinn’s face turned pink, and she gave me a look that made my nuts retract the tiniest bit. “Was there something you needed?”

I shook my head to clear it, a grin spreading across my face despite the lingering shock of seeing her with Enzo. “You, Quinn Porter, are an internet sensation! Our video went viral overnight! And you,” I pointed at Enzo, who looked deeply uncomfortable with both my presence and this conversation, “can finally put that spreadsheet about the new stables to good use.”

Enzo’s eyebrows shot up so fast I thought they might fly off his forehead. “What?” His usual composed demeanor cracked, revealing surprise underneath all that

stoicism.

Quinn's confusion matched his, except hers was more adorable. "Wait, what are you talking about? Our video went viral?"

I pulled out my phone with the flourish of a magician revealing his best trick, waving it triumphantly between us. "The hobby horse video we did yesterday? It exploded overnight. We're booked solid for months." I couldn't keep the excitement from my voice.

Quinn's mouth fell open, her eyes widening with each word I spoke. The tension from moments ago evaporated as disbelief took over. "You're kidding." She stepped forward slightly, her hand reaching halfway toward my phone before stopping, like she wasn't sure she wanted proof of her internet fame. "People want to come here because of that?"

"People are losing their minds over it. I..." I paused, looking between them, suddenly feeling like I was overstaying my welcome. "I should go."

I backed away from the door, nearly tripping down the porch steps in my haste, my usually reliable coordination abandoning me as I caught myself on the railing with a muttered curse. This wasn't normal Kellan behavior. It wasn't a good sign that I was so out of sorts around Quinn.

A distraction was what I needed, and it had been handed to me on a golden platter.

"Staff meeting in an hour! I need to find Reid!" I called over my shoulder, already planning the overhaul we'd need for this influx of guests. "Wear clothes!"

Butters was nowhere in sight as I headed back to the stables. He'd never wandered far, but with the influx of guests we were about to have, maybe we needed to stick a

tracking device on him.

Reid wasn't in the stables, but I heard the sound of hooves in the indoor arena. I burst through the doors, waving my phone like we'd won the lottery, which, financially speaking, wasn't far off.

"Reid! Holy shit, man!" My voice echoed off the walls of the cavernous space. "The ranch is trending!"

Calypso, who'd been walking calmly alongside Reid in the center of the ring, spooked at my entrance. Her silvery-white coat caught the light as she reared back, hooves pawing at the air. Reid's hand shot to her halter.

"Breathe, girl. It's just Kellan being Kellan." He shot me a pointed look that was well-deserved.

"Sorry." I stopped short, suddenly aware I'd undone whatever progress they'd been making. I watched as Reid stroked Calypso's neck, the mare's nostrils flaring but her panic subsiding under his touch.

Reid didn't speak again until Calypso's breathing had steadied. "I'm going to put her out. She's had enough excitement for one session." He clicked his tongue softly and led the horse toward the exit to the pasture. "Don't move." He pointed at me like I was a hyperactive toddler.

I rocked back on my heels, pent-up energy making my skin buzz as I waited for what felt like an eternity. He took his time, letting her settle before removing her halter and watching her trot away.

When he finally returned, wiping his hands on his jeans, his expression was calm but wary. "What's so important it couldn't wait until Calypso's session was done?"

I thrust my phone in his face. “Look at these numbers! It’s over three hundred thousand views and climbing. The booking calendar for the cabins, trail rides, and lessons is solid for the next three months. People are even asking about hobby horses!”

Reid took the phone, his thumb scrolling through the video stats. “All from this video?”

“Yes! We’re finally going to be able to expand!” We’d already had to turn away several boarding opportunities because of space.

Reid handed the phone back. “With what staff?”

The question hit me like a bucket of cold water. “What?”

“We have three people, Kellan. Three. Me, you, and Enzo.” Reid counted off on his fingers.

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I ran a hand through my hair. “Well, yeah, but?—”

“And now you want to add what, exactly? More trail rides? More lessons? Boarding for more horses, even though we are at capacity? Events?” Reid put his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t get me wrong. This is great publicity. But we need a plan, not just enthusiasm.”

The adrenaline that had been carrying me since I’d checked my notifications started to fizzle. “I didn’t think through the logistics.”

“No kidding.” Reid’s lips curved just enough to count as a smile. “But it doesn’t mean we can’t build on this. We need to be smart about it.”

“We could hire a few people. It’s summer; there are probably some kids home from college looking for summer jobs.”

“That could work.” Reid nodded thoughtfully. “It would be easy to find someone to turn over the cabins between guests.”

“Exactly!” I started to pace, unable to control my excitement. “We can make this happen. This is the break we’ve been waiting for!”

Reid’s shoulders dropped slightly. “How are we going to tell Enzo about this?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “We have a few hours until he’s back from his Sunday morning ride.”

I faltered mid-stride, images of Quinn in Enzo’s shirt flashing through my mind. “He

didn't help with morning chores and never left on his ride... well, at least not on a horse."

He stared at me blankly, his brain was trying to catch up with the nonsense that had fallen out of my mouth. I could practically hear the gears grinding to a halt. "What?"

"Enzo was with Quinn."

"Enzo was with Quinn," Reid repeated, his tone flat.

"In his shirt," I added, then immediately wished I could stuff the words back in my mouth. I ran a hand across my stubbled jaw, fumbling through the clarification. "In her cabin. She was in her cabin, and he was there, and she was wearing his shirt. Like, his actual shirt. Not a replica or anything."

As I waited for Reid's response, I swear I could hear the grass growing in the pasture ten feet away. He simply stood there, dustmotes floating in the sunbeam between us while the implications sank in.

"What?" I demanded, throwing my hands up. The way he was looking at me like I'd announced I was selling my share of the ranch made me defensive. "Don't give me that look. I'm the messenger here. An unwilling messenger who wished he'd texted instead of knocked."

Reid shrugged, his expression far too innocent. "Just wondering if that's why you're all keyed up."

"I'm excited about the video."

"Right."

“I am!”

“And you’re not at all jealous that Enzo was with her?”

I scoffed. “Jealous? That’s... that’s ridiculous. Quinn’s leaving in like, what, two point five days? It’s not like anything more was going to happen anyway. And I’ve got the ranch to focus on.”

“Right. The ranch.” Reid sighed. “We need to get our infrastructure sorted before we overcommit.”

As if on cue, Enzo walked in. His expression was tense, phone gripped in his hand like he was trying not to crush it. “Marisol had emergency surgery last night. Appendicitis. She’s going to be out for at least two weeks. Possibly more.”

Marisol ran the summer camps and was the only reason we even did them. She wrangled the kids; we provided the animals and helped her as needed.

Reid dropped his head into his hands. “Perfect timing.”

The three of us stood in silence, the weight of our newest challenge settling over us. Our viral breakthrough suddenly felt like the universe was playing a cosmic joke.

Chapter 13

Stick Around

Quinn

I dumped the last of the fresh hay into the goat enclosure, brushing stray pieces off my jeans. Enzo had given me a list of ranch chores this morning while he, Kellan, and

Reid were busy with their kids' camp sessions. It felt good to be useful, even if I suspected the guys had given me the easiest tasks on their list.

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The events of Saturday night and Sunday morning still lingered awkwardly in my mind. After Kellan had seen me wearing nothing but Enzo's shirt, with Enzo standing behind me in his boxer briefs, I'd expected... something. Anger? Jealousy? A conversation, at least.

Instead, he'd been buzzing around like a caffeinated hummingbird, dealing with social media, organizing for the influx of business, and talking excitedly about expansion plans without once mentioning what he'd witnessed.

I scratched behind Maple's ears as she head-butted my leg for attention. At least goats were straightforward about what they wanted.

Guilt pricked at me, but I swatted it away. I was leaving in a few days. This was summer vacation fun. The kind of fun men had all the time without anyone batting an eye. Why should I feel bad about enjoying myself with two attractive men?

Pancake, the baby of the group, skipped over to me with her adorably awkward gait, tilting her head up for scratches.

I knelt down to her level. "You're the cutest little thing, aren't you?" She pressed her tiny head into my palm, and I could see why people enjoyed goat yoga now, even if goats pooped pellets everywhere.

Pancake cocked her head at a forty-five-degree angle, her right ear flopping slightly, and something clicked in my brain. That head tilt. Those eyes. The arrangement of cream and tan splotches.

I gasped and swiveled my head toward Butters, who was... not there.

“Butters?” I called, standing and scanning the enclosure. There was no sign of the oldest, supposedly dumbest goat.

The enclosure gate hung slightly ajar, and I stared at it in disbelief. I distinctly remembered latching the gate when I’d entered. I’d even checked it twice.

Maple bleated, unconcerned about her baby daddy’s disappearance. I gave Pancake one last look, now certain Butters was her father. The resemblance was uncanny.

I secured the gate behind me and moved quickly toward the barn, checking behind hay bales and feed bins. No Butters. The chicken coop had been Butters’ target once before, but when I peeked inside, I found only hens pecking at their feed.

A high-pitched giggle caught my attention. Rounding the corner of the stables, I spotted a small girl with pigtails stroking Butters’ head like he was a dog. Butters was leaning into her hand with his eyes half-closed in bliss.

“Hi there.” I approached slowly so I wouldn’t startle either of them.

The girl looked up at me with wide eyes, like she knew she wasn’t supposed to be outside petting a goat. “He followed me.”

“I bet he did.” I grabbed Butters by his collar. “He’s supposed to be in his pen, though. And aren’t you supposed to be with the rest of the camp kids?”

She nodded, looking slightly guilty. “I saw him and wanted to pet him.”

“He is pretty pettable, but we should get you back to the group before anyone worries. What’s your name?”

“Griselda.”

I guided Griselda and Butters toward the side of the stables where the indoor arena was. Before we even got there, children’s voices echoed from inside. Pushing open the door, I was met with a scene of barely controlled chaos.

Nine other children between the ages of five and eight were climbing on hay bales that had been arranged in a semicircle around Tater Tot. Kellan was attempting to demonstrate how to brush him while Enzo tried to prevent two boys from dueling with grooming tools. Reid was trying to stop a girl from sticking a piece of straw up the horse’s nostril.

None of them appeared to have noticed a kid had been missing.

And none of them noticed a boy was doing the universal bathroom dance and repeatedly signing “R” in the air. There was no way these men were ready to deal with a child peeing their pants... or worse.

The three cowboys looked up as the door closed behind me. Their expressions morphed into identical masks of silentpleading. They handled thousand-pound animals daily but were completely outmatched by a handful of elementary schoolers.

I let Butters go, and I gestured for Griselda to rejoin the others before nodding toward the dancing boy. “I think someone needs a bathroom break. He’s holding up the bathroom sign most teachers use. R is for restroom.”

Reid followed my gaze. “Oh! Yes, of course.” He jumped up and ushered the grateful boy in the direction of the bathroom.

The remaining children continued talking over each other, grabbing brushes, and generally ignoring Kellan’s increasingly desperate attempts to regain control.

“One, two, three, eyes on me!” I called out.

The effect was immediate. Nine bodies froze in place, their eyes turning to me with the automatic response years of classroom conditioning had instilled in them. “One, two, eyes on you!”

“Let’s make a line against the wall, please.” I used my firm-but-kind voice. “We’re going to take turns brushing Tater Tot, but first, we need to review the expectations for behavior.”

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The children shuffled into an orderly line, while Kellan, Enzo, and Reid stared at me like I'd performed a miracle.

I stood at the front of the group, feeling oddly at home even with being surrounded by horses and cowboys. "I'm Miss Quinn, and it seems we need to have a restart so no one gets hurt. I think we would all be disappointed if we didn't have time with Tater Tot and the other animals today."

The children nodded solemnly, and I led them back to the hay bales. They sat quietly, and I stood next to Tater Tot. "Our first safety expectation is to always listen when an adult is speaking. It is particularly important here on the ranch."

I wasn't sure if the guys had even gone over anything, but judging by the rapt attention of my audience instead of eye rolls or bored expressions, they were engaged. "The second is to never walk behind a horse. Even the gentlest horse might get startled and kick."

A little boy raised his hand enthusiastically and started talking before I even called on him. "My cousin got kicked by a horse, and he had to go to the hospital, and they gave him popsicles even though it was his leg that got broke not his mouth. I thought they only gave that when they cut out your throat because it hurt too much."

"That's exactly why we're learning these rules," I redirected without missing a beat. "Next up, we always speak to a horse before we touch them so they know you're there."

"Miss Quinn?" A girl shyly raised her hand. "My cat likes when I scratch behind her

ears. Do horses like that too?"

"Great question!" Kellan jumped in, stepping beside me with an ease that suggested we'd done this together a hundred times. "Horses do like being petted in certain spots but it depends on the horse. You should always ask the horse's owner before you pet them, like you should with a dog. Let me show you where Tater Tot likes to be petted."

He moved closer to Tater Tot, who stood like a mountain of patience. Kellan demonstrated proper petting technique on his flank. "Nice and gentle, like you're petting a... what's something delicate?"

"A butterfly!" called out a little girl with glasses.

"A bubble!" suggested another.

"My grandma's skin!" offered a boy in a Spider-Man T-shirt.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing while Kellan nodded seriously at all these suggestions. "Yes, exactly. Gentle like all those things."

Each child who wanted to, came up one at a time to pet Tater Tot before returning to their seats. Reid moved quietly among the children, kneeling beside a shy girl who seemed hesitant to approach the horse. His gentle voice coaxed a smile from her, and he guided her hand to touch the horse's nose. The transformation on her face from fear to wonder was magical.

From behind the group of kids, Enzo observed us. His arms were crossed, stance wide, but his expression wasn't stern like I'd expected. Even under the shadow of his cowboy hat, there was an intensity that made me very aware of him. His dark gaze followed my movements as we moved on to how to brush the horse.

The children took turns brushing Tater Tot under our supervision, forming an orderly system that seemed to surprise the men. Occasionally, I caught their exchanged glances, and their raised eyebrows and subtle nods communicated silent relief.

Tater Tot, living up to his reputation, stood with supreme tolerance as the kids brushed his coat, some more coordinated than others. At one point, he released a tremendous fart that echoed through the arena, sending the children into peals of delighted laughter.

“He’s smiling!” shouted a boy, pointing at Tater Tot’s pulled-back lips.

“He is.” Reid patted the horse’s neck with affection.

When I glanced around at the three men, it wasn’t just relief I saw on their faces. There was admiration there, a kind of respect that made me stand a little taller. And beneath that, something more complex flickered in their gazes that made my pulse quicken in a way that reminded me I was more than the walking disaster who’d stumbled onto their ranch.

Later that afternoon, when the kids were all gone and the arena was empty, I focused on a course of jumps Kellan had arranged. My muscles tensed as I approached the first small hurdle. I leapt, holding tight to Thunderbolt, clearing it easily and galloping on with exaggerated bounces, my boots kicking up arena sand.

I’d been at this for nearly half an hour, using physical exertion to quiet my mind. It wasn’t working, and my thoughts were spiraling into far more complex patterns than my jumps.

Enzo’s hand on the small of my back as we’d danced. Kellan’s fingers tangled in my hair in the hot tub. Reid’s eyes watching from the window and the intensity of his gaze even from a distance.

What the hell was I doing? I'd come to this ranch to learn about horses after winning that ridiculous hobby horse competition. Instead, I was collecting cowboys like they were limited edition Beanie Babies or Labubus.

I cleared another jump, stumbling slightly on the landing. I should call April. She'd laugh her ass off at my predicament, but she'd also have advice. Probably terrible advice, but advice nonetheless.

My rhythm faltered as I pictured my inevitable departure. The thought of leaving made my chest ache in a way that terrified me.

I'd known these men for less than a week. This wasn't like me. I was practical, responsible, the kind of woman who didn't jump into bed with strangers.

"Shit." I realized I'd missed my approach to the next jump. I tried correcting too late, lifting my legs to clear the hurdle, but my boot caught the edge.

The world tilted as I pitched forward. Thunderbolt flew from my grip, skidding across the dirt as I tumbled ungracefully to the ground, landing with a grunt on my hands and knees.

"Quinn!"

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The shout came from every direction at once. I sat back on my ass, the arena's dust still swirling around me. Kellan appeared at the rail, vaulting over with his face drawn tight with worry. Reid jogged in from the main stable aisle, Walter bounding at his heels, while Enzo stepped out of the tack room, rag in hand.

Great. I'd managed to summon all three of them with my incompetence.

"Are you okay?" Kellan reached me first, dropping to his knees, his hands moving over my arms, searching for injuries.

"I'm fine, just a bruised ego." Embarrassment heated my cheeks. "What were you all doing? Watching me?"

Enzo crouched in front of me, his eyes scanning my body. "Did you hit your head? Any dizziness?"

I shook my head. "No. I tripped and landed on my hands and knees."

Reid knelt beside me, his presence calming. He didn't bombard me with questions, just settled a solid hand on my shoulder. Walter sniffed at my boots with concern.

I felt ridiculous surrounded by three gorgeous men all because I'd fallen off a stick. "I'm fine, really."

The concern on their faces slowly melted into relief, then into something more complicated. An awkward silence stretched between us, filled with unspoken words.

I became acutely aware of Kellan's hand still on my arm, Enzo's knee brushing mine, and Reid's steady presence at my side.

Enzo's gaze flickered to mine before dropping to the ground. "You were amazing with the kids today."

"You saved our asses." Kellan's thumb traced small circles on my skin. "You should stick around for a few more weeks." The usual playfulness in his voice was replaced by something earnest that made my stomach flip.

Reid, still kneeling quietly beside me, finally spoke. "It feels right having you here."

My heart twisted with the way they looked at me with hope and vulnerability. I opened my mouth, though I had no idea what to say. No one had ever looked at me like these three men were looking at me now.

Before I could formulate a response, Reid's brow furrowed slightly. "But every cabin is booked solid. If you stay, we'd need to figure out where you're going to sleep."

I should say no. I should grab my stick horse, drive back home, and forget this whole fantasy.

Walter nudged my hand with his cold, wet nose, making a satisfied little grunt when I stroked his head, his tiny body vibrating with happiness.

Happiness.

I was happy here. I wasn't wallowing. I wasn't overthinking my future. I was proudly prancing around an arena on a stick horse with three men cheering me on. It would only be for a few more weeks until Marisol was able to work, and then I'd go back to dealing with reality again.

I looked up at Reid, then over at Kellan and Enzo. “I’ll stay.”

Chapter 14

Midnight Restlessness

Reid

I’d been tossing on the air mattress for almost two hours before admitting defeat. Every shift of my weight produced a rubbery squeak that echoed in the sparse guest room. My shoulders ached from tension, and my thoughts wouldn’t quiet.

Quinn was sleeping in my bed.

Her staying with us made more sense than her finding somewhere else for a few weeks and having to drive every day. We needed her help with the camps, but knowing she was curled up in my sheets, her scent mingling with mine, was wreaking havoc on my ability to sleep.

But so was the air mattress.

Walter huffed from his dog bed in the corner, annoyed at my constant movement.

I swung my legs over the side of the mattress, wincing at the loud protest of rubber. Maybe the couch would be better. At the very least, it wouldn’t announce my every movement to the entire house.

Regardless, I needed to sleep. The past few days had been nuts with the kids’ camps starting, the influx of inquiries for lessons and cabins, and people randomly showing up. We hadn’t anticipated the latter, but luckily, Quinn had handled that like a pro for us.

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And then today, we'd moved her stuff over to our house.

Walter didn't even lift his head as I slipped out of the room, clearly unimpressed with my midnight restlessness. The hallway was quiet, and as I passed my bedroom door, I let my hand hover near the knob for a moment before I forced myself to keep walking.

I padded down the stairs, my plan simple: make a nest on the couch, find a boring documentary on TV, and finally get some sleep. What I hadn't planned for was the soft glow coming from the kitchen.

Or the sight that greeted me when I rounded the corner.

Quinn stood with her back to me, reaching into the cabinet above the coffee maker. The light above the stove spilled across her form, illuminating miles of bare legs and the gentle curve where her pink tank top rode up, exposing a sliver of skin at her lower back.

My mouth went dry as I registered what she was, and wasn't, wearing. Black underwear was the only thing covering her lower half. And what a glorious half it was.

If I turned around now, she wouldn't even notice I'd been there.

Instead, I stood frozen, my eyes tracing the line of her spine, the delicate hollow behind her knee, the soft shadow where her thighs met. And her ass? Something awakened in me, a hunger that had nothing to do with food.

She turned, a glass in her hand, and our eyes met.

Her lips parted slightly in surprise, and my gaze dropped to her chest, where the thin fabric of her tank top did little to conceal the outline of her breasts or the hardened peaks of her nipples.

Heat rushed to my face as I jerked my eyes back up to hers.

“I’m sorry.” I took a step backward. “I didn’t... I should’ve... I’ll just...” My back hit the doorframe, and I fumbled to turn around.

Real smooth. Why was I so damned awkward?

“Reid.” Quinn’s voice was scratchy with sleep, and my cock shouldn’t have jumped at that, but it did.

“I couldn’t sleep and was coming down for the couch. I didn’t know you were...” My eyes raked over her. “I’ll go back upstairs.”

“Don’t.” The single word halted me more effectively than a physical barrier.

“I couldn’t sleep either.” Quinn put her glass on the counter and walked toward me. “Something about being in someone else’s bed makes my brain go into overdrive.”

The mention of her in my bed sent another wave of heat through me, this time settling low in my stomach. I swallowed hard. “Is that so?”

The kitchen light caught the gold flecks in her hazel eyes, making them shimmer with something unreadable. Her fingers brushed mine, a touch so light I might have imagined it if not for the trail of electricity it left on my skin. “The couch is too uncomfortable to sleep on.”

I glanced toward the living room, where the couch indeed looked woefully inadequate for my six-foot frame. “Better than that squeaky air mattress.”

Quinn bit her lip, considering something. “Your bed is big enough for both of us.”

I studied her face, looking for any sign of uncertainty or pity, but found only an open invitation in her eyes.

“Quinn.” Her name came out rougher than I intended. “Are you sure?”

“It’s just sleep, Reid.” She smiled, but something in her expression told me it wasn’t just anything. “Unless you’d prefer the couch’s lumbar punishment program.”

I cleared my throat. “I’ll grab us some water.”

Moving to the refrigerator gave me a moment to collect myself. The thought of sharing a bed with Quinn sent electricity racing through my veins, a current of anticipation that had no business being there if this was truly “just sleep.” But after what I’d witnessed between her and Kellan, and knowing she’d been with Enzo as well, I wasn’t sure where I fit in this unfolding dynamic.

I retrieved two water bottles and then followed Quinn up the stairs. The gentle sway of her hips in those black underwear was hypnotic, and I wondered what it would be like to slip my fingers under them and feel her warm skin against my palms.

The thoughts were so vivid that I nearly stumbled on the top step.

Once in my room, I shut the door behind us. The sheets on my bed were rumpled on the side where Quinn had been lying, and seeing the physical evidence of her in my cock twitch.

She slid under the covers, and I put the water bottles on the nightstand before joining her. I held myself rigid, acutely aware of every inch of space between us.

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“I’m glad I chose your room over the others.” Quinn turned onto her side to face me.

I mirrored her position. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?” All three rooms were nearly identical, with Enzo’s being slightly larger.

“I like your view.” Her eyes flicked to the window, then back to me with unmistakable meaning. The reference to my vantage point during her encounter with Kellan was clear.

My pulse quickened. “The view is really nice when a woman is spread open on the side of the hot tub having her cunt eaten out.”

Her breath caught and her hand found mine on top of the covers, intertwining our fingers. “Did you like watching?”

“Yes.” The word hung between us, heavy with implication.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, and I tracked the movement. “And did you wish it was you instead of Kellan?”

I could lie. I could pull back. I could remind myself of all the reasons this would be a bad idea. But I couldn’t. I was past the point of no return.

I moved closer, eliminating the space between us until her breath was against my lips. “I wished it was me making you come, and my name on your lips.”

Quinn’s eyes darkened, pupils dilating until only a thin ring of color remained. She

made that noise again, that little catch in her breath that was quickly becoming my favorite sound, and then her mouth was on mine.

The kiss was nothing like I expected. There was no hesitation, no gentle exploration. She kissed like she was starving, and I was the feast she'd been denied. Her lips parted immediately, tongue seeking mine as her hand let go of my fingers to grip my shoulder, pulling me closer.

I slid one hand up to cradle her jaw as the other found her waist, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath her tank top. Our bodies aligned, and I felt the heat of her through the thin barrier of her underwear pressed against my boxers.

When we broke apart to breathe, Quinn's eyes were glazed and her lips swollen. "We should probably talk about all of this."

I knew she meant the situation with Kellan and Enzo, the undefined boundaries that were shifting between the four of us. But with Quinn's body against mine, her tongue tracing my bottom lip, and her fingers threading through my hair, talking was the last thing on my mind.

"Later." I rolled onto my back and pulled her on top of me. "Right now, I have a much better use for my mouth."

I guided her to straddle my chest. Her tank top had ridden up in our movements, exposing the soft curve of her stomach. My fingers traced a path along her sides, feeling goosebumps rise in their wake.

I looked up at her, my hands resting on her thighs briefly before I ran my thumbs along the insides of them. She shivered at the touch as my fingers hooked into the waistband of her underwear. She lifted herself to help me slide them down, and then the fabric was gone, tossed somewhere in the darkness of my bedroom.

“Come here.” I palmed her ass and urged her forward until she was hovering above me, knees on either side of my head. I could smell her arousal, heady and sweet.

She gripped the headboard, her eyes half-lidded with anticipation. Her breath hitched as I drew her down to my mouth, my tongue making a slow exploration of her center. The taste of her flooded my senses, and it made my head spin. I groaned against her, the vibration making her rock her hips forward.

“Fuck, Reid,” she breathed, one hand leaving the headboard to tangle in my hair.

I took my time, learning what made her thighs tremble and what drew those little catches in her breath that I’d already become addicted to. When I focused on her clit, circling it with my tongue, her grip in my hair tightened.

“Just like that,” Quinn panted, beginning to move against my mouth with more purpose. “Please, don’t stop.”

I had no intention of stopping. I slid my hands up her sides, pushing her tank top higher until I could see her breasts. I cupped them, and her nipples were hard against my fingertips as I teased and rolled them, matching the rhythm of my tongue.

Quinn’s movements became more urgent, her hips rocking against my face with increasing desperation. Her thighs began to shake on either side of my head, her body tensing as she chased her release.

“Reid, I’m—” She broke off with a strangled moan as I intensified my efforts, sucking gently.

Her entire body went rigid, and she cried out as she came. I held her steady, not relenting until she collapsed forward against the headboard, gasping for breath.

“Come here.” I helped her back down my body until she was straddling my hips. I could feel the wetness of her against my stomach as she leaned down to kiss me hungrily.

“I want you inside me,” Quinn whispered against my lips, her hand sliding between us to palm me through my boxers. “Now.”

I reached for the nightstand drawer, fumbling for a condom. She helped me roll it on, her touch sending jolts of electricity through my system.

When she positioned herself above me, I gripped her hips, holding her still for a moment. “I’ve thought about you. Not just with me.”

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Her eyes darkened with understanding. “Tell me.”

I guided her down slowly, feeling her body stretch to accommodate me, watching her lips part as I filled her completely. “I’ve imagined you with them. With Kellan and Enzo. Both of them.”

She began to move, a slow, torturous rhythm that had me gritting my teeth to maintain control. “And what am I doing in this fantasy of yours?”

My hands held her hips as I thrust up to meet her. “Taking them both,” I growled, watching her eyes widen. “Enzo inside you while Kellan fills your mouth. All of us watching you come apart between us.”

She moaned, her pace quickening.

I hadn’t been sure she’d want to hear more, but her response emboldened me to continue. “Sometimes I imagine watching them take turns with you. Sometimes it’s all of us at once, touching every part of you, making you come over and over.”

Her movements became erratic, her nails digging into my skin as she rode me harder. She was on the edge again, and I wanted to send her over.

“I want to watch.” I panted, thrusting up harder to meet her. “I want to watch you with them and watch them fill you with their cum, and then I want to claim you.”

Her head fell back as her body began to shake. “I’m going to?—”

I sat up, changing the angle and wrapping my arms around her. One hand tangled in her hair, pulling her head back gently to expose her throat to my lips. “Come with me,” I demanded against her skin, feeling my own release building unstoppably. “Come with me and show me how badly you want all of our cocks filling this perfect pussy.”

Her inner muscles clamped down around me as she cried out, her entire body trembling in my arms. The sensation pushed me over the edge, and I buried my face against her neck, groaning her name.

We stayed locked together, panting against each other’s skin. Her hands cradled my face, tilting it up so she could press her forehead against mine.

“Do you really want...” She trailed off, seemingly unable to find the words.

I smiled against her neck, kissing her softly. “Yeah, I do.”

“Me too,” she whispered.

The question was, did Kellan and Enzo want that too?

Chapter 15

Vindictive Donkey

Quinn

I woke up tangled in Reid’s sheets, my body sore in all the right places. Sunlight filtered through the curtains, casting a soft glow across the room that matched my hazy state of mind.

My fingertips traced the empty space beside me, still warm from Reid's body. The realization that I'd slept with Reid sent a flush of heat from my chest to my face.

And I'd slept with Kellan too. And done... lots of things with Enzo.

I flopped back against the pillow, covering my face with my hands. These weren't the actions of the Quinn Porter I used to be. In the past, I was cautious and thought things through. But something about sticking to what was deemed normal and then having my heart stomped on by someone who checked all the boxes did something to a woman.

And apparently, that something was not only taking up hobby horsing but three men.

A series of thumps from somewhere downstairs interrupted my existential crisis. I froze, listening. Another thump, followed by what sounded like something dragging across the floor.

Sighing, I slid out of bed, my bare feet hitting the cool hardwood. I grabbed Reid's flannel shirt from the chair in the corner, partly for decency, partly because I liked how it smelled like him, and slipped it on. It hung to my mid-thighs, barely decent enough if it was one of the guys downstairs.

I opened the door and peeked into the hall. "Hello?" No response except another thump.

I tiptoed into the hallway, ears straining for any sound that might identify the culprit. As I crept down the stairs, the thumps grew louder, accompanied by a sound that was unmistakably... chewing?

Rounding the corner into the living room, I stopped dead in my tracks.

There, in the middle of the room, stood Debra. And in her mouth, being thoroughly masticated, was the head of Thunderbolt. Stuffing littered the floor like snow, and one of Thunderbolt's button eyes rolled accusingly toward me from near the coffee table.

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“What the... Debra!” I shrieked.

Debra looked up at me with what I could only describe as smug satisfaction, Thunderbolt’s mangled head still clamped between her teeth. She took a step backward, knocking a lamp off an end table with her substantial donkey ass.

“What’s happening? Is someone dying?” Kellan thundered down the stairs, skidding to a halt behind me. He was wearing only a pair of low-hanging sweatpants, his hair sticking up in every direction. Any other time, I might have appreciated the view, but I was too busy mourning Thunderbolt.

Kellan took in the scene before us. “How did she even get in here?”

“I don’t know!” I gestured wildly at the destruction. “But she’s eating Thunderbolt!”

He cautiously moved toward the donkey. “Okay, Debra, drop the horsie and no one has to get hurt.”

Debra responded by backing up further, knocking over an empty cup someone had left on the coffee table.

“Don’t antagonize her!” I whispered harshly. “She’ll eat the whole living room.”

“I’m not antagonizing her.” Kellan inched closer, and I didn’t know what he was planning on doing when he reached her. “We’ve had a talk about boundaries, haven’t we, Debra?”

The donkey snorted with what I swore was contempt, and more of Thunderbolt's precious insides floated to the floor. I hadn't even known I was so attached to the damn thing, yet here I was wanting to cry over it. It was like each piece of stuffing represented another fragment of my dignity disappearing before my eyes.

Debra's eyes never left mine during this entire performance, and I could have sworn she was enjoying every second of my distress. The audacity of this animal was truly something to behold.

I moved to Kellan's side. "We need to lure her out."

"With what? Your virtue? Because I think that ship has sailed." Kellan looked at me and winked, his dimple making a brief appearance.

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I tugged the hem of Reid's flannel lower on my thighs. I wasn't surprised Kellan made a suggestive joke while a demonic donkey was seeking revenge. His talent for inappropriate timing was truly unmatched, and I couldn't exactly deny the accuracy of his observation, considering I'd just rolled out of Reid's bed. Not that I was about to give Kellan the satisfaction of acknowledging that.

I elbowed him in the ribs. "Food, Kellan! What does she like to eat besides stick horses?"

Kellan edged toward the kitchen. "Apples. I'll grab some from the fridge. You keep her occupied."

"How exactly am I supposed to—" But Kellan was already gone, leaving me alone with the destroyer of worlds.

I faced Debra, raising my hands in a placating gesture. "Hey there, girl. That's not very nutritious, you know. How about you give me what's left, and we can part as

friends?”

Debra regarded me with suspicious eyes, her long lashes fluttering with what I could only interpret as calculated malevolence. Each twitch of her oversized ears seemed to telegraph her thoughts: I know what you did last night, and I’m judging you for it.

I’d spent my entire adult life managing classrooms full of unpredictable children, but nothing had prepared me for the psychological warfare of being sized up by a vindictive donkey.

Kellan returned, an apple held out in front of him like a peace offering. “Look what I’ve got, Debbie. Much tastier than a stick horse.”

To my surprise, Debra’s ears perked up and her attention immediately went to the sweet treat. She dropped Thunderbolt’s soggy remains and clomped over to Kellan. He backed slowly toward the front door, Debra following the apple like a donkey possessed.

He opened the door, and once she crossed the threshold, Kellan tossed the apple outside. She took off after it like a dog chasing a ball, and he slammed the door shut and locked it.

He looked me up and down with a slow grin. “I see you’re wearing Reid’s shirt. I’m starting to feel left out. I should leave one of mine out for the next time you need to cover up after a night of debauchery.”

Heat crawled up my neck. “I... uh...”

“Relax, Quinn.” His voice softened as he reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “We don’t have to figure it all out right now.”

But the gentleness in his touch made my chest ache with confusion. What were we doing here?

Kellan bent down and picked up the mangled remains of Thunderbolt, stuffing dangling from the torn fabric. “I think he’s seen better days.”

Something about seeing the symbol that had started this entire adventure destroyed in his hands broke something inside me. A lump formed in my throat, and before I could stop them, tears welled in my eyes.

“Hey, whoa.” Alarm crossed Kellan’s face. “We can get you another one, or sew this one up.”

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But it wasn't about that. It was about everything; the confusion, the feelings, the fact that this would end and I'd be gone. It was about how I'd never felt more myself than I did here, with these men, at this ridiculous ranch full of misbehaving animals.

Unable to articulate any of this, I turned and fled up the stairs, back to Reid's room, where I could at least lick my wounds in private and try to make sense of this beautiful mess I'd created.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a long time to mope since I had the kids' camp. It was the fourth day and the second time seeing the nine-to-twelve age group. I was a little out of my element with the older kids, but none of them seemed to want to cancel me even after the second session.

Since the camp ended at noon, I spent my afternoon shopping for some necessities since I'd be staying longer. There was no reason to pass up a perfectly good excuse for retail therapy, and boy, did I need it.

After buying a few more outfits and personal care items at the mall, I found a family-owned western wear store that sized cowboy hats. I hadn't even thought about purchasing one for my week-long stay, but now I wanted one.

I'd been staring at the wall of hats for at least ten minutes, overwhelmed by the sheer variety: black, tan, brown, white, and even a few turquoise blue options I hadn't expected. Who knew there were so many shapes? Each one looked slightly different from the others, with variations in crown height, brim width, and decorative bands.

A friendly saleswoman in her sixties approached me, her silver hair pulled back in a

neat braid. “First hat?”

I laughed nervously, running my fingers along the brim of a chocolate brown one. “Is it that obvious?”

“Nothing wrong with that. Everyone has to start somewhere.” After measuring my head and telling me all the different options, she left me to try on hats so she could help another customer.

Several hats later, I was standing in front of the mirror with a tan hat perched on my head. Unlike the others I’d tried, this one seemed to fit, resting comfortably without feeling like it might topple off at any moment.

I tilted my head, examining my reflection from different angles. The hat gave me a confident look I hadn’t expected, transforming me into someone who might belong on a ranch.

A small gasp from behind me caught my attention. I turned to find a girl who was about eleven or twelve staring at me with wide eyes, her hands clasped over her mouth. A woman stood beside her, looking between me and her daughter.

The girl tugged on her mother’s sleeve. “Mom, it really is her! Quinn from the videos!”

I froze, suddenly feeling like I was under a spotlight. This was new territory and surprising. I should have known eventually someone would say something to me since that video had over one million views now, and the other ones we posted every day on both my account and the ranch’s were also getting tons of views. Luckily, I had April running my account so I didn’t have to deal with it.

The woman approached with a tentative smile. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but are

you the woman from those ranch videos? The ones with the stick horse?”

“That would be me.”

The girl stepped forward. “I’ve seen all your videos. I watched the one where you did the jumps like fifteen times.”

Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder. “Maddie’s been obsessed since she saw you. She’s even been practicing in our backyard with a broom. We’re waiting on her hobby horse to arrive.”

“That’s amazing! How’s it going so far?”

Maddie shrugged. “Good, I guess. My friends said it’s babyish.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper. “How do you not care what people say online? There are lots of mean comments.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. I hadn’t been reading the comments on the videos. The thought of strangers dissecting me online was too anxiety-inducing. But, of course, there would be nasty comments; the internet excelled at cutting down anything joyful.

I adjusted my hat, buying myself a moment to think. “You know what? Those mean comments say a lot more about the people writing them than about you. When people see someone having fun and being themselves, sometimes it makes them uncomfortable because they’re too afraid to do the same.”

Maddie’s eyes remained fixed on mine, absorbing every word.

“The secret is to find the joy in what you’re doing that’s bigger than their meanness. I wasn’t trying to be cool or get popular; I was having fun, and that fun is real, no

matter what anyone says about it.”

Her mother’s eyes softened. “That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell her.”

Maddie’s shoulders straightened slightly. “Do you think I could get good enough to compete someday?”

I smiled. “Absolutely. In fact, I bet you’re already pretty good.”

Her mother squeezed Maddie’s shoulder. “Are you planning on teaching classes? Maddie would love to learn from you.”

Learn hobby horsing? From me? I was the least qualified person on earth to do that. “Oh, well, I’m only here temporarily, but something that has helped me is watching horses and learning to ride. La Cuesta Ranch has lessons for all ages and abilities.”

The girl looked hopefully at her mom, who gave her a reassuring nod. “We’ll have to look into that. We’ll let you get back to shopping.”

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After taking a picture with the girl, they left. I stood in front of the mirror again, my reflection staring back at me with wide eyes beneath the brim of the tan hat. What had I gotten myself into?

I tried on several more hats in different colors and shapes. Finally, after I must have tried on every hat in the store, I found the perfect one in medium brown.

I ran my fingers along the brim, then glanced once more in the mirror. It suited me more than I wanted to admit. The woman staring back at me looked a little different than she had a week ago: still unsure, still figuring things out, but maybe beginning to believe she could belong.

I took the hat to the register, wondering what else I'd end up carrying home from this summer that I hadn't planned on.

Chapter 16

To Sparkles

Kellan

I leaned against the counter, watching Quinn dance around the kitchen in full hostess mode. After she'd returned from her afternoon shopping, taken a nap, and helped with some chores, she'd commandeered the kitchen and kicked us all out, insisting she wanted to cook for us. I'd tried to argue that it was literally our job to feed her as part of our room and board agreement, but she'd shooed me away with a wooden spoon.

Now, pasta bake in hand, she moved like she'd cooked us a million meals as she set the dish on the table with a flourish. "Dinner is served, gentlemen."

Her smile was infectious, lighting up her whole face with a glow that reached her eyes and softened every feature. It was the kind of smile that made my pulse do weird things.

I'd seen plenty of gorgeous women smile before, but there was something about Quinn's that felt genuine in a way that cut through my usual defenses. Maybe it was how proud she looked of her pasta creation or how at home she seemed in our kitchen. Whatever it was, I found myself smiling back.

Reid leaned forward, inspecting the pasta. "This looks edible."

"Such high praise." Quinn raised an eyebrow, placing her hands on her hips. "I'll have you know I'm an excellent cook."

Enzo grabbed his fork. "Let's put that to the test, then."

I watched their expressions carefully as they took their first bites. Reid's eyes widened slightly, and Enzo paused mid-chew, looking pleasantly surprised.

I took a bite, savoring the perfect balance of cheese, meat, and pasta. "This is amazing."

Quinn rolled her eyes, but her pleased smile gave her away. "The bar for impressing men is literally on the floor."

"The bar for impressing hungry ranchers is pretty high." Reid helped himself to a second serving, which said more than any compliment could.

Dinner passed with easy conversation, the four of us falling into a rhythm that was surprisingly natural, like Quinn had always been part of our nightly routine instead of someone who'd barely moved in. I watched her reactions to Enzo's dry comments and Reid's perfectly timed observations, enjoying how she gave as good as she got. Something about her presence at our table filled a space I hadn't realized was empty.

After we finished, I went up to my room, where I'd stashed my surprise for her. I'd spent my lunch break and a little downtime at the end of the day working on it. When I returned, I watched her for a moment from the doorway, struck by how much I wanted all of our nights to include her.

Dangerous thoughts.

I approached her from behind, keeping my hands carefully hidden. Enzo caught my eye from the table, his expression turning curious.

"Quinn."

She turned, bubbles clinging to her forearms from washing the casserole dish. "What's up?"

I pulled Thunderbolt from behind my back, and her mouth fell open, eyes going wide as she took in her resurrected hobby horse. I'd picked up all the stuffing from around the living room and carefully stitched the head back together. I'd even added a few embellishments with a bedazzled bridle and some sparkly flower barrettes I'd picked up from the store.

"You saved him!" Quinn squealed, quickly wiping her hands on a dish towel before reaching for him.

"I might have gone a little overboard with the accessories."

Quinn clutched the hobby horse to her chest, her eyes shiny as she looked at me.
“He’s perfect.”

“Where did you even get butterfly hair clips?” Enzo shook his head, taking a pull from his beer.

“Kellan is secretly a fourteen-year-old girl.” Reid smirked.

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“Kellan is dangerously good at crafting. Should we be concerned?” Enzo tried to hide his smirk and failed.

I flipped them both off cheerfully. “You’re just jealous of my skills. It’s not my fault you two haven’t fully grown out of your toxic masculinity.”

“He has a point.” Enzo raised his beer in a toast. “To sparkles.”

Reid clicked his beer to Enzo’s. “To pink.”

Quinn stared at the three of us, her mouth opening like she might say something, then closing again. She shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips. “Thank you, Kellen. You were already sexy, but this made you ten times as much.”

“Do you have any more of those barrettes? I think I might start wearing a few in my hair.” Reid grinned as Quinn giggled.

The three of us lingered in the kitchen despite Quinn refusing to let us help clean up. Reid and Enzo nursed beers while I mixed myself a Jack and Coke. The four of us sharing space was easier than it should have been.

I glanced at Reid and Enzo, wondering if they felt it too. This was something unexpected and probably complicated as hell. Because there wasn’t just me and Quinn. There was Reid and Quinn. Enzo and Quinn. Whatever this was becoming, it wasn’t conventional.

And the weirdest part? I didn’t mind. Not even a little bit.

My parents would have lost their minds over something like this. Their toxic marriage had been a masterclass in possession and jealousy. They would both go ballistic if either one of them so much as smiled at someone else. It was why I tended to keep things casual and short.

But this was different. Watching Quinn laugh at something Reid said and seeing the way Enzo's eyes followed her around the kitchen didn't spark jealousy. It felt right somehow, like we each brought something different to the table—different pieces of a whole.

The thought of her leaving in a few weeks left me feeling hollow. But it didn't have to be that way, did it? She'd already extended her stay once.

She was a teacher. Teachers could work anywhere. And it was summer, which was the perfect time for transitions and for someone to fall in love with a place.

Or with people.

I shut that thought down fast. I wasn't ready to examine what was happening in my chest every time she smiled.

Grabbing my drink, I wandered to the window, looking out at the hills separating us from the ocean. "It's going to be a killer sunset tonight." I turned to her, suddenly nervous. "Want to ride out to the beach and watch the sun go down?"

Her eyes lit up, then dimmed. "I don't think I'm confident enough to ride that far on my own. Or that fast."

I grinned. "We can share a horse. Tater Tot can easily carry both of us."

Quinn bit her lip, glancing at Reid and Enzo. Something unspoken passed between

them, and my stomach twisted with unexpected uncertainty.

“You guys could come too.” I wasn’t even sure if I wanted them to accept, but it felt important to acknowledge whatever was forming between all of us.

Enzo finished his beer and stood. “Can’t. I’ve got evening horse duty.”

Reid set down his empty beer bottle. “I need to check the lodge now that we’ve got more guests coming in. Plus, there’s that reservation paperwork I’ve been putting off.”

I nodded, feeling oddly relieved and disappointed at the same time. “Guess it’s just you and me, Quinn. You game?”

Quinn’s smile returned. “Absolutely. Let me grab a sweater.”

As she disappeared up the stairs, Reid gave me a look. “That hobby horse thing was smooth, Brooks.”

“Just doing my part to keep our guest happy.” I shrugged, trying to play it cool.

Enzo snorted. “Is she even still considered a guest at this point?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted.

Reid’s expression softened. “Yeah. Welcome to the club.”

“She leaves soon,” Enzo reminded us, his voice carefully neutral.

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I tucked that thought away, unwilling to dwell on it. “Not tonight she doesn’t.”

The sound of Quinn’s footsteps sent us all into casual poses, like teenagers caught plotting something.

“Ready to saddle up?” I offered her my arm.

She took it with mock formality. “Lead the way, cowboy.”

I guided Tater Tot along the winding path that led toward the beach, with Quinn settled in front of me, her back pressed against my chest. Having her nestled between my thighs was both sweet torture and absolute perfection. Every bump in the trail pushed her body more firmly against mine.

“You doing okay?” I shifted slightly, careful not to disturb her balance.

Quinn leaned back, tilting her face upward to look at me. “More than okay. I feel... safe.”

The simple admission punched me straight in the gut. For someone who made a living crafting clever comebacks, I found myself speechless. I tightened my arms around her, an instinctive response I couldn’t have stopped if I tried.

The trail crested a hill, and the Pacific stretched out before us, a vast expanse of blue-gray water that had a touch of turquoise where it met the shore. The sun was almost set and made everything glow in a golden color. Quinn gasped, her body going still against mine.

“Wait until it’s down all the way.” The best part was yet to come, hopefully.

I guided Tater Tot off the main trail toward a quieter stretch of beach near the dunes where we’d be alone. The massive horse plodded steadily downward, unbothered by the extra passenger or the shifting sand beneath his hooves.

When we reached the flat stretch of sand, I swung my leg over and dismounted first, keeping a hand on Tot’s bridle to steady him.

Quinn slid down after me, and even though she’d mastered mounting and dismounting since our first lesson together, I still grabbed her waist to steady her as her feet touched the sand.

I didn’t let go immediately, and her hands rested on my shoulders, our faces inches apart. My fingers lingered before I reluctantly released her. “It’s a little different dismounting on sand.”

Quinn smoothed her sweater, looking flustered in the most endearing way. “Sand or no sand, dismounting is way more intimidating than mounting.”

I tugged open the saddlebag. “Toss your boots in; Tater Tot can play pack mule while we walk.”

After slipping off our boots and socks and burying my toes in the texture of the cool sand, I clipped on Tater Tot’s lead. I kept a loose hold as we made our way down the beach, the massive horse ambling contentedly behind us like an overgrown puppy. The air carried the scent of salt and seaweed, and the waves provided a soothing soundtrack.

With my free hand, I reached for Quinn’s, my fingers brushing against hers in a silent question. When she didn’t pull away, I threaded our fingers together. I resisted the

urge to stroke my thumb over her knuckles, but I couldn't stop myself from giving her hand the gentlest squeeze.

"Are you sure we can bring him this close to the water?" Quinn glanced at the incoming tide as it inched closer to us with each wave. There was a touch of concern in her voice.

"He'd be running along the edge if I let him," I assured her with a soft laugh. "He has absolutely no fear of the ocean, which is somewhat miraculous considering he's terrified of puddles back at the ranch. Animals contain multitudes of contradictions, just like people."

"And what contradictions do you have?" She looked up at me, her head tilting slightly. There was curiosity in her expression, but also something more probing, as if she were trying to solve a puzzle.

The question caught me off guard, and my gaze drifted toward the bluffs the sun was sinking behind. How to answer without revealing too much or too little?

"Well... I can talk to a crowd of fifty strangers without breaking a sweat, but sometimes struggle with one-on-one conversations that matter." My thumb finally gave in to temptation, brushing lightly across her knuckles. "I'm terrified of commitment but hate being alone. I memorize jokes to make other people laugh but can't remember to buy milk." I paused, feeling unusually vulnerable under her steady gaze. "And apparently I'm brave enough to ride a thousand-pound animal at full gallop but nervous as hell holding your hand right now."

Her eyes softened. "That's surprisingly honest."

I shrugged, playing it off. "I'm a surprising guy. Full of mystery and intrigue."

“And yet somehow not mysterious at all.”

“Ouch. There goes my enigmatic cowboy persona.” I tugged gently on her hand, nodding toward a smooth stretch of beach where the sand formed a natural seat.

I wrapped the lead loosely around my wrist as we sat, Tot standing quietly behind us with the breeze ruffling his mane. He snorted softly, content to be near.

“Kellan?” Her voice was soft, almost getting lost in the sound of the waves.

“Hmm?” I turned to look at her, struck by how her profile was silhouetted against the darkening sky.

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“What are we doing?”

The million-dollar question. I took a deep breath, watching the last sliver of sun disappear into the horizon before answering. “Honestly? I have no idea. But I like it. I like it a lot.”

Quinn shifted to face me fully. “I’m leaving in a few weeks.”

“I know.”

“And there’s also...” She trailed off, eyes darting away.

“Reid and Enzo,” I finished for her. “I know that too.”

Her eyes met mine, searching. “And that doesn’t bother you?”

I considered her question carefully, wanting my answer to be honest. “It probably should. But it doesn’t.” I brushed a strand of hair from her face. “I don’t know what the hell is happening, Quinn. But I want to see where it goes. With all of us.”

“Me too.”

I cupped her cheek, feeling something powerful and terrifying building in my chest. “So where does that leave us tonight?”

“Kiss me, Kellan,” she whispered, leaning toward me.

I leaned forward, closing the distance between us. Our lips met softly at first, then with growing intensity as Quinn's fingers tangled in my hair. My heart hammered as she sighed into my mouth, making every coherent thought dissolve into nothing but sensation.

A loud, rumbling chuff interrupted us. Quinn broke away with a laugh that died on her lips as her gaze fixed on something over my shoulder. I turned, following her line of sight.

Not too far down the beach, silhouetted against the darkening sky, Reid sat motionless astride his horse, watching us. The distance was too great to make out his expression, but there was something about his posture that was both relaxed and intensely focused.

Reid remained motionless for a long moment before giving us a slow nod.

Quinn's breath caught, and before I even processed what was happening, our lips met with a hunger that said this kiss was only the beginning.

Chapter 17

Not Done With You

Quinn

Attempting to make out on the beach wasn't the brightest idea. There was a complete lack of privacy, and on top of that, Tater Tot attracted a lot of attention. The last thing I needed was to go viral for too much PDA.

Reid stayed behind us as we headed back to the ranch. The trail was dark, besides the light from the moon, and I clung to the saddle horn as if something was about to jump

out and scare the horse.

When we crested the last rise before the ranch, I breathed a sigh of relief and Kellan laughed from behind me. “You aren’t scared of the dark, are you?”

I turned my head enough so he could hear me. “I’m scared of what’s hiding there. There’s probably some man lurking in the shadows.”

“Or bears.”

I stiffened. “What do you mean, bears?”

“I know it’s not like the Sierra Nevada, but we’re along a mountain range. There was a bear the other day in downtown Pismo. Don’t worry though; they’re black bears.”

“Black bears? I’m pretty sure the color doesn’t matter when something is mauling you to death.” My voice pitched higher with each word.

Kellan’s chest rumbled against my back. “Black bears are pretty timid. They’re more likely to run away than attack.”

“Well, that’s reassuring. I’ll remember to tell it that while it’s snacking on my femur.”

His arm tightened around my waist, and I felt his breath against my ear. “I’d heroically sacrifice myself so you could get away.”

“How noble.”

I glanced over my shoulder, hoping to spot Reid’s silhouette again. The moonlight caught him perfectly. He was close enough that I could make out his steady presence on horseback but maintained enough distance to give us space. Something about knowing he was there, watching, made tingles dance across my skin.

The lights of the ranch appeared ahead, a warm glow punctuating the darkness. As we approached the stables, my anxiety about bears vanished, replaced by a different kind of nervous energy.

We were actually going to do this. Yes, Reid had watched before, but this time was different. This time I knew what their intentions were. This time I wanted them both.

Kellan dismounted first, his boots hitting the ground with a soft thud. He reached up to help me, his hands strong and sure at my waist even though I didn’t need his help. I slid down against his body, my hands braced on his shoulders.

“You two enjoy your sunset?” Reid’s voice was low as he dismounted his horse in one fluid motion.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “It was beautiful. Though Kellan tried to convince me we’re in bear country.”

“We are.” Reid led his horse toward the stable doors.

“See?” Kellan nudged me with his elbow. “I wasn’t trying to scare you into my

arms.”

“Though it worked,” I muttered, following them into the hay-scented interior of the stables.

The familiar sounds of horses shuffling in their stalls surrounded us, oddly comforting after the vast darkness of the trail. I stood to the side, not entirely sure what to do with myself as the men began unbuckling saddles and removing bridles.

The way their muscles moved under their shirts as they lifted the heavy gear made my mouth go dry.

“Think you could give us a hand?” Kellan glanced over his shoulder at me with a mischievous smile. “Or are you too tired from our adventure?”

I crossed my arms. “I’m not tired. What do you need me to do?”

Reid nodded toward the tack room. “Saddles need wiping down after being near the salt air.”

“I can handle that.” I’d helped Enzo wipe down saddles a few days ago.

Inside the tack room, the walls were lined with hooks holding bridles and other leather equipment I couldn’t name. Several saddles rested on wooden stands, and the air smelled like leather.

Kellan brought in the first saddle and placed it on an empty stand. “Get all the sand off, then give it a light coat of this.” He held up a bottle of leather conditioner.

I nodded, taking the bottle and a clean rag from him. “I think I can manage not to destroy a very expensive saddle.”

His eyes raked over me. “That’s my girl.”

My heart fluttered at the possessive term. I wasn’t his girl. Was I? I wasn’t anyone’s, technically. But the way my pulse quickened suggested my body had other ideas.

Reid brought in the second saddle, setting it on another stand without a word, his eyes meeting mine briefly before he returned to the horses.

I set to work, carefully wiping down the first saddle, making sure to get into all the crevices. The leather was smooth under my fingers, worn in places from years of use. I admired the craftsmanship, the detailed stitching, and the way it was both functional and beautiful.

I was so focused on my task that I didn’t hear the footsteps behind me until I felt the warmth of a body at my back. Strong arms wrapped around my waist, and hot lips pressed against the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder.

“Look at you, taking such good care of my saddle.” Kellan’s voice was a low rumble against my skin.

My cleaning cloth stilled on the leather. “I’m trying to be thorough.”

His hands slid up my sides, then back down to my hips. “I’ve been thinking about you bent over my saddle since we left the beach.”

My breath caught. “Oh?”

Kellan plucked the rag from my hands and then guided them to the horn of the saddle. “Put your hands here.” His voice dropped even lower. “And don’t move them.”

Heat pooled between my legs at his commanding tone. I gripped the saddle horn, knuckles whitening.

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Kellan stepped back slightly, his hands going to my waistband, unbuttoning my jeans and smoothly tugging them down along with my underwear, far enough to expose me. The cool air of the tack room hit my skin, making me gasp.

“Spread your legs a little wider.” He tapped the inside of my ankle with his boot. “Now lean forward.”

I did as instructed, bending at the waist, my upper body now angled over the saddle. I felt exposed, vulnerable, and impossibly turned on.

Kellan’s hand slid between my legs, fingers tracing my folds. “Already so wet for me.”

I closed my eyes, focusing on the feeling of his fingers exploring me. “It’s been building all night.”

“Has it now?” His finger circled my clit before pushing inside me, making me moan. “Tell me what you’ve been thinking about.”

Before I could answer, I sensed a change in the air. Opening my eyes, I saw Reid standing in the doorway, his intense gaze locked on us. I should have been embarrassed about being caught with my pants down, bent over a saddle. Instead, it only intensified the heat inside me.

Kellan must have noticed my reaction and the way my pussy gripped his fingers. “Look who’s come to join us.”

Reid stepped into the room and moved to stand where I could see him clearly but not close enough to reach.

“How wet is she?” Reid’s question was directed at Kellan, but his eyes remained fixed on my face.

Kellan added another finger, pushing deeper. “Dripping. Feel for yourself.”

Reid shook his head slowly. “Not yet. I want to watch first.”

My cheeks burned at being discussed this way, but my body responded with a rush of wetness that contradicted any objection.

Kellan’s free hand stroked my back. “She looks incredible like this, doesn’t she? Bent over the saddle, waiting to be taken.”

Reid nodded, his eyes darkening. “What do you think, Quinn? Do you like being on display for us?”

“Yes,” I whispered, not trusting my voice to remain steady.

“Do you know what I’ve been thinking about?” Kellan leaned over me, as he continued to work his fingers inside me. “How good you’d look with my cock inside you while Reid watches from this close.”

My knuckles whitened on the saddle horn. “Please.”

Reid moved closer, still not touching me. “Please what, Quinn?”

Kellan’s fingers withdrew, leaving me empty and aching. I heard his belt unbuckle and the rustle of fabric. “Tell us what you want, sweetheart.”

The words were stuck in my throat, but only for a moment. “I want to be fucked.” My cheeks flamed as the word left my tongue, but there really was no other word for what was about to happen.

Reid’s lips curved into a smile. “Good girl.” The approval in those two simple words echoed through me, making my fingers tremble against the saddle horn. His eyes never left mine, holding me captive in that gaze that seemed to see every desire I’d been trying to hide, every fantasy I’d kept locked away. The heat of his attention was almost as tangible as Kellan’s touch.

Kellan positioned himself, the head of his cock pressing against my entrance. “So fucking perfect.” With one powerful thrust, he filled me completely as I cried out.

“Look at how well she takes it.” Reid’s voice was thick with desire as he watched Kellan move inside me. “Like she was made for your cock.”

Kellan’s hands gripped my hips, holding me steady as he set a punishing rhythm. “She’s so tight and so fucking wet.”

Each thrust pushed me forward against the saddle, and I struggled to maintain my grip on the horn. Reid moved closer, close enough now that I saw the prominent bulge straining against his jeans. He unbuckled his belt, lowering his zipper with deliberate slowness.

“Do you want this too, Quinn?” He freed himself, stroking his length as he watched me being taken from behind.

My mouth watered at the sight. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?” His hand stilled.

I licked my lips, eyes locked on his cock. “I want you in my mouth.”

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Reid stepped forward until he was standing directly in front of me. “Ask nicely.”

With Kellan still pounding into me from behind, I struggled to form coherent thoughts. “Please, Reid. Please let me taste you.”

He brushed the head of his cock against my lips. “Since you asked so sweetly.”

I opened my mouth, taking him in as far as I could. The angle was challenging with Kellan’s thrusts rocking me forward, but that only added to the intensity of the moment.

Reid’s hand tangled in my hair. “Your mouth feels even better than I imagined.”

Kellan’s hips snapped harder against mine. “Look at her, taking both of us like she was born for it.”

I moaned around Reid’s length, the vibration making him hiss with pleasure. Being filled overwhelmed me, and I briefly wondered what it would feel like with two cocks inside me, which pushed me closer to the edge.

“That’s it.” Kellan’s voice was strained. “Take what you need, Quinn.”

Reid fisted my hair more firmly. “She looks so unreal like this.”

Their words fueled my desire, the dirty talk giving me new confidence. I hollowed my cheeks, taking Reid deeper as I pushed back against Kellan’s thrusts.

“I can feel how close she is.” Kellan’s fingers dug into my hips. “Her pussy’s squeezing me so tight.”

Reid’s thumb traced my stretched lips. “Come for us, Quinn. Let us feel it.”

Kellen reached around, finding my clit and rolling it between his fingers. “There we go... that’s what she needed.”

The tension that had been building shattered. I came with an intensity that bordered on painful, and I would have screamed if my mouth wasn’t otherwise occupied.

Kellan’s rhythm faltered as my inner walls fluttered around him. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

He pulled out suddenly, his release spilling across my ass cheeks as he groaned my name. It triggered another smaller orgasm that left me trembling.

Reid gentled his movements, allowing me to catch my breath. “That’s it, beautiful. Breathe.”

I released him from my mouth, panting. “Don’t stop.”

His eyes darkened. “Don’t worry. I’m not done with you yet.”

He wasn’t?

Before I could fully recover, Reid was behind me, his hand running up my spine.

“Don’t move.” His voice was dark, and the command sent a fresh wave of heat through my already sensitive body.

He slid his cock along my cheeks, coating himself in Kellan's release. The filthiness of it made my inner walls squeeze, desperate to be filled again.

"Look how eager she is." Reid's hand squeezed the back of my neck.

Who was this man, and where had quiet Reid gone? It was like something had been unlocked, and he was in his element.

Kellan leaned against a workbench, watching us with hooded eyes. "She's insatiable."

Reid's hand moved to my shoulder, pulling me up and away from the saddle. My legs wobbled beneath me as he turned me around to face him, his expression intense and hungry.

"On your knees."

I sank down without hesitation, my body responding to his command. His cock stood proudly in front of my face, glistening with evidence of what had just happened.

"Open."

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I parted my lips, and he slid inside my mouth, one hand cupping the back of my head. The taste was different now, creating something uniquely filthy.

“You taste that?” Reid’s fingers threaded through my hair. “That’s what Kellan tastes like on my cock.”

My cheeks burned at his words, but I moaned around him, taking him deeper.

“Next time, maybe he’ll leave it inside you.” Reid’s eyes never left mine as he spoke. “Then I can dip into his cum while I fuck you.”

The mental image was so filthy that I squeezed my thighs together, seeking friction. Reid noticed, his lips curving into a knowing smile.

“Touch yourself.” He guided my movements with gentle pressure on my head. “I want to see you come while I fuck your pretty mouth.”

My hand slid between my legs, finding my clit still swollen and sensitive. I circled it gently, my eyes fluttering closed.

“Look at me.” Reid’s voice brought my focus back to him. “I want to see your eyes when I come down your throat.”

I gazed up at him through my lashes, my fingers working faster between my legs as his cock slid in and out of my mouth.

Kellan moved closer, his hand lazily stroking his spent cock. “She’s exquisite like

this.”

Reid’s breathing grew more ragged, his control slipping. “Make yourself come, Quinn. Now.”

My fingers moved faster, the pressure building quickly.

“That’s it.” Reid’s hips snapped forward. “Swallow everything I give you.”

The first pulse hit the back of my throat, and I moaned around him. Pleasure radiated from my core to every nerve ending in my body as I struggled to keep my eyes open and locked with his.

When the last wave subsided, Reid slowly withdrew from my mouth, his thumb tracing my lower lip. “Perfect.”

My legs felt like jelly, my body completely spent.

Kellan appeared beside me with a clean rag, gently wiping my face and then moving to clean the remnants of himself from my ass and between my legs. “You did so well.” His touch was tender as he helped me stand and pull my pants back up.

Reid tucked himself away. “Can you walk?”

I shook my head, too exhausted to speak.

Without another word, he scooped me into his arms. “I’ve got you.”

Kellan pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “Let’s get her back to the house.”

The cool night air hit my flushed skin as they carried me across the yard. I nestled

against Reid's chest, listening to his steady heartbeat.

"This wasn't exactly how I pictured the evening ending," I mumbled against his shirt.

Kellan chuckled beside us. "Disappointed?"

I shook my head, my lips curving into a satisfied smile. "Not even a little bit."

Tomorrow, I'd probably panic and worry about leaving soon. But tonight? Tonight, I would let myself be carried back to the house by two men who had destroyed me in the tack room.

Chapter 18

Defiling the Kitchen

Enzo

Lathering up the sponge with more soap, I focused on the gentle circular motions across Tater Tot's flank. The horse flicked his tail lazily, enjoying the mini spa treatment like always. The day was unusually warm, and the water felt refreshing against my skin when it splashed.

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Quinn worked on the other side, her brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to mimic my technique. Her dark hair was pulled back in a messy bun, with wisps escaping to frame her face. She was wearing a tank top, revealing tanned arms that were developing more muscle definition after her two weeks at the ranch.

“So you grew up here?” Quinn dunked her sponge into the sudsy bucket.

I nodded, running my hand along Tater’s shoulder to check for any missed spots. “Not on the ranch exactly, but we were here enough helping that we might as well have been. I started spending a lot of time here as a teenager. This place saved me.”

She moved around to my side, grabbing a brush for Tater’s mane. “Is that why you take care of it so much?”

Her observation hit uncomfortably close to home. “Someone has to.”

“And the other guys don’t?”

“They do their part.” I frowned, immediately regretting my tone. “Kellan can charm anyone and get them to do anything. Reid has a gift with the animals. I’m just the guy who fixes stuff and keeps the spreadsheets balanced.”

Quinn’s hand stilled on Tater’s neck. “That’s not true. This place wouldn’t function without you. I’ve seen how the other guys look to you when decisions need to be made.”

The validation from her was unexpected, and heat crept up my neck. I busied myself

rinsing suds from Tater's coat, focusing intently on the water cascading down his side.

"You all met in college, right?"

Grateful for the subject change, I nodded, relief washing through me. Her perceptiveness could be unnerving sometimes, like she was reading parts of me I usually kept locked away.

"Cal Poly. All three of us were in Ag Business." I smiled at the memory. "Kellan and I were roommates freshman year, and it was a total disaster at first. His side of the room looked like a Mardi Gras parade had exploded. Reid was down the hall and was this quiet guy who kept to himself until we discovered he could save our butts on group projects. Somehow we clicked."

She moved closer to work on Tater's forelock. "And now you're business partners. That must be an interesting dynamic."

I chuckled. "Interesting is one word for it."

Her eyes met mine, something playful dancing behind them. "And what would be another word?"

"Challenging." I paused. "But they're family now."

We fell into comfortable silence, working together to rinse the soap from Tater's massive body. I couldn't help noticing how natural Quinn looked here and how quickly she'd adapted to ranch life. The thought brought a different question to mind.

I hesitated, rinsing another patch of Tater's side before blurting the question I probably shouldn't ask. "So... how was your night with Kellan... and Reid?"

Her cheeks flushed instantly. “It was...” She bit her lower lip, and there was a pull low in my stomach. “Really nice.”

The image of her with them flashed in my mind, and I swallowed hard.

“I wish you had been there too.” Her eyes met mine with a directness that made my breath catch.

I opened my mouth but couldn’t find words. Her expression shifted, uncertainty replacing the openness that had been there moments before.

Without warning, she flicked her sponge at me, sending a spray of water across my shirt.

“Hey!” I stepped back, surprised.

Her eyes widened innocently. “Oops. My hand slipped.”

I raised an eyebrow, fighting a smile. “Did it now?”

“Absolutely.” Her lips twitched, betraying her lie. “Complete accident.”

“Like this is going to be.” I reached for the hose and, before I could second-guess myself, sent a quick spray in her direction.

She squealed, jumping back. “Lorenzo Gustavo Perez!”

Tater Tot snorted at the commotion, shifting his weight slightly. I patted his flank reassuringly before leveling a challenging look at Quinn. “Who told you my middle name so I can shave their eyebrows off while they sleep?”

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She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “I’ll never tell.”

In response, I angled the hose again, this time my aim calculated. The stream caught her square in the chest, making her light pink tank top see-through.

“Oh, it’s on!” She lunged for the second bucket, picked it up, and tossed the contents at me.

I ducked, but that didn’t matter. Cold water hit my back; the sensation was shocking and... freeing.

For a brief moment, I stared at her, watching droplets trace their way down her face, her expression a mixture of defiance and glee. Something that had been wound tight for longer than I could remember loosened.

Without overthinking, I set the hose to a gentler spray and aimed again, chasing her around Tater Tot, who seemed remarkably tolerant of our impromptu water fight.

Quinn darted forward, making a grab for the hose. I lifted it out of reach, but she caught my wrist instead, trying to redirect the spray. We tussled playfully, water arcing in chaotic patterns around us as we both got progressively more soaked.

She slipped, and I caught her without thinking, one arm locking around her waist. Her laugh faltered as our eyes met. The hose kept spraying, but the world narrowed to the space between us.

Her hands gripped my forearms, steadying herself. We stood frozen, her body pressed

against mine, both of us breathing hard.

I became hyperaware of every detail of this moment: the way her tank top clung to her curves, how her throat worked as she swallowed, the flecks of gold in her eyes as she looked up at me.

A droplet slid from her hairline down her cheek, and I caught it with my thumb. Her breath hitched, and her hand came up, lightly brushing wet hair from my forehead.

I leaned down, hesitating a breath away from her lips, giving her time to pull back. Her eyes fluttered closed in an invitation I couldn't resist.

My lips found hers, gentle at first, then deepening as she pressed closer. My hands slid from her waist to her back, drawing her against me.

Tater Tot picked the perfect moment to remind us he existed, shaking off with a dramatic spray. We broke apart, laughing and sputtering.

"I think that's his way of saying bath time is over." Quinn giggled, pushing damp hair from her face.

I nodded, trying to reorient myself. We were both dripping, our clothes plastered to our skin, standing in a muddy puddle beside an equally wet horse. It should have been uncomfortable, but instead, I felt lighter.

"We should probably finish up." I picked up the hose and turned off the spray.

After drying off Tater Tot and putting him out to pasture for the rest of the day, we headed toward the main house to change.

I tried not to stare at the way her wet clothes clung to her curves. We'd stopped

dripping for the most part, but wet jeans were torture.

“Hold up.” I pointed to our mud-caked boots before she could step onto the porch. “Kellan will have a conniption if we track mud everywhere. He is on mopping and sweeping duty this week.”

She looked down. “Good call.”

We both leaned against the railing to pull off our boots. She balanced on one leg like a flamingo, her tongue caught between her teeth in concentration. I smiled at her determination.

After setting our boots neatly beside the door, we entered through the kitchen. I turned to suggest we make lunch after changing, but the words got stuck as she casually gripped the hem of her tank top and peeled it upward.

“What are you...” My voice cracked embarrassingly.

Her tank top hit the floor as she stood there in a simple white bra that had gone completely see-through from our water fight.

“What?” Her fingers moved to the button of her jeans. “They might drip water everywhere, and we can’t have that.”

My mouth went dry as she shimmied out of her jeans, revealing matching white cotton underwear. I stood rooted to the spot, unable to tear my eyes from her.

“You’re staring, Enzo.” Her smile was all heat.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. “Sorry.”

“I didn’t say I minded.” She stepped closer, leaving her discarded clothes in a heap on the floor. “We should probably get you out of these wet clothes too.”

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The kitchen was suddenly ten degrees hotter as her fingers found the buttons of my shirt, slowly unfastening them one by one. Her knuckles brushed against my skin, sending electricity through my body.

My shirt joined hers on the floor, and her hands came to rest on my chest, her touch light yet scorching. I drew in a shaky breath, fighting to maintain control.

This was going to get messy. Three men. One woman. She worked for us. Lived with us. Would be gone soon.

But what if she didn't leave?

Something shifted inside me as I watched her fingers trace patterns on my skin. I'd spent my entire adult life planning, calculating risks, and making sure everything was running smoothly. But standing here with her, soaking wet and half-naked in the kitchen, I suddenly didn't give a damn about being careful.

My hand moved to her face, thumb brushing across her lower lip. "I've been overthinking everything."

Her eyes widened slightly. "That's shocking. You? Overthinking?"

I smiled at her sarcasm. "I know. Hard to believe."

Her fingers trailed down my stomach, stopping at the waistband of my jeans. "So what are you thinking now?"

“That I’m tired of thinking.” One hand slid into her hair, loosening what remained of her bun. “I want you. Kellan wants you. Reid wants you.”

Quinn’s breath hitched. “And?”

“And maybe we should stop fighting it.” I pressed my forehead against hers. “Maybe we should see where this goes. With all of us.”

Her hands moved to my belt, working it open with surprising dexterity. “I think that’s the best idea you’ve ever had.”

I captured her mouth with mine, all of my restrained desire breaking free. Sure, I’d explored her with my mouth and fingers the weekend before, but now I wanted inside her.

I backed her against the kitchen counter, and her fingers fumbled with my zipper, equally urgent. “Last weekend...” I breathed against her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin below her ear.

She arched against me. “What about it?”

“I should have been inside of you.” I unhooked her bra with one hand, letting it fall to the floor. “I’m going to make up for that right now.”

Her eyes darkened as I cupped her breast, thumb circling her nipple. I lifted her onto the counter, yanking her underwear down her legs in one swift motion. My jeans and boxers quickly followed, kicked aside as I stepped between her thighs.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me closer. “I’ve been thinking about this since then.”

The memory of our night out dancing and then ending up tangled in her bed reignited a fire that was still smoldering. I gripped her hips, positioning myself at her entrance. “Tell me what you want, Quinn.”

Her fingers dug into my shoulders, eyes locked with mine. “I want you to stop holding back.”

Something primal uncoiled inside me at her words. I thrust into her in one fluid motion, swallowing her noises with a kiss. Her body tensed around me.

I stilled, giving her time to adjust. When she rolled her hips and her nails dug crescents into my back, I began to move. I set a rhythm that had her clutching the edge of the counter for support.

The sight of her with her head thrown back and her breasts bouncing with each thrust nearly had me coming. I slowed, determined to make it last.

Her eyes flew open. “Don’t you dare slow down.”

I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. “Demanding.”

She bit her lip, a challenge in her eyes. “You have no idea.”

I hooked my arms under her thighs, lifting her off the counter. She clung to me as I carried her the few steps to the kitchen table, laying her back on the wooden surface without breaking our connection.

The new angle drew a moan from her as I resumed my pace, driving deeper. Her hands reached above her head, gripping the opposite edge of the table for leverage as she met each thrust.

“Enzo, fuck, it’s so good.” Her voice was breathless as her body writhed beneath me.

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I leaned down to capture a nipple between my teeth, circling it with my tongue before releasing it with a pop. “I love how you say my name.”

Her legs tightened around me. “Enzo,” she repeated, deliberately this time.

My control slipped another notch. I gripped her hips, angling her to hit the spot that made her eyes roll back. Her body tensed, teetering on the edge.

“Not yet,” I growled, pulling out suddenly.

Her protest died on her lips as I flipped her onto her stomach, bending her over the table. I gathered her hair in my fist, using it to guide her into position as I entered her from behind.

The sound that escaped her was part surprise, part pleasure. I leaned over her, my chest against her back as I established a punishing rhythm, my free hand snaking around to circle her clit.

She pushed back against me, taking me deeper. “Yes, right there. Don’t stop.”

I nipped at her shoulder, marking her. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

Her breathing grew ragged, muscles flexing around me as she approached her peak. I fought my own release, determined to feel her come apart first.

The table rocked beneath us, the legs scraping against the floor with each thrust. In some distant part of my mind, I registered that we should probably be more careful

with the furniture, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

Her arms started to shake, struggling to maintain her position. I pulled out again, turning her to face me. Her pupils were blown wide, lips swollen from our kisses.

"Floor," I managed between breaths. "Deeper."

Understanding flashed in her eyes, and she knelt on the tile. I positioned myself behind her, one hand returning to her hair while the other gripped her hip.

I entered her again, setting a pace that had us both gasping. She dropped to her elbows, changing the angle and triggering a string of curses from my lips.

"Harder," she pleaded, looking back over her shoulder. "Please, Enzo, fuck me harder."

I gently pulled her head back and slid my other hand to her throat. I wrapped my fingers around it, applying just enough pressure without restricting her breathing.

Her reaction was immediate, her body clenching around me as she moaned. "Yes, like that."

My thumb traced her jawline as I maintained my grip, my thrusts growing more erratic as I neared my limit. She pushed back to meet each one, her body tensing.

"Come for me," I growled against her ear.

Her body obeyed, shuddering pleasure overtook her. I felt every pulse and contraction around me, and it pushed me over the edge. With one final thrust, I buried myself deep, my release crashing through me with an intensity that left me seeing stars.

We collapsed in a tangle of limbs on the kitchen floor, both of us breathing like we'd just won a race. I rolled to my back, pulling her on top of me, her hair a wild mess around her shoulders.

For several minutes, we lay there, heartbeats gradually slowing to normal. She traced lazy patterns on my chest, a satisfied smile playing on her lips.

"Well," she finally broke the silence, "that was worth waiting for."

I couldn't stop the laugh that escaped me. "Agreed."

She propped herself up on an elbow. "Though I think we might have traumatized your kitchen."

I glanced around at the scattered clothing, the table that had shifted position, and the puddles of water still drying on the floor. I stroked her back, enjoying her skin against mine. "Are we going to tell them that we defiled the kitchen?"

"Then they'll want details." Her finger traced a circle around my nipple. "We could always reenact it for them."

The image that conjured sent heat pooling in my belly again. "Or we could drop increasingly obvious hints at dinner and watch them try to figure it out."

She lifted her head, eyes gleaming with delight. "Oh, that's evil. I love it."

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I bet I can make Kellan choke on his food at least twice."

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“I bet I can make Reid blush three times. Winner gets a free orgasm anytime, anywhere.”

“You’re on.” I sealed our bet with a kiss that threatened to reignite everything.

She reluctantly pulled away, glancing at the clock on the microwave. “We should probably clean up.”

I sighed, knowing she was right. “Shower first?”

Her smile turned wicked. “Together? To conserve water, of course.”

“Of course.” I stood, pulling her up with me. “It’s the environmentally responsible thing to do.”

As we gathered our wet clothes from the floor, she paused. “Hey, Enzo?”

I looked up, caught off guard by the sudden seriousness in her tone.

“Thank you for not overthinking it and jumping in.”

A quiet kind of warmth took root and spread. “Thank you for making me want to.”

We might not know where this thing between the four of us was going, but for once in my life, I was okay with the uncertainty.

Chapter 19

Wooden Horse Whisperer

Quinn

I straightened the last granola bar in the basket, stepping back to admire my handiwork. The snack station was a work of art now that I'd gotten ahold of it. Before, the prepackaged snacks had been thrown in a basket haphazardly, but now they were arranged artfully in a fanned pattern.

The communal lodge was quiet this morning, with most of the guests out riding, hiking, or spending the day at the beach. I wasn't technically supposed to be working, but apparently my body clock had adjusted to ranch life, and I'd woken up at dawn. I'd decided to make myself useful rather than overthink my complicated situation with three incredibly attractive men.

We still hadn't discussed what we were doing exactly. It was a conversation we all needed to sit down and have together, but with a packed schedule and full cabins for the weekend, dinner together had proven to be impossible the night before.

The lodge door swung open, letting in a burst of air and the sound of excited chatter. A family of four walked in with a littleboy and girl who were about seven. Energy radiated from both of them like they'd had candy for breakfast.

The little girl stopped dead in her tracks, yanking on one of her father's sleeves. "It's the hobby horse lady!"

I froze, a bag of trail mix suspended midair. Me? The hobby horse lady? There really had to be a better name for me than that.

What about an alternative like "Equestrian Stick Enthusiast" or "Wooden Horse Whisperer"? Maybe "Thunderbolt's Champion" had a better ring? Or perhaps "Viral

Sensation Who Made Drunken Choices After a Breakup and Now Lives With Three Hot Cowboys”? That was a bit lengthy for business cards, though.

The boy rushed forward, practically vibrating with excitement. “Can we meet Thunderbolt and can you show us how to do the jumping thing? The one where you went really high and then did that trick with your legs.” He demonstrated by leaping awkwardly and kicking his legs out, his arms flailing so wildly that he nearly toppled a display of bottled drinks.

“Whoa there, buddy.” One of the dads put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Sorry about that. They’ve been talking about meeting you since we got here yesterday.”

I blinked several times, trying to process what was happening. “They wanted to meet me?”

The other dad stepped forward, offering his hand. “I’m Marcus, this is my husband Paul, and these little tornadoes are Everly and Liam. They’ve watched your videos about fifty times. You’re basically a celebrity in our house.”

“They have?” The words came out as a squeak.

Everly nodded enthusiastically. “The one where you were jumping over the barrels with Thunderbolt was so cool! I told my dads that I want a stick horse like yours!”

Liam pushed forward. “And the one where you fell and then got back up! That was my favorite ‘cause you didn’t cry!”

My cheeks heated as I remembered Kellan filming my stick horse adventures over the past week. I’d known he was posting them but didn’t know children were now looking at me like I was some sort of Disney princess.

“Well, um, thank you.” I set down the trail mix. “Are you enjoying your stay at La Cuesta?”

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Paul nodded. “The ranch is beautiful, and the horseback riding yesterday was fantastic. Kellan was our guide, and he’s quite the entertainer.”

“The only thing is,” Marcus said, glancing at the kids who were now circling me like tiny sharks, “we wish there were more structured kid-friendly activities. The horseback riding was great, but it was one hour, and then...”

“Then they’re bouncing off the walls of our cabin.” Paul laughed. “We were wondering if there might be any of those stick horse classes or something similar? The kids haven’t stopped talking about it.”

I nearly choked. “Classes? For hobby horsing?”

Everly clapped her hands together. “Could we make our own? With glitter and ribbons and everything?”

Liam jumped in place. “And then you could show us how to do the tricks!”

“I... um...” My brain struggled to catch up. People wanted to learn hobby horsing? From me? The woman who’d only picked up a stick horse a month ago after a bad breakup and too much liquor?

This was the second time someone had brought up a workshop or training. But what would that even look like?

“We’d be happy to pay extra,” Marcus added. “I’m sure other families would be interested too. There are at least three other kids around their age staying here this

weekend.”

I nodded before my brain had fully thought things through. “You know, that could be fun. We could decorate the horses, practice, and then have a little show afterward.”

The kids erupted in cheers, and their excitement was contagious, even if the idea of teaching hobby horsing felt utterly ridiculous. But so did having a Leprechaun break into my classroom every March, but I still always did it anyway.

“When?” Everly was jumping up and down. “Can we do it today?”

“Please, please, please?” Liam joined in, both of them giving me puppy dog eyes that would make Walter jealous.

I glanced at my watch. It was only nine. “I’d need to check with management, but I can call or text you? There aren’t any supplies here either.” My teacher brain was already kicking in, mentally listing craft materials we’d need. I could print out some certificates so that they could name their horses too.

As the family headed out, I stood in the suddenly quiet lodge, wondering what I’d signed myself up for.

I stuffed the hastily written list into the back pocket of my jeans as Reid and Enzo rode up outside the stables. They’d finished doing whatever it was they’d been doing; I had honestly lost track of everything they did on a daily basis. I wondered which one would be the harder sell on my idea.

They both dismounted and led their horses inside the stables, completely unaware of the sparkly chaos I was about to unleash.

I stopped a safe distance away. “Do you guys have a minute? Some guests would like

me to do something with hobby horsing, and I wanted to discuss it.”

Reid looked over his shoulder as he came to a stop with his horse. “Like a class? When?”

I tried not to look as sheepish as I felt. “Well, I was thinking... today? Maybe this afternoon?”

“Today?” Enzo’s voice was skeptical. “As in, a few hours from now?”

“Or tomorrow morning.” Checkout time for the cabins was eleven, but that should be enough time if I had to do it then. “The kids were so excited, and there are a few other kids who might be interested as well.”

Reid rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s pretty short notice for organizing something.”

“I know, but it’s not like we need to rent a venue or hire caterers. Just some craft supplies and a little space in the indoor arena. I could even do it in the lodge, but glitter will be involved.”

“Glitter?” Enzo began removing his horse’s saddle. “I’m not saying no, but adequate planning prevents poor performance.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did you print that on a motivational poster for your office?”

Reid snorted, earning a glare from Enzo. The corner of Reid’s mouth twitched upward, and Enzo’s eyebrows drew together even further, his jawline tensing. I watched the silent exchange between them, fascinated by how much they could communicate without words.

I stepped closer now that the two horses were aware I was there. It was crazy that a few short weeks ago I had been scared of them, and now I was stepping between two powerful animals like we were besties. “I’ve run enough art projects to handle this. All I need is a quick trip to the store for supplies and some help setting up a table or two in the arena.”

Enzo sighed, his resistance visibly crumbling. “Fine. But what if some kid gets glitter in their eye or stabs someone with scissors?”

What kind of art projects had he experienced as a child? “I’ll be supervising, so those things shouldn’t happen.” I couldn’t promise it though since I didn’t know the kids who would be coming.

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Enzo fought a smile, and I narrowed my eyes at him, not quite believing what I was seeing. He was actually making a joke about stabby children. All along I thought his sense of humor had been surgically removed at birth in exchange for his impressive ability to frown disapprovingly.

Reid gave his horse a treat after removing the bit. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“Really?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

Enzo checked his watch. “I’ve got to meet with the farrier in half an hour, but I can help set up when I’m done.”

Reid wiped his hands on a rag. “I can take you to get supplies. My afternoon’s clear since Kellan took over all the trail rides today.”

I couldn’t believe how easily both men had agreed. I’d been prepared for a battle, armed with at least three more persuasive arguments and possibly some begging if necessary. Instead, they’d practically rolled out the welcome mat for my half-baked plan. Somehow, my hobby horse idea was happening, and I was both thrilled and terrified at once. What if no one showed up? Or worse, what if everyone showed up and the whole thing was a spectacular disaster involving glitter emergencies and disappointed children?

I walked backward toward the door. “Meet you by my car in ten minutes? I need to grab my purse.”

The prospect of spending time alone with Reid made my cheeks warm, though I told

myself it was from the excitement of the project coming together.

By the time we made it to the store thirty minutes later, my nerves had turned into full-blown giddy chaos.

Reid was pushing a cart, watching me with amusement as I nearly squealed when I spotted the display of stick horses. “These are perfect!”

Reid examined one critically. “These are nowhere near as high quality as Thunderbolt.”

“Thunderbolt is a professional competition hobby horse with a very professional price tag. These are starter models for beginners, also known as kids’ toys.”

When April had sent me links to stick horses for hobby horsing, I’d nearly had a heart attack at the price tag. They’d ranged in price from thirty to over three hundred dollars. Of course, I had to fall in love with the one that cost nearly two hundred.

“How could I not know the difference?” He tossed six into our cart.

We hit up the craft supplies section next, and I stopped in front of the wide selection of glitter. “Now, before I begin, I have a very important question.”

“And that is?” Reid grabbed a tube of glow-in-the-dark sparkles, turning it in his hand like it was some alien artifact.

“What’s my budget? Keep in mind that these supplies can also be used for the kids’ camps.” I gestured at the shelves on both sides of the aisle stocked with a rainbow of art supplies.

“Get whatever you think you’ll need.” Reid put the glitter he was holding in the cart.

He seemed entirely unconcerned about the potential cost, which was refreshing after my ex-fiancé's constant commentary on my classroom supply spending.

I ran my fingers along a display of bagged pom-poms, feeling a rush of creative possibility. "Are you sure? Because when you give me free rein in the craft aisle, I tend to go a little overboard. Last summer, I ended up with enough pipe cleaners to create a life-sized replica of the Eiffel Tower." I wasn't entirely joking.

He didn't even look surprised. "You deserve it after bringing us so much new business."

I threw my arms around him. "Thank you! This is the best day ever." I pulled back quickly when I realized how childish I probably sounded.

Reid chuckled. "So craft supplies are the way to a woman's heart?"

"It's one of many ways." I turned my attention to the ribbons and immediately grabbed a variety spool that had all the colors of the rainbow. "When I was little, I used to think craft stores were more magical than toy stores. All this potential was sitting on shelves, waiting to become something."

Reid watched me, his expression soft. "I can see that about you. The way you look at things and see what they could be, not just what they are." He stepped closer. "It's one of the many things I like about you."

His gaze lingered, and heat flickered beneath my skin. "Are you flirting with me right now, Reid Dawson?"

"Is it working?" His voice dropped, low and teasing, making my body light up.

"Maybe." I grabbed a second spool of ribbon and placed both in the cart. "I have a

few more things on my list, then we're good to go."

Reid followed me dutifully down the aisle, adding a few things here and there. "So, I've been thinking... the four of us should go on a date."

I stopped at the sudden comment, and he nearly hit me with the cart. I turned to look at him, my hand still clutching a pack of multi-colored felt squares, sure I'd misheard him. "Like, all together at one time?" I struggled to visualize what that would even look like.

He rubbed his jaw, seeming uncertain. "Is that weird?"

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“Not weird. Surprising.” I laughed nervously, looking around like someone was going to jump out and tell me I can’t be with three men at once. “What did you have in mind? Do we all squeeze into one side of a booth at a restaurant while the server judges us silently?”

Reid’s fingers brushed against mine as we both reached for the same package of scissors, sending a tiny jolt through my system. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“You know, I never expected any of this.” I gestured vaguely between us. “When I came here, I was trying to escape my life for a bit, not... whatever this is becoming.”

Reid stepped closer, his voice dropping to a rumble. “And what is it becoming, Quinn?”

An energy swirled in my chest that was somewhere between nervous excitement and free-falling that I hadn’t felt since... well, ever. “I don’t know yet. But I like it.”

“That’s good enough for now.” His voice held a note of patience that said whatever I was feeling was perfectly fine and acceptable. No pressure or timeline, just acceptance of whatever this undefined thing was becoming.

I quickly turned back to the shelves, grabbing whatever my hand landed on. This man could undo me with one look, and somehow I was supposed to handle three of them? This wasn’t safe, or smart, but it felt right anyway.

Giddy Up

Reid

I pulled the office door closed, wincing at the high-pitched squeal that erupted from the indoor arena. It wasn't quite the sound of a child being murdered, but close enough that I checked twice.

"How many of those little gremlins are out there now?" Enzo collapsed into the rolling chair behind his desk, massaging his temples.

"Five." I leaned against the doorframe, watching through the small window in the door as Quinn directed traffic at the craft table.

Kellan sprawled on the loveseat, legs dangling over the arm. "They were all so excited to see the glitter too."

Enzo groaned. "We're going to be finding that shit in the horses' hooves for months."

I grabbed three waters from the mini fridge, tossing one to each of them as we fell into a comfortable silence. The quiet between us lately felt like we were all thinking the same thing but waiting for someone else to say it first.

Kellan finally cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably on the loveseat. The leather squeaked beneath him as he repositioned. "So... we should probably talk about Quinn."

"What about her?" Enzo's expression remained neutral, but a muscle in his cheek jumped. We all hated talking about feelings, but he was the worst offender.

Kellan waved a hand between us, like he was trying to trace whatever invisible thread

we were all pretending not to see. “The fact that we’ve all slept with her, for starters.”

I shifted my weight against the doorframe, feeling the wood dig into my shoulder blade. Part of me had been waiting for someone to finally name the thing we’d all been tiptoeing around.

I took a long drink while I collected my thoughts. Through the window, I saw Quinn laughing with one of the kids, completely unaware of our conversation. A quiet pang of longing settled behind my ribs as I watched her.

“Are you okay with that? You made a move first.” Even though we’d both been with her at the same time, the possibility was there that Kellan wasn’t, in fact, okay with it. He had the tendency to go along with things to keep the peace.

Kellan frowned, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I think so. Sometimes I do wonder if she’s comparing us or something. It would be hard not to, right?”

“Like keeping score on a report card?” I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Excellent in enthusiasm, needs improvement in duration? Little checkboxes for creativity and technique?”

Enzo snorted water through his nose. “Fuck you,” he spluttered, wiping his face with his sleeve. “Although if we’re being graded, I deserve extra credit for size.”

Kellan threw the cap from his bottle at him, hitting Enzo square in the forehead. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” There was an edge to his voice now, a rare flash of the vulnerability he usually buried under layers of charm and deflection.

I crossed my arms, considering. “It’s Quinn we’re talking about. Does she strike you as the type to keep score?”

“No, but she’s leaving soon. What happens when she goes back to her regular life?” Kellan’s question hung in the air, making the room feel smaller.

I’d been avoiding thinking about it, focusing instead on each day as it came. I traced the condensation on my water bottle with my thumb. Some things were meant to be temporary, but knowing that didn’t make them any easier to let go of when the time came.

Enzo spun slowly in his chair, his head resting against the headrest as he stared at the ceiling. “I think what Kellan is really trying to say is, what if she decides to stay and she only wants one of us?”

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That possibility felt like a stone in my gut. Now that I'd finally let my guard down with Quinn and let myself want something, the idea that she might choose one of us over the others made it suddenly harder to breathe.

Not that I'd blame her. What did I have to offer? A knack for understanding creatures that couldn't talk back. Had I been foolish to think someone like her would see anything lasting in someone like me?

"Then we respect her choice." The words tasted bitter on my tongue, but I meant them. "Whatever happens, we can't let it damage what we have here, but I also won't get in the way of one of you finding happiness."

"But what if she doesn't choose?" Kellan's voice was so hopeful that it made me pay closer attention.

Enzo stopped spinning, his chair making a small squeak against the wooden floor as he planted his feet. "Is that even possible long-term?" His voice carried equal parts hope and skepticism, like he was afraid to consider the possibility but couldn't stop himself.

"I don't know, but I'm not ready to decide it's impossible before we've even tried." Outside of the occasional moment where I watched the two of them with someone, we'd never seriously considered being with a woman like this. Now that it was a possibility, and we were all open to it, we had to give it a chance.

"So what are you suggesting?" Enzo leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Besides the obvious."

“I told her we should go on a date. All four of us.”

Kellan sat up straight like the thought had never occurred to him. “Like, together? At the same time?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s generally what ‘all four of us’ means.”

Enzo looked skeptical. “What did she say?”

“She seemed surprised but not opposed to the idea.” I shrugged, trying to appear more casual than I felt. Taking her out as a group was a declaration. We weren’t just fooling around anymore. We were in this.

Kellan pulled out his phone. “Then let’s get to planning.”

Thirty minutes later, we had a solid plan for a group date that we hoped Quinn would enjoy when there was a knock on the office door.

“Busted.” Kellan jumped to his feet as Quinn opened the door.

“Hey, guys. Do you have a minute? The kids are done with their stick horses, and they would love for you to see them.” She smiled at the three of us before turning back to the chaos.

I stood, stretching my arms overhead. I was feeling much better now that we’d talked and agreed on our first date activities.

We stepped into the indoor arena and straight into glittery chaos. What had been a relatively controlled craft situation had evolved into full pandemonium. Five children galloped around on their newly decorated stick horses, leaving trails of loose glitter in their wake.

Walter darted between the kids, barking excitedly at the commotion. He was going to get himself stepped on or become a tripping hazard. I whistled sharply, and he veered toward me, tongue lolling and coat covered in at least three different colors of glitter.

“You’re having a little too much fun, aren’t you, buddy?” I picked him up and brushed at his fur, sending pink sparkles onto my shirt.

Quinn had made it back into the center of the arena, her hair escaping from her ponytail in wild tendrils, laughing as one of the boys did an exaggerated jump over an imaginary fence. “Higher, Liam!” She clapped as he leaped, his face screwed up in concentration.

A little girl galloped past Quinn with surprising speed for someone with such short legs. Quinn caught my eye and grinned, and something inside my chest did a strange flip. I blamed it on the excessive sparkle in the air.

“Cowboys!” Quinn called out, waving us over. “Come show these kids how it’s done!”

Kellan immediately jogged toward her, ever the showman. Walter wriggled in my arms as if he didn’t want to miss the excitement either. The dog’s enthusiasm was infectious, even as I brushed pink glitter from my shirt with my free hand.

“Who wants to see the real cowboys do some tricks?” Quinn’s voice carried across the arena.

A chorus of excited yells erupted from the kids, who started jumping up and down, causing a shower of glitter to rain from their horses.

Enzo hung back beside me. “I’m not getting on a stick horse.”

Quinn beckoned us over with an exaggerated wave. “Cowboys, these fine equestrians want a demonstration!”

Enzo’s face transformed into a mask of horror. “She wouldn’t.”

“She absolutely would.” I was oddly okay with my fate.

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Kellan had already accepted a stick horse from one of the kids, and he pranced in place, earning squeals of delight.

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Enzo trudged forward like a man walking to his execution.

I put Walter down and followed, smirking as Quinn handed Enzo a stick horse that had purple ribbons and feathers all over it. His expression was a priceless mixture of resignation and disbelief.

She handed me a horse, her eyes bright with amusement. “Ready to see what these cowboys can do?”

The kids formed a semicircle around us, their eyes wide with anticipation. Enzo closed his eyes briefly, as if saying a silent prayer for death to take him quickly.

“Mr. Reid goes first!” A little boy pointed at me with the enthusiasm only a five-year-old could muster.

Five pairs of expectant eyes stared up at me. Behind them, Quinn’s eyes sparkled with mischief. I’d faced down angry bulls with less trepidation than I felt in this moment.

I started a slow trot around the arena, rising and lowering with each step to mimic a real rider’s rhythm. The kids immediately erupted in giggles.

“Faster!” one of the little girls yelled.

I picked up my pace, adding a bit more bounce. Walter followed, clearly thinking this was some new game invented just for him.

“That’s it!” Quinn clapped in rhythm to the music that had started to play over the speaker. “Giddy up, cowboy!”

I shot her a look that promised payback, then broke into an exaggerated trot, rising and lowering with each step like some deranged rodeo ballerina. The kids went wild.

As I came to a stop in front of my new fan club, a little girl with a unicorn shirt tugged on Enzo’s arm. “Your turn, Mr. Purple Horse!”

Enzo looked like he might spontaneously combust from embarrassment. He took a deep breath, visibly steeled himself, and began the stiffest trot I’d ever witnessed. His face remained completely expressionless as he moved around the arena, the horse bobbing mechanically between his legs.

Kellan doubled over laughing. “Man, you look like you’ve got a stick up your—” My sharp elbow to his ribs cut him off mid-sentence.

Quinn covered her mouth, shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. “Mr. Enzo, can you show us your gallop?”

The look Enzo shot her could have curdled milk. Nevertheless, he transitioned into what might generously be called a gallop, though it looked more like he was being electrocuted mid-hop. For a man who was good at dancing, he was not skilled with a stick.

“My turn!” Kellan twirled past Enzo on his horse in an elaborate flourish and launched into a full performance like he’d rehearsed this a dozen times already. His complete lack of self-consciousness was almost admirable. The kids followed his

every move.

“Now for the grand finale,” Quinn announced. “Cowboys, line up for a jumping competition!”

Enzo’s head snapped up. “A what now?”

The children screamed their approval, jumping up and down as Quinn moved a small hurdle into the center.

Kellan immediately stepped forward. “I’ll go first!”

He backed up several paces, giving himself a runway. With dramatic flair, he charged the jump, leaped over it with impressive height, and landed with a victorious whoop.

Enzo muttered something that I was glad the children couldn’t hear as he lined up with the jump, took a deep breath, and executed a perfectly commendable hop over the obstacle.

The kids applauded politely, and I got the distinct impression they were underwhelmed.

I squared my shoulders. If I was going to be humiliated, I might as well commit fully. Taking several steps back, I charged the jump. At the last second, Walter darted directly into my path. I swerved to avoid trampling him and caught the edge of the hurdle with my foot.

I flailed and stumbled forward, miraculously staying on my feet. I raised my horse in triumph as the kids cheered.

Parents began arriving shortly after, collecting their glitter-covered offspring who

chattered excitedly about the cowboy show. Each child left with their hobby horse, proud creations that would undoubtedly spread glitter to every corner of their homes.

As the last family departed, Quinn turned to us, her smile wide and unapologetic. “That was amazing! The kids had so much fun!”

Enzo brushed glitter from his shirt, a futile effort. “I hope you enjoyed yourself.”

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“I did.” She bounced on her toes, completely missing the dangerous undertone in his voice.

Kellan, Enzo, and I exchanged looks.

Her smile faltered slightly, eyes darting between us. “What?”

“Quinn.” I approached her slowly, my voice purposely casual. “You know what happens when you embarrass three cowboys, right?”

She bit her lip, her eyes darting between us. “What?”

Kellan moved to her left while Enzo circled to her right. “They plan revenge.” I took another step closer.

Quinn backed up slowly, recognition dawning. “It was for the children!”

“And revenge shall be ours.” Enzo’s voice was low, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Quinn’s eyes widened, her breath quickening as she glanced toward the exit. “I need to clean up this mess.”

“Yes, you do.” Kellan reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering on her cheek.

Her eyes widened. “What kind of revenge are we talking about?”

I leaned in, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. “The very sweetest kind... but it will have to wait.” I bent to retrieve an abandoned feather from the floor. “Don’t worry, we won’t forget.”

The three of us worked methodically around her as we helped her clean up, occasionally brushing against her as we passed. Quinn’s breathing quickened each time in anticipation.

By the time we finished, she was flushed, breathless, and practically vibrating. We let her walk away like that. For now.

Chapter 21

Sweet Revenge

Quinn

Itugged my brush through my damp hair, straining to hear any movement in the hallway. The house had gone eerily quiet after dinner, the three men vanishing to various corners of the ranch like they hadn’t collectively threatened sweet revenge hours earlier.

“Totally bluffing,” I muttered to myself, pulling on my sleep shorts and an oversized T-shirt that belonged to Kellan. They were just three grown men making empty threats.

The way they’d circled me like predators, Kellan’s eyes darkening, Reid’s intensity, and Enzo’s smoldering promise of retribution made me antsy but in a good way.

I flopped onto Reid’s bed, now my temporary sleeping quarters, and stared at the ceiling. With every small noise, my body tensed with anticipation.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Thirty.

An hour.

Maybe they really had been teasing. The disappointment and embarrassment hit harder than expected. Here I was, lying in wait like some heroine expecting to be ravished.

I grabbed my phone and texted April.

Me: I think I'm in trouble.

April: The fun kind or the actual kind?

Me: The kind where I don't want to leave this place or these men.

April: Called it. Totally called it.

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Me: What do I do? Enzo's cousin will be back soon.

April: Why can't you stay longer? You don't have your first professional development day until the middle of August.

I set my phone down, not wanting to tell April that if I stayed even longer, I was going to fall in love with these men. If that happened, I didn't know where that would leave us. Would they expect me to choose one of them eventually?

While I was sure there were at least a handful of women in the world who had two or more partners, it wasn't something that was talked about.

I hugged a pillow, squeezing it like it might provide the answers my spinning mind couldn't find. What I really wanted was someone to lay it all out for me with a clear roadmap through this tangle of feelings I'd stumbled into. Three men. One me. A situation I'd never imagined myself in.

Just as my eyelids grew heavy, the bedroom door creaked open with a slow, deliberate sound that instantly banished any trace of drowsiness from my system. My body went rigid, every sense suddenly, acutely aware as Reid's silhouette appeared in the doorway, followed by Kellan and Enzo close behind.

"We thought you might be sleeping already." Kellan's voice was a low rumble in the darkness.

I pushed myself up onto my elbows. "Not tired."

“Good.” Enzo turned on the bedside lamp, casting the room in a warm glow. “Because we’ve been deciding how to make you pay.”

Reid closed the door behind them with a soft click that seemed to echo through the room. “Revenge is a dish best served when you least expect it.”

The three of them stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at me with identical expressions of hunger. My mouth went dry.

“What exactly did you have in mind?” I tried to sound casual, but my voice came out breathy and weak.

Kellan’s slow grin was downright wicked as he pulled ropes from behind his back. And not the ones they used on the horses. These were bondage ropes.

My core clenched, and my breath caught. I’d never been tied up before, but damn, did it appeal to me now.

Reid moved to one side of the bed while Enzo took the other, effectively boxing me in. “We thought we’d decorate you a bit before taking you for a ride.”

I swallowed hard, eyeing the ropes in Kellan’s hands. They were dark red, almost burgundy, and looked soft.

“I’ve never...” I lost my ability to speak as Enzo approached, taking the ropes from Kellan.

“Do you trust us?” Enzo’s fingers worked the rope, his movements fluid and confident as he measured out a length.

Did I trust them? These three men who’d somehow tumbled into my life through a

hobby horse competition? Who'd shown me what it was like to be wanted not in spite of my quirks but because of them?

"Yes." The word came out stronger than I expected.

Reid moved closer, his hand gently cupping my cheek. "We'll stop anytime you want."

"Say 'red' if you want us to stop completely, 'yellow' if you need us to slow down or adjust." Kellan perched on the edge of the bed, his hand finding my ankle. "Green means?—"

"Keep going," I finished for him.

Enzo watched me for a long moment, his eyes unreadable. "Stand up for me."

I slid off the bed, suddenly feeling exposed even with my clothes on. My shirt might as well have been transparent under their gazes, each man watching me with an intensity that made my skin prickle with awareness. I fought the urge to cross my arms and shield myself from the vulnerability that had nothing to do with fabric and everything to do with the way they saw through me.

Kellan moved behind me, his breath against my ear as his fingers found the hem of my T-shirt. "Can I take this off?"

I nodded, lifting my arms as he peeled the shirt over my head, leaving me in my underwear. The cool air pebbled my nipples instantly, drawing three pairs of hungry eyes.

Reid knelt in front of me, his fingers hooking into the waistband of my underwear. "These too?"

My heart hammered as I nodded again. He dragged them slowly down my legs, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I stepped out of them, now completely naked.

“Beautiful.” Reid’s gaze traveled from my feet upward.

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Enzo circled me, the rope trailing from his hands like an extension of his body. “I want to create something special on you. Something that highlights all these gorgeous curves.”

I’d never felt there was anything particularly special about my body, but the way the three of them looked at me like I was the centerpiece of some feast they couldn’t wait to devour made me feel like a goddess.

“What do you need me to do?” My voice had dropped to a whisper.

“Stand still and let me work.” Enzo stepped behind me, bringing the first loop of rope across my collarbone.

The rope sliding against my skin was soft but sturdy, like a firm caress as he began creating intricate patterns across my body. His fingers worked with precise movements as he brought the rope around my torso.

Kellan moved to stand in front of me, his eyes darkening as he watched Enzo work. “Have you fantasized about being tied up before?”

I shook my head as Enzo created diamond patterns across my chest that framed my breasts without touching them directly. The slight pressure as he adjusted certain sections, the gentle friction as he manipulated the patterns, was like he was physically touching me.

Reid stepped closer, his fingertips tracing above the rope lines across my collarbone. “Can we touch her?”

Enzo nodded, continuing his methodical weaving as he moved the ropes around my ribs, creating an intricate harness. “Don’t disturb the lines I’ve already set.”

That was all the permission Reid needed. He leaned in, his lips brushing against my neck while his hand cupped my breast, thumb grazing over my nipple. I inhaled sharply at his touch and the ropes tightened around my torso.

Kellan moved behind me, pressing against my back as his hands slid around to my stomach, dipping lower. “Color?”

“Green,” I breathed, my head falling back against his shoulder as his fingers found my center, already slick with desire.

Enzo continued his work, now bringing the rope between my legs in a way that pressed against my most sensitive areas with every slight movement. The pattern continued up my back, seeming to connect every nerve ending in my body.

Reid’s mouth closed around my nipple, his tongue swirling as he sucked gently, then with increasing pressure that had me whimpering. Between his mouth, Kellan’s fingers stroking me from behind, and the rope’s constant pressure, I was rapidly approaching the edge.

“Not yet.” Enzo tugged a section of rope that tightened everything simultaneously. “I’m not finished decorating her.”

My legs trembled as Enzo continued his work, creating elaborate patterns down my thighs while Reid and Kellan touched, kissed, and tasted every available inch of skin but never let me go over the edge.

Reid dropped to his knees, his tongue replacing Kellan’s fingers between my legs, while Kellan’s mouth worked its way across my shoulders and neck, occasionally

catching my earlobe between his teeth.

“Please,” I whimpered, not even sure what I was begging for as the three of them worked in tandem until I was nothing but a bundle of raw nerves and desperate need.

“Almost done.” Enzo made a final few adjustments before stepping back to admire his work. “Perfect.”

Reid reluctantly pulled away from between my legs, leaving me teetering on the edge of release. Kellan’s hands stilled on my breasts, and suddenly all three men were simply looking at me, their expressions a mix of awe and hunger.

“Turn her toward the mirror,” Enzo instructed.

Reid and Kellan gently guided my trembling body until I faced the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door. I gasped at the reflection staring back at me.

The burgundy ropes created an intricate web across my body, highlighting curves I’d never appreciated before. Diamond patterns framed my breasts, a complex harness accentuated my waist, and delicate lines traced down my thighs. The ropes between my legs created a subtle pressure that kept me constantly aware of my arousal.

“Do you see now?” Enzo’s voice was rough with desire as he stood behind me, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “Do you see how fucking beautiful you are?”

“A masterpiece,” Kellan added, his hand trailing along the lines of rope across my stomach.

Reid knelt beside me, pressing a kiss to my hip. “Perfect.”

For once in my life, looking at my reflection, I believed them. The ropes transformed

me, not by hiding my flaws but by celebrating every curve, every stretch mark, every part of me.

My legs trembled beneath me as I stared at my reflection, hardly recognizing the woman looking back. I didn't realize how my fiancé cheating on me had affected my body image, but staring at myself now, all of that was gone.

My breath hitched as Reid slowly stood, his hand trailing up my bound leg until he reached the junction of my thighs. He gently tugged at the rope pressed between my folds, hitting me with a shock of pleasure.

I whimpered, my hips instinctively pushing forward.

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“I think she liked that.” Kellan’s hands finally made contact with my skin, sliding down my arms to grasp my wrists. He crossed my arms behind my back, and Enzo secured them with another length of rope.

The new position thrust my breasts forward, accentuating them within their diamond rope frame. The feeling of being completely at their mercy sent a fresh flood of wetness between my legs.

“Color?” Enzo’s eyes were intense as he checked in.

“Green.” I tested the new bonds and couldn’t move my arms at all now, which somehow made me feel even more aroused. “Very, very green.”

In a heartbeat, Kellan’s hands were on my waist, effortlessly lifting me and placing me on the bed. Enzo knelt beside me. “Put your feet on the bed and spread your legs wider for me, sweetheart.”

I complied, my thighs trembling as I opened myself to them. Enzo secured me to the frame of the bed so I couldn’t close my legs or adjust my position. The vulnerability was overwhelming.

Reid knelt on the bed next to me, his hand cupping my cheek, thumb brushing over my lower lip. “Now you’re ready for us.”

The three men exchanged looks, some silent communication passing between them. Then, as if choreographed, they began removing their clothes. My mouth went dry as each magnificent body was revealed.

And all three of them were painfully, beautifully erect.

“Who gets her mouth first?” Kellan’s hand lazily stroked his length.

Reid positioned himself so the tip of his cock was tantalizingly close to my lips. “I think she’s been waiting for me.”

Without waiting for permission, I leaned forward as far as I could, parting my lips to take him into my mouth. The groan that escaped him was deeply satisfying as I hollowed my cheeks, drawing him deeper.

“Fuck,” Reid hissed, his fingers tangling in my hair.

Hands gripped my hips, and I moaned around Reid’s cock as Kellan knelt between my legs, his length sliding through my folds, not entering me yet, just teasing along my wetness.

“So fucking wet.” Kellan positioned himself at my entrance. “Ready for me, Quinn?”

I could only moan in response, my mouth still full of Reid. The vibration of my moan around his cock made Reid grip my hair tighter, holding me in place as he began to thrust shallowly.

Kellan pushed forward, filling me in one slow stroke that had me whimpering around Reid.

“Look at her take both of you.” Enzo’s voice was tight with restrained desire as he moved to kneel on the other side of me, his hand sliding between me and Kellan to find my clit. “Think she can handle all of us at once?”

My eyes widened at the implication, meeting Reid’s heated gaze as he continued to

thrust between my lips. The thought of all three of them was both terrifying and thrilling.

Kellan established a rhythm, each thrust causing the ropes across my body to go taut. Between Enzo's skilled fingers on my clit and the two cocks filling me, I was rapidly approaching the edge I'd already been so close to several times.

Reid must have sensed it because he pulled back, his cock slipping from my mouth. "Not yet."

Kellan stilled inside me, buried deep. "You're right, it's too soon."

I whimpered at the sudden pause, my body thrumming with need. "Please don't stop."

"We're not stopping." Enzo's fingers hadn't paused, but he certainly wasn't working my clit like he had been. "We're just getting started."

It felt like I'd run a marathon, even though my body was completely immobilized. The tension between almost-there and not-yet-allowed made me tremble, every nerve ending screaming for release.

Kellan remained buried inside me, his jaw working with the effort of staying still. "You feel so fucking good around me. So tight."

The praise made me clench involuntarily around him, which pulled a hissed breath through his teeth. I tried to rock my hips, to create any friction at all, but the ropes binding my legs to the bed frame made it impossible.

Reid's thumb traced my lower lip, still wet from his cock. "Look at you, so desperate for us."

“Please,” I whimpered, tugging uselessly at the ropes binding my arms behind my back. The slight burn of the restraints only heightened everything.

Enzo’s fingers slid down to where Kellan’s cock stretched me, circling my entrance with feather-light touches.

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“I’m going to stretch you more, Quinn.” Enzo’s voice was thick with promise as one finger slowly slid inside me alongside Kellan’s cock.

My breath faltered at the burn of the additional stretch, my back arching as much as the ropes allowed.

“Color?” Enzo’s free hand swept up my bound torso, tracing the pattern of ropes across my skin.

“Green.” My answer came out as more of a moan than a word.

Kellan leaned forward, capturing my mouth in a deep kiss that swallowed my whimpers as Enzo worked a second finger inside me. The slight discomfort quickly melted into pleasure as my body adapted to the stretch.

“So good,” I panted against Kellan’s mouth when he finally released me. “So full.”

Reid smoothed a hand over my hair, as he watched Enzo’s fingers working me open. “Think you can take Enzo too?”

The question sent a flood of wetness between my legs. I wanted to be filled completely and give myself over to them entirely.

“Yes.” The word came out garbled with a moan. “Please, yes.”

Enzo added a third finger alongside Kellan, stretching me further, preparing me for what was to come. “She’s ready.” He withdrew his fingers, leaving me feeling empty

despite Kellan still inside me.

Kellan leaned forward, creating enough space for Enzo to enter me from behind him. My pulse skyrocketed as I watched Enzo grab a small bottle from his discarded pants and slick himself with lube, his eyes never leaving the place where Kellan and I were joined.

Reid's hand stroked through my hair, grounding me as Enzo positioned himself at my entrance. "Breathe, Quinn."

I sucked in a shaky breath as Enzo began to push forward, the head of his cock stretching me alongside Kellan. The pressure was intense, bordering on too much, but not quite crossing that line.

"Fuck," Kellan groaned, his forehead dropping to my shoulder. "That feels good."

Enzo pushed forward with excruciating slowness, giving my body time to adjust to each new inch. "You're taking us so well."

I couldn't form words as the slight discomfort of Enzo fully seated alongside Kellan quickly dissolved into an intense pleasure.

Reid's cock brushed against my lips again, demanding entrance. I opened for him eagerly, desperate for something to focus on besides the overwhelming fullness between my legs.

Above me, Kellan and Enzo established a rhythm so that when one pulled back, the other pushed forward, ensuring I was always filled completely. They had me trembling, the ropes across my body emphasizing every movement.

Reid's hands tangled in my hair, holding me steady as he thrust shallowly into my

mouth. "Look at me."

I raised my eyes to meet his, the intensity of his gaze making me moan around his cock. The vibration pulled a grunt from him.

Between my legs, Enzo and Kellan moved faster, their rhythm becoming less coordinated as pleasure took over. Kellan reached between us, his thumb finding my clit. The added stimulation was almost too much, pushing me rapidly toward the edge I'd been denied several times already.

"She's getting tighter." Enzo's pace faltered slightly.

"She's close." Kellan circled my clit with more pressure. "Let's make her come."

Reid pulled back enough to allow me to speak. "Can I? Please, can I come?"

The desperation in my voice seemed to affect all three of them, their movements becoming more urgent, more demanding.

"Come for us, Quinn." Reid's command was all I needed.

The orgasm crashed into me with a force that made me scream, my body pulsing around the two cocks inside me. The waves of pleasure were so intense they bordered on unbearable as they washed over me again and again.

Kellan came first, his hips jerking as he spilled inside me with a hoarse shout. The feeling of his warmth flooding me, combined with the continued thrusting from Enzo, prolonged my orgasm, leaving me gasping and trembling.

Enzo wasn't far behind, his rhythm faltering as he drove deep one final time, his cock pulsing inside me alongside Kellan's. The feeling of both of them filling me was both

filthy and incredibly satisfying.

For a moment, no one moved, all of us panting and overwhelmed. Then Kellan carefully withdrew, followed by Enzo, leaving me empty and dripping. The sight must have been too much for Reid, who growled low in his throat as he pulled away from my mouth.

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“My turn.” Reid moved between my still-bound legs, his cock harder than ever.

Kellan collapsed beside me, his hand lazily stroking my sweat-dampened hair.

“Think you can take more?”

“Yes.” The word came out wrecked and breathless, but I meant it. Even after the intensity of what we’d just done, I wanted Reid too.

Reid positioned himself at my entrance, pushing into the wetness left behind by Kellan and Enzo. “Fuck,” he hissed, burying himself to the hilt. “You’re so wet with them.”

The filthy observation sent another rush of heat across my body. Reid established a punishing rhythm, each thrust pushing me toward another peak I wasn’t sure I could reach again so soon.

Enzo moved to untie my legs, releasing them from the bed frame but leaving the decorative ropes in place. The freedom allowed me to wrap my legs around Reid’s waist, changing the angle and driving him deeper.

I moaned as he hit a spot inside me that had stars dancing behind my eyelids.

“That’s it,” Reid encouraged, his pace never faltering. “Take what you need.”

Kellan’s mouth found my breast, sucking a nipple between his teeth while Enzo worked his hand under my back and pulled at the ropes binding my arms. The moment my arms were free, I wrapped one around Kellan’s shoulders and tangled the

other in Reid's hair, holding on as he drove into me.

Reid's hand slipped between us to circle my clit. "I can't... it's too much."

"You can," Reid insisted, his eyes locked on mine. "One more time, Quinn. Come for me."

The combination of his words, his touch, and the feeling of Kellan's mouth on my breast pushed me over the edge once more. This orgasm wasn't as forceful but deeper somehow, wringing a sob from me as my body tensed around Reid's cock.

Reid's rhythm stuttered, then became erratic as he chased his own release. With a final thrust, he buried himself deep, pulsing as he filled me.

For several moments, the only sound in the room was our combined ragged breathing. Reid carefully withdrew, collapsing on my other side so I was sandwiched between him and Kellan, with Enzo stretching out across the head of the bed.

"Holy shit," I finally managed, my voice hoarse.

Kellan trailed his fingers along the rope marks decorating my skin. "That about sums it up."

"How do you feel?" Reid's question was soft, his concern evident as he propped himself up on one elbow to look down at me.

"Like I've been thoroughly fucked by three gorgeous men." I grinned up at him, feeling loose-limbed and sated.

Enzo moved off the bed and began carefully removing the ropes, his touch gentle as he unwound each section. "Any numbness or tingling?"

I shook my head, loving how the ropes slid against my sensitive skin as they were removed. “It feels good. Really, really good.”

As the last of the ropes fell away, revealing temporary indentations in my skin that marked their paths, Kellan traced the patterns. “These look beautiful on you.”

“We should get you cleaned up.” Reid started to move as if to get a washcloth, but I caught his wrist.

“Not yet.” I wanted to savor this moment, to lie here nestled between them, feeling claimed and protected and thoroughly satisfied. “Stay with me a while longer.”

All three men settled back around me, their hands gently caressing my marked skin. In that moment, everything felt right, like all the wrong turns and heartbreaks had led me exactly where I needed to be.

And I wasn’t ready for it to end.

Chapter 22

A Simple Truth

Quinn

I clutched my phone, staring at the confirmation email like it might vanish if I blinked too hard. I was now a confirmed participant in the Western Regional Hobby Horse Invitational.

The strange part? I wasn’t even drunk when I filled out the application. There was no alcohol-fueled decision-making. No post-breakup spiral. Just me, fully sober, choosing something ridiculous that made me happy.

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Something that felt like... me. The real me. The me I'd forgotten existed.

Nervous energy coursed through me as I slipped my phone into my back pocket. I needed to tell the guys. They'd get a kick out of this, especially after watching me practice nearly every day.

I grabbed my hat and headed out toward the stables. The afternoon sun beat down, making me grateful for the shade of my hat brim as I walked the familiar path.

The ranch smelled like hay and horses and that earthy scent that had somehow become comfort in such a short time. I reached the stables' entrance, expecting to find the guys working, but slowed my steps when I heard their voices drifting from the tack room.

"She handled that group today like she's been running camp for years." Reid's voice, unmistakable in its quiet appreciation.

"Well, she is a teacher." There was a quiet laugh that could only belong to Kellan. "I wouldn't have thought to do stick horse relays, but the kids ate it up."

"Marisol texted. She's cleared to come back next week." Enzo's tone was tinged with some emotion I couldn't place without seeing his face.

Kellan let out a breath. "Good. That'll take the pressure off Quinn. She's been doing everything."

"Yeah." Enzo's voice trailed off as if he was unsure. "I don't want her to feel like

she has to stay. She didn't sign up for all this."

Did they not want me to stay?

My feet stopped moving like they'd been glued to the floor. He wasn't cruel or even wrong. Their discussion was matter of fact, like deciding on feed schedules. It was a simple truth I'd been trying to ignore.

I was temporary.

These men were permanent fixtures in each other's lives. They were lifelong friends, business partners, and family in all but blood. And I was the woman who'd blown in on a hobby horse and would eventually blow back out.

I backed away silently, my earlier excitement deflating into something small and uncertain. The competition notification on my phone suddenly felt like it was burning a hole in my pocket; a reminder that everything here rested on borrowed time.

Just like my failed engagement had been.

My throat tightened as I walked away from the stables, veering off toward the fence line where the horses grazed. I leaned against a post, watching Tater Tot meander through the tall grass with his massive frame moving in that gentle giant way of his.

What was I doing? Soon I'd be back in my classroom, teaching seven-year-olds. These men had lives that would keep spinning without me. They had horses to train, fences to mend, and a business to run.

I pulled my hat lower over my eyes, which were now filling with tears.

Why was I even surprised? It wasn't like we'd discussed any future beyond my

vacation. I came here for a week, decided to stay a little longer, and now what? I'd been entertaining some fantasy where I never left? Where I somehow slotted into their lives permanently?

I pulled out my phone again, staring at the competition notification. In three weeks, I'd be prancing around on a stick horse in front of judges and spectators. Would Kellan, Reid, and Enzo even want to come?

A sharp whinny cut through my thoughts as Junebug trotted over to the fence, her dark eyes fixed on me like she understood every confused thought in my head.

"Don't give me that look." I reached out to stroke her velvety nose. "I'm fine. Everything's fine."

Junebug huffed against my palm.

"Okay, I'm lying. But what did you expect? That I'd move in with three cowboys and live happily ever after? That's not how real life works."

Except nothing about this situation was how real life worked. People didn't just win hobby horse competitions that sent them to ranches. Elementary school teachers didn't end up in relationships with three men who ran said ranch. Breakups didn't lead to intense sexual awakenings with multiple partners.

Yet here I was.

Junebug pressed her head against my shoulder, surprising me again with her gentleness. For a horse that Reid claimed had attitude issues and was dangerous, she seemed to understand exactly what I needed.

I ran my fingers through her mane. "I should talk to them. But how? 'Hey guys, I

know I'm supposed to leave soon, but what if I didn't?' That sounds desperate."

I was hit with conflicting emotions. I'd spent so much of my life playing it safe and following rules. I usually made practical choices, which had led me straight into the arms of a man who'd cheated on me and then blamed me for it.

Maybe it was time to stop playing it safe.

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Junebug chuffed, practically blowing my hat off my head with the force of her exhale. I steadied the brim with one hand, laughing as her breath ruffled my hair.

A throat cleared behind me, and I jumped, nearly losing my balance. My traitorous heart recognized the sound before my brain did, sending a rush of warmth through me even as embarrassment flared up my neck. I steadied myself against the post and took a calming breath before turning around. I'd been so wrapped up in my one-sided therapy session with Junebug that I hadn't heard footsteps approaching.

"Should I be jealous?" Reid stood a few feet away, hands tucked into his jeans' pockets, his lips curving into a half-smile that always made my stomach flutter.

I regained my composure and stroked Junebug's nose. "She seems to like me better than you."

Reid approached cautiously, and I noticed Junebug's ears flatten slightly. "She usually only likes me."

"She appreciates my lack of expectations." I watched as Reid tried to reach toward her, only for Junebug to pull her head away.

Reid crossed his arms, studying us both with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. "She's fixated on you."

I ran my hand along Junebug's neck, feeling an odd sense of pride at this special connection. "I should try riding her sometime."

Reid's expression shifted instantly from relaxed to alarmed. "You should absolutely not."

"Why? She loves me." I wrapped my arms around Junebug's neck and pressed my cheek against her hide. "Don't you, girl?"

"Junebug is unpredictable and has thrown riders with decades of experience." Reid took a step forward, his brow furrowed with concern. "She's not safe, Quinn."

As if understanding his words, Junebug's head snapped toward Reid, teeth bared in a flash of warning that made him jump back.

My mouth fell open. "Did she just snap at you?"

"Yes." Reid blinked several times, looking puzzled. "She did."

"There's no way she understood what you said." I glanced between them, an absurd referee in a human-equine disagreement.

"Horses understand more than you think." Reid kept a careful distance now, eyeing Junebug with new wariness. "But that was unusual."

Junebug pressed her nose against my shoulder again, completely docile with me. The contrast between her behavior toward Reid versus me was so stark it was almost comical.

"Maybe she's trying to tell us something." I scratched behind her ears, earning a contented huff. "Like that you should let me ride her."

Reid ran a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends slightly. "I'll have to think about it. We'd need to work up to it. Start in the arena with a lead line. Test her responses."

“I get it.” I shrugged, feigning nonchalance while testing the waters. “It’s not like I’ll be here that much longer anyway. Probably better not to let her get too attached.”

The words hung in the air between us, heavier than I’d intended. I hadn’t meant to bring up my impending departure so bluntly, but there it was, the awkward truth wedged between us like Junebug herself.

Reid’s expression shifted almost imperceptibly, the kind of flicker in his eyes that I might have missed if I hadn’t spent so much time studying his face when he wasn’t looking. The sun beat down on us, highlighting the fine lines of concentration across his forehead. Even Junebug seemed to sense the sudden tension, her ears flicking forward then back as she nudged my shoulder again, as if urging me to fix what I’d broken.

Reid nodded slowly. “Yeah, that’s probably smart.”

My heart sank. No protest, no suggestion that I should stay. Just agreement that keeping a boundary between Junebug and me made sense because I was leaving.

I swallowed past the lump forming, trying not to let my disappointment show. “Well, I should probably go finish up some things.”

Reid stepped closer, careful to stay out of Junebug’s strike zone. “I wanted to remind you about tonight.”

“Tonight?” I blinked, momentarily distracted from my gloom.

“Our date.” His smile returned, softer now. “The four of us.”

The fluttering in my stomach returned full force. “Oh, right.”

“You didn’t forget, did you?” Reid’s eyebrows raised slightly.

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“No! I...” I hesitated, realizing I still had no idea what the men had planned. “No one has told me where we’re going or what we’re doing.”

Reid’s smile widened to a devastating grin. “That’s because it’s a surprise.”

I glanced down at my dusty jeans and sweaty T-shirt. “Am I supposed to dress up? Because right now I look like I’ve been rolling around in the paddock with the goats.”

Reid’s eyes traveled down my body and back up in a slow appraisal that sent heat creeping into my cheeks. “What you’re wearing now is fine.”

“This?” I gestured at my decidedly unglamorous outfit. “You can’t be serious.”

“Maybe change your shirt to a fresh one and bring a light jacket.” Reid started backing away, the smile never leaving his lips.

“Reid Dawson!” I called after him. “Where are we going?”

He tapped the side of his nose and continued walking backward. “Six o’clock.”

I huffed in exasperation as he turned and walked away, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

Junebug nickered softly beside me, as if she were laughing too.

I patted her neck. “Well, at least I don’t have to stress about what to wear.”

But that left me with more time to stress about everything else. Where were we going that my current outfit would be appropriate? A hayride? Cow tipping? Some weird cowboy ritual involving fence post inspection?

And more importantly, why was I overthinking this so much? This wasn't my first time alone with these men. We'd already been intimate in ways that made my cheeks burn thinking about it.

Yet somehow, an official date felt more significant than all of that. More intentional. And intention implied a future, which was something that apparently none of them were considering.

I gave Junebug one final pat and stepped back. "Wish me luck, girl. I have no idea what I'm walking into tonight."

As I headed back toward the house to shower off the day's dust, I tried to quiet the voice in my head that kept asking the same question: If they knew I was leaving soon, why bother with a date at all?

Unless they were planning to ask me to stay? Or this was a nice send-off before I returned to real life.

Either way, I had a few hours to settle my nerves before finding out what the evening held. I hoped my heart would survive whatever they had planned.

Chapter 23

Funnel Cakes

Enzo

I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel as the traffic on the highway slowed. We were headed toward the fairgrounds, and I snuck another glance at Quinn in the passenger seat. The evening sun caught in her hair, turning the strands to honey, and I forced my eyes back to the road before I got us all killed staring at her.

“Cotton candy is god-tier fair food,” Kellan announced from the backseat. “Then funnel cake, then those giant turkey legs, then anything deep-fried on a stick.”

Quinn laughed, but the sound didn’t match her eyes.

I’d come to recognize that disconnect in the past three weeks. She was smiling, nodding at all the right moments, but there was something tight around her eyes and something restless in the way she kept smoothing her hands over her jeans.

Reid made a noise in his throat. “Hard disagree. Funnel cake reigns supreme. The powdered sugar alone puts it at the top.”

I flicked my eyes to the rearview mirror. “Kettle corn.”

All three of them turned to stare at me.

I shrugged one shoulder. “Sweet and salty. Perfect balance.”

Quinn’s lips curved into something closer to a real smile. “I thought you were going to say something about taking your own snacks like a responsible adult.”

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“Even I have layers.” I caught her eye again, and for a moment, the tension in her face eased.

Three weeks. That’s all it had been since she’d arrived at La Cuesta with her stick horse and her sunshine smile. Three weeks, and somehow she’d managed to upend everything I thought I knew about my life and about what I wanted.

Quinn turned to look out the window as we pulled into the parking area, and I wondered what she was thinking. Would she think we were crazy if we asked her to stay? The school year was coming up fast, and she had a job.

I paid the parking attendant and found a spot to park. As we climbed out of the truck, I noticed Quinn’s fingers tapping nervously against her thigh.

“You okay?” I stepped closer, keeping my voice low.

She startled slightly. “Yeah! I’m excited. I haven’t been to a fair since I was a kid.”

Her eyes darted away too quickly, and I knew she was lying about being okay. But I wasn’t going to push her. Not here, with Kellan already bounding ahead like an over-caffeinated goat and Reid looking amused behind him.

“Well, if you need to talk, I’m here.”

Quinn paused, searching my face like she was looking for something beyond my words. “It’s our first real date.”

Yes, it was our first date after we'd already been intimate and after she'd already turned our world upside down.

"Is it okay? We wanted to do something fun." I reached for her hand before I could overthink it, lacing my fingers through hers. "We thought it would make you smile. Although all you've been giving tonight is your teacher smile."

Her eyes widened. "I have a teacher smile?"

"You have several." I tugged her along as we began walking toward the entrance. "There's the polite one, the one you use when you're excited but trying not to show it, and the one that lights up your whole face when you're truly happy."

Her fingers squeezed mine. "You've been paying attention."

We reached Reid and Kellan, who had already bought tickets for all of us. As we passed through the entrance gates, the fairground spread before us in a riot of color and noise. Food stands lined the pathways, carnival games flashed with cheap prizes, and rides spun against the darkening sky.

It wasn't exactly what I would have chosen, but now that we were here, I was glad Kellan had convinced me and Reid that it would be perfect.

Kellan spread his arms wide. "What first? Food? Games? The Ferris wheel? You'll have to go on it three times, Quinn, so that each of us can get a turn sitting next to you."

I rolled my eyes. "You're ridiculous."

Quinn's eyes darted between the three of us. "I don't know. What do you guys usually do?"

“Usually, we just go in the morning to view the animals to see if any catch our eyes.” Reid took Quinn’s other hand.

We went to the exhibition hall first, where we wandered between stalls of handcrafted items and local businesses.

“Look at these wooden carvings of animal butts.” Kellan pointed dramatically. “You know what the world needs? More moose hindquarters.”

Quinn’s laughter rang out, genuine this time. The worried crease she’d been sporting between her brows smoothed away as she examined a raccoon rear end.

I stayed back, watching her move from booth to booth. She stopped at a jewelry display, her fingers hovering over a delicate silver bracelet with a tiny horse charm. She lingered, then reluctantly moved on when Kellan called her over to look at something else.

While she was distracted, I slipped back to the jewelry vendor.

“I’ll take this bracelet.” I grabbed the one Quinn had been looking at and pulled out my wallet.

The older woman smiled. “Your girlfriend has good taste. This is handmade by my daughter.”

“She’s not—” What was Quinn to me? To us? “It’s perfect for her.”

Transaction complete, I tucked the small paper bag into my pocket and caught up with the others. Quinn was giggling as Reid tried on a ridiculously large cowboy hat that made him look like a cartoon character.

“Thinking of a career change to a rodeo clown?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

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Reid adjusted the enormous hat. “What do you think? Too subtle?”

“It’s giving urban cowboy who’s never seen an actual horse.” Quinn reached up to straighten it on his head, her fingers brushing his hair.

Something warm and unfamiliar settled in me as I watched them. Not jealousy, which would have been my default reaction before she came into our lives, but something gentler. A quiet contentment, like watching the sunset paint the sky.

I smiled at their easy affection, the same way I smiled when I spotted our misfit family of five goats huddled together under a tree during a light rain. The realization struck me that I wasn’t just tolerating this change, but I was embracing it.

Kellan bumped my shoulder. “You’re staring.”

I blinked and looked away. “No, I’m not.”

“Your face got all soft.” Kellan grinned. “It’s cute.”

I scoffed, but didn’t deny it. What was the point?

After we had thoroughly wandered the exhibition hall, we made our way to the livestock area, passing the prize-winning cattle and sheep. Quinn moved slowly, taking in everything and asking questions.

When we reached the petting zoo area, she froze, her gaze locked on a miniature horse no bigger than a large dog.

“It’s like Thunderbolt came to life.” Her voice was hushed with wonder. “Why don’t you guys have one of these?”

I snorted. “Debra would never allow it.”

Quinn put her hands on her hips. “Did you ever think that Debra might be lonely? Maybe we should pick a donkey out while we’re here.”

We.

She didn’t seem to notice she’d said “we,” but the rest of us did. Reid’s eyebrows lifted, while Kellan’s face broke into a slow smile. Our eyes met in silent acknowledgment as she continued to coo at the miniature horse.

Something shifted between us, a wordless understanding that was simultaneously momentous and inevitable. It reminded me of the moment when a skittish horse finally accepts the saddle; the subtle surrender that changes everything. I tucked the realization away carefully, like the bracelet in my pocket, not wanting to examine it too closely yet.

Kellan raised his phone. “Stand next to it; I’ll take a picture for our social media pages.”

She positioned herself beside the miniature horse, trying to look casual while posing. She clearly wasn’t used to posing for photos, and I watched her adjust her stance three different times, each pose more unnatural than the last, before finally settling on what looked like a prom photo with the tiny horse.

“Relax.” I moved behind Kellan. “You’re not getting your driver’s license photo taken.”

Quinn stuck her tongue out at me, and Kellan captured the moment. He showed her the screen, and she laughed at herself.

“I feel so awkward knowing that the picture is going to go up on social media and tons of people will potentially see it.”

Kellan looked concerned. “I don’t have to post it.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s going to take time to get used to,” she said.

After the animal barns, hunger drove us toward the food stands. The smells of fried dough and grilled meat filled the air.

“I’m getting one of everything.” Kellan rubbed his hands together gleefully.

Reid wrinkled his nose. “And then puking on the Tilt-a-Whirl?”

“Worth it.”

“There will be no puking.” I cringed. “What do you want, Quinn?”

She bit her lip, scanning the options. “Funnel cake. To start.”

“To start?” I raised an eyebrow.

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Her chin lifted in defiance. “According to Reid, it’s the supreme fair food.”

We loaded up on funnel cake dusted with powdered sugar, corn dogs, kettle corn, and whatever monstrosity Kellan had found that involved deep-fried cookie dough.

Quinn took a bite of funnel cake and closed her eyes. Her expression of bliss sent heat through my body. I shifted, focusing on my corn dog with a side of kettle corn.

After stuffing ourselves, we wandered through the midway. Colorful lights flashed against the darkening sky, game operators called out challenges, and children shrieked from the spinning rides.

Reid stopped at a ring toss game, eyeing the array of stuffed animals hanging from the top of the booth. When was the last time I had seen the man play a game of any kind?

He paid, took the rings, and made three out of five tosses.

“Winner! Choose your prize from the middle row.”

Reid pointed to a small stuffed donkey with exaggerated eyelashes. He handed it to Quinn with a straight face. “For you, so I don’t make Debra jealous.”

Quinn giggled. “She’s beautiful. I’ll call her Mebra for mini-Debra. At least this one can’t chase me out of the barn.”

Kellan pointed to the nearby Ferris wheel, its lights tracing patterns against the night

sky. “Who’s first with Quinn?”

Quinn glanced between the three of us, and I realized that this simple question highlighted the unusual nature of our relationship.

“I’ll go last.” I touched the small bag in my pocket. “Save the best for last.”

Quinn’s cheeks flushed, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “So modest.”

Reid placed his hand at the small of her back. “Let’s go before the line gets long again.”

As they walked toward the Ferris wheel, Quinn glanced back at me over her shoulder. Her smile now was the real one that transformed her entire face and made my chest ache.

Kellan nudged me. “You got her something, didn’t you?”

I shrugged.

“You romantic sap. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

I watched Quinn and Reid climb into a brightly painted car. “I don’t think it’s much of a secret anymore.”

The car climbed higher on the Ferris wheel, Reid pointing at something in the distance while Quinn leaned closer to see. The fairground lights painted colorful patterns across her face, visible even from where we stood.

“You think she’d stay if we asked?” Kellan’s voice was casual, but the tension in his shoulders told a different story.

I kept my eyes on Quinn's car as it crested the top of the wheel. "I don't know."

"I keep thinking about it." Kellan kicked at the ground, scuffing his boot in the dirt. "She's got a life back home, though. A teaching job. Friends."

"And we're just three guys she met three weeks ago." It felt wrong the moment it left my lips.

Kellan shook his head. "It's more than that. You know it is."

I did know. Something had clicked between the four of us in a way I couldn't explain and didn't fully understand. But was it enough?

"What would she even do here? Run stick horse classes full-time?" I tried to make it sound like a joke, but it fell flat.

"She could." Kellan's face grew serious. "The videos are still getting views. People are calling about lessons. And she's good with the kids, Enzo. Better than any of us. Better than your cousin, who is great and all, but we both know she does it out of obligation."

He was right. What had started as Marisol earning extra money during her summer breaks from college was now something she squeezed into her busy schedule.

"That's true, and she could apply for a teaching job nearby." The more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

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“That’s if she wants to stay.” Kellan rubbed the back of his neck. “And if she does, what then? The four of us what? Keep doing whatever this is?”

I glanced at him. “Getting cold feet?”

“No.” Kellan’s answer came quickly. “Just thinking out loud. It’s new territory for all of us.”

The Ferris wheel was loaded now and began going at full speed.

“What if it doesn’t work out?” I voiced the fear that had been gnawing at me. “What if she stays, and we wreck everything?”

“What if she doesn’t stay, and we spend the rest of our lives wondering what could have happened? Look, I know it’s intense. It’s fast. It’s not conventional by any stretch of the imagination. But when has anything worth having ever been easy?”

I couldn’t argue with that. Nothing about La Cuesta had been easy, but it had been worth every struggle and every setback.

“We need to talk to her.”

“Tonight?” Kellan ran a hand through his hair.

“Not tonight.” I shook my head. “Tonight’s supposed to be fun. No pressure.”

The Ferris wheel came to a stop, and the first cart to be let off was Reid and Quinn.

Her smile was visible even from where we stood.

“You should go get in line.” I nudged his arm.

Kellan stepped forward but then paused. His eyes flickered between where Reid was helping Quinn off the ride and me. “You should go next.”

I smirked. “You know, when you suggested the Ferris wheel, I was wondering when you’d realize how high it was.”

“Shut up.” He shoved me in the direction of the line. “Not a word about this.”

“A word about what?” Quinn came to a stop next to me and looked between us, confusion creasing her brow.

Kellan waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t want to make you ride this thing three times in a row. That’s borderline cruel and unusual punishment.”

I offered Quinn my arm. “Shall we?”

I led her toward the Ferris wheel, the small bag containing the bracelet a welcome weight in my pocket.

Chapter 24

That Time I Rode More Than Just Horses

Quinn

“This seat wobbles more than Tater Tot when he sees treats,” I joked, trying to mask my nervousness as Enzo slid in beside me and the attendant lowered the safety bar.

I'd just gone on the damned thing with Reid, but that didn't stop the fear from crawling up my spine. Logic told me it was perfectly safe because thousands rode it every day without incident, but my imagination kept conjuring images of bolts suddenly giving way or the safety bar deciding this was the moment to malfunction.

"Ranger practically vibrates when I give him a peppermint." Enzo's hand landed on my thigh, squeezing it gently. "If it helps, Kellan is scared of heights and chickened out."

My eyes shot to the man in question who gave me a tight smile and a wave. "But this was his idea!"

The wheel jerked into motion, lifting us a few feet before stopping to load the next car. I put my hand over Enzo's and he promptly flipped his and entwined our fingers.

"I think Kellan had hoped his desire to ride it with you would outweigh his fear. Make sure you give him shit about it." Enzo's lips curved into the kind of smile that transformed his entire face.

The wheel jolted upward again. With each stop and start, we climbed further away from the chaos of the fairground until the noise below became a distant hum.

"It's so peaceful up here," I whispered, as if speaking too loudly might break the spell. The lights of the fairground sprawled beneath us like fallen stars, and the evening breeze carried the faint scent of fried food and cotton candy.

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Enzo shifted slightly beside me, reaching into his pocket. “I have something for you.”

He pulled out a small paper bag, neatly folded at the top. His fingers trembled the tiniest amount as he placed it in my hand. It was a vulnerability I wouldn’t have noticed if we weren’t sitting so close in our own little bubble. The paper was warm from being tucked against him, and I cradled it between my palms like something precious before I’d even seen what was inside.

“I’m not usually good at this kind of thing.” Enzo’s voice was softer than I’d ever heard it, almost lost beneath the distant carnival music and noise floating up from below.

I carefully unfolded the top of the bag and tipped the contents into my hand. The delicate silver bracelet with a tiny horse charm I’d been looking at in the exhibition hall slid out, catching the colored lights from the ride.

My breath caught in my throat as I ran my finger over the perfect miniature horse. The fact that he’d seen me admiring it and bought it on the spot put me at a loss for words.

He took the bracelet from my palm and fastened it around my wrist, his fingers tickling my skin. I tried not to shiver at the contact. “I thought you might want something to remember tonight by.”

“What, you think I’d forget my first Ferris wheel ride with three cowboys?” I forced lightness into my voice, falling back on humor to mask the sudden ache in my chest. “Pretty sure that’s going in my autobiography. Chapter Seven: ‘That Time I Rode

More Than Just Horses.’“

Enzo’s eyebrows shot up, and a laugh escaped him. “That’s a terrible title.”

“I know, I know. My publisher will hate it.” I twisted my wrist, watching the horse charm catch the light. “Thank you. I love it.”

With the ride fully loaded, we began our repeated circle of suspension between earth and sky. The car rocked gently, and the fair was a kaleidoscope of color and movement.

“You seem nervous tonight.” Enzo spoke carefully, like he wasn’t sure how much to push. “You ready to talk about it?”

I fiddled with my bracelet. “I’m fine.”

“Hmm... the universal tell that a woman is not in fact fine and you’re using your teacher voice.”

I met his gaze, startled. “My what?” Heat crawled up my neck. Was I that transparent? Or worse, had he been paying such close attention to me that he’d catalogued my different tones like they were something worth studying?

“Your teacher voice. The one you use when a kid asks if you’re mad, and you say ‘I’m not mad, just disappointed.’“ Enzo’s eyes held mine. “So I guess the question should be what is disappointing you?”

The Ferris wheel began its descent, but it felt like my stomach remained at the top, suspended somewhere between the truth and what I was willing to admit. I turned to lookout at the fairground, buying myself time while my thoughts scrambled like the colored lights below us.

What was disappointing me? Oh, just the small matter of falling for someone when I'd promised myself I wouldn't. Just the terrifying realization that a silver bracelet with a horse charm meant more to me than a diamond engagement ring ever had.

"I've never done this before." The words tumbled out before I could bite them back.

"A Ferris wheel?" Enzo's confusion was evident in his voice.

"No. This. Whatever this is with you three. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling."

The car swayed as we continued downward, and Enzo's arm came around me. "I don't think there's a rulebook for this, Quinn."

"There should be." I twisted my hands in my lap. "I like knowing what comes next. And everything about this is uncharted territory."

Enzo was quiet for a moment, his fingers tracing circles on my arm. "Does it scare you?"

"Yes." I met his eyes honestly, holding his gaze despite a flutter of anxiety. The lights of the fair painted shadows across his face, highlighting the angles of his cheekbones in ways that made it hard to look away. "And also no. It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once."

The Ferris wheel began its final rotation, bringing us back toward solid ground. Enzo's arm remained around me, and I leaned into him for comfort.

"We're all figuring this out as we go." His breath tickled my ear. "Me, Reid, Kellan... none of us expected you, or this. But I'm not afraid of something unfamiliar if it feels right."

Our car swayed as it reached the loading platform. The attendant raised the safety bar, and Enzo stepped out first, offering me his hand. I took it, feeling a strange sense of stability as my feet touched the ground again.

Kellan bounded toward us with Reid following behind. “How was it? Did our girl scream?”

I nudged him with my shoulder. “At least I got on it, unlike some people.”

Kellan clutched his chest dramatically. “Low blow, Porter. Low blow.”

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The four of us moved through the rides, going on a few more. As we walked, Enzo's hand brushed against mine periodically, while Reid's remained steady on my back. Kellan walked slightly ahead, pointing out games and attractions with the enthusiasm of a kid.

"I need a candied apple before we leave." Kellan gestured toward a food stand with a line about ten people deep. "And another one of those turkey legs."

My own stomach growled in response to Kellan mentioning food. What was it about the fair that made everyone so hungry? Did they pump hunger-stimulating chemicals into the air along with the cotton candy smell, or was it some Pavlovian response to the cacophony of sizzling food stands and colorfully painted vendors?

"I could go for some nachos and one of those frozen lemonade drinks." I eyed the stand where a man was scooping electric orange cheese sauce over a mountain of chips.

Not long after we got in line, someone tapped my shoulder. I turned to find a woman about my age, and her eyes widened when I faced her fully.

"Oh my god, it is you! You're the hobby horse lady!"

My smile froze on my face. "Um, yeah, that's me."

"Can I get a picture? My friends are never going to believe this!" She didn't wait for my answer, already stepping beside me and holding her phone up at a selfie angle.

She snapped several pictures before I could even wrap my head around what was happening. My mind raced to catch up with the reality that I was being recognized in public. This wasn't exactly the claim to fame I'd imagined for myself when I was younger, dreaming of becoming an astronaut or the first female president.

"Thanks! This is so cool. My sister and I literally watch your videos, like, every day." She glanced down at her phone, scrolling through the photos she'd taken. "Perfect! Catch you later!"

And just like that, she was gone, disappearing into the crowd while tapping away on her phone. I stood there, my smile still plastered on my face but something cold and hollow expanded in my chest.

Hobby horse lady. That's who I was to the world now. Not Quinn, the elementary school teacher who spent hours creating lesson plans and worrying about her students. Just the woman who'd done something ridiculous and gone viral for it. Whostillwas going viral for it with my own free will.

"Quinn?" Reid's voice floated through the fog settling around me. "You okay?"

I blinked back to reality, his face gradually coming into focus. The three men formed a protective semi-circle around me.

"I'm fine." I waved a hand dismissively, as if I could physically bat away my conflicted feelings. "It surprised me, that's all."

"I've seen a few other people recognize you too." Kellan stepped closer, his usual joking demeanor temporarily replaced with something softer. He tilted his head, studying me like I was one of the horses showing signs of distress.

Reid's eyes narrowed slightly, like he could see straight through my flimsy pretense.

“How are we feeling about this?”

“It’s nothing, really. It’s just weird to be recognized by strangers.” I folded my arms, suddenly feeling exposed in the middle of the fairgrounds.

“We can head back if you want.” Enzo’s offer was gentle, his eyebrows drawn together in concern.

“No! No.” I shook my head firmly. “We’re having fun. And Kellan needs his apple and giant leg of meat.”

I looped my arm through Kellan’s, moving us up in the line, desperate to move away from the moment and the strange emptiness that had settled over me.

The stars glittered overhead as we pulled into the ranch driveway, the truck’s headlights sweeping across the familiar buildings. I hadn’t said much on the drive back, just watched the dark landscape roll past my window, feeling the weight of being reduced to a viral joke pressing against my chest.

How was this going to affect my teaching career? People on the internet were a bit unhinged at times, which concerned me.

Reid opened the passenger door for me, and I hopped out of the truck. The cool night air brushed against my cheeks, a welcome reprieve from the stuffiness of my thoughts during the drive.

“I don’t think I’m ready to go inside yet.” I glanced toward the house where I could easily hide away in Reid’s room and lick my wounds.

Reid’s hand found mine, his fingers intertwining with my own. “Come on.” He guided me toward the back of the truck, lowering the tailgate.

The metal creaked as he hoisted himself up and extended his hand to help me. I settled next to him, and Kellan hopped up beside me, his shoulder pressed against mine. Enzo leaned his hip against the edge of the tailgate as he gazed up at the sky.

The night was quiet besides the soft rustle of leaves and crickets chirping in the bushes. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the familiar ranch sounds wash over me. In the city, silence meant emptiness, but here, quiet carried its own kind of living, breathing calm that somehow made the confusion I'd been carrying feel smaller.

"Quinn—" Kellan started but my own words tumbled out before he could ask me what was wrong.

"I don't want to leave." I took a deep breath. "I don't want to leave here. The ranch. You three."

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The silence that followed felt electric, and I rushed to fill it before I lost my nerve.

“I know it makes no sense. I know I came here as some chick who won some ridiculous contest. And then somehow, I started helping with the camp, and making stick horses with the kids, and falling into bed with all of you, which wasn’t exactly on the brochure.” I inhaled shakily. “And then that woman tonight called me ‘the hobby horse lady’ like that’s all I am, and maybe that’s all I am to everyone else, this joke on the internet, but here... with you three... I feel like me. The real me. Not a woman cheated on by her fiancé or the viral stick horse woman or even a teacher.”

I stared straight ahead at the dark outlines of the stables, too afraid to look at any of them as I continued.

“I don’t know what that means or how it could possibly work.” My voice grew smaller. “I’m terrified I’m assuming things. That this was just fun for all of you, and here I am making it into something bigger because I’m... because I think I’m falling for you. All of you.”

I started to move to get off the tailgate but Enzo moved in front of me, his hands landing on my thighs. “Then stay.”

“Just like that?” My voice wavered. That had been too easy.

“We have a spare bedroom you could make your own, or we could share.” Enzo brought a hand up to cup my cheek, his eyes softer than I’d ever seen them. “We can figure out the rest.”

Reid's hand slid around my waist. "We want you here."

Kellan bumped his shoulder against mine. "Even your stick horse."

I laughed, feeling the knot in my chest begin to loosen. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

Enzo's thumb ran along my bottom lip. "None of us do. That's what makes it an adventure."

"An adventure with really good benefits." Kellan wagged his eyebrows, and Reid reached around me to swat him.

Enzo rolled his eyes. "Besides the benefits, you could get a teaching job here or we can discuss some other options here at the ranch."

"You've thought about what me staying would look like?" I swear there was dirt in my eye and I wasn't about to start crying.

I'd been so worried that they would think I was ridiculous for wanting to stay and explore what was developing between us. It wasn't everyday you fell for three guys at once and they all wanted us to be together.

The corner of Enzo's mouth lifted. "Maybe."

"We all have." Reid's voice was rough with honesty. "But we didn't want to pressure you."

My heart swelled, so full I thought it might burst. The quiet certainty in their voices, the simple way they created space for me without any grand declarations felt real. I hadn't come to the ranch looking for this, hadn't even known I could want something

like this. Yet here they were, three men looking at me like I belonged, not as an outsider, a contest winner, or a temporary guest, but as someone essential to whatever this was becoming between us.

I opened my mouth to respond, but was cut off by a deafening boom that echoed across the ranch. We all jumped, the truck bed rattling beneath us as the dark sky over the ranch lit up with a firework.

“Fuck!” Kellan was already sliding off the tailgate, his face the most serious I’d ever seen it.

Another firework went off directly above the stables, showering colorful sparks down toward the buildings. Someone on the property was setting them off and it wasn’t even the Fourth of July. Even if it had been, fireworks that went off in the air were illegal in the state.

“The horses!” Reid’s voice was sharp with alarm as he leapt down.

Kellan was already running toward the source, his silhouette briefly illuminated by another burst of light.

I scrambled off the truck, nearly twisting my ankle in my haste. I sprinted after Enzo and Reid, my mind already conjuring terrible images of panicked horses unable to escape their stalls as sparks rained down. The peaceful moment we’d shared seconds ago shattered like glass as another burst of light illuminated the night sky.

Chapter 25

One of the Good Ones

Kellan

Iran toward the cabins, my boots pounding against the packed dirt path. Another explosion ripped through the night sky, illuminating the rooftops in pink and green. My heart hammered against my ribs not from exertion, but from white-hot anger that was quickly overtaking my usual easygoing personality.

The horses were probably terrified. And Debra? She was most definitely losing her mind. She failed on all fronts when it came to our desensitization training.

I rounded the corner to cabin three in time to see a man lighting what looked like a Roman candle. Two kids watched with wide smiles while a woman filmed on her phone. They looked like they thought this was good, clean family fun rather than a potential disaster in the making.

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“Stop!” I bellowed, my voice so harsh I barely recognized it myself.

The man’s head snapped up, the lighter still hovering near the fuse. I closed the distance between us in three long strides and kicked the firework out of range of the lighter, sending it skittering across the ground.

I’d spent years perfecting the art of being the charming host, the guy who could smooth over any awkward situation with a joke and a smile. But there was a line and setting off explosives near a stable full of horses during fire season? That line was about ten miles back.

“What the hell are you doing?” My voice came out low and commanding, nothing like my usual tone.

“Hey man, we were just having a little fun—” the father started, his words slurring slightly. The scent of beer hung in the air around him.

I cut him off with a look that stopped his words cold.

“Fun? You think setting off illegal fireworks near a barn full of thousand-pound flight animals is fun?” I swept my arm toward the stables. “One spark on that dry grass, and we’d have a wildfire that could destroy everything in its path, including you and your family.”

The mother at least had the decency to look concerned. “We didn’t think?—”

“That’s obvious.” I fought to keep my breathing and temper even. “It’s fire season

with drought conditions, and there's a statewide ban on these types of fireworks. Not to mention there are five other occupied cabins and all of the animals you're scaring. On top of that, the Fourth was last fucking week!"

The father's posture shifted into defensive mode. "Look, it's not a big deal. We've got it under control."

"Under control?" I laughed, but there wasn't a trace of humor in the sound. "You're drunk, and you don't even have a bucket of water or a hose nearby to put anything out should something happen. And now there's firework debris scattered all over causing a potential fire hazard."

One of the kids, who looked to be in that awkward stage transitioning into a teenager, shuffled his feet. "We're sorry." At least someone was feeling ashamed.

"I need every single piece of exploded firework collected. Right now." I pointed to the ground where bits of colored paper and cardboard were scattered. "And I need to see every other firework you have."

The man scoffed. "You can't make us?—"

"I can." I pulled my phone from my back pocket. "I can call the sheriff and report illegal fireworks being set off during a burn ban. That's a minimum fine of two thousand dollars in this area, possibly more given the proximity to a working ranch with livestock. Or..."

I paused, letting the threat hang in the air. "You can show me every remaining firework you have, clean up every scrap of debris, and be off my property within the hour."

The father's face flushed red. "Now wait a minute. We paid for three nights!"

“And we’ll consider refunding you for the nights you didn’t stay depending on the damage to the animals and the property, but you’re leaving. Tonight.” I crossed my arms. “The safety of our animals and our livelihood isn’t up for negotiation.”

The woman put a hand on the man’s arm. “Pete, he’s right. This was a bad idea.”

Pete looked like he wanted to argue, but something in my expression must have told him exactly how that would end. He turned to his sons. “Go get the rest of the fireworks from the cabin.”

The boys trudged off, the younger one casting a guilty look back at me.

“And the cleanup?” I nodded toward the scattered debris.

“We’ll take care of it,” the mother promised, already bending down to pick up a piece of colorful cardboard.

I watched as they began gathering the remnants, my jaw still clenched tight. The acrid smell of gunpowder hung in the air, and in the distance, I could hear the nervous whinnying from the stables. Reid and Enzo were probably there now, trying to calm the horses.

And Quinn. Moments ago, we’d been having one of the most important conversations of our lives. She had admitted that she wanted to stay, and we’d been figuring out how to make this unconventional relationship work. And now, instead of holding her close and making plans for our future, I was out here dealing with drunk people playing with fire.

Behind me, the boys returned with a crate filled with more Roman candles and something that looked alarmingly like actual dynamite. I took the crate from them, not trusting myself to speak for a moment.

The man glared at me as I picked up a few other unused fireworks they'd laid out, his eyes burning with the indignation of someone who isn't used to being told no. This family had no idea how quickly their "fun" could have destroyed everything we'd built here.

"Is this all of it?"

They nodded, the father still fuming, the rest sheepish enough to pass for being remorseful.

"You have exactly one hour to finish cleaning up and pack your things." I checked my watch. "At 11:15, I'll be back to escort you off the property. If you're not ready, I'll be making that call to the sheriff."

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Without waiting for a response, I jogged toward the stables, the crate of contraband fireworks tucked under my arm. I stopped at a trough of water for the horses and dumped the fireworks inside it.

The stable doors were flung wide open, and inside, chaos reigned. Ranger was pacing nervously in his stall, while Tater Tot was munching on hay like it was just another night. Several empty stalls told me Reid and Enzo had already moved some of the horses to the pasture for safety.

Reid stood in Junebug's stall, one hand on her neck, speaking softly to her. The horse's eyes were still wild, nostrils flared, but she wasn't thrashing. Enzo moved methodically from stall to stall, checking legs and flanks for injuries. His jaw was set in that way that meant he was barely containing his rage.

"I handled the guests with the fireworks. Confiscated their stash and told them they have an hour to leave." I tossed my hat onto a hook and rolled up my sleeves. "Need me to lead any more out to a pasture?"

Enzo glanced up, his expression hard. "Already moved the worst ones. Calypso nearly kicked through her stall door."

"Any injuries?" I scanned the stalls, mentally tallying which horses remained inside.

"Nothing serious. A few scrapes from the ones that panicked initially. We'll document and inform the owners if they aren't ours." Enzo ran a hand through his hair, leaving it standing on end.

“Where’s Quinn?” The question hit me suddenly as I realized she wasn’t among us.

Reid’s hands paused momentarily on Junebug’s neck. “We sent her to check on the goats and chickens. Figured it was safer than having her in here with panicking horses.”

“When?” My pulse quickened.

“About ten minutes ago.” Enzo frowned, straightening up from where he’d been examining a horse’s legs. “She should have been back by now.”

I didn’t wait to hear more. I spun and sprinted toward the barn, gravel flying beneath my boots. The night air felt suddenly thick, making it hard to breathe.

Quinn was new to all this and didn’t know how to handle animals that were spooked. What if one of them had hurt her in their panic? What if she’d gotten kicked by Debra?

The barn door stood partially open, a slice of yellow light spilling out onto the ground. I slipped inside, my eyes scanning for her.

“Quinn?” I moved deeper into the barn.

In the goat enclosure, Jack and Chip stood together in a corner, unusually subdued. Maple lay in the straw next to them, chewing placidly as if explosions in the sky were an everyday occurrence. Surprisingly, Butters was drinking water in the opposite corner.

But Pancake was missing. The gate was slightly ajar, no doubt from Butters.

I turned toward Debra’s stall, finding it empty. I tested the door, and it opened to

reveal it had been kicked where the latch was.

Damn it.

“Quinn!” I moved faster now, checking every corner of the barn until I got to the other door.

As I stepped outside, I turned on the flashlight on my phone and headed for the gate. I scanned the pasture beyond, the flashlight beam sweeping the tree line.

That’s when I saw her crouched near the far fence, crouched over what I assumed was Pancake. Debra paced nearby, her ears twitching and her tail flicking with agitation.

I exhaled hard and cut across the pasture, the light of my flashlight bouncing wildly over the uneven ground. My lungs burned with each breath, not from exertion but from the knot of worry lodged firmly in my chest.

“Quinn!”

She looked up at the sound of my voice, her face a perfect blend of relief and frustration in the harsh glow of my phone light. Pancake was half-wedged under the bottom rail of the fence, her little body trembling. Debra paced in tight circles nearby, braying occasionally as if she were personally offended by this entire situation.

Quinn’s shoulders sagged. “Debra kicked her stall door and tore out of there like her tail was on fire. I tried to catch her, but she was on a mission.”

I crouched beside her, our knees bumping in the damp grass.

“When I found her, she was standing over Pancake like she was guarding her. She

must have known she was out here.” She gestured to where the tiny goat was wedged. “I was afraid if I pulled too hard, I’d hurt her.”

I ran the light along the fence line, assessing the situation. Pancake had managed to get her head and front legs under, but her little body was too wide to follow. Now she was stuck, bleating pitifully every few seconds.

Debra stamped an impatient hoof, braying loudly enough to make Quinn jump.

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“Easy, girl.” I straightened and approached Debra, keeping my voice low and steady. “You’ve had quite the scare tonight, haven’t you?”

The donkey’s ears twitched, but she didn’t bolt as I reached out to stroke her neck. Under my fingers, her muscles quivered with leftover adrenaline.

“Is she okay?” Quinn whispered, not taking her eyes off Pancake.

I knelt back down beside her, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off her body. “She’s scared, but she doesn’t look injured. Let me help.”

Our shoulders brushed as we both leaned forward, working in tandem in the narrow space. I wiggled the bottom rail, managing to turn the board enough for Quinn to guide Pancake’s trembling body backward. The goat bleated indignantly the entire time, acting like we were the ones who had gotten her into this mess.

“There we go.” I released the rail once Pancake was free. “One baby goat rescue, complete.”

Quinn scooped Pancake into her arms, cradling her like an infant. The tiny goat immediately settled, nuzzling into her shoulder with all the drama of someone who had survived a near-death experience. The sight of them together under the moonlight made something twist in my chest.

It felt strangely intimate, this moment out in a field with a rescued goat and an anxious donkey. Not the romantic moment I had pictured earlier on the tailgate when she had told us she wanted to stay, but somehow perfect in its messy, chaotic way.

“You’re pretty good at this, you know.” I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

She looked up at me, her eyes shining. “At what? Chasing donkeys or rescuing goats?”

“All of it.” My fingers lingered on her cheek. “You fit here. With the animals. With us.”

She leaned into my touch, her skin soft beneath my fingertips. Pancake squirmed between us as if annoyed by this unexpected pause in her dramatic rescue story.

For a moment, we stayed like that, the night settling around us like a blanket, crickets providing a soundtrack that seemed oddly appropriate. Part of me wanted to draw her closer, but the goat between us said otherwise as she tried to bite one of my shirt buttons.

“Okay, okay. Let’s get back to the barn. Do you want me to carry her?” I held out my arms in offering, and Quinn handed Pancake over.

Quinn stepped toward Debra, which immediately made me tense. Reid had spent weeks getting Debra to merely tolerate Quinn’s presence, and that was on a good day without fireworks sending everyone into panic mode.

“Quinn, don’t?—”

But Quinn was already extending her hand toward the donkey, moving slowly like Reid had taught her. Debra’s ears flicked forward, then back, then forward again; the universal sign of a donkey figuring out whether to kick or cuddle.

“You were protecting her, weren’t you?” Quinn’s voice was soft, almost reverential. “Everyone thinks you’re so mean, but you knew Pancake was in trouble.”

To my complete shock, Debra lowered her head and bumped it gently against Quinn's outstretched palm. The same donkey that had nearly taken Quinn's head off last week was now letting her stroke between her eyes.

"Holy shit." My jaw dropped.

She glanced over her shoulder at me, her smile triumphant. "See? She needed time to realize I'm one of the good ones."

Something about those words hit differently, resonating beyond the donkey situation. One of the good ones. Yeah, Quinn definitely was.

Chapter 26

We've Got You

Quinn

I stepped into the shower attached to Reid's bedroom. The muscles in my shoulders relaxed under the pounding spray, and I closed my eyes, letting the water rinse away the stressful evening.

Our date had ended with such promise with me sharing my feelings, their acceptance, and the possibility of staying. And then came the chaos: panicked horses, a worried donkey, a stuck goat. My heart had nearly stopped when I'd found Pancake wedged under the fence.

The bathroom door opened, and Reid walked in. He stood there for a moment, bare-chested and barefoot, watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Without speaking, he reached into the shower, letting his fingertips dance under the spray to test the temperature.

I couldn't blame him; I did take scorching hot showers.

Smiling at the memory of Kellan yelping the last time he got in without checking the temperature, I adjusted the water a little.

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Reid stepped out of his jeans, leaving them pooled on the tile floor before sliding the shower door open and stepping inside.

He didn't immediately reach for me or pull me into his arms the way I half-expected. Instead, he stood behind me, a silent presence. Only when I leaned back, did his arms encircle my waist and his chin rest on my shoulder.

My eyes met his in the reflection of the wide chrome showerhead. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly as he reached for my shampoo bottle, pumping a dollop into his palm.

His fingers worked through my hair, massaging my scalp with firm, circular movements. The day's stress dissolved with each stroke, my eyelids growing heavy as he guided my head under the spray to rinse.

I turned to face him, water cascading between us. Rivulets traced paths down his chest, navigating the lean muscles I'd trailed my fingers along so many times.

He pressed his forehead against mine, water beading on his eyelashes. His hand cupped my cheek, thumb brushing away droplets from the corner of my mouth.

We remained like that for several heartbeats, breathing the same shampoo-scented air, saying everything without a single word.

His lips found mine, gentle at first, then with a quiet hunger that spoke of relief rather than urgency. I melted into him, my hands sliding up his slick back, feeling the muscles shift beneath my palms.

When we finally broke apart, I buried my face against him, listening to his heartbeat beneath my ear. His fingers trailed down my back creating a path of warmth.

Reid reached behind me, turning off the shower with one hand while still holding me close with the other. The sudden silence felt as intimate as a confession.

He stepped out first, grabbing a towel and holding it open for me. I moved into it, into him, letting him wrap the soft fabric around my shoulders. His hands lingered, rubbing the towel gently over my skin with a care that made my throat tighten.

Something had shifted between us all tonight. The chaos of the fireworks, the animals in danger, running through the darkness, had stripped away any pretenses, leaving only what mattered. And somehow, impossibly, I was what mattered to these three men.

Reid toweled off quickly, then draped another clean towel around my hair with careful movements. His eyes never left mine as he lifted me into his arms, one arm beneath my knees, the other supporting my back.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, feeling oddly vulnerable despite having been intimately acquainted with every inch of his body. This tenderness was more exposing than any amount of physical nakedness.

He carried me into the bedroom, water from his hair falling onto my shoulders. The lamp on the nightstand cast a glow across the room, illuminating Kellan and Enzo, who were both waiting on the bed.

Kellan's usual smile had softened, and the worry lines around his eyes from the night had disappeared. He'd showered and changed into a gray T-shirt and basketball shorts.

Enzo sat with his back against the headboard, arms crossed over his chest, watching us with dark eyes that missed nothing. His hair was damp, curling slightly at the temples. Unlike Kellan, he was only in his boxer briefs.

Reid set me on the bed like I was a porcelain doll who might break.

Kellan picked up a bottle of lotion from the nightstand and poured some into his palms, warming it between his hands before gently lifting my foot into his lap. His thumbs pressed into my arch, working out knots I hadn't known existed. I bit my lip to keep from moaning at the immediate relief.

Reid grabbed my hairbrush from the bathroom and knelt on the bed behind me. He took the towel off my head and began brushing my hair like he'd done it a million times before.

Enzo's hand found mine, his thumb tracing patterns across my palm. "You were incredible out there tonight."

I leaned back against Reid as he continued to gently brush my hair. His steady strokes were hypnotic, each sweep lulling me deeper into a state of contentment I hadn't known existed before these men.

"I wasn't incredible." I wiggled my toes as Kellan's strong thumbs worked magic on the arch of my foot. "I just reacted. Anyone would have done the same."

Kellan's eyes met mine, his fingers pausing momentarily. "Not anyone would have run into the dark to rescue Pancake while Debra was having a meltdown."

Enzo's fingers moved to my wrist, his touch adding to the heat pooling in my lower belly. "You have a knack for handling the animals. Even Debra... although we'll see if that sticks tomorrow."

I laughed, and my cheeks heated at their praise. “I was terrified the whole time.”

Reid put my brush on the nightstand and began massaging my scalp, his fingertips making small circles that sent tingles down my spine. “Being brave isn’t about not feeling fear. It’s about feeling it and doing what needs to be done anyway.”

I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into the safety of this moment, surrounded by them. Any moment I’d wake up from this epic dream and find myself in my apartment again.

Enzo shifted on the bed, his weight dipping the mattress as he moved closer. His fingers traced up my arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. His hand cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. “Do you have any idea what you mean to us?”

The sincerity in his eyes made my breath catch. Before I could respond, Kellan’s hands moved to my other leg, his touch firm but gentle. “I think we should show her.”

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My pulse quickened as Reid's lips found the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder. "I think that's an excellent idea."

The tension in the room shifted. Enzo's eyes darkened as he watched Reid's mouth on my skin.

Kellan's hands moved tantalizingly closer to the apex of my thighs. "Is that okay with you, Quinn?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The towel around me was suddenly too constricting and rough against my skin. As if reading my mind, Reid's fingers found the edge of the towel where it was tucked above my breasts. He unwrapped me like I was a precious gift.

The air hit my damp skin, raising goosebumps. Enzo's eyes roamed over me, drinking in every inch with an appreciation that made me feel like the most beautiful woman alive. Kellan's playful smile had transformed into something hungrier.

"Lie back," Reid whispered against my ear, guiding me to the center of the bed.

I complied, sinking into the soft mattress. The three men surrounded me, their gazes heating my skin more effectively than the shower had.

"What do you want, Quinn?" Kellan's voice was lower than usual, a gravelly tone that touched every inch of my body.

What did I want? Everything. All of them. The safety, the hunger, the tenderness, the

passion.

“Touch me,” I breathed. “All of you.”

They exchanged glances, some silent communication passing between them. Then, as if choreographed, they moved.

Kellan’s mouth found my ankle, pressing soft kisses up my calf. Enzo leaned down, his lips hovering above mine, his breath mingling with my increasingly ragged breathing. Reid’s hands cupped my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples in featherlight touches that made me arch into him.

Enzo’s mouth finally claimed mine in a kiss that stole what little breath I had left. His tongue explored lazily, as if we had all the time in the world. Meanwhile, Kellan’s mouth had reached my inner thigh, his stubble creating friction against my sensitive skin.

Reid’s mouth replaced his hands on my breast, his tongue circling my nipple before sucking gently. All of their attention sent shockwaves through my body, my back arching off the bed.

Enzo broke our kiss, his forehead resting against mine as he watched my reactions. “You’re exquisite,” he murmured against my lips.

Kellan’s mouth moved higher, his breath hot against my center. His tongue flattened against me, a long, slow lick that made my hips buck involuntarily. His hands gripped my thighs, holding me open to his ministrations.

Enzo moved behind me so my head rested in his lap, his hardness pressed against the back of my head through his boxer briefs. His hands replaced Reid’s on my breasts, allowing Reid to move down my body, his mouth trailing wet kisses across my

stomach.

The sight of Reid and Kellan both between my legs, their heads so close together, sent a jolt of arousal through me so intense I had to close my eyes. Enzo's chuckle rumbled through his chest at my reaction.

"Don't hide from us," he whispered, one hand moving to stroke my cheek. "Watch them."

I forced my eyes open as Reid's mouth joined Kellan's. They worked in tandem, their tongues alternating between long, broad strokes and quick, focused flicks that had me writhing between them. Occasionally, their mouths would meet over my clit, sharing it in a way that made me whimper with need.

Enzo's hands continued their exploration of my breasts, his fingers rolling my nipples with just enough pressure to send jolts of pleasure straight to where Reid and Kellan were working their magic.

"How does it feel?" Enzo's voice was strained, his own arousal evident in the tightness of his tone.

"So good," I gasped as Kellan's finger slid inside me, curling to find that spot that made stars explode behind my eyelids. "Too good."

Reid's mouth moved to my inner thigh, giving me a moment to catch my breath. "There's no such thing as too good when it comes to you."

Kellan hummed in agreement, the vibration against my sensitive flesh making me clutch at the sheets. His finger was joined by another, stretching me as his tongue continued its relentless assault.

I felt the familiar coiling in my lower belly signaling that I was close. “I’m going to?—”

“Yes,” Enzo encouraged, his fingers pinching my nipples hard enough to push me closer to the edge. “Let go for us. Show us how good it feels.”

Reid’s mouth returned to join Kellan’s, and I shattered, my back arching off the bed. They worked me through it, their movements slowing but never quite stopping, prolonging my orgasm until I was a trembling mess.

As I came down from my high, they shifted positions. Kellan moved up to lie beside me, his hand trailing lazily up and down my side. Reid took Enzo’s place, cradling my head in his lap while Enzo moved between my legs.

“Still with us?” Kellan’s breath was hot against my ear.

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I nodded, my body boneless from the intensity of my release. “Barely.”

Reid’s hand stroked my hair. “Good, because we’re just getting started.”

Enzo’s hands parted my thighs again, his expression intense as he looked at me, still wet and sensitive from Kellan and Reid’s attention. “Look how wet you are from them.”

His fingers slid through my folds, and he raised them, displaying the evidence. Kellan grabbed his wrist before he could retreat, sucking them into his mouth.

Fuck. Was it possible to come from only watching that?

Enzo pulled his fingers away, and like a man possessed, covered my entire pussy with his mouth. I cried out as his whole damn face seemed to devour me. There was nothing gentle about it; he was starving for me.

Kellan’s mouth found mine, the taste of me still lingering as he swallowed my moans. Reid’s hands moved from my hair to my breasts, his touch so gentle it was almost reverent.

Between Enzo’s skilled mouth, Kellan’s hungry kisses, and Reid’s tender caresses, I was rapidly approaching another peak. My hands found their way into Enzo’s hair, urging him on.

He responded by sliding two fingers inside me, crooking them in a motion that made my toes curl. Kellan broke our kiss to watch my face, his own expression a mixture of

awe and desire.

“Look at you, so beautiful like this.” Kellan’s hand moved down to press above my pubic bone.

Reid’s fingers tweaked my nipples at the same time, the slight pain heightening my pleasure. “Let go again, Quinn. We’ve got you.”

The combination of their words, their touches, their hungry gazes was too much. I came again, my body clenching around Enzo’s fingers.

As I came down from my high, Kellan’s thumb traced lazy circles on my hip. “You’re extraordinary, Quinn Porter.”

Reid pulled me closer. “And you’re ours, if you want to be.”

The simple statement, so full of promise and possibility, brought tears to my eyes. I blinked them away, overwhelmed by the emotion welling up inside me. “I really, really want to be.”

Their collective sighs of contentment was the last thing I heard as exhaustion finally claimed me, pulling me into a deep, peaceful sleep surrounded by the three men who had somehow convinced my heart that I belonged.

Chapter 27

It’s You

Quinn

I stared at the last hoodie in my hands, the one from college that I’d worn so much the

lettering had cracked. With a deep breath, I shoved it in the nearly overflowing drawer and pushed it shut. Done. Finally done.

My new bedroom in the ranch house somehow felt more like home already. While I'd been gone, the guys had painted the walls a soft cream color, replaced the ceiling fan, and put up new curtains that let the afternoon sunlight stream in.

I'd driven back from my old home yesterday, where I'd packed up my entire adult life into a U-Haul, resigned from my teaching position, and hugged April goodbye. She'd cried. I'd cried too, but she'd already booked a trip to visit next month.

My eyes landed on Thunderbolt, who stood proudly in the custom wooden stand the guys had built during my absence. It was like a miniature stable, carefully constructed with "Thunderbolt" burned into the wood across the top. The detailwork was impressive, with tiny horseshoes decorating the edges, and there was even a little feed bucket on the side.

I ran my fingers over the inscription. They hadn't mentioned it in their texts while I was gone, like I hadn't mentioned the hobby horse competition coming up. There hadn't seemed to be a good time to bring it up amid all the chaos of moving.

I grabbed Thunderbolt from his stand and tucked him under my arm. Time to practice, and maybe time to break the news about the competition.

The afternoon air greeted me with a blend of hay, horse, and California sunshine as I made my way toward the stables. I heard Reid's voice before I saw him, speaking in that quiet way he had with animals. Peering around the corner of a stall, I found him with Junebug, gently running a soft brush down her flank.

Junebug spotted me before Reid did. The mare's ears pricked forward, and she let out a soft nickering sound that might as well have been a hello. Reid turned, his

expression shifting from concentration to a smile that made my stomach swoop.

“Hey.” The sunlight filtering through the stable windows caught in his hair. “Did you finish unpacking?”

“Yup. I thought I’d get some practice in.”

Reid set the brush down on a nearby shelf and wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Junebug’s been waiting for you. She’s been giving me hell all week.”

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The mare tossed her head as if confirming his statement.

“Sorry, girl.” I approached the stall door, and Junebug immediately stretched her neck out, nosing at me and then at Thunderbolt. “Yes, we’re both back now.”

Reid watched our interaction with that thoughtful look he got sometimes, like he was cataloging behaviors for future reference. “Want to sit on her?”

My heart skipped a beat. “For real?”

“She’s been calmer since you started working with her.” Reid put on her halter and unlatched the stall door.

I hesitated for a moment. “If you think she’s ready.”

“I’ll be right here.” He held out her lead rope. “Trust me?”

The question was heavier than being asked if I was ready to get on a horse, and we both knew it. I’d upended my entire life for this ranch, for these men, and for the person I was becoming here.

“I trust you.” I took the rope, our fingers brushing.

Junebug followed me out of her stall and to a tack-up spot near the tack room where we got her ready. It seemed like a lot for me just to sit on her, but I secretly hoped she’d let me do a few laps.

Reid decided outside would be best, so we went out into the nearest pasture. “Do you want my help?”

I scoffed. “Sir, I am a professional at getting on a horse now. Are you sure she’s okay with this though? She seems like a one-person horse.”

“She’s chosen her person.” Reid’s eyes met mine. “It’s you.”

My chest tightened with something that felt suspiciously like belonging.

I placed my foot in the stirrup, and with one fluid motion, I swung my right leg over Junebug’s back. Suddenly I was up, higher than I expected, my hands clutching the saddle horn.

“Relax your legs a bit.” Reid’s hand stayed on my calf, steadying me. “And remember to breathe.”

I realized I’d been holding my breath and let it out slowly. Junebug shifted slightly beneath me, adjusting to my weight.

“This is... wow.” I couldn’t find the words to describe the feeling of being on Junebug of all horses. It was a mix of vulnerability, power, nervousness, and exhilaration.

Reid nodded, understanding without me having to explain. “Different from Thunderbolt and Tater Tot, isn’t it?”

I patted Junebug’s neck. “A little more opinionated.”

I sat in the saddle, back straight, trying to remember everything I’d learned from my previous rides on Tater Tot. This was different. While Tater Tot was like riding a

sentient sofa with legs, Junebug was alert, muscles tense beneath me, waiting for a signal. I could feel her breathing, the subtle shift of her weight as she assessed me as much as I was assessing her.

“How do I tell her to walk?” I whispered, not wanting to break the fragile equilibrium between us.

Reid’s hand remained on my calf. “Gentle squeeze with both legs and relax your reins a little.”

I squeezed gently and held my breath. For a moment, nothing happened, and I wondered if I’d done it wrong. Then Junebug took a step forward. Then another.

“Holy shit, we’re doing it.” I could barely hear my own voice, afraid if I spoke too loudly she might spook.

Reid moved alongside us, still close enough to grab the reins if needed. “Keep your heels down. That’s it.”

Movement from the other side of the pasture caught my eye. Enzo was striding toward us, a water bottle in his hand, his expression a mix of surprise and concern. Behind him, Kellan followed, using his T-shirt to wipe sweat from his forehead, his hair sticking up in all directions before he put his hat back on. The grin spreading across his face was unmistakable even from a distance.

“Look who finally joined the real horse club!” Kellan called out, his voice carrying across the pasture.

Junebug’s ears flicked at the sound, and her shoulders tensed.

“Easy talk around her,” Reid reminded him, shooting him a glare.

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I relaxed my grip on the reins, remembering Reid's instructions about not pulling on her mouth. "It's okay, girl. That's just Kellan being Kellan."

Enzo reached us first, stopping a respectful distance away, raising an eyebrow as he took in the sight of me atop the notoriously picky mare. "She's letting you ride her?"

"Apparently I'm special." I tried to keep the pride from my voice and failed completely.

"You are special." Kellan reached us, tucking his shirt back into place. "But I bet you twenty bucks she bucks you off within five minutes."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Your confidence in me is overwhelming."

"I'd take that bet, but I'd put my money on Quinn." Enzo unscrewed his water bottle and took a drink.

Reid frowned. "Can we focus on the riding part first before turning this into a betting pool about our girlfriend's riding abilities?"

I squeezed my legs again, and Junebug took a few more steps forward. The saddle creaked beneath me, and I shifted to find my balance. It wasn't graceful, but I wasn't falling off either, which I considered a significant victory.

The guys moved with us, creating a loose arc around Junebug and me. I'd never felt so simultaneously independent and supported.

“Want to try a small circle?” Reid’s eyes hadn’t left Junebug since I’d gotten on her.

“I think so.” I tried to project confidence I didn’t entirely feel.

Reid showed me how to guide Junebug with the reins and my legs, and we began a wobbly approximation of a circle. Adrenaline surged through me as Junebug responded to my signals, however imperfectly executed they were.

“Looking good, Quinn.” Enzo’s voice was serious but also held a note of pride.

“Better than good,” Kellan added, his earlier teasing gone. “You look like you belong there.”

Belong. The word echoed in my mind. I did feel like I belonged here; not just on Junebug, but at La Cuesta Ranch with these three men who had somehow become the center of my world in such a short time.

Junebug suddenly stopped, ears pricking forward.

“What is it?” I tensed, looking around for whatever had caught her attention.

“She’s testing you.” Reid’s voice was calm. “Show her you’re in charge.”

I squeezed again, a little more firmly this time. Junebug snorted but didn’t move.

“Come on, girl.” I patted her neck. “We were doing so well.”

Enzo crossed his arms. “Stubborn recognizes stubborn.”

I shot him a look but couldn’t deny the truth in his words. I took a deep breath and tried again, applying pressure with my legs and softening my hands as Reid had

taught me.

For one long, tense moment, Junebug stood frozen, as if deciding whether I was worthy. Then, almost reluctantly, she started walking again.

“That’s my girl.” I couldn’t keep the triumph from my voice.

We made it around the small pasture once, then twice. My legs were starting to ache, and my back would probably hate me tomorrow, but I couldn’t care less. Junebug and I had found our rhythm, imperfect as it was.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Reid suggested gently. “Always good to end on a high note.”

I nodded, though part of me wanted to keep going forever. “So... how do I stop?”

“Sit deep in the saddle and pull back gently on both reins.” Enzo demonstrated the motion with his hands.

I followed his instructions, and Junebug came to a halt. The guys gathered closer as I dismounted. My legs felt like jelly as they hit the ground, but not as bad as the first time I’d ridden Tater Tot.

“That was...” I searched for words that could capture the feeling. “Amazing.”

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“You were amazing,” Kellan’s hand found the small of my back.

Enzo nodded in agreement, offering me his water bottle. “Not bad for a stick horse champion.”

I took a long drink, suddenly aware of how dry my mouth had become. “Speaking of which...” I handed the bottle back to Enzo. “I have something to tell you guys.”

All three of them looked at me expectantly.

“I, uh, got accepted into the Western Regional Hobby Horse Invitational. It’s in two weeks.”

Silence met my announcement. Three pairs of eyes stared at me with varying degrees of surprise. Junebug bumped her head against my shoulder, nearly knocking me off balance and knocking them out of their shock.

“Two weeks?” Kellan’s eyebrows shot up toward his hat brim. “That’s pretty last minute, isn’t it?”

I flinched, suddenly finding my boot very interesting as I scuffed it against the dirt. “I signed up a few weeks ago, and it’s not like I haven’t been practicing the last several weeks. I only heard back that I was accepted a week ago, and with everything going on, I hadn’t gotten around to mentioning it?”

The last part came out more like a question than the statement I’d intended. I chanced a glance up to find three expressions that ranged from amused to puzzled to

concerned.

“Were you planning to tell us before or after you went?” Reid’s voice was gentle, but I detected a hint of hurt beneath it.

“Before! Definitely before.” I reached for his hand, squeezing it in reassurance. “Like, right now. Which is before. So technically, I’m fulfilling that promise.”

Kellan snorted. “Solid logic there, Professor.”

I swatted his arm and bit my lip, looking between them. “So... are you guys mad? That I didn’t tell you sooner?”

Enzo’s expression turned serious as he crossed his arms. His hat cast shadows across his face, making him look more intimidating than usual. I braced myself for disappointment or perhaps a lecture on communication. “There’s really only one thing to do now.”

I held my breath, my shoulders tensing as I waited for their response. Here it comes. The teasing or the concern that I would spiral again. After all, I had a mini-meltdown after the fair encounter and my newfound internet fame. Because I didn’t quite understand what the big deal was, I’d gone on my social media the following day.

Had I hidden under a blanket while scrolling through comments that were a mixture of encouragement, bullying, and oddly, several sexualizing me? Yes. Had I asked Reid to check if my teaching license could be revoked for stick horse indecency? Also, yes.

It wasn’t my finest moment and exactly why I hadn’t ventured into that hostile territory. Kellan had to coax me out of my nest with homemade brownies and promises that nobody at the state education board was monitoring hobby horse

videos.

Probably.

I cringed, wondering if it was worth it. But then I remembered all the positive comments and all the people that might be inspired to start doing something fun despite the negativity around them. “And what’s that?”

“Prepare.” Enzo’s serious expression cracked into a rare, full smile that was becoming less rare. “We have a champion to train.”

The tension in my shoulders released so fast I almost sagged against Junebug’s side. “Really? You’re not upset?”

“Why would we be upset about supporting you?” Kellan threw an arm around my shoulders. “Though I am deeply wounded you didn’t consult us, your resident horse experts, before entering.”

“I didn’t want to make it weird when I didn’t know where things were going with us!” I protested. “Plus, it’s not exactly normal.”

All three men exchanged glances before bursting into laughter.

“Sweetheart.” Reid’s eyes crinkled at the corners in amusement. “If you think any of us want ‘normal’ after this, you haven’t been paying attention.”

Junebug nickered, as if in agreement.

“Fair point.” I leaned my head against Kellan’s shoulder, reaching out to take Reid’s and Enzo’s hands. “So you’ll help me train?”

Enzo squeezed my hand. “We’ll have you jumping higher than ever and prancing like you had a spa day with the farrier.”

Between Junebug and my three cowboys surrounding me, I was invincible. Whatever the competition threw at me, I’d be ready.

And honestly, how hard could it be? I’d already done it once unprepared and taken on three cowboys and a ranch full of animals.

Chapter 28

A Woman Who Stuck Around

Quinn

The noise inside the convention center swelled around me as I fixed Thunderbolt's mane for the hundredth time. My hand shook slightly as I smoothed down each synthetic strand, ensuring the perfect bounce for my upcoming run.

Why I thought doing this was a good idea was beyond me. I could have just continued to do my little videos and do the occasional workshop for kids.

"You're going to give him a bald patch if you keep fussing." A woman not much older than me in a sequined riding jacket stopped next to me. I was pretty sure her stick horse had real horsehair and hand-painted details on the stick.

"Just pre-competition jitters. It's his first big event." I wanted to add it was my first one not under duress or with liquid courage but stopped myself.

The woman nodded, understanding in her eyes. "This is my third, but this is the largest crowd yet, thanks to you."

I glanced around the room filled with hobby horse enthusiasts of all ages. Children practiced jumps in the warm-up area while a group of college-aged women reviewed a complex dressage routine together. Someone nearby debated the finer points of stick horse gait transitions.

Not long ago, I would have found this entire scene ridiculous. Now, watching all the dedication and sheer grit of everyone, all I felt was impressed.

The individual dressage competition had finished an hour earlier, and while I hadn't competed in it, I'd taken meticulous mental notes. The way the top performers moved fascinated me. Next time, I'd be entering that division too.

My insides twisted as the announcer called for intermediate jumpers to gather near the entry gate. While I would have preferred to remain novice, winners of any placement in that division had to move up.

"Number forty-two, you're second in the lineup," a volunteer with a clipboard informed me.

I nodded, suddenly unable to speak as my mouth went dry. Second. That meant almost no time to watch others and adjust my strategy.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the intermediate jumping division of the Western Regional Hobby Horse Invitational!"

My confidence plummeted as cheers erupted from at least a thousand people who had paid money to watch. I scanned the audience, looking for anyone making fun of what was about to transpire.

But then I spotted them.

In the third row of bleachers sat six familiar faces. My parents sat awkwardly but proudly in brand new western shirts. Beside them, April jumped up and down, her hair dyed a new shade of purple that matched her sparkly eyeshadow.

And next to them were my three cowboys. Reid sat slightly hunched, clearly

uncomfortable with the crowd screaming around him. Kellan beamed with excitement, phone ready to document everything. Enzo tried to look casual, but I could see the intensity in his posture.

Something shifted inside me. These people—my people—had traveled all this way and were about to cheer for me as I pranced around on a stick horse. And not a single one of them thought it was stupid.

The volunteer called for the first competitor.

I bounced lightly on my toes, preparing my muscles for the upcoming jumps while keeping an eye on my cheering section. My mom caught my eye and gave an enthusiastic thumbs up. Kellan waved frantically while Enzo nodded once, his secret signal that I had this.

Reid seemed to notice my nervousness from across the arena. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, making eye contact, then mimed taking a deep breath. I followed his lead, my nervous system instantly calming down.

“Next up, number forty-two, Quinn Porter!”

The noise was almost deafening as I tucked Thunderbolt between my legs and trotted into the arena. I prayed to the hobby horse gods that I didn’t faceplant and become a meme all over social media.

The course spread out in front of me. I took a breath, ran toward the first jump, and cleared it clean. Thunderbolt stayed tucked between my legs, my landing soft like we had practiced.

A wave of cheering hit me, louder than I expected.

I turned sharply and aimed for the next obstacle. One jump, then another. I stumbled a little on one landing but caught myself and kept going. My legs burned, but I didn't stop.

The rest flew by in a mix of jumps, turns, and the sound of my own breathing. When I cleared the last jump and crossed the finish, the crowd erupted. People were on their feet, clapping and whistling, some even chanting my name.

I dismounted, and as I exited the arena, adrenaline pumping through my veins, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

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The rest of my division took their turns, with some sticking their landings, others knocking rails or skipping jumps altogether. I stood off to the side with the others, trying to guess how my round stacked up.

After the final rider finished, we then had to wait for the other jumping divisions to compete before the awards were announced.

Sudden emotion swelled in my throat as the top three for the novice division were called. I hadn't expected to feel this invested, yet here I was, blinking back tears.

I wiped my sweaty palms against my leggings and drew in a steadying breath as the announcer moved on to my division. The rational part of my brain reminded me this was just a hobby horse competition, but something deeper understood what it represented: me stepping out and trying something new, something that made me happy regardless of how others viewed it.

No matter what the results were, I knew I'd given it my all.

When my name was called for third place, I excitedly mounted Thunderbolt and trotted back in, grinning as they pinned a ribbon to his reins.

Once the awards ceremony wrapped, I turned toward the stands only to be intercepted halfway across the floor. One second I was walking, the next I was surrounded by three smiling cowboys who apparently didn't care we were still technically in public.

Kellan reached me first, lifting me off the ground with a whoop that echoed through the arena. I barely had time to protest before he spun me around.

Reid stood behind him, his usual calm replaced with an excited smile, and Enzo appeared at my side, hand steady on my back.

“Okay, okay,” I gasped. “Put me down before someone calls security.”

Kellan set me down reluctantly, but not before I caught a glimpse of April in the stands, phone out, clearly recording every second. My parents stood next to her, looking on with expressions mixed with pride and confusion.

Dinner with them tonight would be fun since I hadn’t exactly explained my new relationship to them.

Kellan threw his arm around my shoulder. “Better get used to it, hobby horse champion. This is just the beginning.”

And looking at their beaming faces, I knew he was right about far more than stick horses.

I peeled off my boots and dropped onto the edge of the bed, exhausted in the best possible way. My muscles ached, my stomach was still full from dinner, and the laughter from the restaurant echoed in my ears.

“I think my parents liked you guys.” I yanked off my socks and tossed them on top of my boots.

Across the room, Kellan shrugged out of his shirt with a cocky smirk. “It was my charm, wasn’t it?”

Enzo uncorked a bottle of champagne. “Your mom hugged me. Twice. I wasn’t prepared.”

Reid sprawled across the bed next to me, his long legs dangling off the edge. “Your dad kept calling me son.”

“I thought at first they didn’t get what was going on when Quinn said we were her boyfriends, but then he asked if we weretreating his daughter right.” Kellan flopped next to Reid, their shoulders touching. “I wasn’t sure if he meant financially or... you know.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Please tell me he didn’t give you guys the talk about his little girl.”

“Not directly.” Enzo handed me a glass of champagne, then distributed the others. “But there were some pointed questions about our intentions when you went to the bathroom with April.”

I sat on the edge of the mattress, suddenly aware of how normal the four of us together felt. “April wanted to make sure I was okay.”

Reid sat up. “And were you? Okay?”

I took a moment to really look at them. Kellan with his easy smile that hid depths I was still discovering. Enzo with his quiet strength and unexpected tenderness. Reid with his intuitive understanding that made me feel seen in ways I never had before.

“I was more than okay.” I took a sip of champagne. “For the first time, I wasn’t embarrassed or making excuses for my choices. I’m... happy.”

Reid’s eyes met mine over the rim of his glass. “We’re proud of you.”

My chest filled with something heavy and beautiful all at once. “Sometimes I still expect to wake up back in my apartment, with a broken heart and wondering where

my life went wrong.”

“Seems like you ended up exactly where you were supposed to.” Kellan’s expression softened.

Enzo took my glass and set it on the nightstand. “When you landed that final jump today, the look on your face...” He shook his head, words failing him for once.

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“Pure joy,” Reid finished for him. “Life has a way of giving us exactly what we need, even when it looks nothing like what we thought we wanted.”

We fell into an easy silence, limbs tangled together on the hotel bed.

Tomorrow we’d drive back to the ranch. Back to the animals and the lessons and the endless work that somehow didn’t feel like work anymore.

But tonight, surrounded by the men who had shown me what love could be when it wasn’t constrained, I closed my eyes and let myself feel completely, entirely found.

No longer lost.

No longer broken.

No longer alone.

I was Quinn Porter, a woman who’d stuck around and found her heart’s home in the most unexpected of places.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Quinn

I stood in the middle of the new indoor arena, breathing in the scent of fresh hay and

new lumber. Sunlight streamed through the skylights, casting a calming glow across the space that had gone from dream to reality in just under twelve months.

“Do you think we need more chairs by the refreshment table?” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, squinting at my clipboard where I’d meticulously organized the day’s schedule. The grand opening was set to start in less than thirty minutes, and my brain was in full organization mode.

Kellan appeared at my side, sliding an arm around my waist and plucking the clipboard from my hands. “The chairs are perfect. The lemonade is perfect. The little sandwich triangles are perfect. And you’re perfect.”

The transformation of La Cuesta Ranch over the past year had been nothing short of miraculous. The new classroom and educational space attached to the new stables and arena not only meant an expanded summer program but also a program we would offer during the school year. We had bridged our worlds in a way I’d never thought possible.

Reid entered through the side door, Walter trotting faithfully at his heels. He carried a stack of brochures with our new logo that was designed during a wine-filled evening where everyone had opinions and nobody had graphic design experience. Somehow, it had turned out perfect.

“Walter’s wearing his bow tie.” I bent down to scratch behind the dog’s ears, heart melting at the tiny, checkered bow attached to his collar. “Who’s the best little ranch ambassador? You are.”

He let out a yip in agreement and darted away to sniff.

“He insisted. Said it was a formal occasion.” Reid handed off the brochures to Kellan and gave me a smile that still made warmth spread through my body even after all

this time.

“Well, he’s not wrong.” I straightened up, taking in Reid’s new pearl snap shirt that matched Walter’s bow. “You clean up nice.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” He tugged me against him for a quick kiss, his hand lingering at the small of my back.

Enzo joined our little circle, his own clipboard in hand. “The Silvermans are already here. They’re twenty minutes early.” He looked distressed by this deviation from the schedule.

The grand opening of the new facility was a big moment for him. He’d not only kept his promise to his uncle to keep the ranch alive, but it was now expanding and thriving.

“Twenty minutes early is right on time in Mrs. Silverman’s book.” I squeezed his arm sympathetically.

Kellan adjusted his hat with a grin. “I’ll go entertain them. Old Mrs. Silverman loves me.”

“Everyone loves you,” I called after him as he strode toward the entrance.

Reid glanced at his watch. “I need to check on a few horses before more people start to show up.”

After Reid departed, Enzo and I were left standing in the center of our new masterpiece. The stalls were pristine and ready for new horses, the tack room was organized to perfection, and the educational spaces were bright and inviting.

Enzo cleared his throat. “You know, a year ago, I would’ve bet good money this would never work.”

“Which part? The construction? The expansion? Or the four of us?” I bumped my shoulder against his arm.

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“All of it.” He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. “Well, except for us.”

I leaned into him, remembering those early days when we were still figuring out boundaries and schedules and whose turn it was to make coffee in the morning. We’d never once doubted what we all had. “It’s a miracle we’ve only had three major fights, and one of those was about whether a quesadilla counts as a sandwich.”

“It doesn’t.”

“It absolutely does, but we can rehash that particular argument later, preferably naked.” I looked at the man who’d gone from grumpy skeptic to one of my three pillars. “Are you happy, Enzo?”

His eyes softened as he looked at me. “Happier than I ever thought possible.”

The next two hours passed in a blur of introductions, tours, and proud moments watching people explore the space we’d poured our hearts into. The mayor stopped by for a ceremonial ribbon cutting. Local reporters took photos. Kellan charmed his way through interviews while Reid quietly ensured everything ran smoothly behind the scenes. Enzo fielded technical questions about the facility, his expertise evident in every detailed explanation.

And me? I bounced between all three of them, filling gaps, answering questions, and occasionally stealing private moments with each man when nobody was looking. A quick hand squeeze with Reid. A wink from Kellan across the room. A brush of fingers with Enzo as we passed each other.

After the last guest had departed and we'd cleaned up the remnants of the celebration, we walked to the fence line along the stables, watching the sun dip below the hills. My heart felt full as I stood there sandwiched between Reid and Kellan, with Enzo's steady presence behind me completing our circle.

"We did it," I whispered, not wanting to break the peaceful moment.

Reid nodded, the barest hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "You did it. This place needed you."

A surge of emotion threatened to overwhelm me. Here I was, standing on the threshold of a life I'd never dared imagine, with three men who loved me in their own unique ways, a career that blended my passion for teaching with my newfound love of ranch life, and a home that was more right than anywhere I'd ever been.

Reid reached for my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine. Kellan's arm tightened around my waist, and Enzo rested his chin on my shoulder.

This was home.