



The Rancher's Mail-Order Husband (Mail-Order Husbands)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The year is 1880 and Graham is a lonely rancher of 36 who is tired of spending all his days in the open fields of Montana on his own. He writes an article in *The Matrimonial Journal* looking for a husband to spend his days with, offering up his simple homestead and honest way of living to whoever can provide him with companionship and the occasional gentle word of affection.

Ciarian is an Irishman in New York who is looking to find his place in life. He answers Graham's posting in the *Journal* and agrees to a mutually beneficial arrangement between the two of them. Neither man is expecting more than friendship and someone to help with the daily chores, but life on the ranch has a way of opening you up to new possibilities.

The Rancher's Mail-Order Husband is a low stakes gay western romance featuring mail order grooms, gratuitous domesticity, size difference, and the overwhelming ordeal of falling in love with your own husband.

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Rancher, bachelor, aged 36, requests correspondence with a man looking for companionship; object matrimony. Box 202, Larkspur Post Office, MT.

It didn't seem like enough. It was, more or less, just like all of the other advertisements in The Matrimonial Journal. With every monthly publication there was a fresh batch of requests for acquaintanceship, photos, and meetings, all with one goal. Object matrimony.

Graham fretted over his own attempt. His penmanship left something to be desired, but so long as the staff at The Matrimonial Journal could read it then there'd be no issue in publishing it. But even next to the other brief missives he thought it was lacking.

IRISH woman of 28 years with a comfortable income wishes to meet an honest woman of similar age to share her home with; object matrimony. P.O. box 745, Cherry Grove, MA.

GENTLEMAN, 34, good appearance, refined, and of means seeks a similarly refined partner, no children; object matrimony. 56 East Street, KS.

What did Graham have to offer? He was proud of what he'd built on his land. A house, a barn, and a chicken coop; a pasture and silo to hold feed for his livestock; a decent-sized garden that sustained him through the seasons. It was hard, honest work that occupied most of his time and gave him a quiet sense of accomplishment. His house was modest, its rooms sparse but clean and orderly—less out of fastidiousness and more because there simply wasn't much to clutter them. Graham lived by simple necessities: a roof over his head, his own bed to sleep in, and food on the table. These

were luxuries he'd once only dreamed of, and now that he had them, he found himself unsure what else his home might need.

Well, besides a husband.

Marriage had always felt like a far-off dream—something for other men, not for him. When he was younger, he'd had nothing to offer another person, barely enough to keep himself alive. It would have been irresponsible, even impossible, to imagine starting a household with someone else. Then came the war, and Graham had enlisted with fervor, fighting for the Union, determined to confront the Confederacy and its evils while serving his country proudly.

The war had been grueling. Long, sweltering days under an unforgiving sun, freezing nights that seemed endless, and meager rations he'd learned to stomach out of necessity. Salt pork, hardtack, and beans formed the core of every meal, served in whatever combinations the men could manage. There were stews of celery, pork, and potatoes thickened with crumbled hardtack, and “puddings” of whiskey, molasses, and sugar softened into something vaguely edible. Coffee was a rarity, and when supplies ran out, dandelion root had to suffice. It wasn't gourmet, but it kept them alive.

The war's horrors haunted him more than the bad food. He had seen death in every imaginable form—men falling under a hail of bullets, ripped apart by cannon fire, or crumpled in the mud, their blood soaking into the earth. Collecting bodies from the battlefield had been the worst, hoisting lifeless comrades onto carts until they groaned under the weight. Graham had come close to joining the dead himself, narrowly surviving a gunshot wound to the leg near the war's end.

The surgeon wanted to amputate, and Graham, fueled by desperation, had snarled at him through gritted teeth, threatening to break his fingers if he so much as tried. He kept the leg but earned a limp that followed him everywhere, along with something

the doctors called “soldier’s heart”—a condition that left him shaking, sleepless, and burdened with memories of blood and gunpowder.

Before the war, Graham had hardly been a prize. He was a big, broad-shouldered man with rough hands, coarse manners, and no money to his name. Now, he was sun-weathered, his dark hair and beard thick and untamed, his body marked with scars from bayonets and bullets. The limp in his leg slowed him down, and the nightmares often woke him screaming into the dark. But he had land now—a place of his own—and a modest livelihood. Maybe, just maybe, that would be enough for someone out there looking for a stable life and a companion to share it with.

He’d subscribed to *The Matrimonial Journal* on a whim, paying for a full year’s worth of issues. Each edition contained articles on household tips, fashion, recipes, and the occasional piece of news, but what really drew Graham’s attention were the matrimonial ads. They were simple, two-line statements penned by hopeful souls searching for love and partnership. Graham studied them for months, trying to divine the secret to writing an ad that might attract the right kind of response.

But two lines hardly seemed enough to explain his life, his hopes, or what he could offer. Friendship, care, and a steady life on his ranch were all he could promise. Would that be enough?

Frustration bubbled up as Graham pushed himself back from the kitchen table. His unfinished letter lay before him, mocking him with its incompleteness. He decided to step away. There was always work to be done on the ranch, and perhaps a little sweat and labor would help clear his mind. He’d tend to the chickens, check on the cows and sheep, and give Ginger, his bay mare, a thorough grooming. Then, with fresh eyes, he’d return to the daunting task of putting his heart on paper.

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It was a sound enough strategy—distract himself with work, let the rhythm of the ranch soothe his restless thoughts—until he actually had to return to the kitchen table. Now, as the late afternoon light angled through the windows, casting warm gold over the simple wooden furniture, Graham faced his unfinished letter once more.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with a sigh, his shirt clinging to him after hours spent in the sun. The day's work was done. The chickens were fed, the cows milked, the sheep checked over for any signs of illness or injury. Ginger had been groomed until her coat gleamed, and she'd nuzzled his shoulder in gratitude before he'd left her stall. All the chores were crossed off the mental list he carried in his head, leaving him with nothing but this—this stubborn, lingering task that had occupied his thoughts for weeks.

The labor of the heart.

Graham poured himself a shot of whiskey, the good stuff he only brought out on rare occasions. He stared at the amber liquid in the glass, then threw it back in one gulp, his throat tightening against the burn as it went down. The heat spread through his chest, sharp but oddly comforting, and he let out a low breath as he set the glass aside.

His hands were rough from years of work, the calluses thick and unyielding, but they trembled slightly as he picked up his pencil. He held it tightly, as if sheer determination could force the words onto the page. The letter stared back at him, his careful handwriting neat but hesitant, the few lines he'd written earlier filled with crossed-out phrases and smudged eraser marks.

What could he say? How could he possibly condense everything he felt into a few sentences? He was no poet, no wordsmith. His strength was in his hands, his back, his endurance—not in flowery phrases or declarations of love. Yet here he was, trying to distill his life and hopes into words that might catch the attention of a stranger.

He'd written about the ranch—about the barn he'd built with his own hands, the garden that provided food for his table, and the livestock that gave him purpose every day. He'd mentioned the house, simple but sturdy, with enough room for two if someone were willing to share it with him.

But what about the things he couldn't put into words? The way his chest ached with longing on quiet nights, the way he sometimes stood at the edge of the pasture staring at the horizon, wondering if there was more to life than the solitude he'd grown so used to. Could any of that be conveyed in a simple matrimonial ad?

Graham tapped the pencil against the table, the soft thud breaking the silence of the room. His gaze drifted to the window, where the sun was sinking lower, casting long shadows across the yard. The whiskey hadn't helped much—it never did—but at least it dulled the edges of his frustration.

“Come on, Graham,” he muttered to himself, his voice rough from disuse. “Just write it down. Doesn't have to be perfect.”

The words refused to come. Instead, he thought about the men he'd known during the war, the letters they'd carried from home—letters filled with promises of love and devotion, words of encouragement that kept them going through the worst of it. He'd envied those men, not just for the letters, but for the people waiting for them. He'd never had anyone to write to, no one waiting for him to come home.

But he was home now, and maybe it was time to change that.

Rancher, bachelor, aged 36, requests correspondence with a man looking for companionship; object matrimony. Box 202, Larkspur Post Office.

Then he set the pencil down again and took another long drink, the burn of the whiskey offering a fleeting distraction. Why was this so difficult? Across the country,

there were dozens of newspapers and periodicals just like The Matrimonial Journal, each dedicated to helping people find a suitable spouse. People from every walk of life penned their hopes and dreams into these advertisements, seeking connection, companionship, or maybe just the promise of not facing the world alone. Was he so different from anyone else asking for a letter of interest?

The question gnawed at him. If he was, if his life and spirit had been irreparably scarred by hardship, then maybe no one would want to write to him, let alone consider marriage. But if he wasn't—if he truly was just another man among countless others with his own quiet loneliness—what were the chances that his personal ad would even be noticed? His words could so easily disappear into a sea of others just like him, all searching for the same thing.

Either way, his odds weren't good.

Graham tipped the bottle and refilled his glass, the amber liquid catching the light as it sloshed against the sides. He stared at the blank page in front of him. The thought that had been stirring in the back of his mind finally pushed its way forward: maybe a simple message wasn't enough. Maybe the standard formula—"seeking a kind, hardworking man to share life's joys and trials"—wasn't going to cut it. His circumstances were different, weren't they? He wanted to make sure that anyone who read his ad understood him, understood why he was searching for someone and what kind of life he had to offer.

The Matrimonial Journal had published longer letters before—he'd seen them himself, sprawling across nearly a quarter of a page. They stood out, and sometimes they even lingered in his memory. But he knew they cost more. Every word, every line, came with a price. Did he have the money to spare? The thought made him glance toward the corner of the room, where his ledger sat atop the small desk he used for tallying farm expenses.

His mind began to calculate, weighing the worth of a few extra sentences against the value of his modest income. Seeds for the garden were a necessity. Feed for the animals couldn't be skimmed on. There were always repairs to be made to the house, the barn, or the coop. Tools wore out; clothes frayed and tore until they were beyond mending. Even simple luxuries, like a new shotgun for hunting or a sturdy pair of boots, came with a cost: \$60 for the gun, \$3.50 for the boots.

And yet, what were those things compared to the price of finding someone to share his life? Someone to share the quiet evenings, the backbreaking work, the unpredictable storms, and the occasional laughter. What was that worth? Certainly more than the price of a few extra paragraphs in a periodical.

Graham drained the glass in one steady motion, savoring the warmth that spread through him. Then, setting the glass aside, he picked up the pencil once more. The weight of it in his hand felt a little lighter now. This time, he wouldn't settle for a simple ad. If he was going to put himself out there, he would do it fully, honestly, and without apology.

He bent over the paper, the pencil poised to capture his thoughts, and began to write.

To the reader of this letter,

I am a bachelor aged 36 seeking a friend and helpmate in life. I am not a man of great resources or words and I have been hurt in the War and am not much to look at but I have land and a house and I will treat a husband well. It is away from the town though if wanting we can visit as often as possible.

But you might enjoy the land as I do. There are many wildflowers of all colors that grow on the prairie and it is a pretty sight to see all the spots of red orange and purple blue and yellow among the tall grass. It is also a very gratifying thing to care for the cows and sheep and the chickens and watch them wander peacefully about.

Currently it is just me taking care of the animals and the garden and I would continue to do so after marriage. I do not expect a hired hand but a companion for whom I would dearly love an affectionate word and gentle conversation here and there.

You will want for nothing, I will make certain of it. In return I only ask for friendship and kindness. If you think you would like to write to me I would be grateful for your letter. Thank you kindly.

Address, Graham Shepherd, Box 202, Larkspur Post Office, MT.

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All Graham could do now was wait—and try to wait as patiently as he could. Which, as it turned out, wasn't very patiently at all.

The Matrimonial Journal published only once a month, a frequency that felt like a cruel joke to someone in his position. Graham had carefully folded his letter and tucked it into an envelope, along with the payment he had saved—enough for the editors to run his ad for two issues. He had carried it to town, handed it over to the postmaster, and watched as it was dropped into the mailbag. Now, there was nothing left but time. Too much time.

First, he would have to wait for his letter to reach the editors, wherever they were. Then, he would have to wait for them to finalize the upcoming issue. After that, it would take more waiting for the journal to be printed, bound, and mailed out to its subscribers. And even then, his real waiting would begin. He would have to wait for someone—anyone—to read his ad, to pick up a pen, to compose a reply, and to send it back. From there, more time would slip by as the letter made its way through the postal system, finally landing at the town post office where Graham would retrieve it.

It could be another month after his ad was published before he had even the slightest

chance of receiving a response.

When the latest issue of *The Matrimonial Journal* finally arrived, Graham spread it out on his small kitchen table and scanned the pages with shaking hands. There it was, on the second page, nestled between two wildly different entries: one from a gentleman seeking an impossibly specific young woman—a petite, attractive, and charming lady between the ages of 18 and 25, no taller than 5’5”, and emphatically not a redhead—and a recipe for lemon cake. Seeing his own words printed there, stark and earnest, sent a shiver down his spine. This was real now.

Of course, that was when the restlessness set in.

The practical thing would have been to wait a full month before checking the post office. Graham knew that. But the thought of a letter, a single letter, sitting unclaimed in the post office was unbearable. What if it was there, waiting for him, while he wasted time out here on the farm? So he made a decision: he would ride into town every Friday. Just to check.

It became a ritual. He hitched up the wagon, and he and Ginger, his old mare, made the familiar trip into town. The postman, Oscar, soon grew accustomed to Graham’s weekly visits. At first, Oscar was just another face in the small, sleepy town, his uniform the only thing that set him apart. But over time, Graham came to recognize the slight nervousness in the man’s smile and the way he fidgeted with his pen when there wasn’t much mail to sort.

“Any mail for me today?” Graham asked, week after week.

Oscar would glance at the mail cubbies, shuffle through a few envelopes, and shake his head. “Not yet, Mr. Shepherd. But I’ll keep an eye out.”

One particularly dreary Friday, with rain soaking through his coat and dripping off

his hat, Oscar ventured a question as he handed Graham a dry towel to wipe his hands. “Are you expecting to hear from someone?”

Graham hesitated, the weight of weeks of disappointment heavy on his shoulders. “To be honest, not really,” he muttered, before tipping his hat and heading back out into the rain.

And yet, the next Friday found him back at the post office. And the Friday after that. No matter how foolish it felt, he couldn’t stop himself from hoping. Every time he stepped through the post office door, he imagined what it might be like to hold a letter in his hands. What if someone saw his ad and thought, This is someone I could share my life with? What if they saw past the rough edges and loneliness to the man underneath?

A partner in work, a companion in quiet moments, someone to sit beside him at the dinner table and talk about the day, to share stories, laughter, even secrets.

Every Friday, he walked in full of hope, and every Friday, he walked out empty-handed, disappointment settling a little deeper in his chest. But still, he kept coming back. Because what if?

Just a little while longer, he told himself. He could keep acting foolish, lovesick for anybody and nobody, for the smallest chance of affection. Just for a little while longer.

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As had become his habit, Graham hitched Ginger to the wagon early Friday morning and made the trip into town. When he’d first started his weekly journeys, the sight of him strolling through the bustling main street had been a novelty. People had paused mid-step to stare openly, their curiosity barely concealed. Graham Shepherd wasn’t

known for his love of crowds, or for his frequent presence in town. In fact, he wasn't known much at all.

A confirmed bachelor living alone on the prairie, Graham kept mostly to himself. He sold eggs to the woman at the general store, stopped in occasionally to place orders for seeds, tools, or medicine, and during the harvest, he hired a few workers to help with the backbreaking labor of collecting and packaging his crops. Apart from those practical interactions, his life was largely solitary. Even his nearest neighbors, Liam and Ronan, only saw him on rare occasions—when a sheep wandered too far onto his land or when they lent each other a hand during emergencies, like a cow struggling to calf or a sudden storm wreaking havoc on the fencing.

Over time, his Friday visits to town became less remarkable to the townsfolk. His presence was no longer a cause for whispers or blatant stares, though he still caught the occasional furtive glance. People were always surprised by his size, and the scars that cut jagged lines across his face and hands only deepened the intrigue. But Graham had grown used to those looks long ago. They no longer stung, and he paid them little mind.

The post office was quiet when he arrived, the bell above the door jingling as he stepped inside. Oscar was there, as always, standing behind the counter in his crisp uniform. Graham prepared himself for the usual polite but disappointing exchange. He'd grown accustomed to Oscar's professional smile and the routine response: "Nothing for you this week, Mr. Shepherd."

But today was different.

The moment Oscar saw him, his face lit up. The man practically beamed, his nervous demeanor replaced with genuine excitement. "Right on time!" he exclaimed, his voice loud enough to echo in the small room. "Your letter's finally arrived!"

Graham blinked, stunned. For a moment, he thought he must have misheard. “Really?” he asked, his voice cautious, the word barely above a whisper.

“Yes, sir!” Oscar said, nodding enthusiastically. “All the way from New York!”

From behind the counter, Oscar held out a thick envelope, its edges slightly worn from travel. It was far larger than Graham had expected, almost bursting with the sheer number of pages crammed inside.

“This is one letter?” Graham asked, his lips twitching into a hesitant smile that quickly widened. He reached out to take the parcel, the weight of it solid in his hands. The sender appeared to be aware of the bulk of the letter. They had very carefully sealed it shut, posted two stamps in the corner and very carefully written on the back was:

From: Ciarán Ryan

431 Baker’s Court

Mrs. Edward’s Boarding House

Room 4, On the Left, Blue Door

New York

To: Mister Graham Shepherd

Box 202, Larkspur Post Office

Montana

A reply. Graham could hardly believe it. He had thought, perhaps, that his personal in *The Matrimonial Journal* might go unanswered. And yet, here it was—a letter. From New York, no less. He stared at the envelope as though it might vanish if he looked away. The eastern cities weren't short on lonely people, of course, but still, the distance seemed incredible. The journal circulated far and wide, but he hadn't dared hope it might reach someone so... perfect.

He glanced at Oscar, the postman, who was sorting through the rest of the mail with practiced ease. "Could I—read this here?"

Oscar gave a genial nod. "Oh, certainly. Go right ahead."

Graham sank onto the wooden bench just outside the post office, the spring sunshine warming his shoulders. He studied the handwriting on the envelope—neat, practiced, and undeniably elegant. Ciarán Ryan. An Irish name, he thought. That brought a small, curious smile to his lips.

He slid his pocketknife carefully along the seal and took a deep breath. Folding back the flap, he removed the letter with reverent care. The paper was fine, the words penned in the same flowing script as the envelope. For a moment, he hesitated, letting the anticipation build before finally reading.

Dear Mister Graham Shepherd,

I am writing, sir, to tell you that I have read your personal in *The Matrimonial Journal* and that, with your approval, I would like to take you up on your offer. I desire a marriage very much, for I have been here in New York without family for some time and would dearly like a friend. I also think the city life does not agree with me. Your description of the prairie, with all the blossoms, has taken root in my mind and flourished into a great many daydreams. I would dearly love to see it. The real thing must be more beautiful than my imaginings. I cannot say that I have much experience

with animals but I do very much like all the ones that I've come across and I would like to learn more about them.

You might think me very selfish, with all these I's, but I want to assure you that I have thought of this with practicality and have come to the decision that the hustle and bustle in the city is not to my liking and that I would be the most agreeable husband in such an environment as the prairie.

I have also thought of this with much sentiment, and I will say that I found your personal to be both very honest and very kind. If you are as you have written, which I imagine you are, then to be your lifelong companion would be, I think, a very welcome role that would give me much contentment.

If it is not too forthright to state, then I will note that there is nothing tying me to this city, and I have few possessions and no business to settle besides saying goodbye to the boarding house mistress. I would gladly board a train to meet you, and marry you, and see the flowers blooming on your land as soon as possible.

If it was too forthright to state, then please disregard my last paragraph, and instead imagine that I have instead written something very charming and very demure that has made you wonder at my grace and good character and has you scrambling to write back to me immediately.

Sincerely, Ciarán Ryan

P.S. Included are some sketches I have made of your land, for your description inspired me very much. Tell me, did I manage to create an accurate likeness from my daydreams? There is also a likeness of my current place of residence, in case you are interested.

Graham read the letter once, twice, and a third time for good measure. His grin grew

wider with each reading until his cheeks ached from the effort. The rest of the papers were, as promised, sketches. The drawings were lively, filled with bold strokes and bright colors from what looked like colored pencils. In one, a pond shimmered beneath a pale sky; in another, a stretch of prairie bloomed with flowers in every shade imaginable. One piece even showed the property teeming with sheep, though Graham hadn't mentioned any in his description.

And the last sketch—an exterior view of a modest green building—brought a pang of curiosity. It was clearly labeled as Mrs. Edward's boarding house, Ciarán's current residence in the bustling heart of New York City. From there, this man had imagined Graham's ranch, written a letter, and filled its pages with earnest sincerity.

The thought warmed Graham. What did Ciarán look like? Was he an older bachelor like himself, or a widower looking for a fresh start? He hoped, at the very least, that he was kind. Kindness mattered more than anything else. And companionship, too—that's what Graham had been searching for. A friend to share the long prairie days.

He turned to Oscar, still marveling at the letter. "You're Irish, aren't you?"

Oscar raised an eyebrow, his tone wary. "I am. Why?"

Graham held out the envelope, pointing to the sender's name. "Can you tell me how to pronounce this?"

Oscar squinted at the elegant script. "Ah, Ciarán. It'd be pronounced like 'KEER-awn.' Why do you ask?"

Graham's grin turned downright radiant as he clutched the letter and sketches to his chest. "Because he's my husband-to-be."

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Graham couldn't stop saying the name. Ciarán Ryan. Over and over, he tested it, tasting the rhythm of the syllables as they passed his lips. Ciarán Ryan. It felt foreign and familiar all at once, like a secret he had only just learned to speak aloud. He let the name roll off his tongue again. Ciarán Ryan. And then, in a burst of spontaneous joy, he tried a new combination, a new thought: Ciarán Shepherd. His grin spread wide as he imagined the sound of it, the two names entwined in something new and hopeful. He let out a sharp bark of laughter, an uncontained sound of giddiness that echoed in the quiet town square. He shook Oscar's hand enthusiastically, his grip firm with gratitude.

"Thank you," Graham said, his voice full of sincerity. "Thank you for bringing me my letter."

Oscar, still bewildered, blinked at him in surprise. "It's my job, Graham. But, you're welcome all the same," he replied, the usual air of detachment in his voice, though his eyes softened just a little at Graham's joy.

It might've been just another part of Oscar's daily routine, another letter successfully delivered. But for Graham, this was something extraordinary. It was more than just a letter. It was an answer to the quiet plea he had whispered into the void, an answer that had crossed hundreds of miles of land and sea to reach him. Somewhere, in a place so distant and unknown to him, a man named Ciarán Ryan was sitting in a room with a blue door at Mrs. Edward's boarding house in New York City. That man had read Graham's words, seen the same longing in his heart, and had written back—not just with a polite reply, but with an eager yes. He would marry him. The words echoed in his mind like a prayer answered. Ciarán had read his letter, seen his offer, and had taken it. He would marry him. That was all that mattered. That was the

miracle.

The letter had come from a man who wrote with such beautiful penmanship, whose words were full of longing and sincerity. And not only that—Ciarán had sent along drawings, little glimpses of his own imagination. Sketches of the prairie, flowers, and wide open skies. How could Graham ever have hoped for more? How could he ever have dreamed that someone would see his words, hear his heart, and respond so earnestly?

In the letter, Ciarán had written that he longed for a place where the city's hustle and bustle didn't overwhelm him, where he could find peace, contentment, and perhaps even a friend, a companion. And Graham—Graham could give him all of that. The prairie was ready for him. The flowers would bloom as promised. He would give Ciarán a place of quiet beauty, a home filled with the sounds of nature, and someone who would cherish him, someone who would take care of him and share in the days and nights ahead. He could give him everything he had longed for, everything he wanted.

Graham's heart was light, giddy as a schoolboy in summer. He couldn't stop the grin that spread across his face. Every step he took felt like a dance, every person he passed felt like a witness to the wonder inside him. He thanked Oscar once again, his voice still bubbling with excitement, and then he wandered aimlessly around town, barely noticing where his feet took him. His mind was spinning with thoughts, ideas, plans, and dreams.

There was so much to do. So much he hadn't even realized he needed to do. He had to make the house ready. Make it a home. Right now, it was nothing more than a place to sleep, a space where he stowed his weary body when he wasn't working. But now, it was going to be something else entirely. It would have to be a home for two. More chairs, another set of plates, more glasses, and utensils. Perhaps a vase, to hold the flowers Ciarán loved so much. There was so much to think of—so many little

details that suddenly seemed so important.

He had to go to the railroad station, too, and figure out how much it would cost to bring Ciarán here. He imagined him stepping off the train, his face bright and full of hope. He would be here. On Graham's land. With him. Graham could already see the two of them, walking side by side across the prairie, talking, laughing, finding their rhythm together. He could feel the excitement rising in his chest again.

Then there was the church. He had to talk to the priest. They would need a ceremony, of course. A formal union to mark this moment. A bond that would carry them into the future. He needed to find witnesses too. Liam and Ronan, maybe. They would be the most obvious choice—if they could spare a moment from their own homestead. Perhaps Oscar, if he was willing. It would be a small affair, nothing too grand, but it would be a wedding all the same. The day when he would stand beside Ciarán, look him in the eyes, and say the words that would bind their lives together. It was all coming together, faster than Graham could keep up.

And then, of course, there was the letter. He had to reply to Ciarán. To officially propose. To tell him that, yes, he was as eager as Ciarán was to meet and marry. To tell him that everything would be ready, that Graham had already started preparing for him, for them. It was more than just a response. It was an invitation to the future.

Graham walked out of the post office, a smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth. He wasn't even married yet, and already his life had taken on a new energy. It was as though he had been sleepwalking through the years, moving from task to task without ever really feeling alive. But now—now he felt awake. His heart was full of purpose. Full of joy. And there was a spring in his step, as though the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. Everything had changed in an instant. And it was only the beginning.

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It was still early when Graham entered the general store, the bell on the door chiming softly as he pushed it open. The store was quiet, save for the owner, Mrs. Fournier, who was tidying up behind the counter, organizing a few items and putting things in their proper place. It was a small comfort for Graham, this rare peace before the bustle of the day began. The town wasn't awake yet, and neither was the world at large. He could almost pretend for a moment that everything in it was still as he'd left it—calm, controlled, and certain.

Graham knew Mrs. Fournier only vaguely through their business dealings. She was a well-known figure, even in the neighboring towns, someone whose name carried weight, not just in Larkspur, but across the broader landscape of their shared history. Mrs. Fournier was not simply a shopkeeper; she was a woman of great resilience, a survivor of immense hardships who had set off on a journey from Louisiana years ago to find her family—people who had been torn apart, sold, or escaped the horrors of the past. And against the odds, she had found them. She had crossed state lines with a growing group of loved ones until they settled in Larkspur, where she established the general store. It wasn't just a business—it was a testament to survival, determination, and the love of family.

Perhaps it was that history that had made her so at ease with people. Graham had always found her to be one of those rare individuals who was completely comfortable in her own skin, who exuded a quiet confidence, and whose sense of self made others feel at ease—or at least, not overly scrutinized. Graham, for all his taciturn nature, found solace in that. He was not a man for small talk, and Mrs. Fournier had long since learned to respect that. From the very first time they had met, she had greeted him warmly, acknowledged him with a smile, and then gotten straight to business. No questions, no pressure—just an efficient transaction, and that was all.

So when Graham stepped into the store that morning, he didn't expect much more than the usual exchange. But this time, there was something different. There was more at stake, more on his mind, and he found himself hesitating as he approached

the counter.

“Well, hello, Graham,” Mrs. Fournier said, turning to greet him as the bell above the door jingled. Her voice was soft but warm. “Buying or selling today?”

“Buying,” Graham replied, his voice rough with a tension he hadn’t expected to feel. He cleared his throat. “And I think I—need help, ma’am.”

She raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. “What are you looking for?”

Graham hesitated again, then exhaled, feeling the weight of his words before he even spoke them. “Everything. I’m planning on—getting married and I need to... get ready.” He cleared his throat again, uncomfortable with his own vulnerability, but there was no turning back now. “Things for the house and for—myself.”

“Congratulations, Graham! That’s wonderful!” Mrs. Fournier exclaimed, a genuine warmth in her voice. Graham felt a rush of relief at her kindness, but it was fleeting. He worried, just for a moment, that she might ask more personal questions—about Ciarán, about their meeting, about the path that had brought them here. But he needn’t have feared. Mrs. Fournier didn’t probe, didn’t pry. Instead, she offered her help with the same ease she always had.

“Well, we have the ready-mades here, if you’re looking for some new clothes,” she suggested, her tone practical and matter-of-fact. “We ought to have something nice that fits a man your size. We’ve also got some lovely new dinnerware patterns, if that’s of interest. And I can get you the furniture catalog while you browse. How’s that for a start?”

Graham nodded, feeling his chest loosen a little. “That sounds perfect.”

It wasn’t the first time he had visited the store, but today it felt different. Mrs.

Fournier's gentle direction made it easier for him to navigate the myriad decisions ahead. As he walked down the aisles, looking at everything from clothes to kitchenware, he felt the weight of the future settle in around him. He picked out a ready-made suit, something simple but nice enough for a wedding. He added a woven rug, a few more pieces of cutlery, and he ordered a fine china tea set, requesting that it be packed with utmost care. The thought of hosting Ciarán, of having him sit at the table with him, filled him with a quiet joy that he could hardly contain.

He also selected a dining chair, one with a cushion, thinking that it might offer some comfort on long evenings spent talking together. The chair would stand in contrast to his handmade kitchen table, and perhaps that bothered him, but it was practical—and Ciarán deserved comfort, deserved the best that Graham could offer.

Then, for the first time, Graham found himself looking for a gift for Ciarán. It was a strange thing to shop for, something he'd never truly considered before. He thought of the fields—the green grass, the open sky—and knew that Ciarán would need something for the changing seasons. So, he chose a dark green coat and a straw hat with a green ribbon tied around the center. The coat would keep him warm in the winter, and the hat would shield him from the sun during summer walks. It wasn't much, but it felt like something Ciarán could wear, something that would fit in with the life Graham hoped to build for them.

By the time he'd made his selections, Graham had spent more than he typically did in two months. But what was money, after all, if not to be spent on things that mattered most? And what better way to spend it than on a future together?

Still, doubts crept in. He hadn't even received a letter in return yet. He had planned for everything—he had the clothes, the goods for the house, the gifts for Ciarán—but was he moving too quickly? Had he counted his chickens before they hatched? He pushed the worries aside, remembering Ciarán's letter—his words about eagerly joining him on the prairie. The man had written back positively. He had expressed an

eagerness to marry him, to see the flowers in full bloom. Surely that meant something.

Later, at the railroad station, the clerk greeted him with surprise as he asked about ticket prices, about the quality of meals and train car conditions.

“Are you planning on taking a trip, Mr. Shepherd?” the clerk asked, a puzzled expression on his face.

“No. Someone’s...” Graham paused, wondering just how much to divulge. He hadn’t exactly kept his plans a secret, but not everyone in town needed to know about his personal life, about Ciarán. “I’m expecting a visitor soon,” he said, hoping that would be enough.

The clerk nodded, but Graham could see the questions still lingering in his eyes. He gritted his teeth and went to the bank, withdrawing enough money to cover Ciarán’s ticket and meals along the way. The train ride would take nearly a week, but he was determined that Ciarán would not want for anything. The journey was long, uncomfortable, but Graham would do what he could to make it easier.

But then there was the food. Graham had never thought about it much—his meals were simple, utilitarian. Biscuits and eggs, fresh garden produce when it was in season, canned vegetables in the winter. But Ciarán deserved more than that. Surely, he would expect more than that.

Back to Mrs. Fournier he went, once more. This time, he bought yeast, baking soda, a sack of sugar, and tins of vegetables that were out of season. He was sheepish as he placed the items on the counter, but Mrs. Fournier was as kind as ever, not commenting on his embarrassment but instead helping him with care, her smile unchanging and warm.

When Graham reached for his wallet to pay, she shook her head. “Consider this a small wedding gift,” she said firmly.

“I can’t—” Graham began, but she cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“You can and you will. I insist. You’ve probably got enough on your plate right now getting things ready for him, am I right?” she said, her tone light but knowing. “This is just one less bill. And if you’re really that worried,” she added, her eyes twinkling mischievously, “Consider this: a Mr. and Mr. Shepherd will be buying twice as much from my shop.”

Graham couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you,” he said, grateful beyond words for her generosity.

Their conversation was interrupted by the loud jangle of the bell on the door, followed by the deliberate, heavy steps of someone entering the store. Graham turned to see Jean Lachapelle swagger up to the counter, a sneer already on his face.

“Ah, Celeste,” Jean said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “You’re running a cabinet of curiosities now, I see. Why, it’s our mythical hermit, out and about in daylight.”

The words stung, but only just. Jean Lachapelle was nothing more than an arrogant son of privilege, a man who thought his good looks and inherited wealth gave him the right to belittle others. Graham had never liked him, and their history had been strained ever since Graham had refused to sell some of his prized cattle for a pittance. Jean had called it a deal. Graham had called it an insult.

But Graham said nothing. He simply looked past the man, as if he were invisible. He didn’t owe Jean Lachapelle the satisfaction of a response. The silence irked Jean, of course. He was a man used to getting attention, and Graham’s refusal to engage only seemed to rattle him more.

“You’d make more money off him if you taught him to speak,” Jean sneered. “A deaf and dumb halfwit won’t bring in the crowds.”

Mrs. Fournier’s temper flared, and before Graham could even react, she snapped at Jean in French. “Rien de tout ca, maintenant! Tu regardes ta langue dans ma boutique, garçon!”

Jean recoiled, but only for a moment. “Je m’excuse. Merely a joke,” he said, though the insincerity was obvious. “I’m here for my father’s order.”

Mrs. Fournier didn’t flinch. “Come around back,” she said sharply, “It’ll be easier for you to haul it in your cart.”

Graham watched as Jean left with a scowl, muttering something under his breath. Once the door slammed shut, Mrs. Fournier winked at him. “Best of luck to you, Graham. Be sure to bring that lucky man around sometime. I want to meet him.”

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After the meeting with the priest Graham left town as fast as he could, urging Ginger along, all his purchases jostling in the cart as they traveled back to the homestead. The money for Ciarán’s ticket was safe in his pocket, but Graham couldn’t help but gently pat it every so often, feeling its weight, making sure it hadn’t disappeared when he wasn’t paying attention.

The priest had been like the clerk at the railway station—surprised and curious. But he couldn’t be reticent with a man of the cloth. Graham informed him of as much as he could. They’d have the wedding when Ciarán arrived, but that was still weeks away.

“He’s Catholic, is he?” the man asked.

Uncertain, Graham answered, “Well, he’s Irish.”

That answer hadn’t endeared him to the priest, but he still promised to oversee the wedding whenever it happened.

It was a relief to get home. The people and the socializing took more out of Graham than a day’s work in the fields and with the animals. Peace and quiet and solitude—that was what he craved, and that was what he needed in order to reply to Ciarán’s letter. Words didn’t come so easily to him, verbalized or written, and he wanted time to think and scratch out mistakes and start anew if need be.

Dear Mr Ciarán Ryan,

Thank you very much for your letter. It was heartening to receive and your message to me was kind and I think perhaps we would get along well together. Your sketches are skillfully done and have brought me good cheer. I hope you find the land here as beautiful as in your drawings.

This brings me to my next point. I would greatly enjoy more letters from you but as you have been bold then I will be bold also and declare that I would enjoy your company even more. You said that you are tired of city life. Well I cannot say for certain that life on the prairie will be an Eden because I cannot lead you wrong. The flowers do not bloom in all seasons and animals are as ornery and unpleasant as people sometimes. But I can promise you that it will be a different life altogether and that I will teach you about it if you are willing and that I will always take care of you as a husband should.

It is my hope that you will accept my proposal of marriage. Enclosed is the fare for a train ticket and also extra for meals as the journey will be long and I do not want you to be hungry if you decide to make the trip.

I wish you well,

Graham Shepherd

He copied the return address from Ciarán's envelope with utmost care, down to the heavy, insistent underlining of Room 4, On the Left, Blue Door.

The next day he made the trip to town again to hand Oscar his own overstuffed envelope filled with plain stationery smudged with graphite, numerous bills for Ciarán's fare, and all of Graham's hopes.

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Two long weeks passed before Graham received his answer, and in those two weeks, he occupied himself with the routine of daily life. Every hour spent in work was both a distraction and a burden. Whenever he wasn't busy, his mind churned with worry. Had the letter been lost in the mail? Would Ciarán's response be favorable, or had he changed his mind? Was the money Graham had sent enough for a ticket, enough for meals along the way? What if Ciarán had found someone else, someone who wasn't a hermit of few words but someone better, someone he could see a future with?

The doubts gnawed at him throughout each day. The mornings started with the usual chores—waking early, eating a simple breakfast, then feeding the animals. He milked the cows and collected the eggs, each task automatic and steady, the rhythm of his labor offering a small measure of peace. In between feeding the chickens and weeding the garden, Graham found himself constantly returning to the same questions: Would Ciarán still want to come? Had he received the letter in the first place? Every task felt like a small battle, and yet, the work cleared his head, giving him a chance to push the worries back down, if only for a little while.

One part of his daily routine gave him both comfort and distress—the reading of The

Matrimonial Journal. His advertisement had been published, and it was now in its second and final print, but no one else had written him back. A part of him was grateful for this, as it was clear that no one could compare to Ciarán—not to his humor, his kindness, his beautiful sketches of the world, or the way he could fill a room with laughter. No, no one could measure up to that. Yet, there was a deeper fear lurking beneath the surface—that if this didn't work out, if Ciarán decided he couldn't follow through, there would be no one else. His heart could not even fathom the thought of trying again. This was it. If this marriage didn't happen, Graham wasn't sure he'd ever find another like Ciarán.

So, he kept himself busy, working the land, feeding the animals, taking care of the house. Every moment between tasks was consumed with a quiet tension. He moved from anticipation and joy to worry and fear, back and forth, as the days crawled by. And as always, it was labor that gave him some relief from the storm of his thoughts, the sweat of his brow grounding him, making the uncertainty of the future seem a little less unbearable.

It was on the morning of the second week of waiting, when the tension had reached its peak, that Alonso Fournier found him out in the fields. Graham was bent low, pulling weeds from the garden, the soil cold and damp beneath his hands. He heard the sound of hooves before he saw the rider, and a familiar voice rang out, calling from behind him.

“Good morning, Graham!” Alonso Fournier's voice was jovial, and Graham turned to see him riding up on his horse, tipping his hat in greeting. “Your order came in, so Celeste sent me out here.”

Graham stood up, brushing the dirt from his hands, and watched as Alonso's cart pulled up beside him. The man jumped down from his horse with a practiced ease and began to unload the goods. Graham immediately spied the dining chair with the cushioned seat and the fine china tea set—everything had arrived, just as he had

requested, carefully packed and padded in straw and cloth. A small wave of relief washed over him, the physical goods a reminder that he was preparing for something real, something tangible.

“Thank you,” Graham said, grateful but distracted, his mind still lingering on the letter he had yet to receive.

“No trouble at all,” Alonso said with a grin, wiping his brow. “Let me help you get it all down. There’s still a lot of stuff in there, and I’ve got a busy day ahead of me.” He gave a small chuckle and looked around the fields. “Been a while since I’ve been out here. Look at this place—you’re doing well for yourself.”

Graham smiled slightly but didn’t respond right away. Alonso continued unloading the cart, clearly enjoying the brief respite from his day’s work. As he shifted some packages around, he paused, his eyes twinkling.

“Speaking of deliveries, Oscar asked me to give you this.” The man reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a familiar envelope. His smile deepened, knowing the weight it carried. “Said you usually come in on Fridays, but that you’d want this as soon as possible.”

Graham’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of the letter. Even from a distance, he recognized the elegant, looping handwriting that filled the front of the envelope—Ciarán’s handwriting. It was unmistakable, beautiful, and full of promise.

The moment felt suspended in time. Graham wanted nothing more than to snatch the letter from Alonso’s hands, tear it open right there and then, and devour every word. But instead, he forced himself to remain calm. He thanked Alonso again for the delivery, tucking the letter carefully into his own pocket as if it were something fragile, something precious.

Alonso, seemingly unaware of the internal storm Graham was weathering, continued to help him with the parcels. “Don’t be a stranger,” he said with a cheerful wave as he climbed back onto his horse. “You’ve got plenty of work to do, but take your time with that letter. I imagine you’ll be reading it over a few times.”

Graham waved goodbye and watched him disappear down the path before rushing inside and ripping open the envelope.

Dear Mister Graham Shepherd,

For just this one letter I will still address you as such, because while I will soon marry you we are not wedded and should not be so familiar to border on intimacy just yet. I ask that you think on the matter: when I arrive and we are joined in matrimony, would you have me refer to you by your Christian name, or Mister Shepherd, or shall I simply call you husband?

I have no real affairs to settle, as I previously mentioned. My material possessions are packed, and my landlady has gotten over the shock of losing a paying tenant and is now eager for me to leave so that she may find the next one. I’ve written my father, to tell him that soon he will have a son-in-law, and I’ve included your address so that he’ll know my new place of residence.

The clerk at the railway station is very familiar to me now because I have been pestering her about travel times. Letter and body travel at the same speeds these days, it seems. Roughly five days for my letter to reach Larkspur, and roughly five days for me to meet you, what with all the stops that must be taken.

Have you ever traveled by train before? I haven’t! You’ve said it’s not very comfortable but I cannot think it would be more unpleasant than my journey to this country! I do not recommend a crowded ship in a storm-tossed sea, not one bit!

This, I think, will be a much more pleasant adventure. And my sincere thanks for the fare. I admit that I had planned to carefully ration some sandwiches along the way. But now I can sample the meals in the dining car and compare them to those at a Harvey House. How exciting! I feel like a world traveler!

Here, I have also thought of how we shall recognize one another at the train station. Unfortunately, since I have no photograph to send to you, and as I have no description of you, either, I fear that whatever I saw about myself might be subjective. Perhaps, compared to you, I am very short, or of average height, or my hair is more auburn than brown, more wavy than curly.

But I own a straw hat, trimmed with dark green ribbon. I would like to think that it is so very unique that no one else has ever heard of a straw hat with dark green ribbon, and that you will be in awe of my elegance and new fashion, but alas, I bought it from a milliner, and if one such item caught a customer's eye than no doubt she made another. Therefore, I will add a paper flower to my hat. I highly doubt that there will be another man with a straw hat with a dark green ribbon and a paper flower arriving at Larkspur!

And I will search for you, too. I will find you, I hope, by the earnest expression you'll wear, eager to meet the man who will become your husband. I plan on buying my ticket on the fifth, so that we shall meet on the tenth.

Yours,

Ciarán Ryan

Graham was struck immediately with the realization he'd purchased a gift of a straw hat with a green ribbon, and yet the man already possessed one. Should he return it? Find something more suitable? Maybe he might like to have an extra just in case something happened to his original. Then, the real truth of the matter almost seemed

to strike him in the head as he reread the letter.

The tenth. The tenth—that meant that Ciarán was already on the train, traveling west. He'd be in Larkspur in less than three days time. And Graham still had so much to do. Clean the house, get his suit ready, figure out what to prepare for dinner, ask Liam and Ronan and Oscar to be their guests, tell the priest that the marriage would, in fact, take place.

His marriage. Soon, he'd leave the house in the morning a bachelor and return in the afternoon a newlywed, with his husband by his side.

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Two lengthy letters and a number of delicate, colorful sketches—and Graham had memorized them all as if they were the pages of a well-loved novel. The elegant, looping handwriting, the slight underlines that emphasized certain words, the way the ink seemed to almost dance across the paper. The color pencil drawings, bright but tender, seemed to capture the very essence of Ciarán—dreamy, thoughtful, a little whimsical. From these small clues, Graham tried to build a picture of the man who was to become his husband.

His imagination pieced together Ciarán bit by bit, like putting together a puzzle with no image to guide him. A straw hat with a green ribbon and a small paper flower tucked into the band—this seemed to fit, given how Ciarán had described his love of nature. Beneath the hat, Graham envisioned a pair of glasses perched on a narrow nose—glasses that spoke of someone who had spent many hours reading, learning, and reflecting. After all, Ciarán’s handwriting was so smooth and perfect, every word flowing effortlessly across the page. It suggested a man who was well-educated, someone whose mind was sharp and agile.

In Graham's mind, Ciarán’s fingers were long and graceful, the kind of fingers that could wield a pen or pencil with ease, drawing the world around him in exquisite detail. He imagined Ciarán to be a little smaller than himself, as most men tended to be. And though he had never met him, Graham could already picture the soft, kind smile that would greet him, a smile that made everything feel just a little bit lighter, just a little bit more hopeful.

"So, you really have no idea what the man will be like," Liam said, cutting through Graham's daydreams as he poured tea into a delicate china cup.

Graham looked up, a bit startled, then gave a sheepish smile. "He'll have a—"

"Yes, yes," Liam interjected, his voice full of playful sarcasm. "A straw hat with a green ribbon and paper flower. You've said that already. But what do you really know about him?"

Graham shifted uncomfortably in his seat, feeling a little exposed under Liam's questioning gaze. He had come to their house under the pretense of looking for a lost sheep, though it was really just an excuse to visit. The truth was, he had wanted to tell them about the wedding, to ask if they would be his guests. He had been putting it off for days, unsure how to broach the subject, but now it was time. After the initial surprise, Liam and Ronan had readily agreed to come, and Liam had insisted that Graham sit down for a cup of tea.

"I know he's tired of city life," Graham said slowly, thinking back to Ciarán's words. "He has a father still living, though I'm not sure where. He must like drawing, because he's sent me a lot of sketches. And he's Irish."

Liam's face lit up instantly at the mention of Ireland. "Ah! Well, if he's Irish, then you've made a good decision! Nothing like an Irish husband, eh?" He slapped Ronan on the shoulder with affectionate humor. Ronan, who was quieter than either of them, nodded slightly, taking another bite of his biscuit. His massive hand settled over Liam's, a silent reassurance that spoke more than words could.

Graham smiled, grateful for the ease with which they accepted his news. But then Liam turned to him with an excited glint in his eye. "I'll bake some things for the wedding. A nice soda bread. And a pie—though what kind? Hmm, I'll figure it out. It's the crust that's all the work, not the filling. You can't go wrong with a good crust, right?"

"You don't have to bring anything," Graham said, though he already knew it

wouldn't be easy to convince Liam otherwise.

"Nonsense," Liam said, waving him off. "What's a wedding without food? You'll be having a reception, won't you?"

Graham blinked, caught off guard by the suggestion. "I didn't—"

"Yes, I know," Liam said, cutting him off. "You've been busy. You've got a lot on your plate. Don't worry about it. I'll get it all planned. I'm fairly good at organizing these things, aren't I, fear céile?"

Ronan drained his teacup, setting it down with a gentle clink before replying in soft, measured tones, "Sea, tá sé amhlaidh, mo ghrá." His Irish was thick with affection, as always.

Liam beamed, kissing the top of Ronan's head. "There you are. A ringing endorsement."

Graham tried not to laugh, but it was hard not to feel the warmth of the moment. Liam had a way of making everything seem easy, of taking over the responsibilities others might hesitate to tackle. It was impossible to say no to him.

Before he left, Graham found himself overwhelmed, though in the best way. Liam had, without asking, taken charge of the wedding reception, promising to bake the bread, make the pie, and ensure the guests were fed. He had even insisted on bringing a few small gifts. It was both touching and a little overwhelming, but it was clear that Liam took immense pride in being part of this new chapter of Graham's life.

As he left Liam and Ronan's house, three warm biscuits with raspberry jam tucked carefully into his jacket pocket, Graham felt both comforted and bewildered. The weight of the upcoming wedding felt heavier now, more real. It wasn't just his

responsibility anymore—it was something shared.

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Before he went to see the priest, Graham made one final stop by the post office. The bell above the door jingled as he entered, and he found himself greeted by the warm sound of Oscar's deep voice, laughing at something Mrs. Fournier had said. The two were standing near the counter, chatting amiably, as Mrs. Fournier adjusted the folds of her skirts. Her youngest child, a small girl with soft baby fat still lingering around her cheeks, stood at her side. The little girl wore a purple dress and a matching bonnet, both adorned with ribbons of the same color, and she clutched a fistful of her mother's skirt in her chubby hand, swishing the material back and forth as though it were some grand piece of fabric that deserved her attention.

As soon as she saw Graham, the little girl's face lit up, and she broke into a toothy, exuberant smile. "Hi, Mr. Shepherd!" she called out brightly, her voice full of uncontainable enthusiasm.

Graham tipped his hat politely, still a little surprised by her forthrightness, but smiled nonetheless. "Ma'am. Miss. Oscar." His eyes moved from Mrs. Fournier's face, where her smile mirrored the one of her daughter's, to Oscar, who was watching him with a slight grin of his own.

"Well, hello again, Graham! I rarely see you so often," Mrs. Fournier said, raising her eyebrows in mild surprise. "What brings you to town today?"

Graham hesitated for a moment, a wave of sudden nervousness overtaking him. His thoughts were already racing, and he could feel his face warming as he gathered his thoughts. This wasn't how he imagined announcing something as personal as a wedding, but the words had already formed in his mind, and he wasn't going to back out now.

“Actually—” he cleared his throat, his voice still slightly rough. “Lucky you’re all here right now. My—wedding is going to be in a—uh, a couple of days. I was wondering if you’d like to come. That, is, you, Oscar. And you and the family, ma’am.”

The words felt strange even as they left his lips, but they hung in the air for a moment. Mrs. Fournier and Oscar exchanged a surprised glance, their expressions shifting between shock and delight. But before either of them could speak, the little girl, Adeline, clapped her hands together and let out a gleeful cry, her voice ringing with excitement.

“A wedding! Mama, please, a wedding!” she practically danced in place, as if she were already imagining the cake and ribbons and all the sweet things weddings were known for. Her enthusiasm was enough to melt any lingering hesitation in Graham’s heart.

“I understand if you can’t,” Graham began, suddenly flustered by the unexpected attention. “I sprung this on you late and all,” he added quickly, though he immediately regretted his words. Why was he apologizing? These were people who had been kind to him. It was only right to ask them.

But before he could retract his words, Mrs. Fournier smiled broadly. “Oh, Graham, of course we’ll come,” she said, her tone warm and welcoming. “I need to get out of that shop more, anyhow. And I want to see what this man of yours is like.” Her voice carried a hint of playful curiosity, as if she were already imagining the man who had managed to capture Graham’s interest.

Oscar nodded in agreement, his easy smile never fading. “Yes, I’d love to,” he said sincerely. “Thank you, Graham, for thinking of me.”

Graham smiled gratefully. Why wouldn’t he invite Oscar? The man had been his

steady companion on those Friday afternoons when the long hours of the week grew too heavy, and he'd always been generous with his time. And then there was Mrs. Fournier, who had not only helped him with his purchases but had also given him a thoughtful wedding gift—a kindness that was hard to repay.

Adeline, bouncing on her feet and nearly glowing with excitement, interrupted the adults' exchange with a question that had clearly been on her mind. "It's nice that you're getting married. I've never been to a wedding before! Will you have sweets?" Her wide eyes shone with eager expectation.

"Adeline!" Mrs. Fournier admonished gently, though there was no real severity in her voice. She was clearly amused by her daughter's curiosity. The child was only four, maybe five, but her enthusiasm was contagious.

Graham couldn't help but laugh at the girl's unbridled excitement. She was so fresh and untainted by the reservations that often came with age. He knelt down a little, smiling at her in return. "Well," he said, his voice carrying a teasing lilt. "It'll be even more special then. The first wedding you've ever attended."

Adeline clapped her hands together, her face alight with glee. "Ooooh, thank you!" she exclaimed, before bouncing back to her mother's side and tugging at her skirts again, her mind already drifting to the sweets and celebrations.

Graham's eyes twinkled with amusement as he thought about what he could provide for the reception. "I know there'll be some kind of pie, at least," he added thoughtfully, his mind now turning to the food as he imagined the small gathering of guests. He chuckled when Adeline's eyes grew wide and she clapped with excitement, her earlier question now answered.

"Well, that sounds good," Mrs. Fournier said with a knowing smile. "I'll make sure we're there. And I'm sure Adeline will be just as thrilled to have pie as she is to see a

wedding.”

Graham stood up, still grinning. “Thank you,” he said to both Mrs. Fournier and Oscar. He felt his shoulders relax, the weight of his earlier anxiety beginning to fade away. Having them there, at the wedding, felt like the right thing. He wasn’t sure why he had been so nervous. It wasn’t as if anyone was going to judge him. It was, after all, a celebration. A new beginning.

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The day of the wedding arrived, and in a few hours so would Graham’s husband-to-be. He hitched Ginger to the buggy and rode to the train station, heart pounding in his chest. At various points along the way he stopped beside the dirt road and just—

Breathed.

Wasn’t as bad as it used to be. When the war ended and his leg had pained him something terrible Graham had sometimes just lost himself in panic for no reason at all, suddenly overcome by dread, sought out a quiet place to shiver and cry with the desperation of a man in the desert crawling toward an oasis.

Now, at least, he had reason to panic. His first meeting with the man he was going to marry. Knees bent, palms on his thighs, he breathed in and out and in and out, slow and steady, trying to curb his fear. The train would not derail into fiery mass of melted and twisted metal, its passengers would not find themselves beset by bandits and outlaws, and Ciarán would come. He had said so in his letter. He had written his father to tell him he would be living with Graham. It would be okay. It would all work out.

Eventually his blurred vision cleared. He sniffled and wiped his eyes. As he straightened up, calmer but a little flushed, Graham noticed wildflowers dotting the

field. Bright and blossoming and lovely, just like in Ciarán's sketches. The petals were soft between his fingers.

Graham gently plucked one, and then another, and another, until he had a veritable bouquet. Butter yellows, sunrise reds, the blue of deep, clear water, the white of sheared, cleaned wool—Graham held all the colors in his hands, marveled at their freshness, their vibrancy, and then carefully stowed the flowers in his bag. A welcoming present for Ciarán.

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At the train station, Graham waited and watched. He wasn't alone in his vigil; the bustling platform was alive with others engaged in their own stories. A woman in a sharp navy suit impatiently checked her pocket watch, the sharp snap of its case echoing above the low hum of conversation. A frazzled man with three small children struggled to shepherd them onto one of the wooden benches, their shrill giggles contrasting with his tired sighs. Nearby, someone fanned themselves with such fervor that their face was obscured by the blur of motion, their bright paper fan a whirl of color.

And yet, among the crowd, Graham stood apart—not physically, but in his purpose. He was the only one clutching a bouquet of flowers, the stems pressed awkwardly to his chest, and he felt the weight of his self-consciousness as if the flowers themselves had grown heavy with judgment. He always felt exposed in public, as though every eye was on him, dissecting his presence, measuring him against some inscrutable standard. Now, with the added pressure of awaiting Ciarán's arrival, the sensation was nearly unbearable.

What if he didn't make the right impression? What if Ciarán didn't show at all? The mere thought of waiting in vain, his loneliness so plainly displayed, made his palms sweat. Graham gritted his teeth and pushed the spiraling doubts aside. Ciarán had

written such kind, thoughtful letters. The man was as good as his word, Graham reminded himself. He just had to hold on to that faith.

The tracks began to hum beneath the station, a low vibration that grew into a rhythmic clatter. The train's whistle cut through the air, sharp and commanding, scattering idle chatter into excited murmurs. Around him, people straightened, craning their necks, eager to greet loved ones or secure a coveted seat on the departing train.

Graham stayed seated, his back rigid, and tightened his grip on the bouquet. His heart pounded in time with the metallic screech of the train's brakes as it pulled into the station. Sparks flew briefly as the wheels ground to a halt, and then the passengers began to disembark—a chaotic, almost celebratory exodus.

The man with the three children found a woman in a bustling gown, and the children squealed in delight as they mobbed her, their joyous reunion drawing smiles from the bystanders. Elsewhere, parents lifted children from the train steps, their laughter ringing out as luggage was juggled and hugs exchanged. Businessmen in fine suits strode onto the train, paying little heed to the scenes of connection around them.

Graham scanned the crowd, his gaze darting between hats and faces. His heart caught when he spotted a telltale sign—a large paper rose, folded expertly from a newspaper page, nestled in the ribbon of a slightly battered straw hat. The green ribbon swayed as its wearer turned his head, chatting animatedly with a porter as he retrieved his bag.

That had to be him. Graham rose to his feet, his mouth suddenly dry.

“There you are, Mr. Ryan,” the porter said, handing over a well-worn suitcase.

“Thank you,” the young man replied, his voice soft and high, the lilting Irish accent

confirming his identity. “I really appreciate it. You’ve been—oh!” His words broke off as his gaze met Graham’s, and his eyes widened.

For a moment, Graham could only stare, rooted in place. His gaze lingered on the hat, the paper flower that had been described so fondly in letters, before finally drifting to the young man’s face. He was younger than Graham had expected—so much younger. His letters had carried a maturity that belied the youth standing before him now. Graham couldn’t help but think of the boys he had served with in the war, barely out of their teens.

Ciarán was slight, with wild brown curls escaping the confines of his hat and a face dotted with freckles. His dark honey-colored eyes were wide with nervous energy, and when he smiled tentatively, Graham was struck by how unexpectedly beautiful it was.

“Mr. Shepherd?” Ciarán’s voice was tentative, his hand adjusting the brim of his hat.

“Graham,” he corrected gruffly, his tongue feeling clumsy. He thrust the bouquet forward, the gesture abrupt and almost clumsy. “You can call me Graham.”

Ciarán’s cheeks turned a soft pink as he accepted the flowers, his long fingers grazing Graham’s briefly. “Oh—thank you! These are lovely.” He held the bouquet close, inhaling deeply. “I—thank you. That was very thoughtful.”

The train station seemed to blur around them, its noise and bustle fading into the background. Graham’s focus narrowed entirely to the man standing before him, his cheeks pink from the crisp spring air or perhaps something more.

The church bells in the distance struck the hour, jolting Graham back to reality. He cleared his throat. “We should get going.”

Ciarán nodded, his smile growing a little steadier. “Of course. Do I—do I look all right for my own wedding?” His laugh was soft and self-conscious, his hands fidgeting with the ribbon of his hat.

Truth be told, Graham’s gaze hadn’t strayed from Ciarán’s face since he’d first laid eyes on him. Every freckle, every subtle movement of his lips as he spoke, seemed like a small revelation. But, realizing he’d been staring too long, Graham forced himself to glance over Ciarán’s clothes. The young man was dressed neatly, in a crisp, white, collared, long-sleeved shirt and a dark green waistcoat. The color suited him, Graham thought, and he felt a quiet satisfaction knowing that the green coat waiting at the house might also please his new companion. Ciarán’s black trousers and freshly shined shoes spoke of care and effort, though Graham suspected they were not new.

“You don’t even look like you’ve been on a train for near a week,” Graham said, his voice as gruff as ever but warm with approval.

“I made sure to freshen up! I changed before we pulled into the station,” Ciarán replied, his cheeks coloring again with that endearing pink flush that Graham was quickly becoming fond of. “You look very handsome, Mr. Shepherd. I mean, um, Graham.”

Graham smiled faintly at the compliment, though it was more polite than accurate. His suit, a readymade one bought for the occasion, fit poorly on his broad, muscular frame. The jacket was tight around his shoulders, the trousers straining at his thighs. Suits weren’t made for men like him—men who had spent their lives working hard in fields and barns, their bodies shaped by labor. He was far more at ease in a work shirt and jeans, but he had made the effort, and hearing Ciarán’s kind words made it feel worthwhile.

“This way,” he said, gesturing for Ciarán to follow as they exited the station. Outside,

Ginger stood patiently hitched to the buggy, her chestnut coat gleaming in the afternoon light.

“She’s a very lovely horse,” Ciarán said, his voice full of genuine admiration.

Graham stepped forward, holding out a hand to help him climb into the buggy. As Ciarán’s hand rested in his, Graham noticed its long, graceful fingers—hands that seemed made for something delicate, like playing a piano or painting. Just as he had imagined, they were the hands of an artist. He must have lingered on the thought too long, though, because Ciarán blushed again, his lashes lowering as he glanced away.

The young man blushed so prettily, Graham thought, hauling the luggage onto the buggy. Ciarán wasn’t fragile—there was a sturdiness to him, a quiet strength—but he was smaller than Graham, as most people were. Still, there was something about him that struck Graham as vibrant and lovely, like the wildflowers he held so carefully in his lap.

Clearing his throat, Graham tried to explain himself. “I—uh. Was looking at your hands.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he winced internally. What a thing to say. “We need to go to the jeweler’s first,” he added quickly. “Didn’t want to buy a ring and not have it fit on the wedding day.”

“Oh, of course,” Ciarán replied, his tone light but still tinged with shyness.

The buggy wasn’t particularly spacious, and as they began the journey along the uneven dirt road, their legs brushed, their shoulders occasionally bumping. Graham’s awareness of Ciarán beside him felt magnified, each small contact setting his nerves on edge. He had longed to talk to Ciarán for months through their letters, imagining all the things he would say once they were finally together. Now, with the young man sitting so close, the words seemed to evaporate.

“Long trip for you,” Graham said at last, grasping for conversation.

“It was,” Ciarán replied, his face lighting up. “But I thought it was quite exciting! I spent most of my time looking out the window. Someone told me it might upset my stomach, but I couldn’t help it. Traveling from one part of the country to another—it was all so new to me! And I didn’t get sick, not even once. My appetite was fine.” He paused, his cheeks flushing slightly before he continued, “Oh, the food! The meals in the dining car were so fine. And the Harvey Houses! What a peculiar thing, having the same menu at every stop. I tried something different each time.”

His enthusiasm was infectious, and Graham found himself smiling. “Sounds like you had quite the experience.”

“I did!” Ciarán nodded, then hesitated. “And I still have the change you sent me.”

“The change?” Graham asked, frowning slightly. “You didn’t spend it all?”

“No! You were so generous to send the ticket money, and—well, I didn’t want to waste it. I brought sandwiches, too, so I didn’t always buy meals.” He glanced at Graham, his wide eyes full of concern. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—did you want me to—?”

“Don’t apologize,” Graham said firmly, his chest tightening. The thought of Ciarán rationing his food during the journey made him feel both protective and guilty. He should have been clearer in his letters. “Did you eat today?”

Ciarán hesitated, then admitted softly, “No. I was just too excited about... the wedding. I couldn’t eat a thing.”

Relief flooded Graham as he remembered that Liam, ever practical, had ensured their wedding reception would include plenty of food. “There’ll be pie,” he said.

“Afterwards.”

Ciarán’s shy smile returned, radiant as the wildflowers in his lap. “What kind?”

Graham’s lips curved into a rare, genuine smile. “It’s a secret.”

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Graham was no stranger to town now. Ever since he’d posted his ad in *The Matrimonial Journal*, he’d made it a habit to show up every Friday like clockwork. In the past two weeks, his visits had become even more frequent as he scrambled to prepare for the wedding. Every shopkeeper, merchant, and rancher in Larkspur knew his broad shoulders and quiet demeanor, but today, riding into town with a stranger seated beside him, he drew more than the usual nods and greetings.

The stranger wasn’t just anyone, after all. He was a handsome, well-dressed young man, and their arrival together sent whispers flying. People paused mid-step, staring openly as Graham hitched Ginger to a post outside the row of stores.

“This is a very pretty town, too,” Ciarán said, his gaze roaming over the neatly painted shopfronts, the flower-lined sidewalks, and the distant view of the surrounding hills. His expression was alight with curiosity and warmth, and when Graham helped him down from the buggy, he smiled. “Thank you, Graham.”

“It must be a lot different from New York,” Graham remarked, his voice low but steady.

“Yes, but that’s not a bad thing,” Ciarán replied, his smile softening into something thoughtful. “In the city, things are always so busy—noisy, crowded, fast-paced. This feels more like...” He hesitated, then added, “Like where I grew up. In Ireland.”

The comparison warmed Graham's chest, though he didn't let it show. The idea that Ciarán already felt at ease in Larkspur, that the town reminded him of home, pleased him more than he expected.

Their destination was the jeweler's shop, a small building wedged between Mrs. Fournier's general store and the tailor's. Graham had passed it a hundred times before but had never gone inside. Until now, there had been no reason.

Inside, the shop was cozy, its walls lined with wooden shelves and glass cases displaying delicate chains, polished cufflinks, and rows of rings. Graham glanced around, vaguely aware of Ciarán exchanging greetings with the clerk.

"Hello there!" the woman behind the counter said brightly. "What can I help you with today? We've just gotten a new order of chains for pocket watches, if you're interested."

Ciarán smiled, polite but a little nervous. "I'm sure they're lovely, but actually, we were looking for, um, wedding rings."

"Oh, how exciting! When is the wedding?"

"Today," Ciarán blurted, his cheeks coloring. He glanced at Graham for reassurance. "Um, right after we get our rings. Right, Graham?"

Graham, who had been examining a necklace of amethysts and pearls, looked up. "Right."

"Right," the clerk echoed, blinking but recovering quickly. "Well, let's see what we can find for you. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

Ciarán hesitated, glancing at Graham again. "W-well. I don't want anything

ostentatious. Just something simple. But I'd prefer gold to silver. It seems, um, warmer to me? Do you agree with that, Graham?"

Gold. Graham hadn't considered it before, but the idea settled easily. Gold would suit Ciarán's warm brown eyes, his freckles, his sun-kissed complexion. It would look right on his long, elegant fingers—those hands Graham had noticed and admired, which seemed made for artistry. He realized he'd been quiet too long and cleared his throat. "Yeah," he mumbled. "Get whatever you like best."

"But what do you think?" Ciarán pressed, his brows furrowed.

"I'm not much of a—jewelry person," Graham admitted, feeling awkward. "I trust you. Pick out something we'll both like."

Ciarán nodded, taking a deep breath. "Okay. I will."

As the clerk laid out trays of gold bands, Ciarán leaned forward, studying each design with care. Graham, however, couldn't take his eyes off him. This was the man who had answered his ad. The man who had sent letter after letter filled with words so tender and sketches so detailed they had made Graham feel as if he were being seen for the first time in years. And now, here he was—real, tangible, and beautiful.

Ciarán's brows furrowed in concentration, his delicate fingers tracing over each ring as he weighed his decision. Graham felt an uncharacteristic surge of nerves, the kind he hadn't felt since boyhood. It was the same feeling he'd had when he'd shared his lunch with another boy at school, hoping for nothing more than a kind word and some company.

Lord, how he wanted Ciarán to like him. Not just now, but always. He wanted him to want to stay.

“I—I think these ones,” Ciarán said finally, holding up a pair of gold bands with an intricate leaf-and-vine pattern. “It’s a pretty design, isn’t it?”

Graham barely glanced at the rings before his eyes returned to Ciarán’s face. “Yeah,” he said softly. “Real pretty.”

The clerk boxed the rings with a cheerful, “Enjoy the day! And your wedding!”

Their next stop was the church. It wasn’t an especially grand building—just a modest white structure with a teal roof and a small bell tower. But as they approached, Ciarán gasped in delight, his eyes shining as if it were a cathedral.

Ginger was set beneath the shade of a tree with a bucket of fresh water and a couple of apples to keep her content. Graham, his hand resting in his pocket to feel the reassuring weight of the rings, turned to Ciarán.

“Ready?” he asked.

Ciarán hesitated, then searched his bouquet. Carefully, he plucked a single white daisy and tucked it into the lapel of Graham’s suit. His hand lingered, and when he looked up, he smiled—a soft, private smile that felt like a promise.

“Okay,” Ciarán said. “I’m ready now.”

Graham returned the smile, his chest tight with a feeling he couldn’t quite name, and pushed open the church door.

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When the church was first built, the entire town of Larkspur could fit inside of it. Back then, the town was a fledgling settlement, its population consisting of a few pioneering families, trappers, and hunters scattered about, and a handful of young, unattached dreamers hoping to carve out a future. The simple white church had been both a sanctuary and a gathering place, its humble pews accommodating the entire community.

By the time Graham arrived in Larkspur, the town had grown significantly. While it could hardly be called a city, its dirt roads often bustled with wagons, horses, and townsfolk going about their lives. On certain days, especially market days, Larkspur's main street hummed with activity. Today, however, it seemed that a good portion of the bustling had funneled directly into the church, and as Graham stepped inside with Ciarán at his side, he was struck by how full the small building was.

The pews were crowded with faces both familiar and less so, a sea of curious smiles and warm gazes. Graham recognized the priest standing patiently at the altar, his hands clasped in quiet readiness. On one side of the church sat Liam, Ronan, Oscar, and Mrs. Fournier, who appeared to have brought not only her household but her entire extended family. The benches were crammed with her cousins, uncles, and a great-aunt or two, all craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the proceedings.

On the opposite side were townsfolk Graham recognized more by sight than by name. Near the front, he spotted Mrs. Murray, who had purchased sheep from him and Liam last spring, and Mr. Doherty from the mill. It dawned on him, with growing amazement, that Liam had likely invited every Irish family in the area to the wedding. Graham had expected a quiet ceremony with only a few witnesses, but it seemed word had spread far and wide.

He glanced down at Ciarán, who gazed at the crowd with a mixture of surprise and delight. His dark eyes sparkled, his cheeks flushed pink, and the sight of him made Graham's heart feel uncomfortably full.

Together, they walked arm-in-arm down the aisle, each step steady but slow, as if drawn forward by an unseen hand. The soft murmur of the congregation quieted, replaced by the low rustle of clothing and the creak of wooden pews as everyone turned to watch.

At the altar, the priest greeted them with a warm smile and began the ceremony. Graham listened to his words, though the meaning of them blurred at the edges. His focus narrowed to the man at his side—Ciarán, who stood close enough for Graham to feel the warmth of him, his freckled face upturned, his expression a mixture of calm and nervous energy.

When the time came, they mumbled their "I do's," their voices small and bashful under the weight of so many eyes. They exchanged rings with care, Graham fumbling only slightly as he slipped the band onto Ciarán's slender finger. He marveled at the feel of Ciarán's hands—soft but with faint callouses, an artist's hands, gentle yet capable. The gold ring gleamed against his complexion, the carved vine pattern catching the light, and Graham felt a swell of pride.

"You may kiss your groom," the priest finally said, his tone kind but expectant.

The kiss. Graham blinked, his breath catching as he met Ciarán's gaze. His new husband—his husband—smiled at him warmly, clutching his bouquet to his chest. Graham hesitated. The idea of a kiss, even one so simple, felt like an enormous leap. Marrying a man after exchanging a handful of letters was one thing; kissing him, truly bridging the gap between acquaintance and intimacy, was another.

Swallowing nervously, Graham stepped closer and placed his hands on Ciarán's

shoulders. He leaned in, his heart pounding, and pressed a kiss to the corner of Ciarán's mouth—a cautious, fleeting touch.

The guests erupted into applause, whistles, and cheers. Graham pulled back, his face burning, only to find that Ciarán looked just as shy and sheepish as he felt. They were, at least, well-matched in their awkwardness.

As the noise settled, Liam rose from his seat near the front. His booming voice carried over the crowd. "Alright now, come along! We've got a reception set up for the two of you. Time to eat and celebrate."

The promise of food and festivities lightened the atmosphere, and the guests began to rise, their laughter and chatter filling the space. Graham turned to Ciarán and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

Ciarán squeezed back, his grip firm but gentle, his smile small and genuine.

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The area behind the church was nothing short of idyllic, a place where nature seemed to collaborate in celebration. The grass was lush and green, soft underfoot, and the tall trees offered shade that danced with the sunlight filtering through their leaves. Over the years, the space had seen quilting bees, lively box socials, and countless wedding receptions. Now, it bore witness to another union—and, as it turned out, its most extravagant feast yet.

Graham's eyes widened as he took in the long tables, groaning under the weight of plates piled high with food and pitchers filled with drink. "You said you were going to make some bread and a pie," he said, turning to Liam.

His neighbor snorted, arms crossed in mock indignation. "And I did. They're over

there. I just thought a few extra things wouldn't hurt."

True to his word, there was a golden loaf of soda bread served with fresh butter, so yellow it was practically glowing, and a large pie with a sugary crust that smelled of cinnamon and sweet apples. But that was only the beginning. Beside them was a savory chicken pot pie, steaming gently under a flaky crust, and an assortment of sandwiches: some delicate and crustless, filled with cucumbers and herbs, while others were heartier, layered with thick slices of meat and cheese.

Children ran about with glasses of lemonade, their lips sticky and their laughter loud. Meanwhile, the adults gravitated toward a separate pitcher of lemonade that carried a decidedly stronger aroma, though more than one sharp-eyed parent was quick to reprimand any older child who tried to sneak a sip.

On one table sat a plate of wedges that looked like thick pancakes, and Graham might have passed it by if Ciarán hadn't pointed them out with a delighted cry. "Oh, Graham, look—fadge!" His grin was so bright that Graham nodded, even though he had no idea what fadge was, and simply smiled back at his husband's excitement.

But nothing Graham had seen—or smelled—could compare to the wedding cake.

"Oh!" Ciarán's exclamation was almost a gasp as he caught sight of it. His hands clasped over his chest, and his dark eyes shimmered with unrestrained delight. "It's so lovely!"

Liam, Mrs. Fournier, and Adeline stood beside the cake like proud artists unveiling their masterpiece. It was two tiers tall, covered in a snowy-white icing that carried the subtle fragrance of orange blossom. Brightly colored flowers—red, yellow, blue, orange, and purple—decorated the sides and crowned the top of the tiers.

"It wouldn't all fit in my oven," Liam admitted, his chest puffed out as though the

challenge had been a badge of honor, “so Celeste very kindly let me use hers.”

“I helped decorate!” Adeline piped up, bouncing on her heels. Then, with a slight pout, she added, “The recipe called for blush roses, but we didn’t have any. Only the violets and nasturtiums.”

Ciarán leaned down to her level, his smile warm and reassuring. “Well, thank goodness for that! Otherwise, I’d never have seen such a beautiful cake. I love nasturtiums and violets—they’re so colorful and cheerful.”

Adeline’s face lit up. “You do? I picked the best ones myself! And Mama helped me candy them, so you can eat them too!”

Mrs. Fournier handed Ciarán the knife with a beaming smile. “Go on now, my dear. Cut the first slice. I promise you, it’s even better than it looks.”

Graham wasn’t sure if the cake was as miraculous as everyone claimed or if the magic of the moment colored his perception, but when Ciarán turned to him with the knife in hand and a hopeful look, his heart skipped a beat.

“Graham—won’t you help me with it?”

Without hesitation, Graham stepped to his husband’s side. His larger hand rested gently over Ciarán’s as they guided the knife together, slicing into the top tier. The crowd leaned forward with anticipation, a ripple of excitement coursing through the guests as the first slice was lifted free and handed to an eager child. They worked side by side, cutting and serving, first the children, then the adults, until only a single large slice remained, meant for the two of them to share.

The crowd erupted in cheers when Ciarán took the first bite, his face lighting up with delight as he tasted it. Another, louder cheer followed when he offered a forkful to

Graham, who opened his mouth only to have the cake gently popped past his lips before he could take it himself.

The flavor was extraordinary. The icing was light, sweet, and fragrant with oranges, while the cake itself was moist and rich, studded with cherries, raisins, and flecks of citrus peel. Notes of brandy and warm spices—cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves—lingered on his tongue, blending the freshness of summer with the comforting warmth of autumn.

“It’s good,” Graham mumbled around the bite, his voice gruff but sincere.

Ciarán laughed softly, his cheeks pink. “I think so, too.”

And as they stood together under the shade of the trees, sharing that single slice of cake, Graham thought he’d never tasted anything sweeter than the sight of his husband’s smile.

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It was, from what Graham could tell, an entirely successful wedding reception. The air hummed with laughter, conversation, and the sounds of joyful feet skimming over the makeshift dance floor. People talked in close circles, their smiles wide and unguarded, and they danced in pairs or groups, hands clasped or twirling freely. Most importantly, Ciarán seemed comfortable, happy, and completely at ease—a remarkable state for a man who had just spent a week on a train to marry someone he had never met before. The oddity of the situation might have unsettled anyone else, but not Ciarán. Perhaps that was why he seemed utterly unflappable, even in the face of the town’s more eccentric residents.

At some point during the evening, Ronan—who was even quieter than Graham most days—was nudged and cajoled by his husband and a few others into giving a speech.

Rising to his full height, his broad frame commanding attention, he took a deep breath. His voice, deep and rumbling like a bear's growl, filled the air as he said, "Comhghairdeas leis na leanaí nua. Go líonfar do chuid ama le chéile le sonas. Buíochas le Dia as nuachtáin agus traenacha."

The toast brought a ripple of laughter, applause, and some knowing cheers. Among them, Mr. Fournier, who had stopped by earlier to shake hands with both Ciarán and Graham, clapped the loudest and hollered his approval.

"You know Irish?" Graham asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Mr. Fournier grinned, his face alight with mischief. "No, can't say that I do. But I think I caught the drift."

Later, as the festivities rolled on, an elderly man with a snow-white beard approached their table. He didn't seem as interested in offering congratulations as he was in inspecting the newly arrived groom.

"And where are you from, lad?" he asked, squinting at Ciarán.

"Kilmannán, sir," Ciarán replied evenly.

The name sparked recognition in the man's sharp eyes. Stroking his beard thoughtfully, he murmured, "Kilmannán, eh? I know of the place. Wouldn't happen to know the Foley family, would you? Thomas Foley, their patriarch—older than me, even."

Ciarán smiled, his tone measured and polite. "I can't say that I've ever associated with the Foleys, sir."

The old man let out a delighted bark of laughter, slapping his knee. "Excellent,

excellent. I could tell you were a good one the moment I laid eyes on you. The tales I could tell you about that family! Speaking of, we'll have to have you over for tea once you've settled in. Mr. Shepherd, you've married a fine young lad."

"I know," Graham managed, still bewildered by the man's energy.

Ciarán, meanwhile, looked as though he were biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

Throughout the evening, people filtered to their table bearing congratulations, warm welcomes, and gifts. Three bolts of fabric, a gleaming new pot, a basket of crabapples—"Perfect for jelly," they were assured—a jar of gumdrops purchased with Adeline's allowance. The little girl beamed as Ciarán thanked her with genuine enthusiasm, making her blush and shuffle her feet. Their table groaned under the weight of the guests' generosity, and Graham silently wondered how they would fit everything into the buggy for the trip home.

Mr. Fournier, ever the showman, played the fiddle with the confidence of someone born with the strings in his hands. He sang as he played, laughed as he sang, and danced as he played, coaxing out songs so lively that Mrs. Fournier giggled and blushed like a courting girl when he made a show of serenading her. Their children wailed in mock dismay, Adeline throwing an arm dramatically over her eyes and crying, "Mama! Papa! Act modestly!" sending everyone into fits of laughter.

Others, too, indulged in the festive spirit. Liam and Ronan, perhaps emboldened by drink or simply caught up in the magic of the evening, shared slices of sweets, feeding each other with an intimacy that left Liam grinning and Ronan murmuring low words in Irish. Their quiet exchange, though incomprehensible to Graham, earned a choked spray of lemonade from Oscar and a scandalized flush on Ciarán's face that rivaled the sunset. Graham didn't need to know the words to catch their meaning—it was immodest enough to make even the unflappable Ciarán shy.

Watching the couples around him, Graham felt a pang of longing. They weren't in love, not yet, but wasn't he allowed to indulge in a moment of closeness with his husband? The thought grew in him until he leaned closer and asked, "Do you want to dance, Ciarán?"

Ciarán hesitated, glancing at the others. "Oh, I—well, I'm a bit tired, and we've just eaten. I don't think I'd be very light on my feet."

Graham smiled gently. "No one is. But do you want to dance?"

Ciarán looked up at him, his blue eyes wide and uncertain but bright with something else—a quiet, unspoken yes. "I would," he whispered. "If you want to, Graham."

"I do."

He led Ciarán to a cooler, quieter patch of grass, giving them space for Graham's sturdy steps and Ciarán's effortless grace. It didn't take long for Ciarán to take the lead, his movements fluid and confident, his guidance gentle but sure.

"Not light on your feet?" Graham teased, a lopsided grin spreading across his face.

Ciarán laughed softly. "Oh, well—I do very much like to dance."

Graham tucked that little fact away, making a mental note to remember it. He wanted to know everything about Ciarán, every like, every dislike, every small detail that made up the man who had changed his life with a single yes. If he could make Ciarán half as happy as he felt in this moment, it would be enough.

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By the time the reception was finally winding down, most of the food had been

eaten—thank God. The buggy was so full of gifts that some of them had spilled over onto the seats, and they had to arrange them carefully to avoid losing anything. Not all of it fit, of course; a few bolts of fabric had to be unraveled and draped across Ginger's back, and Graham couldn't help but worry they might end up smelling like horse before they could air out properly. But Ciarán, ever calm and reassuring, insisted that it would all be fine after a little airing.

They made their way through a final round of thank-yous, shaking hands repeatedly as guests gathered their coats and made their way to their own homes. Liam, ever the spirited one, called out with a grin, "I expect you both over for dinner soon. Don't be strangers, now."

"Of course!" Ciarán had replied, his voice bright, a hint of laughter in it.

And then, with the last of the well-wishers headed off to their own homes, it was time to leave for their own. Their ranch. Everything that had once belonged only to Graham, every corner of it, was now also Ciarán's. The house with its creaky floorboards, the barn filled with livestock, the fields stretching out as far as the eye could see, even the chickens in their coop—they were all his too now.

Graham, lost in his thoughts, hoped Ciarán would like it.

The journey back was peaceful, but quiet. Ciarán sat beside him, his hands folded delicately in his lap, the jar of gumdrops that Adeline had given them resting there like a treasure. From time to time, he leaned ever so slightly against Graham, his head turned to look at the fading light outside the buggy's canopy. Graham's thoughts, though, were on something else.

"I have—something else for you," he said suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence.

Ciarán looked up, surprise flickering in his eyes. “Really?” he asked, his fingers absentmindedly fiddling with the jar.

“Yeah. Just for you,” Graham said, his voice unsteady with a mix of excitement and nerves.

“Thank you,” Ciarán murmured softly, but there was warmth in his tone that Graham hadn’t expected. “You’ve already given me so much.”

“Well,” Graham said, a bit sheepishly, “you haven’t seen it yet.”

When they arrived at the ranch, it was dark, the silhouettes of the land barely visible against the stars. It might have been better this way. Tomorrow, when the sun rose, he’d show Ciarán the animals, the flowers—the life they would begin building together. But tonight, tonight they could settle in, just the two of them, in their new home.

After helping Ciarán down from the buggy and leading Ginger to the stable, Graham turned back to find his husband waiting for him by the house, the jar of gumdrops held tightly to his chest like a child with a beloved toy.

“Did you want me to go in?” Ciarán asked hesitantly. “I didn’t want to go in without you. Um, sorry, I—”

“No, it’s—my fault,” Graham quickly responded, feeling a strange, inexplicable pang in his chest. “I should’ve—said something. We can go in now. Together.”

They stood there for a moment, facing each other, unsure of what to do next, but both silently understanding that this was the beginning of something far greater than either of them had imagined. Finally, Graham cleared his throat, opening the door and stepping inside.

On the kitchen table, amidst the soft light of a single candle, sat the tea set.

Graham had agonized over picking it, worrying that he might have chosen wrong. There were so many patterns to choose from, so many styles, some ornate, others austere. But when he saw the pansy design—simple, elegant, with delicate blue blooms surrounding each cup and saucer, a golden trim dancing around the edges—he knew it was the one.

But now, standing there, watching Ciarán’s quiet gaze fall upon the set, a familiar doubt crept up inside Graham. He had spent so much time choosing the right gift, but what if it wasn’t enough? “Wasn’t sure what you’d like best,” he muttered. “I could return it if you don’t—”

“No!” Ciarán’s voice was immediate, almost scandalized. “No, please—I love it! It’s beautiful. It’s all... so beautiful. Thank you, Graham. I didn’t expect this. I don’t even know what I expected, but certainly not for you to go through all this trouble for me.”

Graham’s heart skipped a beat. “I promised I would take care of you,” he said softly.

“You did,” Ciarán responded, his voice gentle but full of emotion. “Thank you, Graham.”

Graham looked down, feeling a little embarrassed. “I ought to thank you some,” he muttered, but Ciarán shook his head.

“You’ve already given me more than I could have imagined,” he said, his eyes flicking over the tea set again before setting the gumdrops down and carefully placing the tea set next to it.

They spent the next few minutes unpacking the food and gifts, the house filling up with small, meaningful tokens of affection from friends. The crabapples were moved

to the cellar, the extra plate of fadge set aside for breakfast. The space that had once seemed so quiet and lonely now felt full, alive, warm.

Ciarán took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the room with obvious satisfaction. Then, with a soft yawn, he apologized, “I’m sorry, that was rude of me.”

Graham shook his head, smiling. “You must be tired. I can clean up here. You go to bed.”

And then it hit him. He had been so caught up in the excitement of the day, he hadn’t even considered their sleeping arrangements.

The bed.

He froze. How could he have not thought of this? They had only just met, and yet they were married. Where would they sleep?

Before he could voice any of his concerns, Ciarán frowned. “Graham?”

“Sorry, just—thinking,” Graham said quickly. “You’ll have the bed. I’ll sleep in the barn.”

“Oh!” Ciarán looked surprised, clearly unsettled by the idea. “We won’t be—um, sharing the bed?”

Graham rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “It’s not the biggest bed, even for me. We’d be right on top of each other. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Ciarán blushed. “I see.”

“Don’t worry,” Graham assured him, though he felt awkward. “I’ll make another bed.

A bigger one. It'll take some time, but I'll make it work."

"You built your bed?" Ciarán asked, clearly intrigued.

"Yeah," Graham said with a shrug. "It wasn't too difficult. Had all the materials. Didn't want to spend the money on something I could just make myself." And then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "Built the house too."

Ciarán stared at him, a look of quiet admiration in his eyes. "This is... this is amazing. You never mentioned you were such a skilled carpenter."

Graham blushed, feeling embarrassed. "It's nothing special."

Ciarán didn't seem to agree. "It's incredible. You've done so much for us."

Graham shifted the conversation, eager to learn more about his husband. "And you? You never—mentioned what you did in New York. I know you're a talented artist."

Ciarán chuckled softly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, I'm not that good. Really, it was just something to pass the time. But... well, I went to school for stenography and typing, hoping to find work as a secretary. But, um..." He paused, his smile faltering. "A lot of places didn't think I was refined enough."

Graham frowned. "That's ridiculous. You're plenty refined."

Ciarán's smile was bittersweet. "Not everyone saw it that way. But I did find some sewing work. My father's a tailor, you know. I was proud to be able to tell him that what he taught me was being put to good use."

Graham's heart ached. He knew what it was like to work hard for little reward, to feel as if the world was working against you. "I'm sorry you were treated like that,

Ciarán. It won't happen here."

"It's all right," Ciarán said softly. "It worked out in the end."

"But if anyone ever gives you trouble, you come find me," Graham said firmly. "I'll always have your back."

Ciarán smiled again, though it was tinged with something Graham couldn't quite place. "Thank you, Graham."

The silence that followed was comfortable, though both men seemed unsure of what to say next. Finally, Ciarán spoke again, "I'm rather tired. I think I'll go to bed now."

"Yeah, of course," Graham said quickly. "Good night."

"Good night," Ciarán replied, his voice soft. Before closing the bedroom door, he added, "Thank you for everything. The flowers, the ring, the wedding. It was more than I could have ever asked for."

Graham stood there, speechless for a moment. He felt a swell of emotion, his chest tight. "It was the least I could do," he muttered, though in his heart, he knew it hadn't been enough. He should have done more.

"I'm glad you're here, Ciarán," Graham said softly.

"I'm very glad to be here," Ciarán responded.

They exchanged one last smile, and then Ciarán disappeared into the bedroom. Graham, suddenly aware of the silence that filled the house, turned and made his way to the barn. The stars glittered above, the air cool and comforting. He paused for a moment, taking it all in—the vast, open sky, the land that stretched before him, and

the house behind him, where his new husband lay waiting.

What a tremendous day it had been.

With that thought, Graham climbed into the hayloft, stretched out, and closed his eyes, letting sleep claim him at last.

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Graham dreamed, and it was a dream so vivid that he couldn't help but know it for what it was. He was back at the wedding, only this time everything was even more perfect than it had been in real life. He was better. His suit clung to him in a way that seemed almost unreal, tailored to perfection, and his gait was strong, fluid, effortless—the limp that had plagued him for so many years, gone. It was a transformation not just of his body, but of his very spirit.

The music swirled around them as he danced with Ciarán, each movement smooth and graceful, an elegance he'd never thought himself capable of. When the song ended, the guests cheered, clapping their hands in unison, begging for a speech. With a smile, Graham stood, his voice ringing clear and confident as he spoke words that seemed to come from some place deep inside. They were witty, heartfelt, and so charming that they brought the room to tears—tears of laughter and joy, tears of admiration, and all of it ending in a standing ovation. He felt powerful in the moment, his words like music, his presence commanding the room.

As he turned to look at Ciarán, his heart swelled with pride. His husband was gazing at him with such intensity, with such tenderness, that it took Graham's breath away. The look in his eyes was full of wonder, admiration, and a kind of love so pure that it made Graham's chest tighten. It was in that moment, that beautiful, magical moment, that Graham leaned in. He leaned toward Ciarán's lips, soft and slightly parted, the corners tugged into a smile, waiting for him. The kiss was electric, warm, filled with everything they had shared, and everything they would share. And—

He woke.

The reality was jarring. The dream shattered around him like glass, leaving only a

strange ache behind. He lay in the barn, the hay prickling his skin, the familiar sounds of cows lowing and sheep bleating filling the air. Sunlight streamed through the cracks in the wooden boards above, casting long, golden beams across the dusty floor. It was dawn, and Graham wasn't at his wedding. He wasn't dancing with Ciarán, wasn't speaking words that made the room rise to its feet. He wasn't in the midst of any of that.

He was a married man, sure, but the reality was stark and simple. And there was work to be done.

With a weary sigh, Graham ran a hand over his face, pushing away the remnants of the dream. What exactly had Liam put in that lemonade? The memory of the night before was hazy, but he remembered drinking deeply from the sweet, strong concoction. Whatever it had been, it had surely messed with his head while he slept.

That dream. He was hardly the type of man who would stand in front of a crowd, delivering a speech that would make people laugh and cry. And as for Ciarán looking at him like that, with such admiration and love—well, that was downright ludicrous. Ciarán was a friend, a kind-hearted companion who had agreed to this arrangement out of the goodness of his heart. That's all he had ever asked for, and that's all he would ever have.

His cheeks burned at the memory. The dream had felt so real, Ciarán's eyes full of something Graham had no right to imagine.

What would he offer Ciarán, anyway? What kind of man was he? He wasn't a social one, certainly not someone who could weave through a crowd with charm. He didn't know how to dance, he wasn't a smooth talker, and he certainly didn't know how to court someone like Ciarán.

He gave himself a tentative sniff. The scent of sweat, hay, and the unmistakable tang

of barnyard animals clung to him. No, this wasn't the image of a man who had anything to offer.

Shaking his head, Graham climbed carefully down from the hayloft, brushing his hand over the cows' rumps as he passed. They mooed contentedly, and he made his way outside, squinting against the bright light of the morning. There was something peaceful about the tasks ahead, even if they were simple—filling the water troughs, tending to the soil, checking on the crops. It was work he knew well, work that left no room for dreams or complications.

He reached the well and stripped off his shirt, letting it fall to the ground. The day ahead would be long, and the sun was already warming the earth beneath him. The work was simple enough: drop the bucket down, hear the splash, pull it back up, heavy with fresh water. He'd done this a thousand times before, but today it felt different.

The coolness of the water was invigorating as he tipped the bucket over his head. The shock of it made him shiver, but it also washed away the last remnants of sleep from his body. Twice more he repeated the process, the water sluicing over his chest, over his back, his hair dripping in wet strands. It was bracing, a quick reminder of what was real, of what he was.

And then came the shout.

“Oh, mo dhia!” The voice nearly made him fumble the bucket. He turned, startled, to see Ciarán standing there, frozen in place. His nightshirt was old and worn, and it barely reached the middle of his thighs. His face was as red as the sun rising behind him, his eyes wide with embarrassment.

“Forgive me, Graham! I didn't—I mean—oh, Lord, I didn't realize you were awake already, I thought I could just—”

The moment was so utterly unexpected that it sent a wave of panic coursing through Graham. His face burned. He scrambled for his shirt, instinctively covering himself. His heart pounded, not just because of the exposure but because—Ciarán had seen him. He had seen the old scars on Graham's chest, the roughness of his body, the things he had always hidden away.

Graham's hand faltered on the buttons of his shirt as his mind raced. What did Ciarán think of him now? His pulse thudded in his ears. But as he hastily buttoned up, another thought snuck in—the soft freckles on Ciarán's bare legs. A strange sense of warmth rushed through him, a connection he couldn't quite explain, and it made his thoughts scatter.

“Breakfast is cooking!” Ciarán blurted, his voice still laced with panic. He turned quickly, his feet leaving prints in the dirt as he made his escape.

Graham opened his mouth to say something, to explain, but by the time he looked up, Ciarán was already gone, slipping inside the house with an almost comical speed.

Left alone in the morning light, Graham let out a slow breath, his heart still hammering.

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Graham worked in a haze of confusion, his mind still spinning from the morning's unexpected encounter. It wasn't as though he hadn't expected some awkwardness between him and Ciarán—after all, they were two strangers trying to make a life together—but the sight of Ciarán standing there, so flustered and caught off guard, had rattled him more than he cared to admit. It wasn't just the fact that Ciarán had seen him, though that was uncomfortable enough. It was the way he'd seen him—sweaty, shirtless, exposed in the soft, early morning light. It felt as though some invisible barrier had been crossed, a line that had existed between them, one

that no longer seemed to matter after today.

Graham had tried to push the thoughts away as he gathered the animals for their morning routine. He was still wearing his wedding clothes—ill-fitting and strange for the work ahead of him, but he hadn't had the chance to change yet. The silk of the shirt clung to him uncomfortably, the cuffs too tight around his wrists, the fabric too stiff to move freely. His trousers, too, felt out of place as he worked. Still, there was no real point in worrying about it; it was a necessary task, and the animals didn't care about what he was wearing.

The cows and sheep, for their part, eyed him with confusion, their noses twitching as they sniffed at the unfamiliar fabric of his coat. He could almost imagine them wondering if he was a different person altogether, perhaps a wandering stranger who had taken up residence in the barn overnight. They were not particularly concerned by it, but they certainly seemed curious. Their bovine eyes followed him as he moved about, leading them out into the pasture with a quiet command.

The chickens, however, were entirely unfazed. They were creatures of habit, constantly in motion, heads bobbing as they pecked at the feed scattered on the ground. They barely even acknowledged his presence, beyond a few clucks of mild interest. They were the same as always—unbothered by his wedding attire or his disheveled state, more concerned with the grain at their feet than the man who brought it to them. They seemed to carry on without a care in the world.

Ginger, the old mare, was different. She always seemed to know when something was amiss, her wise, kind eyes able to see beyond the surface. She walked up to him slowly, her hooves soft on the ground as she nuzzled his shoulder, then gently tugged at his hair with her teeth, as though trying to comfort him. It was a simple gesture, but it was enough to make Graham's heart ache. Ginger had been with him for years, through everything—the hard days, the long nights, the solitude. She had always been a quiet presence, but in her own way, she understood him better than anyone else.

"What a morning," Graham muttered to himself, running a hand over his face. His mind kept drifting back to Ciarán, his wide-eyed shock, his crimson cheeks. It was impossible to escape the image of him standing there in the soft light of dawn, flustered and embarrassed. His face, so open and expressive, had been a mirror of Graham's own feelings—uncertain, caught off guard, unsure how to react.

But there was something else, something Graham couldn't quite shake from his mind. Ciarán's bare legs. Pale, freckled, with the soft light of morning catching the golden dust that seemed to float in the air. Graham had seen Ciarán's legs before, of course—he'd been helping with the chores for a few weeks now—but this time was different. This time, the sight of them lingered in his mind. The way they looked under the worn nightshirt, how the sun kissed the freckles scattered across his skin. Graham couldn't quite put it into words, but there was a certain softness to Ciarán that he hadn't fully understood before.

The thoughts tumbled through his mind in a chaotic rush, and before he realized what he was doing, Graham found himself walking over to Ginger's water trough. He needed something to ground him, something to erase the images and the strange feelings swirling inside him. Without thinking, he dunked his head into the trough, the cool water splashing over his face and soaking his hair. Ginger whinnied in irritation, clearly displeased by the sudden disturbance, but Graham barely noticed. He was too focused on the shock of the cold water, the way it stung his skin and made his thoughts scatter like leaves in the wind.

The image of Ciarán's freckled legs flashed again, but this time, it was muffled by the water. The image seemed to fade, slipping away as the water rushed over his face, and Graham sucked in a deep breath.

He straightened up, dripping wet and slightly dazed, looking out at the quiet pasture. He didn't know what to do with the feelings that had risen within him, nor did he understand why Ciarán's presence in his life had begun to affect him in ways he

couldn't explain. He was used to being alone, to keeping his distance, to maintaining a simple, practical life. But Ciarán... Ciarán was different. His kindness, his willingness to help, his curiosity about the world—it all created something Graham wasn't prepared for.

He stood there for a long moment, the animals grazing peacefully in the distance, the sun rising higher in the sky. It was still early, and there was much work to be done, but Graham couldn't shake the strange weight in his chest. With a deep breath, he turned back toward the barn, his thoughts still in a whirl, hoping that today would bring some clarity. But he wasn't sure it would. All he knew was that he couldn't stop thinking about Ciarán, about the way he looked at him, and about the strange warmth that lingered in his heart.

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If anyone had been watching, they would've thought it a funny sight indeed—Graham, a towering figure of a man with broad shoulders and calloused hands, walking up the path to his own house with a bouquet of wildflowers, his cheeks a little flushed, a touch of nervousness in his step. The flowers were carefully selected, picked from the meadow behind the barn. Bright anemones and cheerful buttercups mixed with delicate woodland stars—simple, yet beautiful, much like the world around him. His heart beat faster with each step as he approached the door, holding the bouquet with care, trying to steady his thoughts.

He was, of course, nervous. The morning had already been awkward enough, with Ciarán's unexpected appearance at the well. Graham had meant to start the day quietly, doing his chores as usual, but everything felt off since that brief but meaningful moment. He cleared his throat before lifting his hand to knock on the door. "Ciarán, can I come in?"

From inside, he heard the muffled sound of clattering, footsteps rushing, followed by

the faint rustling of cloth and the unmistakable clinking of plates. He raised an eyebrow. What on earth was Ciarán doing in there?

“Ciarán?” Graham called again, curiosity mixed with unease.

“W-wait a moment, please! I’m just—I’m just cleaning up!” came the hurried response, accompanied by more clanging sounds.

He stood there for what felt like forever, holding the wildflowers with an almost comical tenderness, the moment growing longer in his mind. His stomach twisted slightly. What had he even done to deserve these flowers in the first place? The morning had been a mess of misunderstandings and awkwardness. But maybe this was his way of doing something right, something thoughtful. He didn’t know. All he knew was that he wanted to make things right with Ciarán, even if he wasn’t entirely sure how.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, the door opened. There stood Ciarán, a bit flustered, his usually neat hair a little mussed, flour streaking his face, his apron a little askew. He was breathing just a little heavier than usual, and his eyes widened as he saw Graham standing there with the flowers in hand.

“Um, breakfast is ready,” Ciarán said, his voice slightly shaky. He glanced down at the bouquet, a faint pink creeping up his neck and coloring his cheeks.

Graham felt a jolt of warmth at the sight of him. Ciarán was dressed neatly, in a shirt and pants, apron tied securely around his waist. And yet, there was something about the young man’s flustered state that made Graham’s heart beat faster. He couldn’t help but smile, even though the smile was a little awkward.

He extended the bouquet to Ciarán, feeling strangely shy at that moment. “Got these for you,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “As an apology. Didn’t mean

to—make you uncomfortable, at the well.”

Ciarán’s face flushed even more, if that was possible. He reached out to take the flowers, his fingers brushing Graham’s hand. “No, I’m the one who should be sorry. I just didn’t expect you to be awake this early. I should’ve guessed, though—you’re a rancher, after all.”

Graham shrugged, his discomfort simmering beneath his words. “Even so, I know it’s—unsightly. I don’t ever mean to frighten you.”

At that, Ciarán’s face grew more confused. He took a step closer, frowning deeply. “I’m sorry, Graham, I don’t understand what you mean.”

Graham’s heart sank. He hadn’t meant to make things so complicated. He hesitated, then finally muttered, “My—my scars.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he could see the shift in Ciarán’s face—a look of horror quickly replaced by earnest apologies. “No! Oh, no, Graham, that wasn’t—you’re so—that wasn’t it at all! I was just—” Ciarán stopped, visibly flustered, and took a deep breath to steady himself. “I hadn’t expected you to be up yet, so I hadn’t—dressed properly for my trip to the well. I thought, since it was such a short walk—but, it was extremely improper, and quite a shocking display—I don’t know what I was thinking. Forgive me, please.”

Graham blinked in surprise. His mind was racing. “There’s nothing to forgive,” he said, his voice steadying as he realized the misunderstanding. “Guess we just have to get used to living around each other.” He gave Ciarán a tentative smile, and to his relief, Ciarán returned it, the tension easing in the room.

Quick as lightning, Ciarán set the table, his movements fluid and quick. “Sit down, please, Graham. I made pancakes. They’re, um, I thought it’d look nice to add some

beet juice, to make the color. See?” Ciarán gestured at the pancakes, which had turned a lovely shade of pink, just as his cheeks had.

Before Graham could respond, Ciarán continued, “And I’ve warmed up the leftover fadge. I found a jar of raspberry jam. Do you want to try it with that and some butter? Or you can have it with eggs. I wasn’t sure how you like them, so I have scrambled and fried. What—what do you want to eat?”

The nervous energy in Ciarán’s voice made Graham smile softly. He had been worrying over this meal, over pleasing Graham, and he hadn’t even realized how sweet it all was. “I want you to sit,” Graham said, his voice firm but kind.

Ciarán stopped, blinking at him, a little surprised.

“Come sit, and eat with me. That’s what I want,” Graham repeated.

Ciarán hesitated for a moment, but then, with a soft smile, he pulled up a chair and sat across from Graham. The silence between them felt comfortable, though it was clear that Ciarán was still nervous. Graham could see his hands wringing the fabric of his apron, the way his lip worried between his teeth.

“You know that’s all I want from you, right? You don’t have to go through all this trouble just for me,” Graham said softly.

“You’ve done so much for me,” Ciarán murmured, his voice small.

Graham blinked, confused. “We’ve only just gotten married.”

“You paid for my fare, and my meals,” Ciarán replied, a little self-conscious, his eyes downcast. “And the wedding was so beautiful, and—and my tea set. I have to pay you back, somehow.” He trailed off with a self-conscious laugh.

Graham's heart softened. "You don't have to earn anything here, Ciarán. I meant what I said in my letters. You being here is more than enough."

"But surely I have to help you with the chores!" Ciarán protested, his eyes wide with concern.

Truth be told, Graham would've been content if Ciarán spent his days wandering the prairie, watching the clouds, picking flowers, whatever made him happy. But Ciarán had come with the intention to learn, and Graham had promised to teach him. "I'll teach you anything you want to know. And if you want to work, then we'll work side-by-side. Ask me for help if you need it. I'm here for you, too. This is your home."

At that, Ciarán paused for a long moment before speaking. His voice was quieter this time. "I did want to make breakfast for you, though."

Graham's heart swelled. "I'm glad you did. Thank you."

As the meal cooled slightly, Graham glanced down at the table, piled high with food: pancakes, eggs, fadge, and jam. He placed two pink pancakes on Ciarán's plate and spooned scrambled eggs onto it. The pancakes were the perfect shade of pink, fluffy, and full of warmth. He gave them a small taste and smiled. "These are good," he said, his voice full of appreciation.

Ciarán's smile was shy, but warm. "The beet juice adds a bit of sweetness, along with the color. I could make them again, if you'd like."

"I would. I really would," Graham said, smiling back.

As they ate, the quiet settled around them, and Graham realized something he hadn't expected—this silence, this peaceful, easy companionship, was everything he'd dreamed of and more. It was better than anything he had imagined when he thought

about getting married. No chatter was needed, no constant talking. This was the kind of home Graham had always wanted—a home that was filled with contentment and understanding, with Ciarán by his side.

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Over the course of the following week, Graham took great care in acquainting Ciarán with every facet of life on the ranch. He showed him everything there was to know, starting with the full tour, though he was fairly certain Ciarán already knew where the well was, having visited it himself already. But still, Graham made sure to highlight all the key features: the barn where the animals were kept, the spacious pasture where the livestock roamed freely, Ginger's stable—Graham's old friend and the horse that had carried him through so many years of hard work—and the kitchen garden, which needed some attention. With two people now in the house, Graham realized it would have to be expanded. He'd need more crops to feed both of them, and maybe even enough to sell at market. He couldn't help but feel a sense of pride as he showed Ciarán the long rows of tilled soil, the green buds sprouting from the earth, knowing that, in another season or two, the crops would grow into something they could harvest and use to sustain themselves. The land was still a bit untamed in places, but it was theirs. And the boundaries were well marked—he had carefully placed stone towers long ago, each one denoting the end of their property and the beginning of the open prairie beyond.

“All this?” Ciarán asked, his voice filled with a quiet awe as he touched one of the small towers of stones. He looked out over the land, the vast, empty prairie stretching out before them. “It's a lot for just one person.”

Graham let out a low sigh, his thoughts turning inward. “Well, you're here now,” he mumbled, glancing at Ciarán. The words came out more simply than he had intended, but when he looked into his husband's eyes and saw the soft smile in return, it felt like everything was exactly as it should be.

It was true that Ciarán didn't have any experience with life on a ranch. Graham had

known that from the moment they'd met, but it didn't matter. Ciarán was eager to learn, and Graham was more than happy to teach him. The young man's hands weren't used to working the land, and he didn't know the first thing about livestock or farming, but he was quick to pick up the basics. The only plants Ciarán had ever tended to in his life had been small, decorative pots in his father's house in Ireland. There was nothing like the earth under your nails, nothing like learning which soil was rich and which was poor, or how to spot the weeds creeping up among the plants. Graham knelt beside him, guiding his hand through the soil, showing him the differences in texture and smell. He taught Ciarán how to pluck the weeds, careful not to uproot the young plants along with them, how to spot the bugs that ate through their hard work, and which insects were beneficial to the crops and should be left alone.

But it was the animals that seemed to fascinate Ciarán most. The chickens were funny little creatures, and Ciarán enjoyed feeding them and watching them scurry around, clucking with delight. But it was the larger animals—the ones that Ciarán had only heard about in stories—that caused him a bit of nervousness. Horses, cows, and sheep had always been abstract to him, something he knew of only in theory. They were the creatures that gave people milk, butter, cheese, and wool, but now, seeing them face-to-face in the pasture, Ciarán wasn't sure what to expect. He hesitated, unsure whether to approach them or not.

"I'm a stranger to them," Ciarán said softly, extending a tentative hand toward the nearest cow. He kept his voice gentle, hoping the animals would sense his calm. "Will they bite?"

Graham's heart warmed at the sight before him. There was his husband, standing in the middle of the pasture, looking unsure but determined as the animals slowly made their way toward him, curiously sniffing at his hand. Ginger, the old mare, was one of the first to approach, nuzzling Ciarán's arm with a soft snort. Ciarán's nervousness melted away at the gentle touch of the horse. Graham chuckled under his breath.

“They know when someone’s a good person or not. Don’t worry.”

“Well, I—oh!” Ciarán let out a surprised laugh as one of the lambs trotted over and gently headbutted him in the leg, eager for attention. He knelt down without a second thought, his face lighting up with delight as the little creature nuzzled against him. “What a sweet little thing!” Ciarán’s voice was full of awe, and he lovingly rubbed the lamb’s velvety ears and stroked its soft back.

The sight of his husband surrounded by the curious, friendly animals brought an unexpected joy to Graham’s heart. Ciarán’s beaming smile was enough to outshine the sun, and for a brief moment, Graham felt a deep sense of contentment. This was it. This was what he’d always wanted—someone to share the ranch with, someone who would walk alongside him through the daily work, someone who would be a partner, a companion.

Graham tipped his hat, his gaze shifting to the ground as he kicked at the dirt with his boots. He murmured, “Yeah, sure is.”

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One morning, as they were finishing breakfast, cleaning the remains of scrambled eggs and buttered toast from their plates, Ciarán hesitated for a moment before asking, “Graham? Do you think that we might be able to go to town on Friday?”

Graham, who was scrubbing at the last crumbs on his plate, turned to him with a smile. “Yeah. Yeah, of course. That’s no problem. What do you need?” His voice was open and eager to help, though his curiosity piqued at what Ciarán might want to do in town.

Ciarán twisted the corner of his apron in his hands, an unconscious gesture that revealed his nerves. “I’d like to go to the post office,” he said, his voice soft but

resolute. “I wrote ‘thank you’ notes to everyone who gave us a wedding gift. And I—well, I want to mail a letter to my father. To tell him that I’ve arrived safely and that we’ve married.”

Graham’s heart gave a strange little twist at the mention of Ciarán’s father. He had heard about him from Ciarán’s glowing praise, from the way his husband spoke of him with such obvious admiration and love. But the truth was, Graham had never met the man, and the only connection he had to him was through Ciarán’s letters, which had been exchanged over the course of their courtship. In those letters, Ciarán had spoken of his family with a fondness that was palpable, and it was clear that his father had raised him with care, but Graham couldn’t help but wonder what Ciarán’s father thought of the arrangement. What would he think of his son marrying a man he had never met, after only a handful of letters? What kind of man would he imagine was marrying his son?

The thought made Graham feel uneasy, but he masked it quickly. He didn’t want Ciarán to see his uncertainty, not when the request was so simple, so sincere. “Of course we can do that,” Graham replied, his voice steady and warm. He placed his hand on Ciarán’s shoulder in an attempt to reassure him. “Your father needs to know you’re safe and settling in. And, uh, I think it’d be nice to go see Oscar and Mrs. Fournier, too. Thank them for coming to the wedding.” His mind flickered briefly to the thought of seeing the two older folks again, their kind faces welcoming them into the community. And besides, Oscar was always a wealth of information about farming. He had a mind for practical things, things Graham was still learning.

“Friday, then. It’s a plan,” Graham said with a finality that suggested he was more than happy to go along with whatever Ciarán needed. The idea of heading into town, seeing the faces of the people they had met during their short time here, was something Graham looked forward to. It would be a chance to reconnect with the world beyond the ranch, even if only for a few hours.

As the day passed, thoughts of the upcoming trip to town lingered in Graham's mind. He knew it was important for Ciarán to send his letter. It was the kind of communication that would put his family at ease, show them that he was well and happy. It was more than a formality—it was a bridge between two lives, two families, coming together. And Graham couldn't help but feel the weight of his own responsibility in that. He wasn't just a husband, he was the person who had welcomed Ciarán to this new life, the one who would stand beside him through it all. He wanted Ciarán's family to know he was taking care of him, that they were building a life together, one that was peaceful and fulfilling.

At the same time, Graham realized that he had his own tasks to take care of. They were quickly outgrowing the bed they had—the one Ciarán had helped make when he first arrived. The mattress was too small now, too cramped for two people, and with their growing life on the ranch, it only made sense to build something new, something bigger. He'd been meaning to buy the materials for it for a while, but now it felt urgent. With Ciarán's presence, their little home was beginning to feel fuller, more like a proper home. It made sense that they would need more space, not just for themselves but for their future, for everything they planned to share together.

Later that day, as they worked side by side in the garden, Graham took a moment to glance over at his husband. Ciarán was focused, his brow furrowed slightly as he worked the soil, but the quiet determination in his eyes was something that gave Graham a sense of pride. The way he'd taken to the work, learning quickly, asking questions, offering suggestions—it was as if they had always been a team. And they had, even before the wedding, even before the letters had started to arrive. There was an unspoken bond between them now, something that didn't need words to be understood. It was a trust, a quiet confidence in one another.

"You'll feel better after sending that letter," Graham said suddenly, breaking the silence. He wasn't sure where the thought came from, but it felt right to voice it. "Your father will be glad to hear from you. And I'm sure he'll be proud of you."

Ciarán looked up from his work, his expression softening at the words. There was a slight blush creeping onto his cheeks, but he nodded. “I hope so. I want him to know I’m happy here, that I’m with someone who cares about me.” His voice dropped, barely above a whisper. “I want him to know that I’m not alone.”

“You’re not alone, Ciarán,” Graham said firmly. “Not now, not ever. Not with me.” His words were simple, but they held all the weight of his feelings. He hoped Ciarán would understand that he meant more than just a statement about their marriage. He meant a promise about their life together—about all the things they would build, the memories they would make, the challenges they would face and overcome.

“I know,” Ciarán replied, his voice full of warmth. “Thank you, Graham.”

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Ginger had grown accustomed to Graham’s weekly trips into town. The routine had settled into a comfortable rhythm, and the mare was always eager to leave the confines of the ranch, her tail flicking with anticipation as soon as the cart was ready. This morning, she was particularly impatient, whinnying and nuzzling Graham’s hair as he tightened the straps on the harness. She seemed to sense the excitement in the air—though Graham suspected it was more the promise of an outing than any understanding of the task ahead.

“Easy, girl,” Graham murmured, patting her neck, his fingers brushing against the soft, sleek coat. Ginger was a loyal companion, and despite her age, she was still as spry as ever. He had known her for years now, and there was an unspoken bond between them that ran deeper than mere ownership. She was part of the family, her steady presence as much a fixture of the ranch as the land itself.

Still, as he stroked her mane, Graham considered the growing need for another horse. He’d been thinking about it for some time, but today it seemed more pressing than

ever. Ciarán was small but certainly added weight, and as they planned on purchasing the materials for a new bed, Graham didn't want to strain Ginger by overloading her. A second horse would be a smart investment, something that could ease the burden on the ranch and give Ciarán his own steed, should he wish to learn to ride. After all, Ginger wasn't getting any younger. They could both use the help.

"Yeah," Graham muttered to himself, tapping his finger against Ginger's neck. "We'll pick up a new mare today."

The thought put him in a better mood, and as he waited for Ciarán to finish his preparations, he allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to have another horse in the stable, something sturdy and dependable for both of them.

It wasn't long before Ciarán appeared, stepping out of the house with a purposeful stride. His crisp, white shirt gleamed under the sunlight, a stark contrast to the earthy hues of the ranch. The black trousers were neatly pressed, and his boots, freshly shined, gleamed as though he'd just stepped out of a tailor's shop. His straw hat, the one adorned with a dark green ribbon, rested on his head, though today the delicate paper flowers that had once decorated it had been carefully placed on the shelf as a memento of their first meeting.

Graham couldn't help but smile at the sight of him—his husband, always so careful with his appearance, even in the midst of ranch life. But today, Ciarán was more than just tidy. He was radiant, his excitement barely contained as he hurried to the cart, the sack of chicken feed repurposed as a makeshift bag slung over his shoulder. Inside, Graham knew, were the letters to send. His "thank you" notes, and the most important one—the letter to his father, a gesture that had weighed heavily on both their minds since their wedding.

"I'm ready, Graham," Ciarán said, his voice bright and full of purpose.

“All right.” Graham helped him into the cart, his fingers lingering for a moment longer than necessary as he adjusted Ciarán’s coat. There was an odd flutter in his chest that he couldn’t quite explain. He considered telling Ciarán that he looked handsome, but the thought seemed to linger too long, and he discarded it before it left his mouth. It was an awkward notion, one that felt unnecessary. Instead, he climbed into the cart himself, settling beside Ciarán, trying to brush off the strange, unfamiliar feeling that was gnawing at him.

The road to town was a quiet one. The weather was clear and fair, with a slight breeze rustling through the trees, carrying with it the sweet scent of wildflowers in full bloom. The sky above was a brilliant shade of blue, unmarred by any clouds. It was the kind of day that made everything seem possible. Graham glanced at Ciarán, who was humming a tune softly to himself as he rearranged the letters in his sack, checking and rechecking their contents. It was a peaceful moment—one that filled Graham’s heart with a simple kind of joy. They were together. And for today, that was enough.

Their first stop was the post office, where they were greeted by Oscar, the postmaster. As Ciarán handed over the stack of letters, his cheeks flushed a bright pink when he presented the note meant for the postmaster himself.

“Perhaps it’s a bit silly,” Ciarán said, his voice sheepish. “Since we’re here now and can thank you in person, but—”

Oscar laughed warmly and took the letter from Ciarán’s hand. “Thank you, Ciarán. It’s always nice to get mail.” His smile was kind, genuine. “And don’t you worry about that letter to your father. It’ll make its way to him, no trouble. Small town, small community. We all know each other, and we all make sure the word gets out.”

As Ciarán pressed the letter to his heart before handing it over, Graham couldn’t help but wonder what kind of man Ciarán’s father was. He had been a force in his son’s

life—sending him to school, encouraging him to seek out a better future. Graham didn't know if he would ever meet him, but he imagined the man must have had high hopes for his son. What would he think of the new life Ciarán had chosen? A quiet life on a ranch, away from the bustling cities. And what would he think of Graham, the man who had married his son?

Oscar's reassurance about the letter was a small comfort, but Graham still felt a quiet unease. He hoped Ciarán's father would understand. He hoped he wouldn't think his son had been led astray. But there was nothing to be done but wait and see.

Their next stop was the general store, where Mrs. Fournier, the ever-friendly shopkeeper, greeted them with a wave. She was quick to brush off Ciarán's thanks for all her help with the wedding arrangements.

"It's nothing," she said with a laugh. "We're neighbors, after all. Now, tell me, how's the honeymoon going?" At the sight of their flushed faces, she let out a delighted laugh. "Ah, a matching set! What luck, that you found one another."

Graham cleared his throat, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks. He reached out to gently take Ciarán's hand, tugging him toward the door before they could become too embarrassed. "Give our best to Adeline and the rest of the family," Graham said, offering his thanks as he ushered his husband out of the store.

"We enjoyed the gumdrops!" Ciarán called over his shoulder, his voice still tinged with the warmth of Mrs. Fournier's teasing.

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That left buying the lumber and the horse, neither of which were particularly thrilling tasks for a young, newlywed man like Ciarán. Graham knew how it might feel for his husband—town wasn't as bustling as the city Ciarán was used to, and there wasn't

much to do in Larkspur besides the basic errands that were part of daily life. As much as Ciarán was adapting to ranch life, Graham could tell that there were moments when he missed the vibrancy of the places he'd come from, the energy of crowds and the opportunities for distraction.

Graham wasn't about to let his husband waste his day on things that would only frustrate him. "I got to run a couple more errands," he said, glancing at Ciarán with an easy smile. "You could take a walk around town if you'd like. Or get something to eat."

Ciarán hesitated, glancing at Graham with a slight frown furrowing his brow. "You don't... want me to come along with you?" he asked, his voice soft, almost uncertain.

Graham smiled and shook his head. "It won't be very interesting. I don't want you to get bored. You should enjoy yourself. See the town, do some shopping." He gestured toward the small shops lining the main street. "We'll still have plenty of time to spend together later."

The idea of Ciarán wandering around town on his own seemed to unsettle his husband a bit more than Graham expected. He could see the subtle worry in Ciarán's eyes, though he was trying to hide it with a brave face. But this wasn't about leaving Ciarán alone—it was about giving him the space to explore at his own pace. He knew that being new to everything could feel overwhelming. And today, Ciarán deserved to have a little time for himself.

"If—if you're sure, Graham," Ciarán said, but there was still a slight quiver in his voice, and his eyes darted down to the ground, unsure if he was being a bother by wanting to stay with Graham.

Seeing the hint of unease still lingering, Graham leaned forward and gently placed his hand on Ciarán's arm. "Hey, it's okay. I'll be done in a little while, and then we can

meet back up. Maybe even grab a bite to eat together later, if you're still hungry. We'll do something fun after." He paused, then added with a teasing grin, "Use up the rest of that money I sent you."

Ciarán's expression softened at that, his lips curving into a small but genuine smile. "Yes, okay. I will." He looked a little reassured now, but still a touch hesitant.

Graham could tell Ciarán was trying hard to adjust to everything. He was learning the ways of ranch life, embracing the quiet moments, and even finding his footing in Larkspur, but it wasn't always easy. As much as Graham adored him and wanted to share everything with him, he knew Ciarán needed time to find his own rhythm too. And today, that meant letting him wander a little, to discover what he might enjoy in town, even if it was just taking in the sights or finding something small that could make the day a little brighter.

With one last squeeze of reassurance, Graham stood up and grabbed his hat from the cart. "I won't be too long. I promise. You can check out that little bakery or maybe find something to bring back for the house."

Ciarán's eyes lit up at the mention of the bakery. It was one of the few places in town he'd taken a particular liking to, the smell of fresh-baked goods always tempting him in. "I'll see if they have any more of those buns you like," he said, his voice carrying a bit more enthusiasm now.

"That sounds good," Graham replied, smiling back as he walked toward the general store, where he would pick up the lumber for the bed frame and hopefully have a quick word with the local horse trader about finding the right horse. He hoped that this task would go smoothly, though he knew the price for a good horse would be steep. But it was an investment, something that would benefit the ranch for years to come.

As he headed into the store, he turned back one last time to check on Ciarán. His husband was standing a little awkwardly near the bakery, glancing up and down the street as though trying to decide where to go first. Seeing Ciarán there, standing on his own in this new town, Graham's heart swelled with affection. It wasn't the same as the lively streets of New York, but it was a start—a quiet corner of the world where Ciarán could begin to carve out his place.

With a final, warm smile, Graham walked into the store, his mind already half on the errands and half on what he hoped would be a lovely afternoon once they were both done.

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The carpenter, a no-nonsense sort of man with broad shoulders and thick hands, sold him the materials he needed for the bed frame. Dark wood, sturdy but not too dense, the kind that would carve well without splintering too much. Graham could work with it. It wouldn't be anything fancy, he knew that much. He wasn't a craftsman by any stretch of the imagination, and the idea of getting too intricate with the carvings felt a bit out of his depth. But he could make it nice. Perhaps some simple designs, nothing too bold—maybe flowers or birds, something soft and peaceful, like the quiet mornings he and Ciarán spent together. Maybe a pattern that could remind him of the way Ciarán's laughter filled the air. He could sand it smooth, polish it nice, and present it to Ciarán with a quiet sort of pride.

Graham allowed himself a moment to daydream as he paid the carpenter and took the rough-cut pieces. He imagined Ciarán in their room, his husband wearing nothing but a nightshirt, looking over the freshly made bed frame. Ciarán, who would run his fingers over the carvings with that soft, appreciative smile of his, his fingers brushing over the smooth surface, bending over to examine the details as if it were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Graham's chest tightened with warmth, and he could almost hear Ciarán's voice, soft with affection.

“You made this for us?”

But before he could picture more of the scene, a voice broke into his thoughts, snapping him out of the daydream with startling clarity.

“What’re you making?”

The shopkeeper’s question caught him completely off guard. Graham blinked and looked up, finding the man leaning casually against the workbench, a toothpick held between his teeth and a knowing smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. It was clear from the look in his eyes that he had noticed the way Graham’s mind had wandered.

“What?” Graham mumbled, hoping his face wasn’t as red as he felt.

“All this,” the shopkeeper repeated, gesturing to the wood stacked in Graham’s cart, “What’re you going to do with it?”

Graham cleared his throat, feeling his cheeks flush even deeper. “Make a bed,” he muttered. The words came out gruff, a little defensive, but he wasn’t about to let the man embarrass him, not after the ridiculous thoughts he’d been entertaining.

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow, still not letting up. “Don’t you got one?”

Graham grunted. “Yeah, just need a new one, is all.”

“Hm.” The shopkeeper took a long look at him, then proceeded to pick his teeth with the toothpick as though Graham had just told him the most interesting thing in the world. “Marriage is treating you well, then.”

The words hit Graham like a bucket of cold water. He blinked, the reality of it all

settling back in, and he couldn't help the embarrassed smile that pulled at the corners of his lips. "Yeah, it's... it's going well."

Trying not to sound too flustered, he grabbed the lumber and hauled it to the cart with an exaggerated grunt, as if the weight of the wood was all that was on his mind.

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There was a family near town that bred horses—Nathan and Annie Duncan. Nathan had worked on the railroads, and Annie had once been a trail guide for families heading west, a life that had seen her traverse the roughest parts of the country before meeting Nathan in California. After their marriage, they decided to leave the city life behind, bought land in Larkspur, and started raising horses. They were proud of their business and often claimed that theirs were the best horses in the state. Graham couldn't speak to that. It seemed a little absurd to claim they were the best, especially when they were the only ones he'd ever bought horses from. But he could certainly speak to the quality of their stock, especially Ginger, the mare they had sold him years ago. She had turned out to be everything he'd ever wanted in a horse. A reliable partner. The best horse he'd ever had. And if anyone asked, he'd tell them so.

The horses in the nearby pasture weren't much interested in Graham or Ginger. They glanced up briefly as they approached, stared curiously, then returned to grazing in the grass as if they saw this sort of thing every day. Which, to be fair, they probably did. People came and went constantly, making their way to the Duncan ranch to buy, sell, or do business of one sort or another.

When Graham knocked on the front door of the Duncan home, he was met with a greeting like no other he'd received in his years of dealing with people.

“Oh, goddamn—Wasn't I clear enough? How about you fuck right off?”

Taken aback, Graham stood frozen for a moment, but quickly recovered. “I will, soon as I buy a horse off you, Mrs. Duncan.”

There was a beat of silence, then a sudden pause in the words that came next. “That

you, Shepherd?”

“Yep. It’s me, ma’am.”

The door swung open with a squeal of old hinges, revealing Annie Duncan standing there, tall, broad-shouldered, and as redheaded as a sunrise, her face framed by a mass of fiery curls. Her skin, sun-darkened and scarred from her days as a trail guide, was tough, but her expression softened almost immediately when she saw who it was.

“Sorry about that,” she said, almost sheepishly. “Thought you might be the Lachapelle kid again.” She shook her head, clearly frustrated. “He was here earlier today, trying to get me to sell him some of my animals. You should’ve heard the price he was offering. Would’ve made you piss your pants laughing.”

Graham grunted, not sure whether to feel more annoyed by the Lachapelles’ persistent business tactics or to find it amusing. “Yeah, he and his father came around a while back, doing the same thing. Wanted my prize cows. Told them to fuck off, too.”

Annie spit on the ground, the sharpness of the action softening her irritation. “They sure do have a talent for courting words like that.” Then, her gaze shifted to Ginger, who stood patiently by Graham’s side. “Anyway, you said you wanted to buy a horse? Something wrong with your mare?”

Graham shook his head. “No, Ginger’s just fine. It’s just that, well, I’ve got myself a new husband, and we might be coming into town more often now. Ginger likes to ride, but she might get a little tired of dragging the cart and both of us around all the time. And it’d be good if we both had a horse to get around the ranch.”

Annie raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “You got married? When?”

Graham smiled softly. “Nine days ago, now.”

“Well, congratulations.” Annie’s tone was warm, but the twinkle in her eye was unmistakable. “Let’s see if I can’t find you a horse, then.”

As they walked toward the stables, Graham explained what he needed. “I need something strong enough for farm work, but not too large. And it’s got to have a gentle temperament. My husband doesn’t know how to ride yet, but he wants to learn. I’ll be giving him lessons, so the horse needs to be patient.”

The mention of Ciarán’s lack of riding experience seemed to take Annie by surprise. “He doesn’t know how to ride? How’s he going to work on the ranch?”

Graham felt his chest tighten, as if his protective instincts were rising to the surface. “I’ll teach him,” he said firmly. “He wants to learn. He’s been a big help already.”

Annie blinked, a moment of understanding dawning in her eyes. “Easy now, son. I didn’t mean anything by it. Just surprised, is all. I don’t know many people around here who don’t know how to ride a horse.”

Graham shrugged. “He was living in New York. I figure you can just walk wherever you need to go there.”

Annie took a thoughtful moment, letting the information sink in. Then she nodded, impressed. “He came all the way from New York? Damn. He must’ve been real sweet on you, huh?”

Graham’s face flushed red again, and he could feel the heat rising to his neck. It seemed that everyone in town had a way of making him blush these days. He cleared his throat, awkwardly shifting from foot to foot. “Well, I don’t know about that,” he mumbled, suddenly feeling all sorts of self-conscious.

Annie chuckled. “I think I know the feeling. Anyway, let’s see what we’ve got for you.”

It didn’t take long before she found a mare that fit the bill. A piebald, not too large but strong enough for work, with a gentle nature. Graham inspected her closely. She seemed like a good fit for the ranch, and from the way she nuzzled his hand, he could tell she had a sweet temperament.

After a brief exchange of terms, a lighter purse, and some reluctant goodbyes, Graham left the Duncan ranch with his new horse—a lighter load of money and a freshly reddened face. Mrs. Duncan had kept him on edge with her directness and the way she effortlessly dug into him with her observations. But in the end, he had what he needed. He was ready to head back home, where Ciarán was waiting.

The ride back to the ranch was quieter than the one into town, the sun beginning to dip below the horizon. Graham couldn’t help but smile, thinking of how excited Ciarán would be to meet their new addition to the family.

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The ride back to town was uneventful, and Graham couldn’t have been happier for it. He encountered no one, so he didn’t have to listen to any of the usual rumors or comments about his relationship with Ciarán. He could just focus on the quiet, peaceful day, and that was a rare kind of gift. The sun shone brightly, not too harshly, and the breeze was cool without being uncomfortable. A perfect afternoon for wandering around town. Graham didn’t have a specific plan in mind for meeting up with Ciarán, but considering it was well past noon, he figured the restaurant would be as good a place as any to start looking.

He made his way down the street, passing open windows in nearly every building as he went, the sounds of the town drifting out in the warm air. When he arrived at the

restaurant, he spotted the back of Ciarán's head right away. The unmistakable mop of curls that always made him smile. As he neared the window, his hand already raising to wave, Graham stopped short when he realized someone inside had already caught his husband's attention.

"You're newly arrived?" It was Jean Lachapelle's smooth, drawling voice. "You must be. I know everyone in this town. And I wouldn't forget a face like yours."

Graham frowned, noticing the tone and the way Jean had leaned in. Ciarán was still and quiet for a moment before answering, sounding a little uncertain. "Yes, sir, Mr. Lachapelle. I—"

"Where have you been hiding?" Jean's voice was sharp now, like he'd made up his mind about something.

Ciarán's response came, hesitant but polite. "Oh, I haven't been hiding. I was...um, on my honeymoon. I was just married last week. Well, a little more than a week. Nine—nine days now, actually."

"Married? And you decided to honeymoon here?" Jean laughed softly, a sound that didn't sit well with Graham.

"No, no!" Ciarán laughed nervously. "Well, sort of, I came here to meet my husband—he has a ranch—we were sending letters, and he has such a way with—but, you know everyone in town? Do you know my husband? Graham Shepherd?"

Graham's heart sank. He could hear the unease in Ciarán's voice, and it made him bristle. His feet moved before his mind could fully catch up. He pushed open the door with more force than he intended, boots clattering loudly against the worn wooden floor as he stepped inside. Ciarán looked up, his eyes widening as he saw him approach.

“What have you been up to?” Graham asked, trying to sound casual, though he could feel the tightness in his chest. His gaze quickly shifted to the bulging chicken feed bag at Ciarán’s feet, now filled with whatever he had purchased during his walk through town. He noticed Ciarán still had half a sandwich left, some apple slices, and a couple of oatmeal cookies on his plate.

With a glance toward Jean, who hadn’t moved an inch, Ciarán smiled a little awkwardly. “I bought a few things. And I walked around town a little bit. Then I came here to wait for you. I saved you some lunch, if you wanted.”

Graham gave him a soft smile, his irritation easing just a touch. “Thank you.” But his gaze drifted back to Jean, who still hadn’t budged.

“You got some business here?” Graham asked, his tone curt as he addressed Jean for the first time since entering.

Jean leaned back in his chair, a smug look crossing his face as he sneered. “As it just so happens, I’m in town on business. I thought I might have a bite to eat, but now I seem to have lost my appetite.” He leaned in, his lip curling. “Congratulations on your marriage. I see the only way for you to get a husband was to buy one. Must’ve cost you a pretty penny—but the boy’s pretty enough himself. Better than a washed-up old soldier deserves.”

Graham’s blood ran cold at the words. Anger surged up like a wildfire, hot and fast. He opened his mouth to retort, to give the man a piece of his mind, but before he could even speak, Ciarán cut in.

The younger man stood tall, though he was a head shorter than Jean. But the fire in his eyes, the sheer force of his words, took Graham by surprise. “Oh, you—you cad! How dare you! Maybe you do know everyone in Larkspur—but I’m sorry to have made your acquaintance! My husband’s a skilled rancher and a farmer and a

carpenter and he—” Ciarán’s cheeks flushed bright red with anger. “He is certainly not old and washed-up!”

The insult stung, but Graham’s chest swelled with pride at his husband’s words. Jean’s sneer deepened as he hissed, “They might’ve taught you manners before they let you leave the old country!”

Graham saw the flash of hurt in Ciarán’s eyes, but it only made the anger flare hotter in his gut. “You already been told to fuck off once today,” he growled, stepping closer to Jean. “I’m not as polite as everyone else. We cross paths again, and I’ll throw your ass in the dirt.”

Jean’s face twisted in fury, but he glared at the server before turning back to Graham. “Are you just going to let him threaten a customer?” Jean asked, his voice dripping with malice.

The server, who had been quietly stacking plates, glanced up. “You haven’t...ordered anything yet, though,” she said, blinking at him with a mix of confusion and disinterest.

Jean’s anger seemed to boil over, and he stormed off, slamming the door behind him with such force that the hinges rattled.

“Graham?” Ciarán’s voice was soft, hesitant, and when Graham turned toward him, he saw the wide eyes, the hands clasped in front of him nervously. “You...you didn’t mean to—”

“I’m sorry,” Graham interrupted, his own guilt rising. “I didn’t mean to make a scene.”

“Oh, you didn’t, Graham—” Ciarán began, but the server, not missing a beat, chimed

in.

“Kind of did.”

Graham flushed, his face burning with embarrassment. He couldn't believe he'd just let himself get carried away like that. “Sorry,” he mumbled again, this time to everyone in the room. His gaze turned back to Ciarán, and he smiled softly. “Maybe we ought to just head home. I can eat on the way back.”

Ciarán nodded, and with a quick motion, he wrapped the remainder of his meal neatly in his handkerchief. The sandwich half, the cookies, and the apple slices all went into the bag.

Outside, the piebald mare was getting a great deal of Ciarán's attention, and Graham watched with a smile as the mare nuzzled his husband's hand. Ginger whinnied from her spot nearby, looking mildly insulted, but soon, she, too, received her share of affection.

“She's yours,” Graham said, his voice quiet but warm.

Ciarán turned toward him, puzzled. “She's mine?”

“I got her for you today,” Graham said, the words coming easier now. “You needed a horse.”

Ciarán's face lit up with a wide, surprised smile. “Really? But—I don't know how to ride a horse, Graham.”

“I'll teach you,” Graham said, his heart swelling with affection. “You're a fast learner.”

He hesitated, wanting to say something more, but the words tangled in his throat. Finally, after a moment of silence, he spoke. “Ciarán, I’m sorry. About how I acted in there. It wasn’t proper. I lost my temper.” He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling awkward. “That won’t—It won’t happen again. I promise.”

Ciarán bit his lip, his eyes soft. “You found me,” he said, a look of gratitude in his gaze.

“What?” Graham asked, caught off guard by the sudden shift.

Ciarán smiled a little, his voice gentle. “Do you remember? That night after the wedding. You said if anyone ever gave me trouble, I should come find you. But today, with that man—I didn’t even have to. You were already there.”

Graham’s heart skipped a beat. The way Ciarán looked at him made him feel something he couldn’t quite put into words. He could feel his face heat up, and the warmth of his blush made him grateful for his beard, which hid most of his expression. He cleared his throat. “You—You handled yourself just fine back there,” he said, trying to downplay it. “What you said. About me—thank you. He’s an...pardon my language—he’s an asshole of the highest order. Don’t pay him any mind.”

Ciarán just smiled. “He’d get a blue ribbon for it, wouldn’t he?”

“Oh, yeah. Steal the show,” Graham said, chuckling despite himself.

With a steady hand, he helped Ciarán into the cart. He liked the feeling of their fingers intertwining, of holding him steady as he sat down, and then settling in beside him. The closeness, the warmth. Their knees brushed, and Graham couldn’t help but think that, despite everything, things were going just fine.

Ciarán glanced at the wood piled in the back of the cart. “Is all that for the bed? I’m, um, really looking forward to seeing the finished product.”

Graham’s face felt like it might burn through his beard. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll work on that when we get home.”

They settled into comfortable silence as they made their way home. Ciarán began to hum softly, unwrapping the handkerchief and handing Graham the half sandwich he’d saved, then the cookies. The apple slices, however, went to the horses.

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Once back at the ranch, Graham and Ciarán got to work with the horses. Ciarán, already in love with his piebald mare, named her Bó—a name that made him blush when he explained it to Graham. “It means ‘cow’ in Irish,” he said with an embarrassed laugh, but Graham only smiled in appreciation of how endearing Ciarán was.

As the day wore on, Graham got busy with his own tasks, watering the crops, checking on the livestock, and gathering eggs from the chicken coop. Dinner came and went, and afterward, he returned to his workshop to work on the bed frame. The structure wasn’t overly complicated, but Graham wanted it to be something more than just functional. This was for Ciarán—his husband—and he wanted to give him something worthy of the promise he’d made, to provide for him in every way possible, starting with a marriage bed that wasn’t just a place to sleep, but something to be proud of.

The only trouble was that when it was finally finished, they would have to share it. Together. Graham couldn’t help but feel a flutter of nervousness when he thought about sleeping in the same bed as Ciarán, and the thought of his husband’s nightshirt, soft fabric, and freckled skin made his heart race a little faster than he liked to admit.

That night, as Graham lay on the hayloft, he tried to focus on the work he had ahead of him, hoping it would distract him. But it wasn't long before he heard Ciarán's voice calling up to him in the quiet night.

"Graham? Graham, are you awake?"

Instantly alert, Graham sat up, concern flooding his chest. "Ciarán? What is it? What's wrong?"

The familiar sounds of the cows lowing and the sheep snoring filled the silence, and Graham could hear the rustling of hay as Ciarán shifted his weight. "Um, can I come up?"

"Yeah, of course."

Graham quickly made his way to the edge of the loft and crouched, keeping an eye out for any missteps from his husband. When Ciarán's curly head appeared over the edge, he stopped, a bundle tucked under his arm.

"Here, Graham, could you take this? It's—it's for you," Ciarán said, awkwardly lifting the bundle up and passing it to Graham. It was lighter than he expected and much softer.

Graham took the pillow from him, giving it a confused glance before Ciarán continued. "I made it for you with, um, some of the fabric we got at the wedding, and—and I bought some material to stuff it with today at the shops." He was wearing a new nightgown—a soft cream-colored garment that hung loosely, its hem brushing his ankles. His face was flushed with a bashful sweetness, making Graham's heart skip a beat.

Graham had to fight himself not to stare. Ciarán looked so lovely, so delicate and

peaceful, like something out of a fairytale.

His gaze snapped away from Ciarán and he finally looked down at the pillow. The fabric was soft and inviting, the pattern a series of alternating green and blue triangles forming squares, bordered by a creamy trim. It reminded him of a patchwork quilt, warm and carefully made. The sight of it made something warm stir inside Graham—this was something thoughtful, something his husband had made just for him.

“It’s wonderful,” Graham said, his voice thick with appreciation. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Ciarán’s grin lit up the barn, almost as if he’d just received the highest praise imaginable. “You really like it?”

“I do.” Graham found himself laughing softly, the tension in his chest easing for the first time all day. “It’s perfect.”

Ciarán, obviously pleased with himself, plucked the pillow from Graham’s hands and fluffed it before setting it down on the makeshift bed in the hayloft. “I’m glad you like it,” he said. “Thank you again for taking me into town today.”

“It was no problem. I was glad to.”

Ciarán’s smile faltered just a little, though. “Even so, I know we’re busy here, and we’re just going to go back on Sunday...”

Graham’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Back for what? Did you forget something?”

Ciarán laughed softly, the sound like a light breeze in the still barn, but there was a playful edge to it. “Oh, Graham! You must be so tired! We’re going to church, of

course!” His smile dropped just a little when he noticed the look of bewilderment on Graham’s face. “Aren’t we?”

The panic that rose in Graham’s chest was almost suffocating. Church. The last time he’d set foot in one had been at their wedding, and that had barely registered in his memory. The priest’s face had been a blur, the ceremony a distant echo. He couldn’t remember where to sit, or if he needed to say anything, or even if he should pray. But Ciarán wanted to go, and so, Graham would go. He couldn’t refuse.

“Yeah... sorry, I was just—there’s been so much on my mind lately, I nearly forgot about it. Good thing you’re here to remind me.” He gave Ciarán a reassuring smile, hoping it masked the dread settling in his stomach.

Ciarán’s face brightened again, the frown vanishing entirely as he fluffed the pillow one last time. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Graham watched as Ciarán set the pillow down on the hay. He felt a warmth inside—comfort, maybe—but also a slight discomfort at how easily Ciarán had settled in so effortlessly into their life. Graham had never been good at this sort of thing, this domestic life, and sometimes he felt like he was fumbling his way through it.

He tried to ignore the nervous flutter in his chest as he settled back into the hay, the softness of the pillow too inviting. “Are you sure you’re comfortable here?” Ciarán asked, glancing at him with concern. “You could—I wouldn’t mind sharing the bed. Even if it is a little cramped.”

Slept in worse places, Graham thought. His throat tightened at the thought of them sharing a bed, but he didn’t say that. He just smiled, hoping it would hide how he was really feeling. “I’ll be fine.”

A frown tugged at Ciarán's lips, but he didn't press it further. "Well, okay," he murmured. "But, um... if you change your mind, just tell me. It wouldn't bother me at all. We don't have to wait until you finish building the new bed."

"That's kind of you. Thank you." Graham wanted to reassure him, but the warmth of Ciarán's smile made his words falter. "And—thank you again for the pillow."

"Of course, Graham," Ciarán said, his voice soft and tender. He lingered for a moment, then turned to go, glancing back at him once more. "Goodnight. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Ciarán," Graham replied, though Ciarán was already halfway down the ladder. He heard the barn door creak shut, and then the gentle sounds of the livestock settling in for the night.

Graham lay back down, the pillow soft under his head and smelling faintly of soap and wildflowers. It was the most comfortable he'd been all day, but an unease lingered in his chest. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss, some part of the night he had missed, some way that he'd failed to fully be the kind of husband Ciarán deserved.

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Graham couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone wrong, that he'd done something to cause a shift in Ciarán's behavior. His husband was still as dutiful as ever with the chores, still as kind-hearted, still the same Ciarán who had stepped into his life with so much warmth. But now, it seemed that after their conversation in the hayloft, he had become quieter—more withdrawn than before.

Graham could see it in the way Ciarán moved through the house, in the way he tended to the animals and worked the fields. His presence was still there, but it felt like something was missing. The chatter that used to fill the quiet moments between them had diminished, replaced by an unspoken distance that Graham couldn't quite put his finger on.

He wanted to bring Ciarán back. He wanted to hear him hum in the pasture, to feel his laughter echoing around the ranch. Graham had never wanted anything more than Ciarán's happiness. He needed him to stay. He couldn't bear the thought of losing him, especially not now. He was no longer a young man—his body was marked by scars and time, his mind weighed down by the years of loneliness and regret. But now, with Ciarán in his life, he felt something he hadn't in ages: peace. Ciarán had become a part of everything—his home, his routines, his every day. His footprints were in the dirt of the fields, his soft voice filling the space of their house, his presence a constant comfort.

Graham had never been happier in his entire life. Marrying Ciarán had been the best decision he had ever made, and now, he had to make sure that Ciarán was just as happy with his decision. He couldn't stand the thought that he might be the one causing Ciarán's unease.

That's why Sunday needed to go perfectly.

Graham hadn't set foot in a church in years, but he remembered well enough what it was like. There were expectations—traditions to uphold. You had to dress well, be respectful, and sit through the long service. It was a lot of work for what amounted to a few hours of sitting and listening to someone talk. But today, it was important. Today, he needed to make everything go right for Ciarán.

He pulled on his suit, the same one he had worn to their wedding, and did his best to prepare himself. His hair was messy from the work he had been doing all week, and he trimmed his beard just enough to make it look purposeful rather than wild. He polished his shoes, though they were worn from years of use, and tried not to complain about the whole ordeal. He was doing it for Ciarán.

And then, Ciarán appeared.

He had changed into one of his new outfits—pressed white shirt, a plaid double-breasted waistcoat in muted brown, beige, and black, paired with brown trousers. He had even donned a straw hat, its black velvet ribbon accentuated by wildflowers freshly cut from the prairie. The sight of him nearly stole the breath from Graham's chest. He was stunning, so much so that Graham almost forgot to speak. But when their eyes met, Ciarán blushed and quickly looked away.

"How do I look?" Ciarán asked, his voice laced with uncertainty.

Graham was momentarily speechless, but he quickly recovered. "You look like you stepped right out of a fashion plate," he said, unable to keep the awe from his voice.

Ciarán let out a nervous laugh, the sound sweet and nervous. "Oh, Graham. Honestly—do I look okay? I want to make a good first impression."

Graham smiled, the corners of his mouth curling up in genuine affection. “I wouldn’t lie to you,” he said, though a frown creased his brow as he thought of the church. “And you’ve already met most of the people who’ll be there from the wedding. They liked you plenty.”

Ciarán's worry didn't seem to fade. “Oh, but this is different. This is church. I hope I remember everyone’s names. And you’ll have to show me where to sit.”

“Right,” Graham said, a small sense of dread creeping in. “Should be room for the both of us. In my usual... pew.”

Ciarán gave a small nod, though he still looked uncertain, and Graham’s heart ached with the need to make everything right for him.

As they climbed into the buggy, Graham took a deep breath, deciding it was time to start his own quiet prayer. Lord , he thought, forgive me for straying from Your path. As You can see, I’m currently back on it, heading to church thanks to my husband, who is good and faithful. If You could find it in Your Godliness to spare me from making a fool of myself in front of him today, I’d be eternally grateful, and I promise I’ll be at Your service, and church service, every Sunday from here on out.

The wind rustled the prairie grass as they made their way down the road, and Ciarán’s voice broke the silence. “I think it’s a very fine day,” he murmured softly, his smile gentle and full of warmth.

Graham couldn't help but smile, the sincerity in his heart finding its way into his words. “Amen,” he muttered under his breath.

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The fear of God gripped Graham like a vice. He hadn’t prayed like this in years, not

since he was a boy, and the weight of his anxiety made every word of his pleas to the Lord feel desperate and raw. He had started as soon as they left the house, whispering quiet prayers beneath his breath, asking for guidance, for mercy, for forgiveness. But now, the panic was growing, as if each second he spent in that church was another step toward exposing every flaw he carried with him.

The choir's voices were soaring through the church, but to Graham, their song sounded like a dirge of judgment. It was as though each note was directed solely at him, a clear condemnation for his years away from the faith. His mind raced, scrambling for some form of solace as the sound of the hymns filled the air—notes that seemed to echo louder in his head than in the grand hall itself. He tried to keep his head down, hoping the attention of the congregation would stay elsewhere, but the whispers and stares of the townsfolk cut through him like a blade.

He felt every pair of eyes on him. His heart pounded as the familiar faces of his neighbors watched him walk by, surprised and shocked by his sudden reappearance in a place he hadn't been in years. Graham prayed fervently that no one would ask about it, that no one would make a comment about how out of place he felt in the house of God. He could almost feel their judgment in the way they eyed him as he passed, and he couldn't bear to meet their gazes.

Ciarán, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to the attention. His husband, with his bright eyes and open heart, was taking it all in with quiet curiosity. Ciarán had likely been too distracted during the wedding to really notice the church's layout, and now, he was eagerly scanning the rows of pews, his gaze flicking from side to side with wonder. Graham was thankful for the distraction. At least Ciarán was more concerned with familiarizing himself with the place than wondering why the church had turned into a spectacle because of their arrival.

"Where do you usually sit, Graham?" Ciarán asked, his voice soft, not yet realizing the tension gnawing at Graham's insides.

Graham's prayer intensified, an urgent plea that there would be enough space in the crowded church for them both. They needed somewhere to sit, a place where they wouldn't be forced to stand in the back, exposed for all to see. He glanced around, his stomach tightening with dread as his eyes scanned the packed pews. The church was full, too full for his liking. He cursed their piety under his breath. Why couldn't this town be like others, where the saloons had more patrons than the house of worship? It would have made this whole thing much easier.

"Graham?" Ciarán's voice pulled him back from his spiraling thoughts.

Graham clenched his fists and fought the wave of panic rising in his chest. He looked again, desperately searching for any sign of familiarity, any face he could trust.

And then, in the third row, he saw them. Liam and Ronan, his neighbors, sitting together in prayer. Relief washed over him like a flood, and for a moment, he thought he might collapse right there. He didn't care that the pews were nearly full or that the church was almost bursting at the seams—he just needed a place to sit. Somewhere he could settle into, where he didn't feel the weight of everyone's eyes on him.

He grabbed Ciarán's hand and pulled him toward the row. "There—right over there," he said, his voice tight, though he couldn't hide the relief that slipped through.

Ronan spotted them first, his eyes narrowing before he spoke. "Graham," he said, his voice neutral. Then he turned his attention to Ciarán. "Ciarán."

Ciarán, ever the picture of politeness, smiled brightly, greeting them with genuine warmth. "Good morning, Ronan. Good morning, Liam."

Liam, always direct, snapped his prayer book shut with a frown. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his brow furrowing as he studied them both. But then he saw the desperation in Graham's eyes, and his expression softened, understanding the silent

plea. “I mean, that is, what are you doing just standing there? The service is about to start. Come and take your seats.”

Ronan shifted aside, making just enough room for Graham and Ciarán to squeeze into the tight pew. It wasn’t comfortable—especially not for someone of Graham’s size—but it was a place to sit. He didn’t care that it was a tight fit.

With a deep breath, Graham slid in beside Ciarán, his bulky frame pressed up against the side of the pew, barely fitting. Ciarán, for his part, seemed utterly at ease. He looked like he belonged in that church, sitting with his hands neatly folded in his lap, his straw hat resting on his head, still as sweet and bright as ever. He was completely focused on the choir, listening with a rapt attention that made Graham’s heart ache.

But for Graham, the tightness of the pew was nothing compared to the tightness in his chest. Ciarán, nestled between him and Ronan, looked like he was in his element. The joy that radiated from his face was almost too much for Graham to bear. It only made the knot in his stomach tighten further.

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Graham’s childhood had been filled with hard labor on the family farm. His father had no head for business, and while his mother worked tirelessly to keep things running, managing a seven-person household on limited funds was always a struggle. Church attendance had been sporadic, never a day of true rest but just another task to fit into the endless list of obligations that never seemed to ease. He recalled his mother dressing him in his finest, lacing up his boots with precision, pulling at the fabric of his shirt that always felt too tight. The journey to town was long, crowded, and uncomfortable, with the scent of sweat, hay, and dust hanging thick in the air. They’d pile into the carriage, his siblings squashed together, their limbs jostling as the wheels rattled over the road. Yet, for all those memories, Graham couldn’t recall a single detail about the service itself. Church had always been something distant,

incomprehensible. The words, the rituals, the rituals—they had all blurred into a haze, as irrelevant as the cows in the barn that needed milking. He'd never quite understood what he was meant to take from it all.

Now, sitting in the crowded church beside Ciarán, Graham could almost feel his past crashing into his present. The building was hot and stuffy, the air thick with the scent of too many bodies packed into too small a space. The choir was singing, their harmonies rising and falling, but it was all in Latin—a language that might as well have been ancient Greek for all it meant to Graham. His husband, however, was right there beside him, singing along with the others. Ciarán's voice was a soft, melodic murmur, barely audible over the rest of the congregation, but Graham, sitting so close to him, had the privilege of hearing it up close. It was absolutely angelic, a sound that made his chest tighten.

He found himself wishing that he could understand the words—understand the meaning behind them—but the Latin swirled around him, indecipherable, unintelligible. The service, like his childhood experiences in church, was long and drawn out, and he couldn't help but wish for it to end. The priest's voice droned on, a constant hum in the background of his thoughts. Graham shifted uncomfortably on the hard pew, his legs aching from being cramped into such a small space. He was hungry, thinking about the meal he and Ciarán could share once they were free of the confines of this building.

Just as his hopes began to rise that the service might come to a close, it continued. There were more prayers, the priest read from the Bible, and the choir broke into more songs—songs he couldn't sing along to, even though he tried to mouth the unfamiliar words. He didn't want to draw attention to himself, didn't want anyone to hear him stumble through the lyrics, and so he kept his mouth shut. He was content to simply sit there, endure the discomfort, and be with Ciarán. After all, what else could he do? A few hours, once a week, to sit beside his husband in a place that made Ciarán so happy, to witness the serenity that always seemed to radiate from him—it

was a small price to pay. Every time he glanced at Ciarán, his face filled with peace, Graham couldn't help but feel a deep ache in his chest. He was content in a way that Graham hadn't been for years. Maybe, just maybe, he was finally learning how to be content too.

Communion came and went, and although it was familiar to Graham—he'd had a taste of it during his time in the war, where the chaplain would bless them before battles, offering quick communion before they marched to their deaths—it was nothing like what he was experiencing now. The rushed, battlefront rituals had been blunt, pragmatic. No time for ceremony, no time for reflection. Here, in the quiet of the church, everything felt drawn out, slow, and deliberate. The priest gave each person their wafer, their sip of wine, and Graham accepted it, the taste lingering on his tongue long after the ritual had finished. The whole experience left him feeling both grounded and strangely detached.

When the service finally ended, Graham let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He hoped that they could slip away and share a meal together, just the two of them, away from the crowds. But no. That wasn't to be. The social aspect of church was as much a part of the experience as the service itself. The people clustered in groups, talking and laughing, introducing themselves to new faces, and catching up with old ones. Ciarán, ever the social butterfly, was immediately caught up in the tide of conversation. He greeted people, smiled brightly, introduced himself to new faces, and made small talk with those who had attended their wedding.

Graham stood back, watching him, wishing he could just sneak away with Ciarán and forget about the formality of it all. He would've been content to just slip away from the bustle, to find some quiet corner where the two of them could talk and share a meal. But instead, he found himself standing awkwardly as Ciarán made the rounds. Ronan, ever the easygoing one, stood off to the side as well, content to wait for Liam to finish a particularly animated conversation with one of the townswomen.

Graham was lost in thought, daydreaming about the simple pleasures of a quiet lunch with Ciarán, when Liam's voice suddenly cut through the chatter. "Ah, they must be joking! You can't misplace two beasts like that!"

Graham's attention snapped back to the conversation. "What's going on?" he asked, moving closer.

Ciarán was the one who explained. "The Duncans are missing two horses. The sheriff says they might have just wandered off, but Mr. and Mrs. Duncan are sure it's theft."

Graham, who had a mind for details and a keen sense of the practical, furrowed his brow. There was something off about this. He didn't trust it. "Any description of the thief?"

"No," Liam answered. "They woke up in the morning, and two of their finest were just gone—a mare and a stallion."

"Nothing broken? The fences?" Graham pressed, trying to gather more information. It didn't add up. Horses like that didn't just wander off.

"Not a one," Liam confirmed, shaking his head. "All was fine until they noticed they were gone."

Graham's suspicion deepened. "Those animals were stolen," he said firmly. "The sheriff thinks they just wandered off?"

"Well, I've never had use for a lawman in my life. Is that not so, my love?" Ronan's deep voice rumbled, his hand resting comfortably on Liam's shoulder.

"Sea, tá sé amhlaidh, mo ghrá," Liam agreed with a low chuckle, but it wasn't as jovial as it seemed.

One of the churchgoers, overhearing them, looked scandalized. “Sir, how can you say such a thing?” she gasped. “What would happen if some of your livestock went missing—why, who would you go to?”

Ronan’s reply came smoothly, without missing a beat. “Well, first I’d go to my husband, and then I’d go to my rifle, and we would find them ourselves. Wouldn’t we, my love?” He turned to Liam, who nodded, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

“Sea, mo ghrá,” Liam agreed again, their bond evident in the shared understanding between them.

The exchange left Graham thinking. Whoever had taken the Duncans’ horses had done it with purpose. This wasn’t a simple case of wandering animals. And in a small town like Larkspur, where crime wasn’t common, that meant someone had a plan—and that plan was just beginning to unfold.

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After Ciarán had been welcomed into nearly every household in Larkspur for afternoon tea, their day was coming to a close. The small town seemed to embrace him with open arms, and Ciarán had handled the attention with his usual warmth and charm. But as they finally said their goodbyes, Graham couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief. The social whirl had been a lot, and now it was time to return to the peace and quiet of their home.

“You don’t want to go into town?” Graham asked, his voice carrying the weight of a long day.

Ciarán shook his head. “No, no. That’s okay. I’m a bit tired.”

Graham understood. He was tired, too. It had been a long day, full of introductions and small talk, and though it had been nice to see Ciarán so embraced by the town, the thought of retreating to the sanctuary of their home was a welcome one. They both needed a break. He longed to change out of his formal clothes and slip back into the comfort of his work clothes, the kind that didn't pinch or scratch.

Outside the church, the gossip had run rampant, as it always did in a small town. But what had really bothered Graham was the news about the Duncans' stolen horses. It gnawed at him, his mind running through the possibilities. The thief had taken two prized animals, and Graham knew the Duncans were no fools—they wouldn't just let their livestock wander off without a trace. If the thief had stolen them, then they would need to be found. The idea of someone trespassing on his property to steal livestock—his livelihood—was something Graham couldn't stomach. He'd have to be more vigilant, keep a closer eye on his own herd. Losing a cow or a sheep to theft would be a blow, not just to his income but to his heart. Each animal was more than a profit; it was a part of his family.

And there was more at stake now. He wasn't alone anymore. He had Ciarán to think about. It wasn't just his land or his animals he had to protect. It was Ciarán, too. The thought of someone trying to harm him—stealing what was rightfully his, or worse—made something dark and protective stir in Graham's chest. A guard dog, maybe. A loyal, fierce creature that would keep an eye on the house while they were away. It might even put a smile on Ciarán's face. He pictured a dog—big enough to guard the place, but not too big to be manageable. Maybe someone nearby had a litter. A dog like that would be a good companion, a protector, and would keep Ciarán safe when Graham wasn't around.

But then, just as the thoughts were beginning to settle in his mind, Ciarán's voice broke the quiet.

"Did I do something wrong?" Ciarán blurted out, his words soft but filled with an

undercurrent of worry.

The question caught Graham off guard, making him turn his head sharply toward his husband. “What—what would you have done wrong?” he asked, the confusion evident in his voice.

“I don’t know, Graham. That’s why I’m asking you,” Ciarán said, his gaze distant, eyes focused on his hands. “You were so tense at church. So—uncomfortable. Did I—did I embarrass you in some way?”

Graham blinked, completely taken aback by the question. He had thought Ciarán had been too wrapped up in the service to notice his discomfort. “No! Why would you—you wouldn’t ever—you’re so—I’m more likely to embarrass you,” he stammered, his face flushing with panic at the idea that he might have made Ciarán feel anything less than welcome.

Ciarán’s brow furrowed slightly, his voice soft as he spoke again. “I don’t see how,” he murmured, his fingers nervously fiddling with the buttons on his waistcoat. “You’re an established, successful rancher and a respected member of the community, and I’m... an Irishman who was doing piecemeal work in New York.” He gave a sad, self-deprecating smile and shrugged. “I just—don’t know if I belong here.”

Graham’s heart clenched at the words. He leaned in, taking Ciarán’s hands in his. “You’re selling yourself short. And thinking too highly of me,” he said, his voice firm but gentle. “There wasn’t—there’s nothing wrong with you. We’ve talked about this before, Ciarán. I’m real happy you’re here. Happiest I’ve been in a long, long time.”

The faint blush that appeared on Ciarán’s face told Graham that he was still struggling with the doubt in his own heart. “Then what was on your mind at church

today?” Ciarán asked, his voice small, almost hesitant.

Graham sighed, the weight of the truth pressing down on him. He knew he couldn't lie to Ciarán anymore, couldn't let him carry the worry that he'd somehow done something wrong. “Ciarán,” he began, his voice quiet but steady. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course, Graham,” Ciarán replied, though the puzzlement in his eyes deepened.

“I've been thinking about this all day. It's been eating at me,” Graham said, holding the reins tighter in his hands. “I never meant to lie to you, but I did. And I'm sorry for it.”

Ciarán's eyes widened in surprise. “Lied? About what?” he asked, a thread of concern creeping into his voice.

Graham paused for a moment before continuing. “Today was the first time I've been to a church service in years. Not since—well, the war.” He let out a breath. “And that wasn't—you know, we were out on the battlefields and in camps, and it was just all us soldiers and—well, it wasn't the same. I didn't—today wasn't anything like I remembered, or what I expected. I didn't understand most of it. I didn't feel comfortable there.”

For a while, Ciarán was silent, his gaze thoughtful as he processed the words. The only sound was the steady clip-clop of the horses' hooves on the path, and the occasional rattle of the buggy as they made their way back to the ranch. Graham's stomach tightened as he waited for a response, unsure of what Ciarán would say.

Finally, Ciarán spoke, his voice quiet but gentle. “Then—why did you take me to church today?” he asked, his eyes searching Graham's face.

Graham frowned, a little confused by the question. “Because you wanted to go,” he said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You asked—how could I refuse?”

Ciarán blinked, a little taken aback by the response. “You got up and got ready for church just for me? After all this time?”

“Yeah,” Graham replied simply, his voice quieter now.

“Why?” Ciarán’s voice was full of wonder, his eyes wide and awestruck as he looked at Graham.

Graham shifted uncomfortably in his seat, flustered by the question. “Because I want you to be happy here. I want you to stay. I want you to—want to stay,” he said, his words tumbling out in a rush.

Ciarán smiled, his hand covering Graham’s. He squeezed it gently, his eyes warm. “Graham, I—of course I want to stay. I’m very happy here. I promise. Sometimes I wonder if—” He stopped himself, his face flushing pink as he turned away slightly, embarrassed.

“Wonder if what?” Graham asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Sometimes I just wonder if you’re happy with me,” Ciarán murmured, almost too quietly to hear.

Graham’s heart swelled with affection. He leaned in closer, his voice firm as he spoke. “I’m happy,” he said, his gaze steady. “Whatever else you might worry about, don’t—don’t worry about that. I’m happy that you’re here, Ciarán. That you’re here with me. I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression at church.”

A slow, relieved smile spread across Ciarán's face. He seemed to breathe a little easier now. "Does that mean—what if Liam and Ronan hadn't been there? Where would we have sat?"

Graham puffed out his chest with mock bravado. "I would've gotten us a seat. Even if I had to throw someone on their ass."

Ciarán burst into laughter, the sound like music to Graham's ears. "Graham! You wouldn't have!"

"I'd have cleared a pew just for the two of us," Graham declared, his chest swelling with pride.

Still laughing, Ciarán leaned in a little closer, resting his head against Graham's shoulder. They still had a ways to go before they reached the ranch, but for once, Graham didn't mind the distance.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:56 am

“There’s not a single puppy in this town,” Graham muttered, frustration creeping into his voice. He’d spent the better part of the past week traveling from farm to farm, asking every rancher and farmer he could find about the possibility of a dog with puppies for sale. He’d even put the word out to a few neighbors, hoping for a lead, but it was as if the very idea of puppies had evaporated from Larkspur. Not a single one to be found, not even a stray. He might as well have been searching for buried treasure.

Oscar, the postmaster, raised an eyebrow and glanced over at him with an expression of mild amusement. “Well, they’re not like chicken eggs, Graham. They don’t just pop out every day.”

Graham shot him a withering look. “I’m aware, Oscar. Thank you.”

“I’m only saying,” Oscar replied, turning back to his work, sifting through more letters and packages. He seemed completely unaffected by Graham’s visible frustration. “Give it a couple of months, though. I’m sure someone’s dog will get loose and turn up with a handful of puppies. Happens all the time around here.”

Graham grunted in response, but his heart wasn’t in it. He had hoped, even just once, to find a dog that might meet his needs—faithful, protective, and affectionate—but every visit had been a disappointment. And as the days passed, his impatience was growing. It wasn’t just about the dog anymore, either. Ciarán had been asking him about the guard dog idea more and more, and Graham felt the pressure of needing to deliver on his promise. It was a good idea, wasn’t it? To keep Ciarán safe. To have something that could protect their home when Graham wasn’t there. But if no puppies were turning up, he was starting to wonder if his plan would ever come to fruition.

Oscar's voice broke through his thoughts, offering a slight diversion. "Ah, here we go. A package for Mr. Ciarán Shepherd, straight from Ireland." Oscar tapped the top of the package with his finger, bringing Graham's attention to it. It was wrapped in plain brown paper, neatly folded, with a green ribbon tied around it. There was something familiar about the handwriting on the label—Ciarán's father's handwriting, the letters flowing and dignified in their formation.

Graham felt his frustration momentarily melt away as he reached for the package. The weight of it seemed reassuring. It wasn't enormous, but it was substantial enough to feel like something important, something Ciarán would appreciate. He felt a small thrill as he took it into his hands, his fingers brushing the green ribbon. It was always a joy to receive something from Ireland, but the fact that this was from Ciarán's father made it all the more meaningful. It would mean a lot to Ciarán. It would give him a connection to his family, a piece of home that would remind him of where he came from. Graham could already picture the way Ciarán's face would light up when he saw the package.

He glanced down at the package again, admiring the care with which it had been wrapped. This would be something special, something Ciarán could hold onto. Maybe it was a letter or a small token of some sort, or perhaps even something more. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. It would make Ciarán's day, and that was all that mattered to Graham.

Oscar saw the change in Graham's demeanor, and the postmaster smirked, clearly pleased to have provided a small bright spot in his otherwise mundane day. "There you go, Graham. Looks like it's a little slice of home for your husband."

"Yeah, it sure is," Graham said with a genuine smile, his mood lifting as he tucked the package under his arm. The thought of Ciarán's joy over the surprise was enough to make the rest of the day seem more bearable. Maybe he hadn't found a dog, but at least he had something to bring back with him—something that would make Ciarán

smile.

He thanked Oscar for his time and left the post office in a much better mood than when he had entered.

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Ginger's ears twitched as the soft rays of the sun warmed her coat. She carried herself with a light, carefree canter down the familiar path, and Graham couldn't help but smile. He, too, was glad for the bright day. The warmth of it spread through him like a balm after a long morning of travel. His hand absently stroked Ginger's neck as they trotted toward home. The package from Ciarán's father was nestled safely in Ginger's saddlebag, and Graham couldn't wait to give it to his husband. It felt like a tangible connection from the past, a little piece of Ireland coming across the sea to land in their hands, and he was eager to see Ciarán's face when he opened it.

But as they neared the ranch, he was about to encounter a surprise that eclipsed even the one he'd been preparing for.

The sight that greeted him as he approached the house made him pause in his tracks. The line had been set up—perfectly, it seemed—with all manner of clothes fluttering in the breeze. But not just any clothes. No, there, hanging in full view, was a collection of garments that made Graham's heart jump into his throat. His husband's undergarments—his shifts, stockings, undershirts, and chemises—all billowing in the wind, as if they were the most ordinary things in the world. Some had delicate lace trim; others were simpler, worn and mended in places. White and cream fabrics gently swayed, catching the light. There was something almost delicate about it, the way they were all pinned to the line in such an orderly fashion.

And yet, all Graham could focus on was the fact that they were his—Ciarán's personal garments, so intimate, so private. The mere thought of them drying in the

wind made Graham feel conspicuously exposed. It felt almost... indecent, even though he knew it shouldn't. There was no reason for him to be so embarrassed by the simple sight of his husband's things hanging in the sun. But somehow, there it was, as if a layer of privacy had been peeled away and left out in the open for anyone to see.

He hopped off Ginger, ignoring the laundry as best as he could. He retrieved the package from the saddlebag and tucked it firmly under his arm, determined not to look at the fluttering clothes. The last thing he wanted was to make this moment awkward, so he focused instead on the task at hand—delivering Ciarán's package. He couldn't let anything ruin this moment.

As he drew closer, Ciarán's bright, welcoming face turned toward him. He grinned broadly, his eyes lighting up with a warmth that Graham couldn't resist. "Laundry day!" Ciarán called out cheerfully. "I think I made good time on it all. It's been a while since I've had to do laundry for two people, but look!" He beamed at the drying clothes with pride.

Graham, trying his hardest not to stare at the undergarments flapping in the wind, cleared his throat awkwardly. "Yeah, looks good. Very—uh, clean. I went to the post office today. Something came in for you," he said, holding the package out with both hands. His voice was slightly strained, but he was doing his best to act as though the laundry was just another part of their routine.

Ciarán's face lit up the moment he saw the green ribbon on the package. There was a moment of breathless anticipation before a sound—somewhere between a gasp and a cry of delight—escaped from his lips. Graham half-expected him to grab the package eagerly, but instead, Ciarán stepped closer, almost reverently. He took a deep breath, savoring the scent of it, and gently lifted it as though it might break in his hands. He traced a finger lightly along the elegant handwriting on the package, his expression softening with emotion. "Oh, Graham," he murmured, a smile tugging at his lips,

“Thank you so much for bringing this to me.”

The warmth in Ciarán’s voice, the sheer adoration and gratitude, made Graham uncomfortable. He didn’t deserve such praise. He was merely the messenger, after all. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, unsure of how to respond. “I’m just the messenger,” he muttered, but his voice was quiet, as if even he didn’t believe the words.

Ciarán didn’t seem to mind. He cradled the package to his chest, clearly overcome with emotion. “Do you—have you eaten?” Graham asked, desperate to shift the focus elsewhere. He didn’t want to stand there feeling like he was some sort of hero. He just wanted to see his husband happy, and if Ciarán wanted to open the package, then that’s what he would let him do.

“Not yet,” Ciarán replied, his brow furrowing slightly in thought. “But I’m not in a hurry.”

“Well, just... Why don’t you sit down and take a look at what your father sent you? There’s got to be a long letter in there, right?” Graham suggested, trying to keep his voice light. He still wasn’t sure how to navigate this moment, but he was determined to make it feel comfortable for both of them. “I’ll make lunch. Won’t be anything fancy, but...” He trailed off, his hand rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture.

Ciarán smiled softly. “You think I’ve eaten anything very fancy?” His voice was playful, teasing even.

“Well, you ate at the Harvey Houses,” Graham offered. He could feel the warmth creeping up his neck, a touch embarrassed by how little he knew about Ciarán’s life before Larkspur.

“They were nice,” Ciarán said with a soft laugh. “But I don’t know if I would call that fancy. Honestly, I can’t remember much of the train ride. All my thoughts were about, um... About you, Graham. And the wedding.” He looked down, a hint of pink coloring his cheeks as he spoke, but the tenderness in his words made Graham’s heart swell.

Graham wasn’t sure how to respond to that. The rawness of it caught him off guard. They stood there, caught in a moment that felt too intimate, too personal. His mind raced, his emotions tangled in a knot. He cleared his throat, trying to break the silence. “Right. Well, I’ll get started on lunch. Just, sit down and rest for a bit.”

Ciarán smiled that soft, genuine smile of his, and Graham found himself smiling back despite the awkwardness. But before he could turn and head for the house, Ciarán called after him.

“Oh, Graham—could you bring the laundry in? It should nearly be dry by now.”

Graham’s gaze drifted involuntarily back to the laundry line. There they were again—Ciarán’s underthings, delicate and private, fluttering in the breeze. They were so light, so soft, and they reminded him of the quiet moments they shared together at night, the way Ciarán’s freckled skin looked in the dim light, the way he felt so comfortable and safe in his arms. Graham swallowed hard, his voice suddenly thick with a mix of confusion and desire. “Yeah, I’ll do that,” he said, his tone hoarse.

He turned back toward the laundry, trying his best to focus on the simple task ahead, but all he could think about was the weight of his husband’s words, the tenderness in Ciarán’s eyes, and the growing realization that, somehow, he was deeply, irrevocably in love.

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Graham washed his hands twice before taking a single piece of laundry off the clothesline. He didn't want to dirty any of Ciarán's hard work. He worked as quickly as he could, placing each article of clothing into the basket, careful not to cause creases or wrinkles but trying desperately to limit the amount of time he spent touching his husband's undergarments because every brush of the material between his fingers made him think about Ciarán wearing said undergarments and those were very dangerous thoughts, to say the least.

When everything was safely in the basket and placed safely outside their bedroom he took a deep breath, berated himself for every indecent image that had passed through his head, and set about making lunch.

He wasn't a chef by any means, but he'd been on his own for some time and he knew how to cook a decent meal.

Tea—Ciarán preferred tea to coffee—a few fried eggs, hashed brown potatoes, a fresh green salad sprinkled with dandelion flowers, a bowl of pecans and almonds, and a plate stacked with fried hand pies filled with peach preserves.

It wasn't bad. A bit of everything. Graham wiped his floury and buttery hands on his apron and surveyed the spread with satisfaction. All that was left was to set the table. It always sent a jolt of happiness coursing through his body when he grabbed enough for two—two spoons, two forks, two knives, two plates—two people eating together, him and his husband.

Ciarán entered just as soon as Graham placed a vase of wildflowers in the middle of the table. Draped over his arm was what appeared to be a new waistcoat, a pocket watch, a choker necklace of red velvet with a shell cameo pendant. In his other hand was a letter. Ciarán's eyes were red and puffy—he'd been crying. Graham's worry must've shown on his face, because Ciarán sniffled and said, "Everything's fine. I just miss him terribly." He gave Graham a watery smile. "But, look! We've got some

wedding presents.”

The waistcoat was Ciarán’s; his father apparently knew his measurements by heart and had tailored it for him. It was beautifully made, with a red and gold brocade pattern, and matched the necklace. The cameo depicted a pastoral scene of a young man reading underneath a tree. “That’s very pretty,” Graham said. He imagined Ciarán wearing them to church, how sweet he’d look, the admiration of all in attendance.

And Rory, the father-in-law that Graham had never met, had given him a silver pocket watch. When Ciarán showed it to him Graham balked. “I can’t take that. That’s too much—”

“Oh, he didn’t buy it, it’s an heirloom.”

Christ, he really couldn’t take it. “He didn’t have to go through all the trouble. He could’ve given it to—to family, or something.”

Ciarán frowned. “Graham,” he said, slowly, “You’re my husband.”

“I know, but. He doesn’t know me. He hasn’t even met me.”

“He knows what I’ve told him about you. That you’re so kind and hard-working and that you—” Ciarán paused, blushing, freckled cheeks pretty and pink. He seemed to be working up the courage to continue. “That you’re so very handsome.” Trembling, Ciarán placed his small hand over Graham’s large one. “I, um. I really want us to share the bed. Even if it’s cramped. I wouldn’t mind that, not at all.”

Graham stared at him, mouth agape. Ciarán’s words settled into his mind, nestled in nice and cozy and snug like a sparrow returning to its nest to settle down for the night. He squeezed Ciarán’s fingers, gently, and asked, a bewildered smile spreading

across his face, “You didn’t—you didn’t tell your dad about that, did you? About the bed and, uh. Wanting us to share it?”

The tension left Ciarán’s shoulders. He burst out laughing. “Graham! No, of course not! I just told him that I, um. That I liked you very much and that—that I hoped in time we would grow—closer.” Ciarán’s face had gone as red as the sunrise. “But I—I’ve been hoping that you would see me as your husband in—all aspects of life.”

Without a word, Graham took the waistcoat, the letter, the necklace, and the pocket watch. He folded the waistcoat, set it on the shelf, and placed the necklace and pocket watch on top of it, and the letter on top of them. Then he returned to the side of the table, where his husband stood with the most hopeful expression Graham had ever seen.

He placed his hands on either side of Ciarán’s slim waist. “Ever since our wedding I’ve been dreaming of kissing you again. Kissing you right.”

“Me, too,” Ciarán murmured. “I’ve wanted to kiss you. I’ve wanted you.” His lips were full and soft and slightly parted, expectant and needy, and Graham had done his best to give his husband everything he could possibly desire and he wasn’t about to stop now.

He kissed him.

Ciarán’s eyes fluttered shut. He grasped the back of Graham’s shirt. Graham’s hands moved to the small of his back, pulling him closer. The movement of Ciarán’s hips against his forced a shuddering moan from his mouth. Nothing had ever felt so right—how soft his husband’s lips were, how sweet his mouth tasted, how lovely the little noises that he made as Graham’s hands roved his back—curious and greedy, eager to learn the contours of Ciarán’s body after so much time.

They surely would've kept kissing longer, but a twinge in Graham's bad leg made him break away with a grimace.

"What's wrong?" Ciarán asked.

Graham gave him a peck on the nose. "Nothing, sweetheart. Just my leg acting up."

"Do you, um." Ciarán glanced at the bedroom door then back up at Graham through his long, dark lashes. "Do you want to lie down? We could—continue, if you wanted. Oh, but your lunch—"

"Lunch will be there when we're done," Graham said, firmly. There wasn't anything on the table that couldn't be warmed, or eaten cold if they worked up enough of an appetite and didn't want to wait.

And that was a very interesting thought.

Ciarán laughed. He grabbed both of Graham's hands and led him to the bedroom. Their bedroom. The first time that Graham had been inside of it since their wedding day.

Before, it had been practically empty. Now, however, it was clean and tidy, with a little rug on the floor, a flowerpot on the windowsill, a number of drawings and paintings that Graham recognized as Ciarán's adorning the walls, Ciarán's trunk at the foot of the bed, with the bed itself covered in a great many more blankets and pillows than he remembered. Clearly, Ciarán had wasted no time in making himself comfortable and at home. The sight warmed his heart. A bedroom, lived in, comforting and warm and intimate.

Ciarán asked, "What now, Graham?" He was still flushed from their kissing, his lips wet, his eyes dark.

Graham swallowed hard. Then he shut the door behind them and took his husband to bed.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:56 am

Graham was 36 years old. He'd had a lot of troubles and faced them all to the best of his abilities and with as much courage as he could muster. As a boy he'd walked slowly to the schoolhouse chalkboard, trying to figure out the solution to the teacher's question before he got there so he wouldn't look like a fool in front of his classmates. When he was a soldier he'd stood tall and steady during the war, even during rifle volleys, even when he was exhausted, and hungry, and aching, never once thinking of fleeing. When he had just started the ranch he'd dealt with ornery livestock of all shapes and sizes and fretted over crashing thunderstorms that seemed ready to rival Noah's flood and prairie fires that threatened to turn everyone and everything to ash.

Now he thought, with not a little bit of panic, that unbuttoning his husband's shirt was the most daunting task he'd ever faced.

They were tiny, delicate, shiny little brass buttons, and Graham's hands shook as he fumbled with them. Their boots were already in a pile next to the bed. Graham had kicked his off with little fanfare and carefully unlaced Ciarán's before moving on to the cufflinks, which he set on the bedside table, blushing as he held his husband's wrist, Ciarán's pulse frantic underneath his thumb.

And then, the buttons.

Never before had Graham felt as large as he did now, kneeling on the floor at Ciarán's feet, undressing him with hands that were scarred from war and tough from labor and surely just too big and ungainly for such a task. With every new inch of Ciarán revealed Graham grew clumsier and flushed all the more red. There was his husband's neck, his collarbone, the white cotton undershirt he wore against his skin—slightly sweaty from all his activity in the morning—and then, as Graham

helped him shrug off both layers, his bare, freckled chest with rosy pink nipples.

When he moved his hands to Ciarán's belt buckle, however, his husband gave a little gasp and grabbed hold of his wrists to stop him.

"Am I going too fast, sweetheart?" Graham asked.

A lovely blush bloomed on Ciarán's cheeks. "No! Well, um, yes, actually. That is, you're so much more heavily clothed than I am."

Graham glanced down at himself. Somewhat stupidly, he replied, "I took my boots off."

"I only mean that I want to see you as well, Graham." The blush on Ciarán's face deepened. He twisted the bedsheets between his fingers, looking so very sweet and shy for someone who had just requested that Graham strip down to nothing.

Flustered, he started to pull at his own shirt when Ciarán stopped him once more.

"Oh, Graham—I mean that what I really want to is—I'd like to do it myself, if you'd let me."

"Yeah, of course. If that's what you want."

"Yes, please." His husband, before a little bashful, a little stuttering, now smiled, clearly pleased and, by the determined glint in his eye and the way he deftly dealt with Graham's shirt, clearly very eager.

The air was cool on his chest and Diamuid's touch hot. He shivered as his husband ran his fingers through his chest hair with a hum, looking like the cat who had gotten the cream.

“You’ve seen me without my shirt before,” Graham muttered, embarrassed.

Ciarán brushed his fingertips over Graham’s nipple. He gave his pec an experimental squeeze, and then, apparently satisfied by what he found, did it again. “Oh, yes, but last time I was so mortified that I’d walked out in barely anything—I scarcely got a glance at you, really. It was all a blur.”

Graham recalled the morning when they’d accidentally spied one another in their respective shocking states of undress. He remembered the panic he’d felt, but he especially remembered the sight of Ciarán’s bare, freckled thighs. They’d stirred an interest in him then, and now, with his husband half-dressed and practically purring against him, Graham felt himself growing hard. He shifted slightly on the bed and admitted, voice low and husky, “Ever since I saw you that day I’ve been dreaming about your legs. And all the little freckles on them.”

“R-really?” There was pure wonder in Ciarán’s voice.

“Yeah.” Maybe it wasn’t seemly to admit such a thing, even to one’s husband and even when he was about to bed him, but Graham suspected that Ciarán would like to hear it, so he said, “I’ve thought about you at night. Before I go to sleep.”

“And—and what exactly were you thinking about?”

“Your bare legs. All of you, bare, sometimes. But your legs especially. And you bending over in your old nightshirt. The short one. Or pulling up your night gown around your waist so that I can look at you.”

“What then?” Ciarán whispered.

With a gentle shove he pushed Ciarán onto his back. His husband lay on the mattress, staring up at him through long lashes, eyes dark, lips slightly parted. This time when

he went for the belt buckle Ciarán allowed it, even lifted his hips a little so that Graham could more easily peel off his pants. In no time he was left with a husband clad in nothing but socks that ended just above his knee. “Well,” Graham said, voice thick, “Then I touch you.” He ran his hand along the inside of Ciarán’s thigh.

“And do I like it?”

His words were playful, teasing. A surge of confidence rolled through Graham’s body. “Why don’t you tell me?” He wrapped his fingers around Ciarán’s cock, gave it a few leisurely strokes. “Do you like that, sweetheart?” It was a rhetorical question—the answer was obvious. He was hot and hard in Graham’s hand.

Ciarán let out a breathless little giggle. “V-very much so. I would like it more if I could see all of you, though.” He bit his lip and stared meaningfully at Graham’s lower half, still clothed. “Let me?”

Obediently, Graham straddled him, his knees on either side of Ciarán’s chest. Ciarán sat up on the pillows as he happily did away with Graham’s belt. His pants fell to his thighs to reveal his half-hard cock.

Whatever it was that Ciarán saw, it delighted him. He breathed, “Oh...” and reached out once more to touch Graham’s body, his fingers trailing along the scars along his hips, brushing through the coarse hair between his legs, and delicately, tentatively, with an uncertainty that was feather-light and near to torture, took Graham’s cock in his hands and began to touch and stroke and squeeze, testing the feeling and the reactions he caused.

He asked, “Do you—like that, Graham?” as he rubbed his thumb along the head of his shaft in little circles, precum glistening on the tips of his fingers.

Another rhetorical question. But that was something, too. Hearing each other voice

their want, their pleasure. Graham shivered. “Yeah, I like it.”

With an impish smile, Ciarán brought his lips—so very pink and wet—to the head and kissed it.

A jolt of pleasure went through his body, swiftly accompanied by a twinge of pain in his leg. He winced. Ciarán immediately drew away, smile gone, his eyes wide and horrified. “Did I do it wrong?” he asked.

“No, no, no—you did it right. Everything was—right. And good. Great,” Graham panted. “Sorry, sweetheart. It’s just my leg. I can’t stand like this anymore.”

“Oh—I’m sorry, Graham. We can stop—”

Graham gritted his teeth. “We are not stopping. Just means that I need to—change positions.” He cleared his throat, hoping that his husband understood his meaning.

He did. Ciarán’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Yes, of course. Let me grab the oil—” As Graham wrestled his pants all the way off and massaged his knee, Ciarán rolled over to the bedside table and grabbed a container that Graham had honestly thought was some sort of perfume.

“How long have you had that?”

The shy expression returned to Ciarán’s face. “Since we first went to town. I thought—well. I thought we’d have cause to use it together sooner.” Then, he pouted. “I’ve used enough just on my own.”

All this time, Ciarán had been lonely and wanting in their bedroom, thinking about Graham—touching himself to the thought of Graham.

“I’m sorry, Ciarán,” he said again.

Ciarán’s fingers were smeared with oil. He leaned back against the pillows once more and slowly, almost lazily, rubbed circles around his rim. “I knew you’d be kind from your letters. I just never imagined you’d be so handsome, too. And I hoped that eventually you’d want me like I wanted you. It’s been lonely at night.” With that, he slipped a finger inside his hole.

Graham’s mouth went dry. “Sorry, sweetheart.” It seemed all he was capable of saying at the moment, focused as he was on watching his husband open himself up, pumping and scissoring his fingers, gasping and shivering, his cock hard and leaking between his legs.

“What are you sorry for?”

“I’m sorry that I left you here by yourself for so long. I’m sorry I was so dense. And I’m sorry that I could’ve been with you this whole time—touching you and kissing you and—” And a whole lot more.

Ciarán smiled. “We were both pretty silly about this whole thing, weren’t we? Why don’t we make up for it now.” He removed his fingers, still slick and shining with oil, and shifted to lay on his back, his head cushioned by the pillows. He spread his legs in invitation.

There wasn’t a prettier sight in the world. Just Ciarán, naked save his knee-length socks, open and ready for him.

Graham didn’t need to be told twice.

He crawled atop Ciarán, kissed all along his neck and jaw as he took hold of his cock and pushed, so slowly and so carefully, easing himself past Ciarán’s rim.

“Oh!” The cry was muffled as Ciarán buried his face in the crook of Graham’s neck.

As Ciarán went still underneath him Graham asked, “You okay? It doesn’t hurt?”

“It’s different from my fingers,” came his husband’s breathless reply.

“But you’re okay?”

“I’m okay, Graham. Please, keep going.”

He did so, burying himself into that tight heat until he was completely sheathed inside him, his balls, heavy and taut, resting against Ciarán’s ass. Graham all but collapsed on top of him, pinning him to the bed, their legs entwined.

He gave an experimental thrust and was rewarded with a sweet moan, Ciarán’s lips right against his ear. “Again—please, Graham.”

Again and again and again—with each thrust his husband squirmed underneath him, nails digging into his back, his hole squeezing his cock tighter and tighter until all Graham could do was hump with abandon.

The room was filled with Ciarán’s panting cries of delight and by Graham’s ragged moans. There was no longer a rhythm to his movement—he’d long dreamed of taking Ciarán and he did so in earnest now, thinking of nothing but his husband’s keening and frantically pumping his aching cock into Ciarán’s tight little hole.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “Fuck.”

“Yes, please, Graham. Oh! Please, more,” Ciarán begged. He lifted his hips to better meet Graham’s frenzied rutting.

Ciarán's legs were wrapped tight around his waist, his knee-length socks rubbing deliciously against Graham's skin. It felt good—all of it felt good. Holding his husband, his husband holding him, being inside him, being together, joined as one, a union of their bodies, their collective pleasure.

He sensed it now—Ciarán's orgasm building. How his cries became short, high-pitched gasps, how his legs kicked at the air in an effort to chase his pleasure, how his nails raked at Graham's back as he tried to pull him closer, ever closer—and then, suddenly, he was trembling and moaning Graham's name, desperately rubbing his cock against his stomach as he spilled between them, wonderfully hot and messy.

He wanted to see him better—to watch him tremble through his climax—but as Graham tried to push himself up Ciarán said, “No! I want it—” He closed his eyes and groaned as Ciarán squeezed around his cock. “Graham—inside me—I want you to—I want my husband—”

That pushed him over the edge into his own release. Once more Graham let himself fall on top of Ciarán, let him coo and stroke his back and run his fingers through his hair and murmur such sweet things into his ear as Graham desperately continued to thrust, spilling his seed inside him in sharp bursts as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through him until he lay there, exhausted and spent and more satisfied than he'd ever been.

When the sweat had cooled on their skin and the cum was drying on their stomachs and leaking onto the bed, Graham asked, “Was that good?” He nuzzled Ciarán's neck, kissed the delicate skin there. “Did you like that?”

Ciarán stretched against the sheets, a lazy smile on his face. “Oh, Mr. Shepherd. I think you're fishing for compliments, now.”

“I want to know if I made love to my husband the way he likes,” he growled. He gave

Ciarán's shoulder a sharp bite.

His husband squealed with laughter. "Oh! Graham! I wouldn't know—that was my first time, after all."

"Guess we'll just have to keep going."

"I'd like that. Maybe next time you could have me on all fours? Or—maybe I could ride you." At the look of surprise on Graham's face he added, "I've read—publications—about what goes on between a married couple."

"Not in *The Matrimonial Journal*?" Graham had read plenty of articles in it when he'd had a subscription. He'd even clipped some of the useful ones about household management out and saved them in a scrapbook. He most definitely did not recall anything about bedroom activities. Those would have been squirreled away for sure.

"No, of course not. Its columns rarely mention the intimate duties of marriage. I had other subscriptions."

He kissed Ciarán's fingers and considered that. They had to have a lot of things in New York that they didn't have in Montana. Or, perhaps, some material was just easier to find in a city. It wasn't important. Whatever Ciarán wanted to try. Whatever he asked of him.

A buzzing, pleasant kind of warmth coursed through his body. A good tired, an intimate happiness, cozy and comfortable. Who would have thought that marriage could bring such bliss? Or, no—it had to be Ciarán especially. His husband, the man he was lucky enough to marry, the best in the world.

"Graham?" Ciarán was playing with his hair, tracing his finger along the shell of Graham's ear. It tickled. "What are you thinking about?"

He blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. “I want to get you a puppy.”

“W-what?”

Hell. Graham slapped his face with his hand and groaned in frustration. “I mean that—You make me so happy. And I want you to be happy. And protected. With this horse thief around, I was thinking that you should have a dog. It’d keep you company—keep you safe when you’re here by yourself.”

Ciarán’s hand stopped moving. “By myself?” he asked.

“That was before,” Graham said hastily. “Before we—you know, when I was sleeping in the barn. I didn’t want you here in the house alone. But now I’ll be here. With you. Won’t I?”

His husband gave a sigh of relief and snuggled closer to him, soft and warm. “Right.”

“But I still aim to find you a puppy.”

Ciarán hummed. “That’d be nice. I’d like a puppy,” he murmured.

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Their honeymoon had finally arrived and they indulged with vigor. Their nights were longer, their days started later, and their chores were often interrupted.

One morning Graham found Ciarán in the middle of cooking breakfast and had bent him over, palms flat on the kitchen table, and taken him from behind. The biscuits had come out of the oven slightly burnt, but it was nothing a little extra jam hadn’t fixed, and they’d eaten with wide grins on their faces.

Another day they were working together in the barn and Ciarán had bumped the side of Graham's hip with his and smirked. They'd fought, playful, teasing, eager, until Graham shoved him into the hay bale and pulled Ciarán's pants down and pulled his own cock out and pounded into his husband until they were sweaty and satisfied. Afterwards, they'd spent quite some time picking the hay from their hair and clothes.

And, every night, when the day was done, they always found the energy to kiss and rub and stroke one another, to simply enjoy making love and learn the contours of each other's body.

The bed was too small, to be sure. They slept wrapped in one another's arms with Graham dangerously close to tipping right off the side. But neither of them found that they really minded all that much—and if Graham was too busy with other activities and could only work on the new bed intermittently, then, well, it wasn't too much of a bother.

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Graham's sleep had been unusually peaceful lately, filled with dreams of sun-drenched days and Ciarán. In the dream, Ciarán was always waiting for him—lightly dressed, reclining on the soft, sun-warmed grass, a serene smile on his face. He'd wave and beckon, and Graham would walk toward him, his heart brimming with affection, a bouquet of wildflowers clutched in his hands, their fragrant petals filling the air. Every step closer to him made his heart beat faster, the feeling of finally reaching him overwhelming in its simplicity and joy.

But tonight, something felt wrong. Despite his every effort, Graham couldn't seem to get any closer to Ciarán. The figure of his husband remained just out of reach, always waving, always calling for him, but no matter how much he walked, the distance between them remained constant, unyielding. The dream began to fray at the edges. The air turned thick and heavy, the soft grass beneath his feet shifting into something

darker, rougher.

Suddenly, a terrible noise shattered the stillness—a deafening series of crashes, each louder and more violent than the last. Bang! Bang! Bang! It sounded like cannon fire, the deep booms shaking the very ground beneath him. The sky darkened, swirling with clouds that had a hue of foreboding, and the once-soft grass beneath his feet turned to a thick, churned mud. The air smelled of gunpowder, thick and acrid, and there was only chaos around him.

And there, in the distance, was Ciarán—still too far away, still calling for him, but now with panic in his voice. Graham’s heart pounded in his chest. No, no, no, he thought. His legs moved before he even had time to think, propelling him forward through the growing cacophony. He had to get to Ciarán. He couldn’t let him be alone out there in the chaos. He couldn’t let anything happen to him.

He could hear Ciarán’s voice, desperate, calling for him. “Graham! Graham!”

His foot caught on something—his leg flared with pain, but he didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. He pushed forward, each step heavier than the last, his body screaming for rest, but his heart—his heart drove him onward. He had to reach him.

And just as the distance between them seemed like it would close, a horrific crack echoed through the night, and then—

“Graham!” A voice, sharp and real, broke through the nightmare.

Graham jerked awake, his body tensing as if he had been holding his breath for too long. His eyes flickered open, blurry and disoriented. For a moment, he didn’t know where he was, only that something wasn’t right. The sounds of the nightmare still echoed in his mind, lingering like a shadow. He groaned and rubbed his eyes, trying to shake off the remnants of the dream.

Above him stood Ciarán, his face pale, a worried expression etched on his features. One hand rested gently on Graham's shoulder.

Graham blinked, his pulse still racing. "What's—what's going on?" he muttered, still half-caught in the remnants of his nightmare.

"There's someone outside the house." Ciarán's voice was tight, his eyes flickering toward the window, where the shadows seemed unnaturally still.

Before Graham could ask anything further, there was a terrible sound—a thundering, forceful knock that shook the front door. Bang! Bang! Bang! It sounded like someone was trying to tear it off its hinges. Graham's instincts kicked in, adrenaline flooding his veins. His body, still groggy from sleep, responded automatically.

He sprang out of bed, reaching for the rifle that hung on the wall beside him. He grabbed it with urgency, the weight of it comforting in his hands, a steadying force in the chaos that had just erupted in their home.

"Stay inside," Graham whispered to Ciarán, his voice low and firm as he turned toward the door.

He cursed under his breath. Should've found a dog—even a lazy hound would've been enough to alert them to any danger before it reached their doorstep. But now it was too late.

With a deep breath, Graham flung open the door, ready for whatever danger might lie beyond. But what he didn't expect was the sight before him: the cart belonging to Liam and Ronan, both horses visibly spooked, whinnying and kicking up the dirt in a frenzy. The animals' eyes were wide with terror, their bodies shaking, and at the back of the cart, a bulky figure was moving—Ronan, no doubt.

Graham lowered the rifle, his heart racing for entirely different reasons now. “Ronan? What’s going on?” His voice was rough with concern.

Ronan stepped forward, his face pale and strained with fear. But it wasn’t just the cart that caught Graham’s attention—it was the limp bundle in Ronan’s arms. A deep dread settled in Graham’s chest as he saw who the figure was: Liam. His friend was bloody, his face ashen, his eyes closed. There was a deep gash on the side of his head, blood soaking the side of his shirt and dripping steadily onto the dirt beneath them.

Graham’s stomach twisted. “Oh, Jesus,” he muttered, moving quickly toward them.

“Cabhraigh liom, le do thoil,” Ronan’s voice was frantic, his words tumbling out in rapid Irish. “Le do thoil. Tá sé gortaithe go dona. Mo fhear céile—Níl a fhios agam cad atá le déanamh.” He was sobbing, his shoulders shaking as he cradled Liam’s head, desperate and terrified.

Graham’s mind raced. A doctor, they needed a doctor, and fast. But first, they had to get Liam inside, out of the cold, away from the cart. He spun around, calling over his shoulder, “Ciarán? It’s Liam and Ronan—they need help.”

Almost immediately, Ciarán emerged from the house, his face drawn with worry. He held a lantern in his hand, its warm glow lighting the space between them. His eyes were wide with concern. “What’s happened, Graham?”

“I don’t know,” Graham said, his voice tight with fear. “It looks like Liam’s hurt bad.” The words felt hollow in his mouth. He didn’t even know if Liam was still alive. “We’ve got to get him inside. Calm Ronan down, and I need to get the doctor.”

Ciarán’s face hardened with determination. “Yes. Of course.” His voice wavered only slightly, but there was no doubt in his eyes. He moved swiftly, gently taking Ronan’s arm and leading him toward the bedroom, speaking to him in a calming rush of Irish.

Graham turned his gaze toward the back of the cart, and it was there—there was blood, staining the wood beneath Liam.

He placed his rifle back on the wall, his mind already running through the possibilities of what needed to be done next. Ciarán emerged from the house, his hands shaking as he held a bloodstained rag. His eyes were wide, and his voice was full of panic. “Oh, Graham, it’s terrible—someone tried to steal Liam and Ronan’s sheep. Liam tried to stop them—he was hit over the head. We’re so much closer to town than the doctor, and Ronan wasn’t sure if he’d make it.”

The blood had already soaked through Liam’s shirt, and from the looks of it, the injury was more than just a bad bump. It was a serious wound, and there was no telling how long he’d been out there before they arrived.

Graham’s heart clenched with helplessness. “We have to do what we can right now. If he doesn’t make it to the doctor in time...” He trailed off, his mind racing.

“I think—I think I can stitch him up,” Ciarán said, his voice unsteady, but determined. “But Graham, we need the doctor. We need him now.”

Graham nodded. “Right. I’ll take Ginger and—” He paused, then reconsidered. Ginger was too slow, too old for such a frantic ride. He would need to go faster, and that meant he would need Bó.

Ciarán’s face softened with understanding. “Go, go. Just... be careful, Graham, please.”

“I will,” Graham promised. He pressed a kiss to Ciarán’s cheek, feeling the brush of his husband’s skin beneath his lips. The sensation grounded him, anchoring him in the moment, before he turned and ran toward the stables, knowing every second counted.

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Mrs. Duncan had sold him a fine horse. Bó was strong and sure-footed, built for the hard miles that Graham needed to cover. The moonless night enveloped them in darkness, the prairie stretching out wide and silent before him. Graham kept one hand firm on the reins, guiding Bó through the thick night air, and the other clutched the lantern that Ciarán had lit just before he'd left. The light flickered in the wind, casting strange shadows against the vast emptiness around them. Traveling at night was always a risky business, but tonight, it was a necessity.

The pounding hooves of Bó against the hard-packed earth were steady, but the urgency in Graham's chest didn't subside. Liam's injury was serious, and every second counted. The prairie stretched wide, the roads familiar, but the darkness made everything seem more foreboding. A single misstep or misjudgment could be the difference between getting to town and losing more precious time. But Graham had grown up on this land, knew every twist and turn, every landmark along the way, and he trusted that knowledge now more than ever.

They rode on, faster than Graham had intended, the horse's muscles rippling beneath him as Bó carried them through the night. Graham's mind kept drifting back to Liam's bloody, limp form, the pale face, the depth of the gash on his head. He pushed the thought aside. They weren't there yet, and he couldn't afford to lose his focus. Every thundering gallop of Bó's hooves drove them closer, closer to the help that Liam so desperately needed.

As they neared the outskirts of town, a few people stumbling out of the saloon blinked up in confusion, barely registering the speed of Graham's ride. One of them, a drunkard with a bottle in hand, shouted at him in a slurred voice. "What's the hurry?"

Graham barely spared him a glance, his jaw clenched in frustration. The town's noise

and idleness were nothing to him right now. He was thinking of Liam, and that was all that mattered. “No time for idle chatter,” Graham muttered under his breath, urging Bó to keep going.

Graham could see the silhouette of the doctor’s office at the end of the street, just past Mrs. Fournier’s shop. The familiar sight was a beacon of hope in the otherwise oppressive darkness. They reached it in no time, the horse barely slowing before Graham threw himself from Bó’s back. He didn’t waste a second. His boots hit the dirt with a thud, and he hurried to the door of the doctor’s office, his hand thumping against it with force.

“Doctor! Got an emergency!” he shouted, his voice carrying with the urgency of the moment.

There was a pause, a muffled thump, and then the door creaked open a crack. The doctor’s sharp eyes appeared through the narrow opening, narrowing as they fell on Graham. “You don’t sound drunk enough to be bothering me at this hour, Mr. Shepherd,” she said, her voice laced with dry humor, but her eyes were scanning him, gauging his seriousness.

“I’m not here for a drink,” Graham snapped, the tension in his voice clear. “Thieves got into Liam and Ronan’s ranch. Liam tried to stop them. He’s in real bad shape. We’ve got him at my house—my husband’s doing his best, but we need you, doctor. Right now.”

For a moment, the doctor just stared at him, then her gaze flickered to the lantern in his hand, to the palpable desperation in his stance. She sighed and nodded, her expression softening with understanding. “Fine. You’ve got my attention. Let me grab my bag.”

As the doctor moved to gather her things, her wife appeared at the door, a large

leather bag slung over her shoulder. “You go on, dear. I’ll alert the sheriff,” she said with a concerned frown, glancing out toward the street, as if wondering what had brought on such a late-night emergency. “What’s this town coming to?”

Graham didn’t answer. The sheriff could deal with whatever mess was brewing in the town; right now, the only thing that mattered was getting Liam the help he needed. He looked at the doctor, who had already gathered her supplies, her expression grave. “You ready?” he asked, his voice low and urgent.

“Let’s go,” the doctor replied, her tone businesslike now, as she moved toward the door.

Graham mounted Bó again, and the doctor climbed onto her own mount. The town was quiet, save for the occasional rattle of a shutter or the distant murmur of the saloon. Graham didn’t look back. His focus was on the road ahead, on getting to his home, to Ciarán, to Liam—and praying it wasn’t too late.

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The doctor was a good rider. She and her horse kept pace with Bó, the two of them galloping through the darkened prairie as if they were chasing time itself. Graham kept his eyes ahead, the steady rhythm of Bó’s hooves a comforting beat beneath him, but his mind was consumed with the thought of Liam and the bloodied state he’d left him in. There was no time to waste. Every second could be the difference between life and death.

Behind them, Graham could hear the clopping hooves of the sheriff and his deputy, a trio of horses now following the frantic pace. If it’d been a race, they would’ve made it to the house in record time. But tonight, the race wasn’t for victory—it was for survival. Graham’s thoughts were clouded with the image of Liam’s pale face, the gash on his head, the blood that had soaked through Ciarán’s hands. All he could do

was push forward, praying they wouldn't be too late.

"Come on," he muttered to Bó, urging the horse on. "Ciarán's been tending to them—he's holding on, he's holding on..."

They reached the house, the flickering lights from the lantern in Graham's hand casting eerie shadows on the land around them. The night was silent but for the soft rustling of the wind in the grass. It felt as though time itself had slowed. The moment they entered the yard, the house seemed so small in the vastness of the world, and yet tonight, it felt like the only place that mattered.

The house was cramped with so many people inside. The tension was thick in the air, palpable and suffocating. Not everyone could fit in the bedroom, so the doctor, being the first to arrive, went in alone. After a few hushed minutes, Ciarán emerged to explain, his eyes exhausted but resolute.

"I did what I could. His breathing is slow, and the bleeding's slowed, but—" He didn't finish. The exhaustion was evident on his face, the weight of the night's events pulling on him.

"But at least he's breathing," Graham interjected, trying to offer comfort, though his words didn't quite have the strength they needed.

"Yes," Ciarán sighed, his shoulders heavy with the burden of what he had witnessed. "I think I'll make some tea. Something to warm us all up."

Graham nodded absently as Ciarán went to the stove. His hands were shaking, and he could feel his stomach twist with the unease that refused to leave him. He'd done all he could for Liam and Ronan, but it still didn't feel like enough. The doctor had said that Liam would survive, but the uncertainty of it all hung in the air like a storm cloud, waiting to burst.

After two cups of tea—too much sugar and too little comfort—Ciarán finally led the deputy and sheriff to the main room. There, they would question Ronan about the events that had led to Liam’s injury. Graham watched from the corner, his chest tight, as the deputy leaned forward with his typical brusque tone.

“Well, what’d they look like? Was it someone from town or a stranger?” the deputy demanded, his tone clipped.

Ronan, still clearly in shock, began to speak in a rapid stream of Irish, his words tumbling out like a river that couldn’t be stopped. Ciarán, standing close by, translated quickly, his voice calm but strained with concern.

“He didn’t see,” Ciarán explained. “They heard a noise and thought one of the sheep had escaped the barn again. Apparently, they’ve a very clever one, and Liam went out to check. That’s when he found someone trying to carry off some of their livestock. Liam called for help, but by the time Ronan reached the barn, the thief had already gone, and Liam was... was hurt.”

Graham could see the deputy’s impatience growing. “You just let him get away? You didn’t go after him?” he asked, the accusation thick in his voice.

Ronan’s glare could’ve leveled a city. He stood stiff, the tension in his muscles visible. The words that left his lips were thick with anger, and Graham didn’t need a translation to understand the tone. “Is beag nach bhfuair m’fhear bás! Is é do phost gadaithe a ghabháil! Ní tharlódh a leithéid dá mba rud é—”

He broke off with a sob, his shoulders shaking with emotion. Ciarán, ever steady, reached out and placed a hand on Ronan’s arm, whispering soft words of reassurance. “Beidh sé ceart go leor, Ronan.”

Graham could feel the anger bubbling in his own chest. He didn’t speak much Irish,

but he understood what Ronan was saying. If it had been Ciarán lying on the ground, bleeding, what would he have done? The same thing. Ciarán was his world, just as Liam was Ronan's. But the deputy didn't understand that. He didn't understand the gravity of a man's love for his partner.

"Maybe if you'd taken the theft at the Duncans' place seriously," Graham snapped, voice low but thick with frustration, "the thief wouldn't have gotten so bold and we wouldn't all be here in the first place."

The deputy straightened, his face going red with indignation. "Are you implying this is our fault?"

"I'm not implying shit," Graham retorted, standing taller. "I'm stating it."

The deputy moved to retaliate, his chest puffing up, but before he could open his mouth, Ciarán's voice cut through the tension like a whip.

"See here!" Ciarán said, his voice sharp and commanding. Despite his smaller stature, his presence filled the entire room. "We've had enough excitement for one night! There's a man who dearly needs rest in the other room! You will not argue in my house! If you're going to quarrel, do it outside!"

The deputy, stunned by the outburst, mumbled an apology, his face turning pink with embarrassment. Graham flushed as well, his temper having gotten the better of him. He turned to Ciarán, his voice dropping. "I'm sorry, Ciarán."

But Ciarán, ever gracious, simply gave him a soft look. "It's alright, Graham. Just... just breathe."

Turning back to the sheriff, Ciarán said, his voice much calmer, "I don't know if there's anything else we can tell you."

The sheriff sighed, looking toward the door. “In the morning, we’ll take a look around the ranch, see if we can find anything. And we’ll put out a bulletin in town, let everyone know to be on the lookout. Thank you for the tea, Mr. Shepherd.”

“You’re welcome,” Ciarán replied softly.

Graham stood up and offered to walk the sheriff and deputy out. He saw them to their horses, the tension in the air still thick, but nothing more was said. The sheriff tipped his hat to Graham with a solemn look in his eyes. “Looks like you found yourself a fine husband, Graham.”

“I know it,” Graham replied quietly, his eyes on Ciarán, who was standing in the doorway of the house, waiting for him.

The sheriff cleared his throat, looking away. “We’ve had thieves before. And drunkards—many a drunkard. Even some brawls. But I think this is the first time something like this has happened in this town.” He shook his head. “An attack. A near-murder.”

“Make it the last time,” Graham said firmly, his voice low and unwavering.

They tipped their hats once more, and Graham watched them ride off into the night, their figures slowly fading from view. With a heavy sigh, he turned back toward the house, his heart still pounding with adrenaline. It wasn’t over. Not yet.

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The bedroom was full. Not just of bodies, but of the heavy atmosphere that came with a life teetering between life and death. Liam lay in their bed, looking so small under the blankets, his head carefully bandaged and stitched. His breaths were steady but slow, each one a reminder of how close he'd come to losing everything. The doctor

sat on one side of the bed, her eyes constantly flicking between Liam's condition and the small things she needed to monitor. Her focus was unwavering, but Graham could see the fatigue in her posture. Ronan, on the other side of the bed, was a contrast in his tenderness. His large hands held Liam's smaller ones, his thumb gently stroking over the knuckles. He whispered soft words into Liam's ear, words that Graham didn't need to understand fully to know they were gentle and full of love. Ronan was a man who wore his heart on his sleeve, and right now, that heart was completely devoted to the man lying in front of him.

But that left Ciarán and himself to figure out where to sleep for the night. The house, which usually felt so spacious, now felt unbearably small, too crowded for the four of them, especially with Liam in such a fragile state.

Ciarán set the teacups back on the shelf, his eyes lingering on the scene before him for a moment, as if he were trying to memorize the moment in case it was all too fleeting. He sighed and turned to Graham. "We can just sleep in here, I suppose. The stove is still warm, after all."

Graham shook his head, his heart heavy. "I don't want you sleeping on the ground," he said, voice low. The very thought of his husband curled up on the floor, vulnerable and exposed, unsettled him to his core. Never. "We could—we could sleep in the hayloft."

Ciarán gave him a small, soft smile, one that made Graham's chest ache with affection. "We?"

"It won't be very comfortable with both of us up there," Graham admitted, "but it'll be better than sleeping on the floor."

Ciarán's smile widened, and then, without a second thought, he wrapped his arms around Graham, pulling him into a tight hug. "So long as I'm with you, Graham, I'll

be just fine,” he whispered, his voice thick with warmth.

Graham held him for a long moment, his heart full, yet heavy with everything they had faced tonight. Then they said their goodnights to Ronan and the doctor, who had nodded gratefully at Graham before turning back to her work. The two men made their way out of the house, Ciarán’s hand never leaving his, a silent comfort as they walked through the cool night air toward the barn.

The livestock were all asleep, peaceful and unaware of the storm that had raged just outside. The cows and horses were nestled in their stalls, calm, their steady breathing filling the air with a rhythm that was almost soothing. Graham went to the hayloft and hauled their pillows and blanket up with a grunt. He settled them as best as he could, making a small nest for them to sleep in, then helped Ciarán up the ladder, making sure he was steady before letting him climb on his own.

It was snug up there in the loft, the small space filled with hay and the lingering scent of the animals below. But despite the discomfort of it, Ciarán didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he seemed to find peace in the smallness of the space, as though the closeness brought a sense of security. Graham, too, found himself relaxing just a little, the weight of the evening finally starting to fall from his shoulders as he pulled Ciarán close.

Ciarán nestled into his side, his voice quiet in the dim light of the barn. “What do we do tomorrow?”

Graham shifted slightly, pulling Ciarán a little closer. “Liam’s in no condition to be moved, and the doctor will still be here tomorrow. Do you think you can take care of the chores by yourself in the morning?” He hesitated. “I don’t want Ronan to be alone right now, and he’ll need help at their ranch in the meantime. A rancher’s work never ends.” It was a stark reality that neither of them could afford to ignore, no matter what had happened tonight. Just because Liam had been hurt didn’t mean the rest of

the world stopped turning. The fields needed tending, the animals needed care, and the crops needed attention.

Ciarán nodded without hesitation, the quiet strength in his voice unwavering. “I can, Graham. I’ll take care of everything. You don’t have to worry. I promise.”

But Graham couldn’t help it. He would always worry. He’d worried about Ciarán from the first moment they met, wondering if he was happy, if he was safe. He’d worried about the days they spent apart, and now he worried about the possibility of another thief, another attack. He had never been taught that marriage meant constantly worrying about the other person’s safety, about whether they'd be there when you returned, or whether they'd come home at all.

"I'll be back in the evening," Graham murmured, more to himself than to Ciarán. "And I'll have a dog."

Ciarán chuckled softly, his breath warm against Graham’s chest. “A dog?”

“Definitely. A good one. A watchful one,” Graham said, trying to sound lighter than he felt. “There’ll be no more thieves on our land. Not while I’m here.”

Ciarán’s arms tightened around him, and for a moment, they just lay there in the hayloft, listening to the distant calls of the night animals and the steady, comforting rhythm of the animals below. The world outside might have been chaotic and unpredictable, but here, in the stillness of the barn with Ciarán in his arms, Graham felt the first real peace he’d had all night.

“We’ll be okay, Graham,” Ciarán whispered, as though reading his thoughts.

Graham nodded, but he didn’t say anything. There was no need to. As long as they had each other, they would always find a way through. And for tonight, that was

enough.

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He woke slowly, the faint light of dawn creeping through the slats in the hayloft wall, soft rays of amber casting lines across the rough wooden floor and over the hay-strewn bedding. The morning air was cool, and the warmth of Ciarán's body beside him only made the chill more pronounced. A dull throb in his bad leg jarred him from the stillness of sleep, and he cursed under his breath.

"Christ," Graham muttered, blinking against the light and shifting, trying not to wake Ciarán. The muscle in his leg was stiff, and the scar tissue from the old bullet wound pulled painfully as he flexed his foot. He winced and attempted to stretch it out without disturbing his husband, but that proved difficult. His movements were more jerky than he intended, and his discomfort was sharp, crawling up his spine.

Beside him, Ciarán stirred with a deep, rumbling yawn. Bits of straw tangled in his dark curls, and he blinked sleepily, his face soft and unguarded in the half-light of the morning. "Oof," Ciarán murmured, rubbing his eyes. "I'm a little stiff. Did you sleep well, Graham?"

"Always, next to you," Graham replied, his voice thick with the remnants of sleep. He tried to smile, but the effort was cut short by the sharp pain that lanced through his leg. His words came out strained. "Just a little sore, that's all."

"What's wrong?" Ciarán asked, his tone instantly full of concern. He pushed himself up onto his elbows, eyes narrowing with worry as he looked at Graham, already sitting on the edge of the makeshift bed.

"Was a bit cramped last night, I guess," Graham replied, trying to downplay it, but it was clear from his pained expression that it wasn't just discomfort from the position.

"My leg's acting up."

Ciarán moved closer immediately, his face softening into an expression of gentle empathy. "Let me help?" he asked, his voice full of the unspoken understanding that had bloomed between them over the years.

In the early days of their marriage, Graham would've recoiled at such an offer. The thought of letting Ciarán see him vulnerable, exposed like that, would have been too much to bear. He would have refused him, even though the longing for care and touch was there. And Ciarán, just as shy and earnest, likely wouldn't have asked in such an open, unassuming way. But time had taught them both differently. They'd shared more than a bed and a life; they'd shared the growing, tender understanding that intimacy came in many forms. And now, as he looked into Ciarán's big, brown eyes, the only thing he felt was gratitude.

Graham sighed, leaning back against a bale of hay and giving a reluctant nod. "Go ahead, then," he murmured.

Ciarán moved toward him with a softness that felt almost reverent, kneeling beside him as he adjusted his nightgown. He was a quiet figure in the half-darkness, but his touch spoke volumes. Gently, he placed his hands on Graham's leg, beginning to knead the sore muscles of his thigh. He worked with care, massaging the scar tissue with a tenderness that made Graham's heart swell.

It was a different kind of intimacy than what they were used to, not charged with the heady warmth of passion, but with a depth of connection all its own. The touch wasn't about desire, but about the quiet act of care, of making sure the other was okay, that the wounds of the body and soul were tended to. Ciarán's brow furrowed slightly in concentration as he worked, his fingers pressing into the taut muscles with determination.

Graham closed his eyes, allowing himself to relax into the sensation, the gentle rhythm of Ciarán's hands working away the stiffness in his leg. Outside, the rooster's crow rang out, loud and insistent, as if proclaiming to the heavens that the sun had no right to be so bold in the sky. It was a familiar, almost comical sound—loud and raucous, and Graham couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of it.

Ciarán caught his eye, a soft, tired smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. They exchanged a fond glance, each of them feeling the same quiet acknowledgment that it was time to face the day, to step back into the world and the work that awaited them.

Graham reached out, pulling Ciarán closer. They shared a brief, but affectionate kiss, a quick meeting of lips that spoke more than any words could. There was no hurry, no rush—just a moment to connect before the day began.

"Good morning, Graham," Ciarán said softly, his voice still carrying the warmth of sleep.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Graham replied, his own voice thick with affection.

Down the ladder they went to lead the animals out to the pasture. A cow nibbled at Ciarán's curls in a way that Graham worried was less affectionate and more that she thought his hair some sort of appetizing plant, and he shooed her away. She shot Graham a withering glare and wandered away to join the rest of the herd with a huff.

"Watch yourself when you're milking her today, or you might lose your hair," he told Ciarán.

Ciarán chuckled. "You never mentioned that particular danger in your letters."

"Slipped my mind. There's so many," Graham said. He was only half joking. The sight of Liam's bloody, unconscious form and Ronan's distraught face was seared

into his mind. Curious cows, and the occasional murderous thief. Just a few perils a rancher might face. “We need to get ready. There’s a lot to be done today.”

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Breakfast was a hurried affair, with everyone working on autopilot, moving quickly despite the exhaustion of the previous night. Ciarán bustled about the kitchen, preparing sandwiches for the road and making sure they had enough to eat for the day ahead. Graham inhaled his breakfast in the same frantic manner, knowing they couldn’t waste any time. As soon as the last bite of food was swallowed, he grabbed his coat and went outside to check on the cart and the horses.

The morning light was still soft and golden, casting long shadows across the yard. The air was crisp, the kind of chill that made you draw your coat tight around you and wish for the warmth of a fire. The animals, however, didn’t seem bothered by the cold. They stood patiently, their coats gleaming in the light, the warm breath from their nostrils rising in little clouds. The cart, though, was another matter. While the horses seemed in good spirits, the cart was another story. There were stains of dried blood on the wheels, splatters that made Graham's stomach tighten. He forced himself to inspect the cart carefully, even as his throat went dry at the sight. He checked the wheels, looking for any signs of damage, but nothing appeared to be wrong with it. No cracks in the wood, no bent axles, just the remnants of the chaos from the previous night.

A shadow fell over him, and Graham straightened up, turning to find Ronan standing nearby. The Irishman was petting one of the horses, his hand moving slowly over its mane as though the motion itself provided him some small comfort. Ronan looked a mess—his clothes were rumpled, his hair wild, and the bags under his eyes were massive, as if sleep had eluded him entirely. The anguish in his face was raw, impossible to hide. It seemed as though the terror of the night had worn itself into his very bones, the worry over Liam eating him alive.

Graham cleared his throat and asked, "How's Liam?"

Ronan's voice was rough as he replied, "Codlaíonn sé." His eyes flickered with a sorrow too deep to articulate, and he quickly looked away.

Ciarán, who had been finishing up the last bit of preparation for their trip, hurried to their side to translate. "Sleeping," he said gently to Graham, his tone laced with the care he always gave to Ronan's heavy heart. To Ronan, he added softly, "That's good. Tá scíth de dhíth air," which Graham knew meant, "He needs rest."

Ronan's face crumpled at the words, and his lower lip trembled. For a long moment, he stood silently, his gaze focused on the horses, but his eyes shimmered with unshed tears. Graham and Ciarán purposefully avoided looking at him directly, letting him have this moment of quiet vulnerability. Finally, Ronan sniffed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "Mo grá. Ní féidir liom a iompróidh—chun é a fheiceáil gortaithe."

The pain in his voice made Graham's chest tighten. Ciarán's comforting hand rested on Ronan's shoulder, and he spoke again, the words smooth and steady, a balm to the rawness of the man's grief. "Beidh sé ceart go leor, Ronan." It was the same thing he had said the night before, those simple words that meant, "It will be okay, Ronan." Graham could see in Ciarán's eyes the depth of that promise—whatever happened, they would make sure Ronan and Liam made it through this.

Graham clapped Ronan lightly on the back and said, "We should be on our way."

Ronan looked at him, a weary nod of agreement. "You won't hear the end of it if Liam wakes up and the chores haven't been done," Graham added with a small grin, trying to lighten the mood.

Ronan's lips quivered, and he let out a watery smile, the first one Graham had seen

from him since last night. “Tá tu ceart. Tá tu ceart, Graham,” he said quietly. You’re right. You’re right.

With that, they all set to work, preparing the horses and loading up the cart. Ciarán had packed them a generous stack of oatcakes, each one carefully wrapped in a cloth, as well as the remainder of the jar of raspberry jam. Three boiled eggs each, some strips of jerky, and a few apples filled the baskets. “Is that enough?” Ciarán asked, his brow furrowed in concern. “Oh, I’m sure I can manage to make something more for the two of you—”

Graham chuckled, cutting him off before he could get too carried away. “It’ll do just fine, Ciarán. Don’t worry.” His husband had a way of over-packing, of always ensuring that every possibility was covered. Sometimes, it felt like the cart might collapse under the weight of Ciarán’s generosity.

“All right, then,” Ciarán said, still looking at the cart with an anxious expression. “Be careful. Both of you.”

The parting felt strange. With Ronan right there, it didn’t seem right to indulge in the private moments of affection that Graham and Ciarán were so accustomed to. There was something almost obscene about their marital bliss in the shadow of Liam’s unconscious form, still in bed, bloodied and bruised. It felt wrong to show the kind of closeness that was so natural for them while Ronan was silently suffering through his own private heartache.

As Ronan climbed onto the cart, Graham caught Ciarán’s eye, giving him a small, reassuring smile. He pressed his index and middle fingers to his lips, then placed them gently on Ciarán’s. “I’ll be back tonight,” he whispered, his voice low but certain.

Ciarán’s lips curved into a soft, fond smile, and he nodded. “I’ll be waiting,” he said

quietly, the words filled with an intimacy only the two of them shared.

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Graham rode ahead on Ginger, the horse's steady gait cutting through the morning air with ease. The rhythmic clop of hooves accompanied the slow creak of the cart behind him, where Ronan followed with the horses pulling the load, their pace unhurried and methodical. The cart didn't need much guiding, the animals were well-trained, and Ronan seemed to let the journey unfold before him, lost in his own thoughts. His gaze was distant, his mind no doubt still tangled in worry over Liam.

Graham glanced over his shoulder, watching the cart's slow movement as the wheels turned in the dirt with a constant, almost soothing sound. The horses nickered softly, occasionally tossing their heads as they made their way down the familiar path. The air was still and mild, an unusual calm that contrasted sharply with the storm of emotions brewing in Graham's chest. He could feel his own thoughts weighing heavily on him, though he tried to push them aside for the moment.

Theirs had never been a friendship that was built on constant conversation. That wasn't what connected him to Ronan in the first place. They had always bonded over the shared work, the silent camaraderie that came with tending to cattle, fixing fences, and plowing fields. It was a relationship built on mutual respect and the understanding that words weren't always necessary. But now, as the day stretched on with little more than the sound of the wheels and the distant calls of birds overhead, Graham found himself wishing for something—anything—to say. Anything that might ease the visible weight of grief and worry that Ronan carried.

Could he assure him that Liam would be okay? That he would pull through, despite the severity of his injury? The doctor had said as much, and surely, that should be enough to calm Ronan's nerves. But Graham knew better than anyone that when it came to the people you loved, nothing—nothing—could erase the worry that gnawed

at you. Especially when they had been hurt at the hands of someone else's malicious intent.

He could promise that they would catch the bastard who did it, that justice would be served. But the sheriff and his deputy had already shown their ineptitude when they arrived at the ranch. The deputy's accusatory manner had made Graham's blood boil, and the sheriff's half-hearted assurances didn't exactly fill him with hope for a swift resolution. The wheels of justice often moved slowly, and right now, it felt like they were stuck in the mud.

Graham was about to offer some sort of empty reassurances about the mild weather when the sound of another wagon approaching broke his thoughts. He looked up to see a family coming down the road, the driver waving with a broad grin on his face.

"Ah! Dia daoibh! Mr. Shepherd! Ronan! Good, we were hoping to run into you!" the driver called out with a cheerful tone, his voice carrying easily through the quiet morning.

Graham blinked, his mind racing. The family seemed familiar. He knew he had seen them at his wedding, but for the life of him, he couldn't quite place their names. He raised a hand in greeting. "You were?"

The woman in the wagon laughed, the sound warm and inviting. "Well, more Ronan than you, truth be told. We wanted to check up on your Liam, Ronan," she said, her eyes showing concern. "We got the news about what happened. Uafásach! Heard you were at the Shepherds' place, wanted to see how you were doing, see if we could help."

"Word travels fast," Graham remarked, a little dryly, though he was grateful for the offer of help.

“In this town? Fast, yes. Among the Irish? Faster,” the woman replied with a grin. She looked over at Ronan. “But, what are you two doing here?”

Ronan, still lost in thought, took a moment before answering. As he explained the situation to the family, Graham tried desperately to place their names. The woman had three children—grown or nearly so, two sons and a daughter. They all looked very much like their mother: tall, blonde, with striking dark eyes. But no matter how hard he racked his brain, he couldn’t bring their names to the front of his mind.

Ciarán would remember, of course. Ciarán had an uncanny knack for remembering every detail, every name, every face. Graham envied him for that.

The woman turned to Graham and smiled as she spoke again. “Here, then,” she said, nodding toward her children. “Myself and Ethan, we’ll go check in on Liam and give a hand to Ciarán and the doctor if they need it. Callum and Bridget, you go with Ronan and Mr. Shepherd. How’s that sound?”

Her children muttered their assent, though it was clear they were more than a little uncomfortable with the sudden intrusion. Still, they followed their mother’s orders without hesitation.

Graham was about to protest the formality of “Mr. Shepherd” when he caught himself. With the way she addressed him, it was clear they weren’t particularly familiar with one another. He muttered an awkward, “You can just call me Graham, ma’am,” his voice thick with the discomfort of social niceties.

She grinned widely, a twinkle in her eye. “Then you can just call me Clodagh.”

It wasn’t long before they reached the ranch, and Graham was hardly surprised when yet another wagon pulled up, followed by a couple of other families. Word had spread like wildfire, as it always did in their small community, and now everyone

seemed to be rallying to help, offering their well wishes and hands for labor. As each family arrived, Ronan split them up, keeping some to work on his own land and directing others to visit Liam and assist Ciarán. It was a flurry of activity, each person eager to lend a hand, to take some of the burden off Ronan's shoulders.

As Graham worked to milk the cows, he couldn't help but feel a strange mixture of gratitude and embarrassment. It was humbling, really—this outpouring of support—but also a little uncomfortable. Liam wasn't even awake yet, and already the town was treating him as though he were a hero, even though all he had done was get injured while protecting their livelihood.

But then again, that was what neighbors were for, wasn't it? In a place like this, where life was hard and no one could make it alone, a little help went a long way. And as Graham looked around, he realized that, at the very least, out of this whole predicament, he was finally learning the names of all his neighbors.

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The work on Ronan's ranch had gone far smoother than expected. With so many people showing up to help, it almost felt as though they were building more than just the barn—it was a community. The wood was hauled, the beams raised, the foundation set. Despite the busy movement of so many hands, it took far less time than anyone had imagined. By midday, the barn was standing tall, much more than a frame now, and the hum of productivity slowed to a trickle.

Graham wiped the sweat from his brow as he surveyed the work. It had been a good day's effort, but now the task was done. The chatter of the workers, the sounds of hands clapping and tools being set aside, filled the air. There was nothing more to be done. His work here was finished.

"I'll stay if you still need me," Graham offered, looking to Ronan, whose own

weariness seemed to match his. Despite the stoic expression, Graham could see the deep lines under his eyes, the exhaustion weighing on him.

But Ronan only looked around at the group of people milling about, chatting casually now that the heavy lifting was over. People were hauling away the last of the supplies, some had even started to feed the animals. His lips turned up in the faintest smile, weary but grateful. "Tá muid ceart go leor anseo."

Graham nodded. "Thank you. I have some business to take care of." His thoughts turned to Ciarán, to the small yet thoughtful gesture he wanted to surprise him with. "Wanted to get Ciarán a puppy," he said. "But now I'd rather have a guard dog."

At the mention of a dog, a young woman nearby who had been helping with the feeding stopped, the feed bucket in her hands jingling with the noise of it shifting. Bridget—Graham had recognized her from the wagon earlier—looked up, a goat nibbling at her sleeve as she answered, "I don't think anyone around here has a dog to spare. And I haven't heard of any whelping lately."

Graham gave a dry chuckle. He knew all too well the situation with dogs around here. "Yeah, I know. We're in a bit of a dog desert," he said, the humor not quite reaching his eyes. He'd asked around before and had come to realize that there wasn't a single pup to be had. "I was going to go out of town, look around there."

Bridget raised an eyebrow, a skeptical smile tugging at her lips. "You that desperate?"

The question hung in the air for a moment, but Graham didn't hesitate. "Yes." His response was blunt, and his voice held a layer of honesty that, perhaps, he hadn't fully acknowledged before. The truth was, it wasn't just about getting a puppy—it was about having someone, something, to keep Ciarán safe when Graham wasn't around. A guard dog wasn't just an extra set of eyes; it was a silent protector for the

one person in his life who mattered most.

Bridget looked thoughtful for a moment, then her face brightened. “Well, there’s a stray that wanders around near the church. A mutt. Sweet-tempered enough,” she said, her voice warming as she recalled the dog.

Graham’s ears perked up. “A stray?” That was exactly the kind of dog he needed, one that wasn’t bound by any obligations or expectations but simply wanted a place to call home. “Sweet-tempered enough, you say?” he repeated, already starting to think of how he could find this dog.

She nodded, a slight shrug rolling over her shoulders. “Yeah, but if it’s so sweet-tempered, how come no one’s taken it in?” Graham asked, his curiosity piqued. If the dog was so friendly, why had no one claimed it yet?

Bridget’s expression softened. “Not the prettiest beast in the world. It’s a stray, you know?” she said with a small grimace, as if the dog’s less-than-perfect appearance was somehow a mark against it.

Graham didn’t care about that. He didn’t need a pretty dog. He needed one with heart, with loyalty, and one that would protect Ciarán. Looks weren’t important; the safety of his husband was.

“That sounds like what I need,” Graham said decisively. He gave Bridget a quick nod, already turning to whistling for Ginger. “I’ll try my hand at catching a stray,” he said with a half-smile. He wasn’t sure how easy it would be to find a stray dog, let alone catch one, but there was no harm in trying.

Bridget’s voice followed him, a note of amusement in her words. “Good luck with that, Mr. Shepherd. He’s a tricky one to catch. You might need more than just your charm.”

Graham waved over his shoulder as he made his way to the horses. “I’ll make do,” he called back, a bit of humor in his voice, but determination in his step. After all, if anyone could find a dog that would protect his family, it would be him.

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Every Sunday, without fail, Graham and Ciarán attended the church service. It had become a part of their routine, one they both valued, even if the rest of the day rarely allowed for much rest. Between the ranch chores and the responsibilities that came with running their small farm, there was little time for relaxation. The service was a moment of peace, a small break from the endless list of tasks that awaited them at home. But it was brief. They didn’t linger long after the service ended. Most Sundays, they exchanged pleasantries with the few people who remained, but then it was back to work.

The last time Graham had wandered the area behind the church had been at his and Ciarán’s wedding reception. That had been a day to remember—one of joy and laughter, the kind of celebration that could last a lifetime. The food had been plentiful, the drink flowing, and the music had filled the air. It was the day that marked the beginning of everything. He smiled at the memory, the way Ciarán’s laughter had echoed across the yard, how his husband’s eyes had shone brighter than the sun itself.

They hadn’t danced since that day. It wasn’t for lack of desire; Ciarán had always enjoyed dancing. He’d mentioned it a few times, the way he missed it. Graham had promised himself that the next time there was a shindig in town, he’d ask Ciarán to dance. Maybe he could even ask Mr. Fournier if he’d be willing to teach him to play the violin, just so he could play a song for his husband and watch the joy light up his face as he danced for him again.

But for now, he had his work cut out for him. The ranch was calling, as it always did.

Suddenly, Graham's thoughts were interrupted by a loud snort from Ginger. He turned to see the horse shifting her weight, her head lowered toward the ground. A dog was cautiously sniffing at her leg, its nose twitching as it investigated her scent. When Ginger lowered her head further to nudge the dog, it jumped back in surprise, its tail wagging in excitement.

"Hey," Graham muttered, amused by the dog's sudden timidity.

The dog's ears perked up at the sound of his voice, but when Graham stepped closer, it gave a small bark and darted behind a tree. Graham blinked, surprised by the animal's cautiousness. He'd half expected it to be more outgoing.

"Well, I guess I found you," Graham said with a wry smile.

He glanced down at his pack and pulled out one of the oatcakes Ciarán had baked that morning. The smell still lingered faintly on the pastry. Graham broke it in half, quickly eating one piece before tossing the other toward the tree where the dog had disappeared. The dog's nose appeared first, sniffing furiously at the ground before the rest of its head followed. With a small hesitation, it bolted out from behind the tree and leapt forward, snapping up the oatcake with lightning speed, almost as though it had been starving for weeks.

Graham paused to observe the animal. It wasn't a puppy, but it was still young, the kind of dog that hadn't quite grown into its large paws yet. Its fur was sparse, and it looked a little too thin for comfort—probably a result of its life as a stray. One of its ears was ragged and torn, the other hanging limply at its side. The dog's eye was cloudy, a scar around it, but its remaining eye was bright and alert. Despite its rough appearance, there was a spark in the animal, a gleam of hopefulness in its gaze as it licked its chops, tail wagging cautiously.

Graham's heart tightened in sympathy. He knew what it was like to hope for

something, to cling to the smallest glimmer of affection when it seemed as though the world was against you. The dog's longing was palpable.

Whistling softly, Graham called to the dog, watching as it hesitated for only a moment before bounding toward him with eager steps. "Hey, boy," he said softly, extending a hand toward the animal.

The dog responded eagerly, pressing its head into Graham's palm, its body wriggling with delight at the attention. Graham scratched under its chin, his fingers finding the soft fur there. "You're going to love Ciarán," he murmured, smiling down at the dog. He could already imagine Ciarán's delighted reaction when they brought it home. This dog might not be the most well-bred, but Graham had always believed that what mattered most was loyalty. And this dog, with its weathered exterior and its battered eye, had loyalty written all over it. It was exactly the kind of companion Ciarán deserved.

"Come on," Graham said, reaching down to tug gently on the dog's collar, guiding it toward Ginger. "Let's get you home."

The dog followed obediently, as if it already trusted Graham, its tail wagging in joyful anticipation.

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Graham rode Ginger at a canter, the rhythmic thud of hooves pounding in the dirt beneath them, and the dog followed eagerly, his tail wagging furiously and tongue lolling out of his mouth. He barked with pure joy, his paws kicking up dust as he frolicked beside the horse. The dog was hardly a beauty by any standard—his fur was thin and ragged in places, his good eye still a little cloudy—but his temperament was as sweet as Bridget had promised. Every now and then, the dog would dart ahead, tail wagging excitedly, as if to urge Graham to go faster. The two of them—man and

beast—formed an unlikely, yet perfectly matched, team. It felt good to see the dog enjoying himself, to see something, someone, full of life in such a simple, carefree way.

As they reached the ranch, Graham slowed Ginger to a trot, and the dog, as if sensing that they were almost home, trotted alongside them, still full of energy but starting to calm down as they approached the familiar place. The ranch was quiet, the sounds of the animals milling about in the pasture a comforting backdrop to the day's tasks. The barn was just ahead, and Graham saw Ciarán in the yard, corralling the chickens back into their coop, his face contorted in determination as he waved a kitchen towel at the birds, who squawked in protest.

“Ciarán!” Graham called out with a grin.

His husband looked up at the sound of his voice, his eyes lighting up when he saw the dog bounding along beside Graham. “Graham!” Ciarán's voice was full of warmth, a reflection of the joy in his expression. And then, his face broke into a wide smile as he saw the dog clearly for the first time. “A puppy!” he exclaimed, dropping to his knees and opening his arms wide.

The dog, sensing the invitation, raced toward Ciarán with such speed that it knocked him right over when it reached him. “Oof!” Ciarán's surprised yelp was drowned out by the dog's excited barking. The animal's affection was immediate, and it nearly knocked Ciarán flat on his back as it covered him with licks and nuzzles.

Graham chuckled, watching the scene unfold. His heart warmed at the sight. “I knew he'd love you,” he said softly.

Ciarán struggled to sit up, laughing as the dog continued to shower him with affection. “What's his name, Graham?” he asked, still grinning.

“None yet,” Graham replied, shaking his head. “He’s your dog, honey. You name him what you want.”

Ciarán’s expression softened, and he began rubbing the dog’s head, showering it with compliments. “What a lovely, handsome boy. Oh, you need a fitting name.” He paused thoughtfully, his fingers running through the dog’s fur as he contemplated. Then, his eyes lit up. “What about... Roisin? How’s that? Will you be my Roisin?”

Graham wasn’t entirely sure where the name came from or what it meant, but he could tell that Ciarán felt a deep connection with the dog. And the dog, with his wagging tail and eager eyes, seemed to agree. Roisin—it was a name full of care, a name that sounded as though it belonged to something or someone precious. The dog immediately preened under Ciarán’s touch, basking in the affection. It was clear that the name was a fitting one.

Graham stood back for a moment, hands in his pockets, watching the two of them interact. He felt a touch of envy—he was used to being the one to receive Ciarán’s attention, but seeing the bond form between his husband and the dog was something special. A different kind of love. He looked around the ranch, admiring how well everything was coming along. The garden was neat, the crops were thriving, and the livestock seemed content, wandering peacefully in the pasture.

A cow lifted her head and stared at Graham, her large brown eyes chewing on what appeared to be a bouquet of flowers. Her contented chewing was accompanied by the occasional swish of her tail.

“What’s that?” Graham asked, his brow furrowing slightly as he stepped closer.

Ciarán looked over at him, puzzled. “What’s what?”

“That,” Graham said, nodding toward the cow. “What she’s eating.”

“Oh. That.” Ciarán’s face flushed slightly as he wiped his hands on his pants. “Well, a lot of people came by today, asking about Liam and offering to help. And Jean Lachapelle came by too.”

Graham raised an eyebrow at the mention of Jean. “And he brought flowers for him?” His voice held an undertone of surprise. Jean hadn’t exactly struck him as the kind of man who would offer flowers.

Ciarán’s blush deepened as he glanced at the ground, his fingers absently playing with Roisin’s fur. “They weren’t for Liam,” he murmured, his voice a little tight.

Graham’s mind quickly pieced things together. “He came here to see you,” he said, his voice calm but steady. He tried to keep the edge out of his tone, but a flicker of anger sparked within him.

Ciarán nodded reluctantly. “He did ask about Liam, about whether he’d woken up or if he’d seen the thief. At first, I thought the flowers were for Liam, but Jean said they were for me—an apology for how he acted in town. I said I’d accept the apology, but I didn’t think it was right to accept the flowers. But he insisted.” Ciarán’s expression darkened slightly. “He also wanted me to show him around the ranch. He said a few things, but I told him I was too busy. So, he just wandered around by himself. When he left, I threw the flowers to the cows.”

Graham’s jaw tightened. He wasn’t angry with Ciarán, not at all. But the thought of Jean Lachapelle showing up here—using Liam’s injury as an excuse to get close to his husband—made his blood boil. “All right,” Graham said, trying to keep his voice level. “All right, then.”

Ciarán looked up at him, concern etched across his face. “Are you angry?”

“At you?” Graham shook his head firmly. “No. Never. But if there’s a next time, I’ll

be here. The dog and I will be right by your side.”

Ciarán’s face softened at his words, and the mood lightened a bit. Graham smiled and clapped his hands together, changing the subject. “So, you like him then? R-Roisin?”

Ciarán’s face lit up again, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Roisin. I love him. Thank you, Graham.”

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The chores had been completed remarkably early that day, leaving Graham with an unexpected sense of free time before Ronan would return to be with Liam. He had no immediate tasks on his mind and decided to make the most of the quiet moment. When he found Ciarán in the garden, wiping his hands on a cloth, Graham called out to him, inviting him for a walk across the prairie.

“Want to take a stroll with me? There’s time before Ronan gets back,” Graham said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Ciarán looked up and smiled, his warm, brown eyes sparkling in the late afternoon light. “I’d love to,” he said, setting the cloth aside and reaching out for Graham’s hand. They wandered away from the house, leaving behind the familiar comforts of the ranch for the sprawling fields beyond.

The day was still warm, with a gentle breeze ruffling the tall grasses that swayed beneath their feet. The air was thick with the scent of earth and new growth, and the prairie seemed endless, stretching out before them in a patchwork of green and gold. The wildflowers that dotted the landscape were a vivid contrast against the vastness of the fields, bright spots of color that created an impression of tranquility.

But the flowers weren’t the main attraction. As they walked side by side, arms gently

brushing against each other, their conversation turned to the events of the day. Graham began recounting the events at the ranch, the unexpected arrival of the neighbors, and how Clodagh's family had come to offer help.

"Everyone came to help out," he explained, his voice carrying a sense of warmth. "Clodagh and the others worked all day. They wanted to make sure we had everything we needed, with Liam down and out."

Ciarán listened attentively, his hand occasionally slipping into Graham's, a gesture that spoke volumes. "Here as well," Ciarán murmured. "So many people came to ask about Liam, and they wanted to help with whatever they could. Someone was always there with him, keeping him company while the doctor did his work. They brought me lunch, and helped me with the chores. It was overwhelming. I couldn't have managed without them."

Graham nodded, understanding the weight of the situation. "It would've been foolish to turn them down, though," Ciarán continued, a faint frown creasing his brow. "But... I wish I could've done it all myself."

"Why?" Graham asked, genuinely curious.

Ciarán's gaze dropped to the ground, his voice soft. "So that when you came back, I could show you that I managed everything on my own. That I didn't need help." He smiled faintly, as if the thought was bittersweet. "I didn't want you to worry."

Graham squeezed his husband's hand and stopped walking for a moment. He faced him, taking in the honesty in Ciarán's eyes. "I managed everything alone," he said thoughtfully. "But I was always alone. Do you know what I mean?" His voice softened, the weight of those words hitting him in ways he hadn't quite realized. "I'm glad that you've got people around here who care about you. I'm glad you've got friends. You deserve that."

Ciarán smiled up at him, his eyes shining with affection. “They care about us, Graham,” he corrected gently. “They care about both of us. And you’re a part of this town now, too. You’re not alone.” His words seemed to settle into the quiet space between them, and for a moment, neither of them said anything more. They simply stood there, holding each other close, the prairie stretching endlessly before them, the sounds of nature filling the air.

Graham pulled Ciarán a little closer, feeling the warmth of his body against his own. There was so much to be thankful for—Ciarán, the land, their home—and he couldn’t imagine being anywhere else in that moment.

Ciarán cleared his throat suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence. Graham glanced down at him, his smile growing in response to the soft flush creeping onto his husband’s cheeks.

“Are you, um...” Ciarán’s voice trailed off, and he looked almost sheepish. “In the mood?”

Graham blinked, his heart skipping a beat at the question. “Here?” he asked, surprised, his eyebrows rising in disbelief. The last thing he’d expected was a suggestion like this out here in the open.

Ciarán, blushing furiously now, continued, “The grass is tall. Even taller, if we were... lying down.” His voice was low, and his gaze flitted between Graham’s face and the tall prairie grass surrounding them.

Graham stared at him in stunned silence for a moment, his mind working to process what his husband was suggesting. Then, he glanced around. They were at the far edge of their land, where the prairie seemed to go on forever. The wind rustled the grass, and the silence was almost complete, save for the distant calls of birds and the rustling of leaves. They were alone, with no one else in sight.

The image of Ciarán—naked and freckled, laying amongst the wildflowers—sent a surge of heat through Graham’s veins. He swallowed hard, trying to collect himself. “You sure?” he asked, his voice suddenly hoarse. His mind was racing, caught between desire and the knowledge that they were still in the open.

Ciarán nodded, his blush deepening. “We still have some time before supper,” he said, his voice a little breathless. “It’ll be our secret.”

Graham’s lips curled into a smirk as he gave Ciarán’s hand a playful squeeze. “All right, sweetheart,” he said with a wicked glint in his eye. Then, he added, teasing, “But you don’t have to thank me for the dog.”

Ciarán laughed, and without warning, he playfully slapped Graham’s shoulder. The sound of their laughter rang out across the fields, blending with the breeze and the soft whispers of the prairie. And then, they were beneath the sky, hidden amongst the tall grass and wildflowers, lost in the moment and each other. The world outside seemed to fade, leaving only the two of them, wrapped up in the simple joy of being together.

For a while, nothing else mattered—just the warmth of their bodies and the peaceful solitude of the prairie surrounding them. Graham knew there would be more challenges ahead—Ronan and Liam’s situation, the future of the ranch—but for now, as he held Ciarán close, everything felt perfect.

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Graham was completely useless for the rest of the day. His mind kept wandering to the sight of his husband's naked, freckled body glistening in the sunlight as beads of sweat rolled down his chest. How Ciarán had rocked his hips as Graham greedily squeezed his ass. How he'd tried to keep quiet, biting his lip as Graham thrust up into him and how he'd failed, crying out with pleasure at each and every stroke of Graham's cock.

After the fifth or sixth time catching him in a daze, Ciarán asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Jokingly, Graham replied that he was thinking about confessing what they'd done to the priest on Sunday. It'd been too good to not be a sin.

His husband stared at him in horror. "Oh, Graham, don't you dare!"

"That man's heard worse!" Graham laughed. But of course, it was only a joke. There wasn't a soul alive he was sharing that memory with.

Ciarán, skin warm and slightly pinker but thankfully not sunburnt, spent the evening picking blades of grass and petals from Graham's hair.

"It's so lovely and thick," he murmured. His fingers stroked Graham's scalp as they laid in the hayloft together. "Ah, here's another—how did this happen? Every time I think I've found the last..." He dropped a petal into Graham's hand.

Drowsy from his husband's touch, Graham only hummed. He held the petal in front of his eyes. It was a cheerful yellow, a little piece of summer. He let it fall from his

fingers and closed his eyes, settling his head more comfortably in Ciarán's lap. "That feels nice, sweetheart."

"Are you tired?"

Graham smiled. "You wore me out."

"Then let's turn in for the night."

He went to bed exhausted and satisfied, but he was slow moving come morning. Graham stretched gingerly and was rewarded with a dull ache in his back. Wildflowers aside, the ground probably hadn't been the best place for their conjugal activities. Next time they'd be in a bed. Or, Graham amended with a wince, what with their own bed being taken up for Liam's convalescence, maybe they would just find a position that wasn't near so hard on his body.

Once they were out in the sunlight Ciarán noticed his discomfort. He placed his hand on the small of Graham's back. "Are you all right?"

It was a testament to how far they'd come in their relationship that Graham now felt comfortable enough to tease, "Just an ache. You rode me too hard, sweetheart."

"Graham!" His husband gasped so demurely and prettily for being the one to suggest they make love out in the open in the first place. Then his big brown eyes were full of worry. "Oh, I'm sorry, Graham. I didn't think about that."

"I'm not complaining. I'd have you again in a heartbeat." He kissed Ciarán's blushing cheek—soft, and warm.

???

Graham wasn't Irish himself, but being married to one meant the rest of Larkspur's Irish population forgave him the minor inconvenience of having French ancestry. Among the tightly knit community, that was as close to acceptance as one could get without a drop of Irish blood. Those who came to lend a hand at Liam and Ronan's farm quickly realized Graham wasn't one for long conversations. He wasn't unfriendly, but words seemed to weigh heavier on him than most. Still, he didn't mind others talking around him. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it—watching and listening as they shifted seamlessly between English and Irish, their laughter ringing in the air as jokes and jabs flew like sparks from a fire.

Living with Ciarán at home and working with Ronan and the others, Graham had even started picking up bits and pieces of their language. A practical man, he focused on the phrases he heard most often. *Dia dhuit* for hello, *le do thoil* for please, and *amadán*—a term regularly aimed at some of the younger, lazier boys by their crustier, more no-nonsense elders—meant fool. The words came naturally to his ear now, even if his tongue hesitated to follow.

So, on the third day of working at Liam and Ronan's ranch, when one of Clodagh's daughters came charging up the road astride her mother's reliable old mare, Graham immediately understood the urgency in her cry of *Tar go tapa!*—Come quickly!

The girl's blonde hair was a tangled halo of windblown strands, and her eyes were wide and bright with emotion. "Ronan! Graham! Ciarán sent me! You have to follow me right now!"

Graham felt his heart leap and falter in the same breath. He dropped his tools, his voice coming out rough and panicked. "What is it? What's happened? Is it the ranch? The thief?"

But the girl shook her head, her excitement spilling over into every hurried word. "Come on! Liam's woken up!"

For a moment, Graham stood frozen, the weight of her words striking him like a hammer. But Ronan was already moving, swinging into the saddle of his horse with the speed of someone long accustomed to urgent rides. “A ligan ar dul,” he said, his voice thick with emotion, his hands trembling as he took up the reins.

Graham scrambled onto his own horse, repeating the phrase with all the urgency pounding in his chest. “Let’s go.”

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Once more, the ranch was plunged into chaos. The usual rhythm of work had ground to an abrupt halt, replaced by a palpable tension that seemed to thicken the very air. Workers who had been diligently tending to their tasks now found themselves clustered near the front door, their faces etched with anxiety and anticipation, each person silently yearning for some shred of news. Even the livestock, normally indifferent to human affairs, seemed unusually restless, their eyes fixed intently on the house as if sensing the turmoil within.

Clodagh’s daughter called out with urgency, her voice cutting through the murmur of the crowd. “Here they are. I brought them.”

The throng of ranch hands and family members parted like the Red Sea, creating a clear path for Graham and Ronan. Both men paused briefly to offer their heartfelt thanks to the girl before making their way up the winding path that led to the main house.

Graham dismounted Ginger, his faithful horse, and approached the front of the house. “Roisin! Here!” he called out, his voice steady despite the storm of emotions brewing inside him. In response, Roisin barked once, his sharp sound echoing across the yard, before trotting back to his side with his tail wagging energetically. Graham knelt down, gently rubbing his head and soothing his ragged ear. “Good boy,” he

murmured, giving him a reassuring pat. With a firm snap of his fingers, Roisin took his position once again, guarding the entranceway with renewed vigilance.

Inside the house, the bedroom door remained firmly closed, muffling the sounds of urgent conversation that took place beyond its wooden barrier. Graham could hear the low voices, the tension evident even through the thick walls. He exchanged a glance with Ronan, whose face told a complex story of hope, disbelief, and fear all tangled together. Ronan had removed his hat in a gesture of respect and vulnerability, holding it reverently over his heart.

Graham's large hand formed a tentative fist as he approached the door, the weight of his actions pressing heavily upon him. With a deep breath, he rapped his knuckles softly but firmly against the wood, the sound reverberating slightly in the quiet of the house.

“Liam?” Ronan's voice called out, tinged with both hope and anxiety.

A moment later, a delighted cry responded from within. “Ronan! Come in, my love, let me see you!”

Ronan's eyes lit up with relief and joy as he moved with surprising speed, almost instinctively, to swing himself onto his horse. His eagerness almost made the door seem too slow, but the bedroom door held steadfast. For a brief instant, Ronan stood frozen, staring in awe at his husband, who was now sitting up in bed, an empty teacup and saucer resting in his lap. The sight of Liam, so vulnerable yet radiant with life, filled Ronan with an overwhelming surge of emotion. Without hesitation, he was by Liam's side, showering him with kisses—his hands caressing Liam's face, his jaw, and gently touching his still- bandaged head. “My love, my love,” he whispered repeatedly, each word laden with affection and relief.

The doctor, who had been monitoring Liam's condition closely, quickly intervened.

She swiftly grabbed the teacup and saucer, carefully setting them down on the nightstand to prevent them from falling to the floor. “As I was telling your husband, Ronan—strict bedrest for at least a week. No chores or other arduous activities,” she reminded them, her tone professional yet compassionate.

Liam let out a gruff harrumph, the remnants of his disorientation still evident. “And what shall I do while my mind and body waste away to nothing?” he demanded, the edge in his voice betraying his normally calm demeanor.

Ciarán, who had been standing silently and watching the exchange with a gentle smile, stepped forward to ease the tension. “Oh, don’t worry, Liam. I’ll come and visit and keep you company,” he offered, his voice soothing and steady.

Liam sighed deeply, the weight of his circumstances pressing down on him. “Well, at least I’ll be a better host now that I’m conscious,” he mused, trying to inject some humor into the grim situation. “So, tell me. What happened?”

Graham and Ronan exchanged uncomfortable looks, the air thick with unspoken fears and uncertainties. “You don’t remember anything from that night, Liam?” Ciarán asked, his tone gentle but probing.

Liam placed a reassuring hand on Ronan’s shoulder. “I remember that something had upset the animals, and that I went to check on them. Then—nothing.” He managed a grim smile, lightly touching his bandaged head as if to reassure himself. “A great big nothing cracked my skull open like an egg.” He chuckled softly, immediately wincing at the pain, but the attempt to lighten the mood was evident.

While Ronan fretted over his husband’s condition, Ciarán continued, “Never mind, Liam. They’ll find the culprit. The sheriff and his deputies are looking into it.”

Graham, feeling the tension rise again, tried to mask his discomfort. He attempted to

turn his snort into a cough, a futile effort to deflect the seriousness of the situation. “Pardon me,” he said hastily, meeting Ciarán’s stern glare with a sheepish expression.

Liam, noticing Graham’s unease, merely smirked. “Nothing to apologize for. We have the same regard for lawmen, I think. If they’d only taken the horse theft more seriously—isn’t that so, my love?” His eyes met Ronan’s, seeking affirmation.

Ronan gave a long, satisfied sigh, the frustration of the past days momentarily easing.

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They prepared a small cart to transport Liam back to his and Ronan’s ranch. It was a sturdy little vehicle, outfitted with layers of soft pillows and thick blankets. Graham couldn’t help but think it looked more comfortable than any bed he’d ever slept in—like sitting on a cloud made of wool and down. It seemed a fitting throne for someone who had narrowly escaped death.

Liam, however, didn’t share Graham’s admiration for the contraption. Standing stiffly in the yard, he crossed his arms and stared at the cart as if it had personally offended him. “Don’t be ridiculous, Ronan. I’ll ride one of the horses—”

Before he could finish, Ronan stepped forward, his eyes flashing. He jabbed a finger at the cart with the force of a command and launched into a torrent of furious Irish. “No. Suífidh tú agus ligfidh tú do scíth. Chaill mé beagnach thú. Má tá grá agat dom, suífidh tú, agus ligfidh mé aire duit!” His words came fast and sharp, cutting through any protest Liam might have made. Then, seeing the stunned expression on Liam’s face, Ronan softened, adding in a gentler but no less firm tone, “Is féidir liom a bheith chomh stubborn mar tú nuair is mian liom a bheith.”

Liam blinked, his mouth twitching as though he wanted to argue but thought better of it. Finally, he sighed in defeat. “Well, if you insist.”

Graham, standing off to the side, didn't understand most of what Ronan had said, but he didn't need to. The tone, the gestures, and Liam's reaction told the story well enough: Ronan had put his foot down.

With Ronan's help, Liam climbed into the cart, his movements slow and careful. Once settled, he waved to the crowd that had gathered to see them off. Graham watched as Ronan climbed onto his horse, taking the reins and leading the cart down the road. The pair looked every bit like a king and his devoted knight, and Graham couldn't help but smile.

He placed a hand on the small of Ciarán's back, and together they stood in the quiet yard, watching their friends until they disappeared over the horizon.

The other Irish neighbors, who had come in droves to help, insisted on staying until all the day's chores were done. They worked with the easy cheer of people buoyed by good news, and by the time the last wheelbarrow was stowed and the final gate latched, everyone's spirits were high. Handshakes, hugs, and well-wishes were exchanged before the group finally dispersed, leaving Graham and Ciarán standing alone in the dusky quiet of the ranch.

After all the commotion of the past few days, the silence felt like a balm. The absence of bustling voices, clinking tools, and barking dogs left room for the natural sounds of the ranch to reclaim their place: the rustling of the trees, the soft lowing of the cattle, and the distant whinny of a horse. Graham let out a long, slow breath, tension draining from his shoulders as he turned to Ciarán.

It was a relief to finally have time alone with his husband again.

But there was one matter they couldn't ignore.

Graham glanced at the small bed tucked against the wall of their bedroom. It had

served them well enough in the early days, its too-small frame forcing them to sleep close—an arrangement neither had minded. But that same bed had borne witness to Liam's injury and recovery. It had been soaked with blood, its blankets used to staunch the flow, and for days, it had held the weight of life and death. Now, even clean and empty, it felt like it belonged to a different chapter of their lives.

"I'll finish the new frame," Graham said, breaking the silence. His voice was steady, practical. "And we'll order a new mattress. But we've got the bedroll, and plenty of blankets. It'll do for now."

Ciarán frowned slightly, tilting his head. "Will that be comfortable for you?"

Graham chuckled. "More comfortable than the hayloft."

"Well, all right, then." Ciarán gave a small smile, his frown easing. "That's fine with me. Let's go to the general store tomorrow."

Graham nodded. "We can do that." The idea of a trip to town—a chance to replace what had been lost and perhaps indulge in a few treats—appealed to him. The past few days had been relentless, and he wanted to reclaim some small piece of normalcy. "What should we do with the old bed?"

The mattress, though slightly lumpy, was still serviceable. Graham glanced at it with a carpenter's critical eye, but Ciarán tapped a thoughtful finger against his chin before Graham could suggest selling it.

"Perhaps—" Ciarán's lips curved into a mischievous smile. "Perhaps Roisin would like it. We could keep it at the foot of our new bed."

As if summoned by his name, Roisin appeared in the doorway, his tail wagging enthusiastically. The dog had quickly become spoiled during the recent chaos,

basking in attention and treats from the visitors. He looked every bit the pampered pet, his posture one of lazy confidence, as though he knew his life was enviable.

Graham grinned. “Well, let’s see if he approves.”

The two of them dragged the mattress down from the bed frame and laid it on the floor in the corner of the room. Ciarán fetched one of Roisin’s blankets and spread it across the top, tucking it neatly. Roisin trotted up, sniffed the setup thoroughly, then circled once before flopping down in the center. He let out a contented sigh and rested his chin on his paws, his eyes half-closed. It was as if the mattress had always been his, and he’d simply been waiting for them to realize it.

“Well, I’d say he approves,” Ciarán said with a chuckle.

Graham folded his arms, watching the dog settle in. “Looks like he’s claimed it.”

Roisin wagged his tail lazily in agreement, his kingdom now complete.

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Over the next week, their lives gradually settled back into a rhythm of normalcy. Graham and Ciarán fell into their familiar routine: working side by side during the day, sharing hearty meals at sundown, and curling up together at night. The kitchen floor, with its warmth from the stove, became their makeshift bedroom. Ciarán had insisted it would be cozier and far more comfortable than the hayloft, and while Graham had been skeptical at first, he had to admit his husband was right.

The bedrolls, layered with thick blankets, provided a snug cocoon where they could drift off to sleep in each other’s arms. Even Roisin seemed content with the arrangement, often curling up nearby, his soft snores adding to the domestic tranquility.

Though they spent most of their time together, there were still moments when they went their separate ways. Ciarán, ever the social butterfly, made a habit of attending small gatherings in town or visiting their neighbors. Graham, on the other hand, preferred the quiet satisfaction of working on the ranch or tinkering with projects in the barn.

One such morning, after the day's chores were complete, Graham found Ciarán in the yard, saddling up Bó. The sunlight glinted off the polished leather of the saddle, and Ciarán, humming a cheerful tune, was already securing a saddlebag.

"Where are you off to, sweetheart?" Graham asked, leaning against the fence post with a curious smile.

Ciarán glanced up, returning the smile with one of his own. "I'm going to visit Liam and Ronan. Thought I'd bring them a little something."

He opened the saddlebag, revealing its contents with a flourish. Inside was a jar of gleaming blackberry jam, a neatly wrapped square of shortbread, and a tin of their best black tea.

Graham chuckled. "Jam, huh? Is it just me, or does everyone around here seem to gift jam for every occasion?"

Ciarán laughed as he adjusted the straps. "It's tradition, love. Jam's practical, delicious, and it always feels thoughtful. Besides, who doesn't like a little sweetness now and then?"

Graham couldn't argue with that. In fact, he had developed quite an appreciation for Ciarán's blackberry jam. His husband had spent days perfecting the recipe, and Graham had been more than happy to act as the official taste tester. Each jar was a small masterpiece, bursting with flavor, and Graham often found himself sneaking

spoonfuls straight from the jar. Watching Ciarán lick the sticky sweetness off his own fingers during these culinary experiments had been... well, distracting in all the best ways.

“That’s not the last of the blackberry jam, is it?” Graham asked, eyeing the jar. The bushes on their property were heavy with ripe fruit, and the two of them had spent hours harvesting the berries.

“Oh, there’s plenty left,” Ciarán assured him, fastening the saddlebag. “We’ve got more than we can eat. I was actually thinking—we could sell the extra. Do you think Mrs. Fournier might be interested?”

Graham nodded. “She’d jump at the chance. That jam of yours will sell like hotcakes. I’ll bring some along next time I head to town to sell the eggs.”

The way Ciarán’s face lit up at the idea was too sweet to resist. Graham stepped closer, pulling him into a kiss that left Ciarán laughing and breathless.

“Graham!” he chided playfully. “Not now, or I’ll be late for tea!”

Graham grinned but released him, his hands reluctantly moving from Ciarán’s shapely backside to rest on his hips instead. “All right, but be careful out there. And tell them I said hello.”

“I will,” Ciarán promised, giving Graham a quick peck on the cheek before swinging up onto Bó’s back.

With a wave, Ciarán rode off, the horse’s hooves kicking up small clouds of dust as they trotted down the road. Graham watched until they disappeared from view, the warmth of Ciarán’s parting smile lingering like a sunbeam.

Turning back toward the barn, he rubbed his hands together and let out a satisfied sigh.

It was time to finish the bedframe.

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Never before had Graham poured so much of himself into a single piece of work. The patterns on the headboard and footboard of their new bedframe weren't just designs—they were a testament to the life he and Ciarán had built together, to the love they shared, and to the future they were growing with every passing day.

Graham was no stranger to crafting. His hands had built the barn where their horses found shelter, the chicken coop that housed their hens, the fence that kept their livestock safe, the house that had become their home, and the furniture that filled it. But this bedframe was different. It wasn't just about functionality or necessity—it was about beauty, about joy. It was about giving Ciarán something that would make him smile every time he looked at it.

The wood felt alive under Graham's hands as he carved, his blade moving with careful precision. He thought of Ciarán's letters, the ones they had exchanged before this life was even a possibility. How those pages, filled with sketches of prairie wildflowers and dreams of a shared future, had carried him through long, lonely nights. Ciarán had a gift for imagining beauty even in the roughest of places, and Graham wanted this bed to reflect that—to reflect him.

Each cluster of bluebells and daylilies seemed to bloom beneath his knife, their petals opening wide in full, intricate detail. Dainty wild roses climbed the corners of the headboard, their delicate stems weaving through the other flowers like ribbons of greenery. He added sunflowers, their proud faces turned skyward, and the curling fronds of ferns, grounding the whole piece in the earthy vitality of the prairie that

Ciarán had once only dreamed of.

The work was slow and meticulous, but Graham didn't mind. Every stroke of his blade, every sweep of sandpaper, every gentle press of the chisel was a meditation on his love for the man who had changed his life. The bedframe would be strong and steady, just like their bond, but it would also be intricate and beautiful, a reminder of the ways Ciarán had brought light and color to Graham's world.

He thought of mornings yet to come: waking with Ciarán at his side, the dawn creeping through the curtains and gilding the wildflowers he had so carefully carved. He thought of nights when they would tumble into bed together, their laughter filling the room, and the warmth of Ciarán's arms around him as they drifted off to sleep. This bed wasn't just for sleeping—it was a symbol of the life they had built and the many more days they would share.

By the time the sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the workshop, Graham stepped back and wiped the sweat from his brow. His shirt clung to him, damp from the heat of the day, and his hands ached from hours of steady work. But his gaze lingered on the bedframe, taking in every detail. The carved wildflowers seemed almost to sway in the fading light, and the wood's surface gleamed, smooth and warm to the touch.

He frowned, his brow furrowing with worry. What if Ciarán didn't like it? What if the flowers weren't quite right, or the patterns didn't suit his taste? The thought made his stomach twist, but he shook it off. Ciarán had a way of finding beauty in everything Graham did, no matter how small.

Still, this wasn't small. This was their bed. It had to be perfect.

With a deep breath, Graham reached out to trace one of the carved roses, his rough fingers skimming the delicate petals. He thought of Ciarán's smile, of the way his

face lit up when he was happy, and a quiet determination settled in his chest.

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As the hours passed Graham grew more nervous. At first, he'd thought his work good, and placed the bedrolls, pillows, and blankets onto the frame with satisfaction. But then he'd wandered back into their room some minutes later and stared at it, and decided it was an affront to their carpentry, art, and his marriage. Graham waffled between pride and despair and then, once Ciarán arrived home, filled with tea sandwiches and cookies and gossip, he only wished that his husband wouldn't be disappointed.

"You had a good time?" he asked Ciarán as he led him back to the house.

"It was very nice. Liam's relegated to the inside of the house—Ronan's insistent on making him rest, and Liam said he's been getting antsy with all the free time, so he was glad to have an afternoon tea. The blackberry jam went over very well," Ciarán added, obviously pleased.

"Knew it would. You made it, after all."

Ciarán chuckled. "Thank you, Graham. Both Liam and Ronan send their best. They want you to come with me next time."

"I'd like that." Graham cleared his throat. "Got a surprise for you."

"Oh?"

He cleared his throat again, nervous, and motioned for Ciarán to accompany him to their bedroom. Graham opened the door with a flourish that he didn't quite feel. "Well," he said. "Here's our new bed."

By the sound of Ciarán's gasp someone might've thought that Graham had presented him a mountain of gold and jewels. "Oh, Graham!" It seemed to be all he could say as he walked around the bed, marveling at the decoration, running his fingers over the flowers. "Graham!"

"You like it, then?"

"Of course I do! I can't believe you've made this for me—for us! It's so beautiful. I love it! I love you! I—" He stopped, eyes the size of saucers, his cheeks that lovely shade of pink. "Oh, Graham, I love you."

Never in his life would Graham hear a lovelier phrase. What were songs and poems compared to those words from Ciarán's lips? He thought his heart would burst from sheer joy. "Ciarán, I—" He swallowed. "I've loved you since—since I read your first letter to me."

"Even then?" Ciarán asked, softly.

"Even then."

Ciarán took his hands in his. "I knew you would be kind. I could tell that, just from reading that advertisement you put out. When I received your response I showed everyone in the boarding house, you know. I thought, here's something. Here's someone. Here's a life for me. You said you would teach me, do you remember? That you'd take care of me as a husband should. All through the train ride I was so excited. And then—" He gazed up at Graham through his lashes. "And then I laid eyes on you for the first time and I knew there wasn't a man luckier than I was. I didn't expect you to be so handsome. I didn't expect you to give me flowers."

Gruffly, Graham said, "You wanted to see the flowers. In your letter. And you drew them in your sketches. I wanted—to give you what you wanted. I wanted you to be

happy here. With me.”

“I am.”

“Can you say it again?” Graham swallowed. “That you love me?”

Not for the first time he admired Ciarán’s eyes—the shape of them, their color like that of dark honey, his long lashes. Now they shone. “I love you, Graham!” He cried out in surprise when Graham lifted him up into his arms. He wrapped his legs around Graham’s waist and rested his hands on his shoulders. When Graham kissed his neck and his beard brushed against his skin he laughed, and Graham laughed too, open and joyously.

“I love you,” he whispered, lips on Ciarán’s throat. He said it again and again and again, even as he brought his husband to lay in their new bed, even as unbuttoned Ciarán’s shirt and ran his hands greedily over his chest, his nipples, his stomach, even as he pulled his pants down and pulled his cock free from his underclothes and stroked it as Ciarán moaned his name.

“Graham—Graham—”

Graham pressed his lips to the tip, sweeping up a bead of precum with his tongue. It simply wasn’t enough to say the words. He needed to show his husband how much he loved him with his body. His hands, his mouth, his cock—all were to be used for Ciarán’s pleasure.

He hissed as Ciarán’s long, elegant fingers grasped his hair and tugged. Graham palmed at the front of his pants, trying to ease the ache of his arousal. Ciarán trembled beneath him as he continued to lick his cock with the flat of his tongue. His face was flushed and red, his curls damp with sweat. So beautiful, and his—his husband, his love.

Lord, let him forever be Ciarán's.

With another cry, Ciarán arched his back, thrusting further into Graham's mouth and spilling down his throat, salty and hot. His trembled as he came, breathing with small, sweet little gasps. "Graham," he said again.

"Ciarán." He barely recognized his own voice; it was so desperate and rough with wanting. He gently turned Ciarán onto his side and freed his own leaking cock from his pants to slip it between his husband's legs. Ciarán squirmed as Graham fucked his thighs, smearing them with precum. He reached between them, brushing Graham's cock with his fingers. Light, gentle little touches, as if he were trying to tease out Graham's climax.

It was working.

Graham kissed Ciarán's bare shoulder. When he thrust between Ciarán's warm, slick thighs once more, he gritted his teeth and shivered when Ciarán cupped his hand around him. "Make me come, sweetheart, please."

Ciarán turned his head to catch Graham's lips with his. Graham kissed him eagerly and hungrily, and then he spilled between Ciarán's thighs with a shuddering groan. He wrapped his arms around Ciarán, pulling him towards him, gasping into his ear, murmuring Ciarán and I love you over and over.

When they grew too hot and sticky to be comfortable Graham eased himself up to fetch a cloth and a basin of water. His husband's legs and pants were streaked with cum. With careful swipes of the damp cloth Graham cleaned the evidence of their pleasure off Ciarán's skin. The pants, though, would need a good wash.

Ciarán giggled as Graham brought the cloth along his upper thigh. "I'm ticklish there."

Graham grinned. “I know.” Then, watching Ciarán stretch, he said, “Nice to have a bed to ourselves again.”

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Some days later Mr. Fournier arrived at the ranch with a cart full of goods to deliver. As Graham and Ciarán helped him lift the mattress and bring it inside the house, he said, “Must’ve been hard sleeping for you both without one of these.”

Graham glanced at his husband. “We made do just fine,” he said.

Ciarán blushed.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:56 am

The blackberry jam wasn't just delicious; it was extraordinary. Graham knew this for a fact because he'd eaten more than his fair share during the past week. The blackberries came from wild brambles he had transplanted to the ranch years ago, giving them a proper place to thrive. With careful pruning and attention, the bushes now produced plump, sweet berries in abundance, their deep purple hues glistening in the sun. They were perfect for eating fresh, baking into pies, or—most importantly—making jam.

The house had smelled divine when Ciarán was at work in the kitchen, the air thick with the rich, fruity aroma as pots of bubbling jam simmered on the stove. The jars themselves were as delightful as their contents: each one meticulously prepared and adorned by Ciarán's careful hands. A square of purple cloth covered each lid, fastened neatly with a bow of dark green ribbon. Together, the jars were a small treasure trove of sweetness, each one prepared with love and precision. Graham was confident they'd fetch a fine price at the general store, but he knew Ciarán wasn't so sure.

On their way to town, Ciarán's nerves were palpable. He chattered anxiously as they bumped along the dirt road, casting frequent glances into the back of the cart to check on their crate of goods. Every few minutes, he turned to inspect the jars, the small wheels of cheese, and the eggs, making sure everything was just as it should be.

"But blackberries are everywhere," Ciarán fretted, chewing his bottom lip. "Anyone can just pick some and make their own jam."

"That's true," Graham replied calmly, "but they haven't. You have."

Ciarán sighed, fiddling with the edge of his sleeve. “What if people don’t like it?”

“They will,” Graham said with quiet certainty. “It’s not to everyone’s taste, sure, but you’ve made something good. People will like it.”

Ciarán wasn’t convinced. “Oh, but I’ve never sold anything before. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Graham chuckled softly. “I manage, don’t I? And I’m not much of a talker.”

Ciarán turned to him with an earnest expression. “You do yourself a disservice, Graham. You have such a quiet, confident air. When you speak, it’s... authoritative.” A faint blush colored his cheeks. “It’s very admirable. And attractive.”

Normally, Graham would have puffed up with pride at the compliment, but today he sensed something else in Ciarán’s tone—a hint of self-doubt. That wouldn’t do.

“Maybe,” Graham said thoughtfully. “But you’ve got something better. You’ve got charm. You talk, and people like you. That’s not something I’ve got, but you do.”

Ciarán smiled, though he still seemed a bit nervous. “Thank you, Graham.”

“You’re welcome.”

The town was alive with summer activity by the time they arrived. Children darted through the streets, their laughter ringing out like bells, while townsfolk milled about, running errands or stopping to chat in small groups. A couple sat outside the restaurant with their young daughters, sipping lemonade. The scene was bright and cheerful, a picture of everyday life.

Graham pulled the cart to a stop near the general store and turned to his husband.

“I’m going to find a trough for the horses,” he said.

Ciarán nodded, though his complexion was a little pale. “Okay. I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“You sure?”

Ciarán rolled his eyes affectionately. “Graham, it’s barely a stroll.”

True enough—the store was just a short distance away. Even so, Graham felt a pang of hesitation. “Still,” he mumbled, reluctant to let Ciarán go on his own.

His husband leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be fine,” he said firmly.

As Graham handed him the crate of goods, he paused. “Sweetheart?”

“Yes?”

“You’ll do just fine.”

Ciarán’s lips quirked into a small, grateful smile before setting in a determined line. “I’m going to sell these jams!” The jars clinked softly as he adjusted the crate in his arms.

“I know you will,” Graham replied, his voice steady and reassuring. “Just come get me when you’re done.”

He watched as Ciarán marched down the street, his back straight and his chin held high, though Graham could tell he was still nervous. When Ciarán reached the steps of the general store, he paused, glancing back over his shoulder to find Graham.

Graham waved, offering a small smile of encouragement.

Ciarán nodded, then squared his shoulders and strode through the door. Graham sat back in the cart, the faintest of smiles tugging at his lips as he watched the door swing shut behind his husband.

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Once the horses were watered and resting, Graham decided to take a leisurely walk around town. The streets bustled with life on this warm summer's day, the hum of conversation and the distant peals of children's laughter creating a pleasant backdrop. As he strolled, a thought settled over him like the warm sunlight: he was just like any other man waiting for his spouse.

The idea filled him with a quiet, satisfying pride. When Ciarán finished his business, they might visit the restaurant and order lemonade, like the family they'd seen earlier. Or perhaps they'd head straight home to celebrate Ciarán's first foray into Larkspur's market. Both were equally fine options. Either way, he would spend the day with his husband, and that was all Graham truly cared about.

Those thoughts warmed him, accompanying him as he wandered through the streets, nodding at shopkeepers cleaning their storefronts and exchanging polite greetings with townsfolk. For a man who lived mostly with animals and the quiet rhythm of the ranch, this was a fine change of pace. People-watching had a charm of its own, and the town seemed alive with little stories playing out on every corner. A man haggled over the price of grain, two women shared conspiratorial whispers outside the bakery, and a pair of boys darted between wagons, a stolen loaf of bread clutched between them.

It was a fine time—until he crossed paths with Jean Lachapelle.

The man was impossible to miss, with his gaudy fashion and smug demeanor. Today, he wore a striped waistcoat with silver buttons, a gold pocket watch dangling ostentatiously from a chain, and boots polished to an absurd sheen. But no matter how often Lachapelle changed his attire, his expression never shifted: that sneer, etched permanently onto his face, like he was the only rooster in a yard full of hens.

“Well, well,” Lachapelle drawled, his voice dripping with mockery. “It’s been a while since you graced us with your presence, Shepherd.”

Graham’s mood soured instantly. Lachapelle’s voice could curdle milk, and it had certainly ruined his walk. Resisting the urge to spit at the man’s polished boots, Graham replied curtly, “Been busy. You might’ve heard.”

“Oh, the whole town knows,” Lachapelle said, his tone laced with faux sympathy. “But I hear your neighbor’s recovered. Sprightly as ever.”

“That’s right,” Graham said, keeping his tone even.

“I also heard he couldn’t identify the thief.”

Graham’s eyes narrowed. “No.”

Lachapelle’s too-casual tone grated on Graham’s nerves as he continued, “Was it that he didn’t see the thief, or that he couldn’t remember?”

Graham clenched his jaw. “Go ask the sheriff if you’re so interested.”

Lachapelle didn’t blink. “Here I am trying to have a civil conversation, and you’re being extremely brusque. I’d call it rude if I didn’t already know you were lacking in social graces.”

Graham's temper flared. "You've got a lot of nerve to talk about social graces after what you tried to pull with my husband."

The memory of that day still burned in Graham's mind. Lachapelle had come to the ranch while Graham was away, bearing flowers and some pretense of concern. Whatever words he'd exchanged with Ciarán had left his husband visibly shaken, and that was something Graham couldn't forgive.

"Why, all I did was inquire about your neighbor's health," Lachapelle said, feigning innocence. "And ask a few questions about your home."

Graham growled, "Stay away from him."

Lachapelle smirked. "Possessive, aren't you? Where is he now? I'd have thought you'd keep him on a tight leash. But I suppose he's easier to train than a dog. He almost speaks English."

The insult hit like a spark to dry tinder. Before Graham could think, his hands shot out, grabbing Lachapelle by the waistcoat and slamming him against the nearest wall. The man's eyes widened in shock. For years, Graham had tolerated Lachapelle's barbs with little more than a grunt or glare, but this was different. This wasn't about him—this was about Ciarán. And no one insulted his husband.

"What are you two doing? By God, don't I have enough to deal with without grown men squabbling in the street?"

The doctor's sharp voice cut through the moment like a whip. She marched out of her office, her expression stern. "Mr. Shepherd! Let him go!"

Snarling, Graham hesitated for a moment before he released Lachapelle, though his fists itched to land at least one punch.

“It’s a good thing you were here to witness this,” Lachapelle said, his voice dripping with indignation. “He attacked me—”

“Don’t think I didn’t hear what you said, Mr. Lachapelle,” the doctor interrupted. “You’d best run back to your father. How is it you’re always surprised when someone gets tired of your insults? Your father’s hired hands might tolerate your abuse, but the world is much larger than the baron’s property. You’d do well to remember that. Now, kindly leave my front steps, both of you. You’re scaring my patients.”

Lachapelle glared at Graham with a venomous look but dusted himself off and stalked away under the doctor’s watchful eye.

Graham turned to her, his anger cooling. “I’m sorry, doctor.”

She sighed, waving a hand dismissively. “Everyone’s on edge lately. This thief has got people rattled, and the summer heat doesn’t help. Just be careful, Mr. Shepherd. There’s enough trouble in town without you making more.”

“I don’t intend to,” Graham said firmly.

She gave him a long look before nodding and heading back inside. Graham stood there for a moment, rolling his shoulders and exhaling slowly. Trouble, indeed. He’d need to find Ciarán soon—being with his husband always had a way of reminding Graham what really mattered.

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He returned to the horses chastened and angry with himself. Angry that he’d given in to his temper and caused a scene in the middle of town, and angry that he hadn’t been quick enough to land a single punch on Lachapelle before the doctor intervened.

Graham cupped his hands and dipped them into the water trough. He splashed his face, the cool water dripping into his beard and running down his neck. Ginger and Bó sniffed at him, their ears flicking in what felt like shared disapproval of his behavior. He gave the horses a sheepish look. "All right, I know. You're better at keeping your head than I am."

As he straightened, water still dripping from his beard, he noticed a small cluster of townspeople lingering nearby. Their wary glances and muted muttering only added to his frustration.

"Morning," Graham said curtly.

The group dispersed quickly, though their whispers carried faintly on the breeze. He shook his head and turned back to the trough, swiping water over his face one last time before Ginger tried to dunk her head into it.

"Sir, that's for the animals."

Graham whirled around, his cheeks flushing at the sound of Ciarán's teasing voice. His husband stood a few feet away, hands folded behind his back, his expression alight with amusement.

"I was just—" Graham started, fumbling for an excuse.

Ciarán laughed, his smile as warm as the summer sun. "It's okay, Graham. I'm only teasing. It is rather warm today, isn't it?"

The sound of Ciarán's laughter chased away the last of Graham's irritation. His husband looked much more at ease now, a sharp contrast to the nervous energy he'd carried earlier that morning. "Did it go well, then?" Graham asked, straightening.

Ciarán's grin widened as he proudly held out a slip of paper. "See for yourself."

Graham took the receipt, his eyes scanning over Mrs. Fournier's familiar looping script:

? 2 dz. eggs - \$0.60

? 5 lbs. farmer's cheese - \$0.75

? 5 jars blackberry jam - \$1.50

"Look at that!" Graham exclaimed, his grin broad. "Didn't I tell you everything would be just fine?"

Ciarán flushed slightly under the praise. "You did."

"Hold on, though," Graham said, frowning playfully. "Didn't we have six jars of jam?"

Ciarán's cheeks deepened in color. "Oh, I gave one to Mrs. Fournier as a gift. Just a little thank-you for all she's done for us—the mattress especially. And, well, I thought perhaps a sample might encourage future sales."

Graham chuckled, shaking his head. "You're a clever one, aren't you? I'm real proud of you."

Ciarán beamed, the sight making Graham's chest swell. He slipped an arm around his husband's waist and kissed him gently. Ciarán laughed, his face glowing pink. "It's a nice little amount, isn't it? What should we spend it on?"

The question made Graham pause. He didn't want Ciarán to think he had to earn his

place in their home—it was as much his as it was Graham’s. But he also knew that Ciarán took pride in contributing, and ignoring that would only hurt him. After a moment’s thought, he said, “We could put some toward a fresh coat of paint for the house. Make it look real nice.”

Ciarán nodded enthusiastically. “I think that’s a wonderful idea!”

“It’s an idea,” Graham said with a shrug, giving Ciarán a squeeze. “But it’s your sale, so you ought to keep some for yourself.”

“Oh, I—” Ciarán hesitated, looking uncertain. “Are you sure, Graham?”

“Of course I’m sure. Isn’t there something you’ve been wanting? Something just for you?”

“Well,” Ciarán began, nibbling at his lower lip—a tell Graham knew well. “Yes, there is something I’ve been thinking about. But I think it might be best to discuss it later. At home.”

That piqued Graham’s curiosity, but he simply nodded. “All right. We’ll talk when we get back.”

As he tried to puzzle out what Ciarán might have in mind—something in the catalog at Mrs. Fournier’s store, maybe? Or a piece of furniture?—he held out his arm. “Come on. Let’s go to the restaurant and get something to eat. I’ve been wanting a glass of lemonade.”

Ciarán slipped his arm through Graham’s, his earlier nervousness nowhere in sight. Together, they started toward the restaurant, the warm sun overhead and a quiet satisfaction settling between them.

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Between the two of them they shared half a pitcher of lemonade, perfectly sweet and extremely refreshing, a small plate of gingersnap cookies, and a platter of tiny cucumber sandwiches, cut into triangles. A light lunch with good company, made even better by how proud Ciarán was to pay their bill.

“I like treating you,” he said as they left. They linked their arms together as they walked back to the cart.

Graham enjoyed being treated, but it didn’t have to come at the expense of Ciarán’s hard-earned money. “I can think of a few different ways you can treat me,” he said. A fresh cooked meal at home would suit him just fine. A nice walk around the ranch. Or maybe Ciarán could read aloud to him after dinner—he had a wonderful voice.

Ciarán, however, interpreted his words differently. He smiled flirtatiously, cheeks turning that pretty pink, and replied “Oh, well—so can I, Graham.” There was something quite promising in his expression, and Graham hastened them to the cart, eager to get home and in bed.

The cart clattered down the road at a steady pace. They were barely halfway to the ranch when Ciarán leaned against him, heavy and warm, and kissed his cheek. Graham smiled, turned his head to catch Ciarán’s lips, then returned to driving the horses along the path.

Something tickled his leg. Graham glanced down and saw Ciarán’s fingers graze his knee. When he met Graham’s gaze he smiled wider and reached between his legs to stroke his inner thigh. A blaze of heat surged through Graham’s body. He asked, in a somewhat strangled voice, “What are you up to?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Ciarán stared at him with wide-eyed innocence. “I’m just enjoying the beautiful day with my husband.” Without an ounce of modesty, he palmed Graham’s cock, rubbing him through the material of his pants.

Sweat beaded on Graham’s forehead. He looked around. They weren’t too far away from the ranch, and the road wasn’t busy. He stopped the cart. “Maybe we should take a walk, then,” he said, sounding more nonchalant than he felt.

Ciarán preened as though he had won a great victory. He swung his legs over the side of the cart and hopped out, a small skip in his step. Graham eagerly followed him, leaving Ginger and Bó at the side of the road, nibbling on wildflowers.

Once underneath the shade of the trees Ciarán immediately undressed. He tossed his hat to the ground, kicked off his shoes, stepped out of his pants, and stood there clad only in his shirt and socks, surrounded by junipers and oaks. He looked like a forest sprite, mischievous, alluring, impossible to resist.

Graham practically threw his belt onto the grass. “Come here, honey,” he said.

The grove rang with Ciarán’s delighted laughter as Graham hauled him up. He hooked his legs around Graham’s waist, clasping his hands at the back of Graham’s neck. He was a bit heavier, Graham thought, trying and failing to hide a grin. Married life had been good to him. Graham guided them toward the trees, so that Ciarán’s back rested against the tree trunk. If anyone happened by, Graham’s block would block Ciarán from view. And, it provided just a bit more support for his bad leg.

“You good?” Graham asked.

Ciarán laughed again. “Very good.”

“All right, then.” He eased Ciarán down onto his cock, chest swelling with pride as

Ciarán's laughter turned to a low moan.

It was rough and quick and messy. It had to be. There was a chance that they could be seen—even when they'd made love in the fields, they'd still been on their own property. Here, anyone might pass by and see Graham taking his husband against a tree like they were a pair of insatiable newlyweds.

Which, he supposed, they still were. When did a couple stop being newlyweds? A year down the road, or maybe two. He'd never been told the exact time, only to enjoy the honeymoon period, as the more time spent in marriage, the less romance there was. Graham had never paid it much thought before—he'd never imagined he'd find himself married and in love and happy. But as Ciarán clenched around him, lashes fluttering, nails digging into his back, moaning his name, Graham was sure that the bloom would never come off this rose. What could be better than being with his husband?

"You feel amazing, sweetheart." He gave a sharp thrust into Ciarán's tight heat.

Ciarán shivered in his arms. "Oh! Oh, Graham—" His words quickly dissolved into sharp cries as Graham hammered that spot over and over again. He writhed against him, stockinged feet pressing at the small of Graham's back.

Sweat ran down Graham's neck. He could feel it pooling in his shirt, the cotton material damp against his skin hot. Leaves, bright and green, fluttered to the ground around them as their movements shook the tree. Graham panted against Ciarán's flushed neck, wondering at the turn his life had taken, that here he was on a beautiful, warm, sunny summer day, fully clothed, rutting into his husband without a care in the world.

He let out a breathless laugh. "I love you," he said.

Ciarán clutched his shoulders, spilling onto Graham's shirt with a shuddering gasp. "Oh!" He tightened around Graham's cock, milking the orgasm from him not a few moments later.

"God, Ciarán—" Graham panted. He pressed a wet kiss to Ciarán's neck, felt his pulse against his mouth. "So good, sweetheart."

Ciarán hummed, content and satisfied. He leaned against the tree, knees shaking, as Graham took a handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped away the cum dripping down the inside of his thighs.

"Still good?"

"Still very good."

He couldn't resist giving the soft skin of Ciarán's freckled thigh a kiss. "Good."

His own shirt wasn't so easily cleaned. Graham gave it an honest try, dabbing at the stains with the same sticky handkerchief before simply unbuttoning it and draping it over his shoulder. It wasn't the most seemly thing, to be out in his undershirt, but it was far better than walking around with his husband's spend all over his stomach.

"Maybe we should try this more often," Ciarán said, slipping back into his shoes. "I think that—"

"Hello?"

They both tensed at the sound of a stranger's voice. Ciarán gasped, lacing up his shoes and fixing his hair. "Oh, Lord," he murmured.

"Hello?"

Graham quickly buckled his belt. He called back, “H-hey, there!”

A man wandered tentatively into view. Graham knew his face, but not his name. Someone from town. He gave a jerky, awkward wave.

The stranger waved back. “You all need any help? Saw your cart stopped.”

Graham spluttered, flailing for an excuse, but Ciarán grabbed his hat from the ground, brushed a few blades of grass from it and placed it firmly back onto his head. “The wind took my hat off! We had to chase it down.”

The man frowned. “Hasn’t been much of a breeze today, I don’t think.”

“Sudden gust of wind. Surprised us both,” Graham grunted.

Before the man could respond, Ciarán cheerily said, “Thank you for your concern! We’ll just be on our way, now. Have a nice day!” He grabbed Graham’s arm and dragged him back to the cart, waving goodbye to the befuddled man as Graham took hold of the reins.

When they were safely out of ear shot, they burst into peals of laughter.

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On the way home, the wagon swayed gently over the dirt path, the afternoon sun casting long shadows across the fields. Graham held the reins loosely, his shoulders relaxed, while Ciarán sat beside him, a contented smile playing on his lips. Their earlier conversation about the market had meandered into other topics, eventually landing on one of their more daring pastimes.

“As enjoyable as it was to have sex outside,” Ciarán said with a slight flush creeping

up his neck, “I think we ought to keep those instances few and far between. You know, in case a neighbor happens upon us.”

Graham raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Even on our property?”

Ciarán paused, clearly weighing his words. “Well,” he said slowly, “I’m not saying never. Just that we should be more careful and aware of our surroundings.” His tone was practical, though the faint pinkness in his cheeks betrayed him.

Graham bit back a laugh. He decided not to mention that it had been Ciarán who’d proposed both their tumble in the field last summer and the romp in the woods just a few weeks ago. Each time, Ciarán’s enthusiasm had been infectious, leaving Graham more than willing to go along with the idea. Still, he had no intention of embarrassing his husband by pointing that out now.

Instead, he nodded solemnly. “Of course, honey,” he said, his voice laden with affection.

Ciarán narrowed his eyes at Graham’s tone. “You’re humoring me,” he accused, though there was no real heat in his voice.

“Am not,” Graham said, grinning. “I mean it. I’ll be careful. We’ll both be careful.”

Ciarán leaned back, his arms crossed over his chest, though his lips twitched with a smile. “Good. I’m glad we’re in agreement.”

The path grew narrower as they passed the tree line marking the boundary of their property. Birds chirped lazily in the heat, and the faint rustle of the wind in the leaves was the only other sound. Graham stole a glance at Ciarán, who was gazing out over the fields, his expression soft and thoughtful.

“I’ll admit, though,” Ciarán said suddenly, breaking the silence, “there is something thrilling about it, isn’t there? The open air, the wildflowers, the—freedom of it all.”

Graham chuckled. “Now, don’t go tempting me again. You’re the one who just said we need to be more careful.”

“I know, I know,” Ciarán said quickly, his blush deepening. “I’m just saying—”

“That you’re not entirely against the idea,” Graham finished for him, his voice warm and teasing.

Ciarán sighed, but his smile gave him away. “Fine, yes. Just not when there’s any chance of someone stumbling across us. I mean it, Graham.”

“Message received,” Graham said, his grin widening. “I’ll make sure we’re alone next time.”

“Graham!” Ciarán’s laugh bubbled up, light and unrestrained, and the sound made Graham’s chest ache with affection.

The house came into view as the wagon crested the final hill. The sun was beginning its slow descent, casting a golden glow over the land. Graham pulled the horses to a stop near the barn, and they set about unloading their purchases and supplies in companionable silence.

Later, as they sat together on the porch, sipping cool water and watching the sky turn shades of orange and pink, Ciarán rested his head on Graham’s shoulder. Graham wrapped an arm around him, pulling him close.

“You know,” Graham murmured, pressing a kiss to Ciarán’s temple, “I’d say today was just about perfect.”

Ciarán hummed in agreement, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Graham's arm. "It was, wasn't it? Even with our little... debate about outdoor activities."

Graham laughed softly. "Well, as long as I've got you by my side, I don't much care where we are."

Ciarán tilted his head up, his eyes shining in the fading light. "I feel the same, Graham. Always."

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The evening air was soft and cool as it drifted through the open window, carrying the faint scent of wildflowers and freshly turned soil. Dinner was quiet at first, punctuated only by the occasional clink of spoons against bowls as they ate. Graham savored the rich flavors of the chicken and dumpling soup, but his attention kept wandering back to Ciarán's earlier words.

His husband sat across from him, his head slightly bowed, as though lost in thought. There was a nervous energy about him—his usual light chatter was absent, replaced by a pensive silence. Graham let it stretch for a moment, waiting for Ciarán to speak, but when the younger man didn't, he decided to gently nudge him.

"You know," Graham said, setting his spoon down and leaning back in his chair, "bringing your father here—he'd be lucky to have you looking out for him."

Ciarán looked up, startled. "Do you really think so?"

"I know so," Graham replied. "You've got a good head on your shoulders and a big heart. Anyone can see that."

Ciarán's lips curved into a small, shy smile. He set his spoon aside, his hands folding

in his lap. “I’ve just been thinking about him a lot lately. He’s getting older, and the work back home—it’s hard, Graham. Too hard for a man his age. And I think about how much he’s done for me, how he sacrificed so much so that I could—so that I could have a chance at a better life.” He swallowed, his voice thick with emotion. “It doesn’t feel right, leaving him there alone.”

Graham nodded, his expression softening. He’d heard bits and pieces about Ciarán’s father before—a man who had taught his son resilience and a strong work ethic, even in the face of hardship. It didn’t surprise him that Ciarán wanted to repay those sacrifices.

“I get it,” Graham said after a moment. “Family’s important. And if bringing him here is what you want, then we’ll make it happen.”

Ciarán’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “But what if it’s too much? What if it’s more than we can handle?”

Graham reached across the table, his calloused hand covering Ciarán’s smaller one. “We’ll figure it out. Together. Like we always do.”

Ciarán nodded, but there was still a shadow of doubt in his gaze. “It’s not just the money,” he admitted. “I worry about how he’ll adjust. America’s so different from Ireland, and he’s not...he’s not as young as he used to be.”

“That’s why he’ll need you,” Graham said firmly. “And he’ll have both of us to help him settle in. He’s your family, and that makes him mine too.”

The words seemed to lift a weight off Ciarán’s shoulders. He squeezed Graham’s hand, his grip warm and steady. “Thank you,” he said softly. “You always know how to make things feel possible.”

Graham chuckled. “That’s what husbands are for, isn’t it?”

They finished their meal in a lighter mood, their earlier tension replaced by a shared sense of purpose. After the dishes were cleared and the kitchen tidied, they sat together on the porch, watching the stars appear one by one in the vast night sky.

Ciarán leaned against Graham’s side, his head resting on his shoulder. “I’ll start saving up,” he said. “Every penny I make from selling the jam and the cheese—it’ll go toward bringing him here.”

“And I’ll start drawing up plans for the addition,” Graham said. “We’ll need a proper room for him. Something comfortable.”

“You’re really amazing, you know that?” Ciarán said, his voice soft and full of wonder.

Graham smiled, wrapping an arm around his husband and pulling him close. “I’m just doing what any good man would do for the person he loves.”

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That night, he dreamed of war.

More specifically, he dreamed of the medic’s tent, where they’d carried him after a Minié ball tore through his leg. The air in the tent was thick with the stench of mud, blood, and alcohol—a harsh reminder of the battlefield that still raged just beyond the canvas walls. The canons roared in the distance, their thunderous blasts vibrating in his chest. The cries of dying men, desperate and guttural, rang in his ears. But despite all this, it was daytime, and the battle was far from over. Yet, he knew it wasn’t real. He could tell by the way his perspective shifted—looking down at the scene below him from a bird’s eye view. He wasn’t really lying on the table; he was observing,

distant from the pain that wracked his body in that fleeting moment.

His jaw was clenched tight, teeth grinding against the unbearable agony. His voice, hoarse from screaming, cracked as the medic dug his finger into the raw wound in his thigh, trying to dig out the shards of metal embedded deep within. “Fuck! God, fucking damn it!” The pain was unspeakable, far worse than anything he’d ever endured, but there was something more in his voice: fear. Fear of dying. Anger. Anger at the thought of making it so far, surviving the horrors of war, only to be felled now.

The surgeon, cold and detached, with a blood-splattered apron, examined the injury with clinical precision. “We ought to take the leg,” he said, his voice flat, devoid of any compassion.

Graham’s heart raced, his hand shaking as it reached up, gripping the surgeon by the collar. “You put that saw near my leg, and I’ll break every fucking one of your fingers,” he growled, his face twisted in a grimace of fury and fear.

Was it a memory or just another piece of his dream? He couldn’t say. The surgeon’s face paled, but whether it was from Graham’s threat or from the nightmare’s influence, he couldn’t recall. The dream seemed so real—so sharp—that he could almost feel the blood rushing from his body as he shoved the man away, his strength seemingly unbroken despite the blood loss, before passing out from the pain.

Suddenly, the ground beneath him trembled, the unmistakable smell of gunpowder thick in the air. His surroundings shifted, the blood-stained table in the medical tent becoming the familiar bed he shared with Ciarán. His leg still throbbed, the ache a dull reminder of his past, but instead of a medic’s hands, there were Ciarán’s, gently pressing against his thigh, trying to ease the pain.

“Oh, Graham,” Ciarán murmured, his voice filled with concern, his hand firm but

tender on the wound. Blood seeped between his fingers, but his gaze never left Graham's face, worry etched in the lines of his brow.

Graham's eyes fluttered open, and the darkness of the night surrounded him. It took a few moments before his surroundings began to take shape—the comfort of their bedroom, the weight of Ciarán's presence beside him, still asleep. The ache in his leg was sharper now, an old pain, a constant companion that flared up unexpectedly. He shifted slightly, and a twinge of pain ran from his foot up to his hip.

“Ah, shit,” he muttered softly to himself.

Ciarán stirred beside him, his voice thick with sleep. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Just my leg acting up,” Graham lied, wincing slightly as he tried to stretch it. He didn't want to admit it, but the strain earlier that day had taken its toll.

“I'll give you a massage,” Ciarán mumbled, his hand groping blindly in the darkness, smacking Graham's chest with an awkward pat. His eyes remained closed, and there was a bit of drool at the corner of his mouth, making Graham chuckle despite himself.

“Nah, sweetheart. Go back to sleep. I just need to walk around. Stretch my legs a bit.”

Ciarán responded with a quiet murmur of agreement and rolled over, taking most of the blanket with him. Graham eased himself out of bed, careful not to wake him, though no sooner had he stood up than Roisin, the dog, hopped up onto the mattress to claim his spot. Graham couldn't help but smile, though he couldn't resist giving her a playful warning.

“Don't get too comfortable,” he said, watching him look up at him with a smug expression.

He moved quietly, making his way toward the door, his leg heavy and aching beneath him. As he stepped outside, he let out a deep sigh, the familiar ache settling in his muscles. The night was still, the air crisp, the only sound the crunch of his footsteps on the ground. It was just an old war wound, he told himself. Nothing more.

He'd taken this walk a hundred times before. The pain had become a part of him, a reminder of the past he couldn't forget, but tonight, it seemed easier to bear. Especially knowing that Ciarán was waiting for him, warm and safe in their bed.

Graham limped toward the well, his steps slow and deliberate, his hand resting on his thigh as he massaged the aching muscles. When he reached the stone well, he ran his hand along the cool surface, trying to steady his breathing. Then, with a grunt of effort, he continued on toward the barn. He hoped the walk would ease the pain before he reached the far end of the property.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he froze. There, standing just outside the barn, was one of their cows. She turned her head as he approached, her large, liquid eyes meeting his. She seemed as startled to see him as he was to see her. Her tail flicked nervously, and she shuffled a bit, her hooves clattering softly on the ground.

"How'd you get out here, girl?" Graham asked, scratching the cow's velvety head. They'd corralled all the animals back into the barn before dinner. How had one of them managed to escape?

Before he could think more on it, another cow emerged from the barn, lowing softly in the quiet night. Graham's lips curled into a small smile at their late-night wanderings. But before he could laugh, another figure stepped out from the barn behind them.

A human figure stood in the dim light of the barnyard. Tall, with a bandana obscuring their face, their outline was all too familiar. The thief.

Graham's breath caught in his throat, and he felt a rush of anger flood his chest. His pulse pounded in his ears as he stepped forward, his limp more pronounced with every stride. His heart was hammering, but his voice was steady as he called out, "Hey!"

The thief startled, a brief moment of panic flashing across their figure before they turned toward him. The cow beside them gave an anxious snort, and Graham didn't hesitate. With a sharp slap to the cow's rump, he sent her scurrying back toward the safety of the barn. He then turned, glaring at the intruder. "The fuck you think you're doing?" he spat, fury burning through him.

This was the bastard who'd tried to rob from the Duncans. The same one who'd almost killed Liam and left Ronan a widower. And now, here he was, attempting to steal from Graham and Ciarán. Their cows, their livelihood—the animals they cared for and relied on. The thought alone sent a surge of protectiveness through him.

It wasn't just about the theft of an animal. It was about stealing their means of survival. The milk, the butter, the cheese they worked so hard to produce—everything depended on these cows. Every hour spent caring for them, every bit of labor that kept their farm running. Without it, they'd lose everything: the land, the house, even the future they'd been building together. All of it could be taken in an instant.

Anger bubbled up inside Graham, and without thinking, he grabbed a heavy bucket of feed and threw it with all his strength at the thief. The bucket missed his head but collided with his shoulder, sending feed scattering across the dirt. The thief cursed loudly, and that's when Graham heard the voice.

"Merde—" The voice was unmistakable.

Jean Lachapelle.

Graham's eyes narrowed with disgust. Lachapelle, the rich heir of the sprawling land and livestock that would eventually fall into his hands. And yet here he was, stealing from those who had far less than he did. He hadn't been satisfied with the fortune he was about to inherit—he needed more. More money, more power, more everything.

“You fucking piece of shit—” Graham snarled, his fist tightening with rage.

Lachapelle, still clutching his shoulder, recovered enough to face Graham. But Graham was faster. He swung a heavy blow, not a punch, but a forceful strike with his closed fist, hammering into Lachapelle's face. The force sent the man stumbling backwards, and Graham followed up, delivering hit after hit. Each blow landed with a sickening crack as bone met knuckles. Blood flowed from Lachapelle's nostrils, but Graham didn't stop. He couldn't—he was past reason now, past restraint.

It wasn't until the fourth hit that Lachapelle retaliated, his fist landing squarely in Graham's side, knocking the wind from him. The shock of the hit made him stagger, a sharp pain flashing through his ribs.

Lachapelle took advantage of Graham's moment of weakness and kicked him in the knee. Pain flared in Graham's leg like a fresh wound, and he gasped, biting back a curse. The thief shoved him backward, sending Graham crashing to the dirt.

A sharp breath of pain escaped Graham as he tried to get his bearings. But Lachapelle wasn't finished. He was still standing, though shaky, his bloodied face twisted in rage. He sneered as he lifted his foot.

“You'll regret that!” Lachapelle spat, his voice thick with venom.

And then, with a cruel laugh, he brought his heel down onto Graham's bad leg. The pain was immediate, a blinding burst that nearly sent Graham back to the ground. But before he could react, there was a blur—a shape moving fast.

“Roisin?” Graham blinked, disbelief flashing across his face.

The dog came charging in, snarling and leaping at Lachapelle with a ferocity that Graham hadn’t expected. Roisin snapped at Lachapelle, dodging his attempts to swipe at him with his arm. But Lachapelle’s wild swing connected with the dog, his elbow catching Roisin in the side. The dog yelped in pain.

“Don’t you hurt my dog!” Graham’s heart leaped in his chest. He lurched forward, trying to reach them.

As Lachapelle aimed another kick at him, Graham grabbed Roisin by the scruff, yanking him out of the way just in time. Lachapelle’s boot missed its mark but sent Graham stumbling. He let go of Roisin with a growl of frustration, his knee throbbing with pain.

“What do you think’s going to happen here?” Lachapelle taunted, his voice slick with arrogance as he wiped the blood from his lips. “You going to march me to the sheriff with that fucked up leg of yours? Huh, little soldier boy?”

The words hit like a slap, but Graham didn’t flinch. He stood his ground, his jaw tight with fury. “Nah. You aren’t walking anywhere. I’ll have you hogtied and in the back of my cart. We’ll go right through town, and everyone will see I caught a thief.”

Lachapelle’s eyes narrowed as he spat a bloody glob into the dirt, a look of disdain crossing his face. “You could’ve just sold me the cows to begin with—”

“Shut up!” Graham snapped, his voice cold with fury.

He didn’t dare take his eyes off the man, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement—Ciarán.

Ciarán emerged from the house, his face a mask of fury, dressed in his cream-colored nightgown and work boots. The rifle in his hands was aimed squarely at Lachapelle.

“If you lay a hand on my husband again,” Ciarán warned, his voice fierce, “I swear you will regret it!”

Lachapelle’s dumbfounded expression was priceless, but he didn’t say anything. “You don’t know how to use that thing,” he sneered, eyeing the rifle.

“You don’t know a thing about me,” Ciarán retorted, his gaze hard. “But I know you’re nothing but a thief.”

“Graham, are you okay?” Ciarán asked, his voice softer now but still tinged with worry.

“Fine, sweetheart,” Graham replied, though his side ached and his leg throbbed.

Ciarán nodded, his face still set in determination. “Okay. Okay, I think—” He swallowed, glancing quickly at Lachapelle, who was still standing there, bloodied and defiant. “We need rope. If you really want to hogtie him.”

“We’ve got some in the barn,” Graham replied, his voice low. “But—”

“But you don’t want to leave me alone with him?” Ciarán finished for him.

Graham nodded grimly. “Exactly.”

“I’m fine,” Ciarán reassured him, his gaze flicking to Roisin, who stood protectively at his side. “I have a guard dog, don’t I?” He whistled, and Roisin bounded to him, tail wagging.

Graham hesitated only for a moment before limping toward the barn, grabbing the rope from the wall. When he returned, he bound Lachapelle's wrists and ankles tightly, his hands shaking with the effort to contain his anger. Lachapelle struggled and protested, but Graham wasn't listening. He gagged him with the bandana, securing it tightly over his mouth.

"I don't want to hear another word from you," Graham growled as he stepped back. To Ciarán, he said, "I'll stay here with him. Can you bring me a shirt and my boots, sweetheart? Can't go into town half-naked."

Ciarán looked down at himself, realizing the state he was in. "Goodness, I'll need to change, too. Give me a moment." He handed Graham the rifle before darting inside the house.

A few moments later, Ciarán returned, hastily dressed in pants and a shirt, carrying Graham's clothes and boots. As Graham changed, Ciarán fussed over him, concern written all over his face. "Graham, you're sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," Graham reassured him, though his side throbbed with every breath. "You saved me before I really got hurt." He cupped Ciarán's cheek gently. "You were like a hero out of a dime novel."

Ciarán blushed, his smile soft but pleased.

Graham smiled back, pressing a quick kiss to Ciarán's cheek before standing up. "Let's get him in the cart. The horses are getting quite the workout these days."

He snapped his fingers at the cows, motioning toward the barn. "Get back in there. You two have had enough excitement for one night."

The animals, seemingly unbothered, chewed their cud, mooing softly as they ambled

back into the barn.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:56 am

It was the middle of the night, and the stars were so bright they seemed to hang in the air like scattered diamonds. The soft glow of moonlight cast long shadows across the road as the cart rumbled along, its wooden wheels creaking with every bump and jolt. The night felt oddly serene, the kind of calm that followed chaos, like the world had exhaled after the storm. Graham could feel the cool night air brushing against his face, but it didn't dull the heat of anger that still simmered beneath his skin.

Beside him, Ciarán sat quietly, his back straight, the rifle draped across his lap. There was a stillness to his posture, a quiet strength that always seemed to settle over him when things were most uncertain. The rifle was an extension of Ciarán, a promise of protection, and right now, it made Graham feel a little less exposed.

The cart was heavy with the weight of their mission—and of Jean Lachapelle. Behind them, the rich, arrogant man who'd dared to steal from them and their neighbors was trussed up like a hog, his hands and feet bound tightly with rope, and his mouth gagged with the very bandana he'd worn earlier. He'd been surprisingly quiet ever since they'd left the farm, though the muffled curses and grunts from the back of the cart still filtered through the night air. Lachapelle wasn't a man who knew how to stay silent for long, but his options were limited now.

"Odder things have happened," Graham thought to himself, but at the moment, it was hard-pressed to think of any. He couldn't recall a single instance that had felt more surreal than this. Just days ago, he and Ciarán had been tending to the cows, laughing and joking about the next meal they'd have, and now here they were, on their way to town with a bound and gagged thief in tow, prepared to turn him in. It was as if life had spun on its axis and dumped them into a whole new world.

Ciarán shifted beside him, a slight motion that had Graham glancing at him, just in time to see him hide a yawn behind his hand.

“You tired, sweetheart?” Graham asked gently, his voice low so as not to disturb the night too much. “Go to sleep. I’ll wake you when we get to town.”

Ciarán shook his head, his lips pulling into a small smile, though his exhaustion was evident in the slight droop of his shoulders. “No, I’m fine. Besides, you can’t drive the cart and keep an eye on him—” He turned to glance behind them at Lachapelle, who was making an incoherent series of muffled noises, his movements jerky as he struggled against the ropes. “—at the same time.”

Graham chuckled softly. “You’re right about that.” His gaze flicked to Lachapelle, who swore at them from behind his gag, his words no doubt filled with venom. At least, that’s what Graham assumed. Lachapelle had been swearing ever since they’d tied him up, a constant stream of insults that was muffled to the point of being comical.

It was almost too easy to ignore him now, though. The man had always been a thorn in their side, and now he was little more than a nuisance—a noisy one at that. Graham was used to dealing with threats, but somehow, the absurdity of the situation made Lachapelle’s presence less threatening, more of an annoyance than anything else. The silence of the night was more of a comfort than a danger.

“All right,” Graham muttered under his breath, more to himself than anyone else, “I guess this is what happens when you decide to play the hero.” He couldn’t help but smirk, though the moment felt strange. There was something surreal about this whole thing—the quiet night, the stars overhead, the tension coiled between them, and yet the odd, almost domestic feeling of it all. It was just another night for them, but this one was far from ordinary.

Behind them, Lachapelle's voice rose, more muffled now, but still filled with defiance. "Mmmph... damn you... just wait—"

"Most pleasant Jean Lachapelle has ever been," Graham muttered to himself with a dry laugh. He glanced over at Ciarán, who raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. They both knew exactly what he meant.

For all of Lachapelle's bravado, he'd been eerily silent for most of the ride. Even with all his cursing, there was something about him that seemed smaller now, diminished by the ropes and the gag. The man who'd caused so much trouble for them and their friends was now just another criminal on his way to justice. The thought didn't sit entirely well with Graham. He'd always preferred when things were simpler, when it was just him and Ciarán against the world. But life rarely worked out that way. Sometimes, the world was messy. Sometimes, it demanded they take actions they never imagined they would.

Ciarán let out another soft yawn, his eyes fluttering as he tried to fight it.

"Go to sleep," Graham said again, this time with a gentle smile. "We've got time. Let me drive the cart. I'll wake you up when we get to town."

"I'm fine," Ciarán insisted, but his voice had the slightest edge of weariness now. "I'll sleep once we're done with this mess."

"You sure?" Graham pushed.

Ciarán nodded, though his eyelids were starting to droop. "Yeah. I just... I don't like leaving you alone with him. Not after what he tried to do."

The protectiveness in his voice was clear, and Graham felt his heart soften. He didn't mind. It was just another reason he loved Ciarán so deeply—how fiercely he cared.

Even now, with everything they'd been through, with the darkness of the night pressing in around them, he was still worried about Graham's safety.

"I'll be fine, sweetheart," Graham reassured him. "I'm not about to let him get the drop on us."

Ciarán gave a soft hum of agreement, and finally, with one last glance at Lachapelle, he leaned back against the side of the cart, his eyes fluttering shut. Graham could see the tension in his face slowly melt away as he let himself relax.

It wasn't long before Ciarán's breathing evened out, soft and steady, and Graham was left alone with his thoughts.

The ride to town would take a while, but that was fine. It gave him time to think, to let the events of the past few days settle in. There were things he still didn't fully understand, things that were left unspoken between them, but for now, the quiet night, the warmth of Ciarán's presence beside him, and the knowledge that they were doing what needed to be done—that was enough.

As the cart rattled down the road, the sound of the wheels on dirt mixing with the rustling of the night, Graham's grip tightened on the reins.

???

The sheriff's office was always busiest at night, when the saloon's regulars spilled out onto the dusty streets, their laughter and rowdy talk drifting into the night air. Some of them stumbled their way down to the jail, needing a place to sleep off one too many shots of whiskey and not caring whose cot they crashed on.

Tonight was no different. From the noise and commotion inside, it was clear the saloon had been well-attended. Graham pushed the door open, stepping into the

small, dimly lit office. Inside, the jail was populated with a mix of drunks and troublemakers. A handful of men lay in the cells, some sprawled out on the floor in varying degrees of unconsciousness. One snored loudly on a cot while two others shuffled a weathered deck of cards back and forth, their hands slick with the remnants of spilled liquor.

When Graham hauled Lachapelle inside, the man hopping awkwardly in his bindings, and Ciarán followed closely behind, rifle at the ready, the two cardplayers paused their game. They looked up, their eyes narrowing as they took in the scene.

One of them burst into a loud, mocking laugh. “Ha! Look at that! Caught a rabbit, did you? Found him nibbling in your garden?” He was clearly enjoying himself, his voice dripping with humor at the sight of the bound man struggling in Graham’s grip.

“Found him nibbling at something, I bet,” his companion added with a chuckle. He gave Ciarán a wink, his smile wide and playful, but it was clear from the way Ciarán’s jaw tightened that the jest had rubbed him the wrong way.

“Watch it,” Graham growled, his voice low but sharp. He didn’t have the patience for this kind of disrespect, especially not when his leg ached like someone had tried to drive a knife through it. The man raised his hands in mock surrender, but the teasing smile remained.

“Where’s the sheriff?” Graham asked, his eyes scanning the room for the man in charge.

“Somewhere around here,” one of the card players replied, not bothering to look up from his hand. “Probably in the back.”

Graham grunted, eyes flicking to Lachapelle, whose angry murmurs and muffled curses filled the room. “He ought to get a bell. Ring him for service,” Graham

muttered under his breath, the words carrying a bite of frustration.

The two men snickered at that, clearly amused by the idea. It was a long moment before the back door swung open with a squeak, and the sheriff himself appeared, looking as if he had been pulled from whatever quiet corner he'd been trying to nurse his own drink in. He looked cross, his brow furrowed as he stepped into the dim light of the office.

“Where’ve you been?” The sheriff started, his voice gruff, no doubt thinking they were just another pair of drunks with a complaint. “If you had a drink at the saloon, I’ll—” He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes locking onto the sight of Jean Lachapelle, still bound and furious, and Ciarán, standing there with the rifle slung across his chest. The sheriff’s expression shifted, recognition dawning. “What’s going on here?”

Graham crossed his arms, his gaze steady. “Caught the thief.”

“Jean Lachapelle? What was he—” The sheriff’s voice trailed off, but Graham didn’t wait for him to finish.

“Found him in our barn, trying to steal a couple of our cows. Put up a fight. Luckily Ciarán was there to help me,” Graham said, his tone dry but firm.

Ciarán offered a small smile, but his eyes were hard as he stood by Graham’s side, his rifle still pointed low, ready if anything escalated.

The sheriff’s frown deepened. “Baron’s not going to be happy about this,” he muttered under his breath, more to himself than to anyone else.

“I wouldn’t be happy either, if my kid turned out to be a shit-eating, thieving little fuck,” Graham shot back, his voice laced with venom. He turned slightly to Ciarán, his lips twitching into a half-smile. “Sorry for swearing, sweetheart.”

Ciarán glanced at him, a small chuckle escaping him despite the tension in the room. “No, I quite agree, Graham,” he said, his voice smooth and measured. He cleared his throat before turning back to the sheriff. “What happens now, sir?”

The sheriff sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Well—my deputy and I will be taking over from here. Thank you for the work you did in bringing him in—” He trailed off, clearly not understanding the full weight of the situation.

But Ciarán was having none of it. He stepped forward, his voice sharp as he cut in. “Yes, my husband and I have done all the work, I think. What happens now? He was caught in the act of trying to steal our livestock—and he tried to hurt Graham, too.” He turned to Graham briefly, a flash of concern in his eyes.

Graham nodded, not bothering to speak. The ache in his leg had only gotten worse since Lachapelle had dug his heel into the sore muscle, but he didn’t want to make a bigger deal of it. Not yet.

“He nearly killed Liam,” Ciarán continued, his voice growing colder as he spoke of their neighbor. “And I bet the Duncans’ horses are somewhere on his father’s property, and—”

The sheriff held up a hand, his expression turning wary. “Now, son—” He paused when he saw Ciarán’s brow furrow. “I mean, Mr. Shepherd. If you want to be one of my deputies, feel free to ask me for a job. Hell, might even have an opening soon, if the fool I have now doesn’t find his way back to his office in a few minutes. But if not, then I’m going to have to ask you to just leave it to the lawmen for now.” He let the words hang in the air, his jaw set.

Ciarán’s glare was icy, and it was clear he wasn’t going to let it slide so easily. “Before we leave it to you, I want it in writing. Everything that we told you, signed and dated. And the time, too.”

Graham didn't hesitate. He pulled out his father-in-law's pocket watch from his vest and checked the time. "It's a quarter to midnight," he said, his voice low but precise.

"Thank you, Graham," Ciarán said, giving his husband a grateful nod before turning back to the sheriff. "A pen and paper, please, sheriff."

The sheriff grumbled but motioned for his deputy, who was still busy nursing his own hangover in the corner, to fetch the necessary materials. "This isn't how I expected my night to go," the sheriff muttered to himself, but he didn't argue further.

Ciarán tapped his foot impatiently as they waited for the sheriff to scribble down the information, his mind clearly running through the next steps. Once the sheriff had finished, Ciarán didn't waste a moment, checking the paper thoroughly before nodding in approval.

The sheriff sighed, clearly eager to be rid of them. "There you go. Everything's in writing. You happy now?"

Ciarán smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant one. "I will be when I know he's behind bars for good."

With the formalities out of the way, Graham and Ciarán turned to leave, Lachapelle still squirming in the corner of the room, bound tightly and glaring at them as though he could burn them with his eyes.

They left the sheriff's office with more than just a signed account of what transpired that night. Ciarán had expertly browbeaten the sheriff into not only writing the account but also making a copy for their records, much to the befuddlement of the two cardplayers who had been forced into their role as witnesses. Neither man had seemed to quite grasp the seriousness of what was happening, much less the intent behind Ciarán's firm and unwavering demand for justice. Lachapelle, now untied and

gag removed, was left in the jail cell, looking just as confused, if not more so, by the turn of events.

As they walked back toward the cart, Graham couldn't help but wonder if Ciarán had expected some sort of grand spectacle—a showdown, perhaps, where the sheriff and his deputy would gallop out with guns drawn, racing to the estate of the Lachapelle patriarch, demanding that his son's wrongs be righted on the spot. The scene might have played out like something from one of the dime novels that Ciarán liked to read: Baron Lachapelle would be dragged from his bed in the dead of night, forced to confront his son's crimes, the Duncans' horses would be returned, and the elder Lachapelle would fall on his knees, begging forgiveness from Liam and Ronan for the sins of his son. But that hadn't been the case.

Instead, the sheriff had nodded, scribbled the details down with a gruff demeanor, and promised that justice would be done—eventually. It had all been much quieter, less dramatic than Ciarán had likely anticipated. Graham could see the slight disappointment in his husband's posture as they made their way home, but he kept his thoughts to himself, allowing the silence between them to grow as they walked under the stars.

By the time they finally arrived back at their little cottage, the quiet of the night settling around them, Graham's body felt the weight of the evening. His leg throbbed, his muscles stiffened, and the exhaustion from the tense moments of the night seemed to finally catch up with him. Ciarán, ever the attentive husband, had been mostly silent during their walk back, but once they were inside and the door was safely shut behind them, he turned to Graham with concern.

“It's late, sweetheart,” Graham said gently, already sinking onto the bed with a sigh of relief as he stretched out his throbbing leg. “No one's going anywhere. The sheriff's got to sleep, too. It'll be easier to find those horses in the daylight, besides.” He settled himself into the warmth of the blankets, the weight of the day easing off

his shoulders now that he could finally rest.

Ciarán, standing at the foot of the bed, hesitated for only a moment before he climbed in beside Graham. “I just thought... well, I don’t know. You read stories in the newspapers about, oh, gunfights and whatnot,” he said softly, clearly still processing the events that had unfolded.

Graham chuckled, the sound a quiet rumble in the otherwise still room. “Larkspur isn’t known for its gunfights,” he said, though he knew exactly what Ciarán meant. He had expected more of a showdown, something dramatic, but what had really happened was far more subdued—and maybe that was for the best.

“I know that,” Ciarán replied, his voice almost apologetic. “I suppose I just thought that once we brought him to the sheriff, it’d be over. You know, the end of the story. But now it feels like...” He trailed off, his words faltering for a moment.

“Tomorrow,” Graham murmured, not needing to hear the rest. It was a simple truth: they couldn’t force the sheriff’s hand, and the situation wasn’t going to resolve itself in one night. Ciarán, ever the idealist, had wanted more than the quiet assurances of a sheriff who was unwilling to act hastily. But tomorrow, once the sun rose, there would be time for proper action.

“Tomorrow,” Ciarán repeated, sounding a little more resigned, but the tension in his voice still hadn’t fully disappeared. He paused, then turned to Graham with a sudden tenderness. “How’s your leg, Graham?”

Graham, about to respond with his usual reassurance, paused. For a brief moment, he considered lying—telling Ciarán that it was fine, that it didn’t hurt too much, that the dull ache wasn’t anything to worry about. But that wasn’t fair to Ciarán. His husband deserved the truth.

“Could be better,” Graham admitted, wincing slightly as he shifted his leg beneath the covers. “That fight did a number on me.”

Ciarán’s expression softened instantly, and he leaned down to press a gentle kiss to Graham’s forehead. “But you had him! You’re so strong.” His voice was full of admiration, a mixture of pride and concern.

Graham chuckled, his lips curling into a smile despite himself. “Yeah, I had him. And he had me.” He shifted slightly, feeling the bruises in his side and the tightness in his leg. “Knew right where to hit me hardest.”

Ciarán made a sound that was half-laugh, half-grumble, clearly not pleased with the idea of Graham being hurt. He moved down toward the foot of the bed without a word, settling on the floor beside it. “Let me give you a massage. It’ll help you sleep,” Ciarán said, his voice determined. “You can’t very well go for a walk around the ranch at this hour.”

Graham looked up at him, about to protest, but Ciarán’s eyes were already fixed on him with that familiar, gentle intensity. His touch was always a balm, a comfort, and so Graham allowed it—allowed Ciarán to tend to him, even when he would have preferred to do it all himself.

“Ah, sweetheart, you don’t have to,” Graham began, though he couldn’t bring himself to argue for long.

“But I want to,” Ciarán insisted, and with that, Graham knew there would be no more refusal.

Ciarán’s hands, warm and gentle, moved to Graham’s thigh. He pressed his palms to the muscle and began to knead, his thumbs working in firm, steady circles that seemed to melt away the pain. Graham sighed in contentment, allowing his eyes to

close as Ciarán's rhythm worked its magic. He could feel the tension, the strain, all of it slowly easing with each passing second. Ciarán was skilled at this, practiced even, and it didn't take long before Graham felt a wave of comfort and relaxation washing over him.

"How's that feel?" Ciarán asked softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Really good," Graham mumbled, his body relaxing more with each movement.

"Really, really good."

As the minutes passed, Graham let himself sink into the warmth of the bed, into the rhythm of Ciarán's touch. And before he knew it, sleep was pulling him under, his mind wandering to the quiet moments of their life together.

He glanced at Ciarán, catching his eye. There was his husband, still wearing his nightgown, a soft smile on his lips as he continued his work. He looked at Graham with a quiet affection that made Graham's heart swell.

"Oh, Graham," Ciarán sighed, the tenderness in his gaze unmistakable. And in that moment, Graham knew that everything would be alright—tomorrow, justice would come, and for now, they had each other.

With a final sigh, Graham closed his eyes, content, and let the quiet of the night take him into sleep.

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The following day, Graham and Ciarán found themselves enjoying the most normal and pleasant morning they'd had in a long while, a respite after the tension of the previous evening. The morning sun shone warmly, casting a soft glow over the ranch, and the gentle clucking of chickens and the occasional bleat of the sheep filled the air.

Graham quickly made a breakfast of egg on toast and oatmeal, topped with a handful of juicy, ripe blackberries. The sweet, tart berries stained their lips a deep red as they ate, and Ciarán's usual sweetness seemed to linger even longer when they shared a kiss before setting off to begin their chores.

It was a quiet morning in many respects—Ciarán, Roisin, and Graham were the only ones who seemed particularly bothered by the events of the previous night. Everyone else went about their tasks with little concern. The livestock didn't seem to mind the events of the night before, nor did the land. While Ciarán tended to the animals—feeding the cows and counting them as he went—Graham checked over the animals one by one to ensure none had been harmed in Lachapelle's attempt at thievery. The hens squawked in outrage as he moved through their pen, the sheep regarded him with their large, dark eyes while they nibbled lazily on the grass, and the cows, who seemed to think he was merely giving them attention, headbutted him in affectionate play when they thought one of them was getting too much affection. Thankfully, all was well—especially the two prized heifers that Lachapelle would've made off with had Graham not been wandering around the property the night before.

Ciarán was in the barn feeding the cows when one of them licked his outstretched hand, causing him to laugh. Graham couldn't help but smile as he watched the interaction, a bit of warmth blooming in his chest. It had been a rough week, but moments like this—moments of simple joy—reminded him of how good life could be.

“Remember your first day with them?” Graham asked as Ciarán wiped his hand on his apron.

Ciarán chuckled. “I was worried they wouldn't like me,” he admitted, looking at the cow in front of him, who seemed perfectly content to be near him. “Now, look at me. A proper rancher.”

“I don’t know about that,” Graham teased. “But I think you’re doing all right. You’re getting better every day.”

Ciarán gave him a grateful smile, bending down to give the cow one last stroke on its head before turning to Graham. “Thank you, Graham.” He leaned in to kiss Graham’s cheek.

Next, they moved on to the garden, where they weeded, watered, and harvested the crops that were ready for picking. Graham couldn’t help but smile as he watched Ciarán’s delight over the growing crops. The garden was a rainbow of colors—blueberries and blackberries, bright yellow zucchini flowers, verdant herbs, and the vibrant red of ripe radishes and tomatoes. It felt like their hard work was finally paying off, and the satisfaction was evident in Ciarán’s face as he bent to carefully pluck the ripe produce.

They started with the tomatoes. Those that had ripened to a bright ruby red were plucked and placed carefully in their basket, while others, still tinged with green, were left to ripen further. As Graham inspected the leaves for signs of pests, he was pleased to see that the ladybugs had been doing their job, keeping the aphids at bay.

But then, Ciarán let out a small cry of dismay. “Oh, no!” He’d pulled a plant with a bit too much force, snapping a stem that held a perfectly ripe tomato along with two others that were still unripe.

Graham, who had seen this kind of mistake before, just shrugged. “It happens. We have plenty. Don’t worry about it.” But Ciarán’s crestfallen expression lingered, and Graham felt the need to ease his worries. “Look, don’t worry about it. We can still use the unripe ones.”

“What?” Ciarán asked, looking up with surprise.

“We can fry up the green ones.” Graham smiled at the thought of fried green tomatoes, a treat that always reminded him of simpler times.

Ciarán’s eyes brightened immediately. “Really?”

“Yeah. Just slice them, dip them in batter, and fry them up like that. Or we can pickle them. We have options, sweetheart,” Graham explained. “Even if something’s underripe, or bruised, we can still make use of it. So don’t worry about it too much.”

A little ruefully, Ciarán smiled. “Maybe I’m a proper rancher, but I’m not much of a farmer yet.”

“You’re doing just fine.” Graham gave Ciarán a reassuring pat on the back. “Sometimes the crops are just as difficult as the animals. Just try giving it a twist next time if it doesn’t want to be picked. Like this.” He demonstrated by twisting a shiny, ripe tomato off its vine with a flick of his wrist. He handed the tomato to Ciarán. “Go on. Take a bite.”

Ciarán set the basket down, wiping his hands on his apron before inspecting the tomato carefully. He took a large bite from it, and the burst of juice flooded his mouth, dripping down his chin as he chewed.

Graham swallowed, feeling a sudden heat rise in his chest at the sight of Ciarán’s satisfaction. “How is it?”

“Delicious,” Ciarán replied, licking the juice off his lips before handing the rest of the tomato to Graham. He ate the rest of it, savoring the sweetness of the fruit. It was perfectly firm on the outside, juicy and almost like a plum on the inside, with a satisfying sweet-and-sour tang.

Graham grinned. “Fruit of our labor,” he said with pride, feeling a sense of

fulfillment that had little to do with the work itself and everything to do with the satisfaction of sharing it with Ciarán.

They continued their work, snipping some chard and pea greens for a salad later and gathering a few sweet peppers and radishes. As they moved from section to section, Graham continued to impart bits of wisdom on the crops. He felt a little like a teacher—pointing out which radishes were fit for eating and which should go to the chickens, showing Ciarán how to check if a green bean had snapped, and explaining that the melons still needed another month before they were ready for harvest.

“When it comes to the zucchini,” Graham added, adjusting his hat, “pick some if you want. I can fry those up for you later, too.”

“Really? The flowers?” Ciarán asked, surprised.

“They’re good like that.” Graham grinned, though he suspected that Ciarán was beginning to suspect that Graham thought pretty much anything was good when fried. But it was true—the fried zucchini flowers were a delicacy, and they always had a way of making everything feel a little more special.

“And what will we sell?” Ciarán asked, already thinking about the future as they continued to work.

Graham adjusted his hat again. “First, we think about ourselves. Some of it will keep in the cellar. Cold enough there. The rest, we’ll pickle or preserve. You’ll be a big help with that. We have to plan for winter, especially if we’re going to get things ready for your father.” He paused, glancing at Ciarán, who was listening intently. “Once we’re done here, we’ll separate it out. The really good-looking stuff can go to market. I usually sell by the pound—have the crates, just like with the eggs and the cheese. They go to Mrs. Fournier’s shop. Sometimes people come to buy in bulk, sometimes just for what they need for dinner. Either way, it’s good business.”

He stopped as he noticed Ciarán grinning at him with an almost amused look. “What’s with that look?” Graham asked, confused.

Ciarán just gazed at him with a quiet affection, his dark honey-colored eyes warm with admiration. “Oh, I was just thinking about how much you know. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard you speak for so long before.”

Graham, suddenly shy, felt his face flush. “It’s not all that interesting, though,” he mumbled, embarrassed by the fact that he had just spent so much time talking about work. There was nothing particularly romantic about it.

Ciarán sniffed in mock indignation. “Well, I’ll be the judge of that,” he teased. “I think it’s extremely interesting. I enjoy listening to you.”

Blushing, Graham replied, “I could tell you more about pickling cucumbers, if you wanted.”

Ciarán nodded eagerly, but before Graham could launch into a lengthy explanation of his perfected pickling recipe, Mrs. Duncan rode up the path, her horse kicking up a cloud of dust behind her.

She halted at the gate, hopped off the horse, and led it to the water trough. As the horse drank, Mrs. Duncan waved to them. “Hey there! The heroes of the hour! What are you doing there in the dirt?”

“Work,” Graham said, grinning. “I don’t think you’ve met my husband yet.”

“I haven’t,” Mrs. Duncan said, extending her hand. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Annie Duncan. My husband William and I breed horses.”

Ciarán shook her hand with a smile. “It’s a pleasure. I’m Ciarán Shepherd. I believe

Graham purchased my mare, Bó, from you?”

“Bó, now, is she?” Mrs. Duncan smiled warmly. “Yes, indeed! Ginger, too. We’ve done good business, your husband and I. And now, you’ve both done me and mine a good turn. You ought to have been in town today, since you’re the ones that caught our horse thief!”

Graham motioned for her to come inside out of the heat. “So, the sheriff went through with the arrest?”

Mrs. Duncan nodded. “Arrested, charged. Our mare and stallion, found. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let me tell you what happened this morning...”

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What a morning Mrs. Duncan described. The men from the saloon had been released a little after dawn, and, to no one’s surprise, they were only sleeping off a night of drunken revelry. But the two card players, who had remained sober enough to recall the events of the previous night, could remember Jean Lachapelle being dragged into the sheriff’s office by Graham Shepherd and his handsome young husband, Ciarán.

“Oh!” Ciarán blushed at the mention of their involvement, but Graham just grumbled as he brought Mrs. Duncan a cup of water and a few warmed day-old biscuits with butter, feeling both proud and a little awkward. It wasn’t every day that you were the talk of the town.

The sheriff, presumably wanting to take some time to collect himself and talk to Lachapelle about the situation, was handling matters with great care. He was also strategizing on how best to address the situation with the Duncans, Ronan and Liam, and Baron Lachapelle, as the whole ordeal was quickly becoming a powder keg ready to explode. Thanks to the loose lips of the newly energized saloon-goers, word of

what had transpired last night had spread quickly, and by the time breakfast had rolled around, nearly everyone in town had already heard the story.

Determined to settle the issue once and for all, Mr. and Mrs. Duncan rode to the sheriff's office, demanding—quite reasonably, according to Mrs. Duncan—that Lachapelle return their stolen mare and stallion before they tore down his father's property, board by board. The sheriff, ever the calm and collected figure, refused, citing the more pressing crimes that Lachapelle was accused of: attempted theft, actual theft, and most serious of all, attempted murder. It was clear that the theft of their horses would have to wait, as the sheriff had already sent his deputy to collect Ronan and Liam to see if the latter could identify Lachapelle.

While the Duncans hotly debated this with the sheriff, Baron Lachapelle stormed through the door, demanding his son's release. According to him, Jean had acted foolishly but there was no reason for him to be held in jail. He had, after all, only made a mistake in judgment.

The sheriff raised an eyebrow. "What, exactly, was this foolish act?"

Baron Lachapelle scoffed, dismissing the situation with a wave of his hand. "All he did was be too indiscreet during a late-night rendezvous. Hardly a crime."

Here, Ciarán, who had been listening intently, couldn't hold back his confusion. "Excuse me? A what?" He shot a glance at Graham, who was listening with a furrowed brow.

Mrs. Duncan sighed, looking at Ciarán as if he should have expected it. "Jean told his father he was coming over to see you, Ciarán. He said he made some sort of offer to you a while back, and that you were... well, amenable to it. He claimed he was coming to collect."

Ciarán recoiled at the accusation, pushing himself away from the table in a mixture of shock and anger. His face flushed crimson as he spoke. “How dare he! That cad! The things he said to me! He showed up when Graham was gone, asking me to—” He paused suddenly, his eyes wide with realization, then turned to Graham. “Oh, Graham, I swear, I never agreed to anything he asked of me. I told him to leave!”

Graham reached across the table to take Ciarán’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I know, sweetheart. I know.”

Ciarán sighed, his voice becoming smaller. “But what will everyone else think?”

Mrs. Duncan’s voice cut through the air, firm and reassuring. “That Jean Lachapelle is a lying piece of shit, that’s what they’ll think.” She sipped from her cup of water, her expression not even the least bit perturbed. “I don’t think anyone who’s seen the two of you together could believe you’d have eyes for anyone but each other. The man’s a thief, a near-murderer, and a liar. He’s been lying about all his escapades, not just this one. So don’t you worry about it.”

Her words worked like a balm to soothe Ciarán’s frazzled nerves. He managed a small smile, a flicker of hope returning to his eyes. Graham shot Mrs. Duncan a grateful smile in return, feeling a sense of relief wash over him.

“Thank you, Mrs. Duncan,” Graham said. “What happened next? After you left the sheriff’s office?”

“Well,” Mrs. Duncan continued, “Baron Lachapelle was still in the middle of arguing that his son hadn’t done anything worth being jailed for when Ronan and Liam burst in, followed by the deputy and that big bear of a man and the little spitfire himself. Jean saw Ronan and practically begged to be put back in the cell, he looked like a man who knew he was caught. And then Liam starts hollering, telling the sheriff to put the bandana back on him so he could be sure it was the same man he’d seen

trying to steal their sheep.”

Mrs. Duncan chuckled at the memory. “Then, there’s Nathan, who’s standing by the door, watching it all go down. He sees Jean trying to slink away, so he goes, ‘D?ng y ?xià!’—‘Wait a minute!’—and grabs him to pull him back. And Jean, naturally, growls out, ‘Get your hands off of me!’”

At that moment, Mrs. Duncan clapped her hands together in delight. “Would you believe it? Liam just points and shouts, ‘That’s him for sure! That’s what he sounded like when I tried to stop him from stealing our sheep!’”

What followed, Mrs. Duncan said, was chaos—worse than anything that had happened before. “Ronan, of course, being Ronan, throws aside the sheriff, the Baron, the sheriff’s desk, and wraps his big hands around Jean’s throat, shouting in Irish. Lachapelle, in a panic, admits to everything. Every last bit of it. He tells them where the horses are, on his father’s ranch, just wandering around. The bastard took care of them at least, but only because he was hoping to breed them. He thought he could get the best from all the stock around here. The horses, the sheep, the cows. But it didn’t quite work out for him, did it?”

Mrs. Duncan paused, her face a mixture of disbelief and disgust. “Anyway, that’s what I came here to tell you. I figured you’d want to know. And, well, here’s a little something for your trouble.”

She reached into her pocket and slid a small stack of bills across the table. Graham stared at it, his eyes widening at the amount.

It was nearly \$300.

Ciarán immediately objected, his voice soft but firm. “Ma’am, that’s too much.”

Mrs. Duncan shook her head. “No, it’s not. You deserve every penny. We should’ve posted a reward, but the sheriff and his deputy insisted the horses might’ve just wandered off. As if Nathan or I would’ve just let them wander off.” She sighed, frustrated by the whole ordeal. “Then with the incident at your neighbors’ place and now this at your ranch, the whole town’s been on edge. You caught Jean, put an end to the madness. So, here’s a reward. You two did a good thing, and I’m glad it’s over.”

“I got something in mind,” Graham said, his tone thoughtful as he looked at the money. There was someone else he had in mind for it—his father-in-law, still overseas. This brought them that much closer to making their reunion possible, and Graham could already picture the joy on Ciarán’s face when they could finally bring him home.

Ciarán didn’t protest anymore, his eyes softening with a quiet acceptance of Mrs. Duncan’s generosity. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Mrs. Duncan smiled, rose from her seat, and turned to head back out. “Don’t mention it. Just keep your heads down. The storm’s passed for now, but the wind’s still blowing. You’ve done good work, and now you get your reward.”

With that, she left them, her horse waiting for her at the gate.

Graham looked over at Ciarán, who was still holding the stack of bills, the weight of the situation settling in. A future that seemed uncertain now felt a little more tangible. He squeezed Ciarán’s hand. “We’ll get him back here. We’re closer than we’ve ever been.”

Ciarán nodded, his smile returning, brighter this time. “Yes. Together.”

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It wasn't until they finished up for the day and were washing up for supper that Graham decided to ask Ciarán exactly what happened between him and Jean Lachapelle.

Maybe it was a dirty trick—catching his husband by surprise when he was underdressed and vulnerable—but it was better than broaching the subject while they were eating, or before they went to bed.

Ciarán dipped a cloth in a basin of cool water, wrung it out, and wiped the sweat from his neck and chest, running the damp material along his freckled skin. His curls were windswept, his cheeks flushed pink. Droplets of water glistened on his collarbone, his stomach, his hips. He looked gorgeous. He always looked gorgeous.

Graham watched him. He took a deep breath. “Ciarán—will you tell me what Lachapelle said to you that day I was at Ronan and Liam's?”

For a moment Ciarán didn't acknowledge that he'd heard him. Instead, he asked, “Will you help me wash my back?”

He handed Graham the cloth and turned around. Graham placed a hand on his hip and gently brushed the cloth down his back in slow, smooth swipes. Ciarán was just as freckled there as he was anywhere else.

“I'm not mad, sweetheart,” Graham said. “I just—I'd like to know.”

Ciarán took a deep breath. “I'm embarrassed.” But then he said, “He came with flowers, and asked about Liam. If he'd woken up, if he saw who'd attacked him. I thought he was concerned, but now I know he was just seeing if he had anything to worry about—if Liam could identify him. He was relieved when I said he was still sleeping. That's when he said that we'd gotten off to the wrong start, and that he had just come to check up on me because he wasn't sure of your—skills. As a rancher, or

as a husband.” Ciarán’s cheeks were red. “He offered to buy some of the cows, because it’d be easier for us if they were off our hands so there’d be less work for us and more—free time. For other things. He said he could show me what I was missing. I told him I’d never been happier, Graham. I told him to leave.”

That made sense, Graham thought. That made a lot of sense. He’d already refused to sell his prize cows to the Lachapelle once before. It was just like the man to try again—and to proposition his husband in the process.

Graham let the anger inside him flicker and die. There was no point to it now. Jean Lachapelle was in the law’s hands now, and Ciarán was safe and sound here with him. He did wish that he’d gotten a few more hits in, though.

To Ciarán he said, “I’m sorry he said those things to you, sweetheart,” and held him close.

“I just—didn’t want to make you worry when there was already so much going on. And I was also a bit worried that, well. That I might’ve done something that made him think I was courting his attention.”

“Jean Lachapelle thinks everything and everyone on this Earth has been put here to serve him,” Graham said, flatly. That’s why it galled him so much that anyone would refuse his offer. “I’m glad you stood up to him that day. And I’m glad you were there to save my hide last night.”

His husband sighed. “I love you, Graham.”

“I love you, too.” Graham cleared his throat. “Now, what do you say we sit down and eat? We got a lot more to talk about. Like getting things ready for your father. With that money Mrs. Duncan gave us, I can start buying the material to add another room onto the house.”

Ciarán's eyes were shining.

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Graham wasn't much used to writing letters. The one he had sent to The Matrimonial Journal had been a mix of liquid courage and a sense of quiet desperation, and his reply to Ciarán had been fueled by giddy hope and excitement, but never had he attempted to convey himself as someone he wasn't. His words had always been sincere, even if they were sometimes awkwardly put together. But writing a letter to Ciarán's father—that was a different kind of challenge. This letter had to be perfect. It wasn't just about exchanging pleasantries. This was about telling a man who had raised the love of his life that he, Graham Shepherd, would take care of him forever. It was about conveying to Rory Ryan that he loved his son deeply, that he would do anything to ensure Ciarán's happiness, and that he knew how fortunate he was to have him as a husband.

Ciarán spoke of his father often, always with such admiration and affection that it made Graham's heart swell. He adored Rory, that much was clear. But as much as Graham could feel Ciarán's pride when he spoke about the man who raised him, there was also an underlying fear—a fear that Rory might not approve of him, that the love he shared with Ciarán might not be enough to win his father's respect.

Graham desperately wanted Rory to like him. More than that, he wanted him to know how much Ciarán meant to him.

The morning sun filtered softly through the kitchen window as Graham sat at the table, nervously tapping his pen against the wood. Ciarán, for his part, hummed cheerfully at the stovetop, stirring a pot of blackberry jam. It was a batch he had been preparing with care, as he always did, and it was likely to be the last large one of the season. Summer was waning, and autumn would soon come, bringing with it the busyness of ranch work that they both cherished. But for now, the warmth of the

kitchen and the sweet scent of simmering berries seemed to slow time itself.

Graham watched him, grateful for the peacefulness of the moment, but the letter weighed heavily on his mind. “What do I call him?” he asked, breaking the silence.

Ciarán turned, a bemused expression crossing his face. “Call him? Why, you can call him Rory, or father.”

Graham grimaced, feeling immediately awkward. Both options felt too familiar, too soon. He didn’t want to come off as presumptuous, but calling him “sir” felt distant and cold.

“You’re thinking too much,” Ciarán chided him with a lighthearted laugh, shaking his head. “Just write it however you feel.”

“I can’t say I’ve been accused of that before,” Graham replied, half-joking, though he still wasn’t sure what the right approach was.

“Oh, Graham, hush,” Ciarán said, a soft smile tugging at his lips as he returned to his task. But there was affection in his tone, a quiet understanding that made Graham’s heart flutter with reassurance. Ciarán was always good at grounding him when his mind raced.

With a deep breath, Graham picked up his pen and began to write. His words poured out, guided by a mixture of love and earnestness, and he wrote:

Dear Sir,

I must thank you for the watch. It is a very fine and beautiful thing, and I think it truly too great to be mine, but I swear to you that I will cherish this gift for the rest of my days.

I think the same of your son. Ciarán is the finest person I have ever met, and it is my great joy that he agreed to be my husband. I will do anything within my power to make sure that he is happy and provided for. He has told me that there is nothing he would like more than to have you here with us, so I have begun to build an addition to the house which would be your room, and I hope it is to your liking. The house I have built with my own two hands, and I think you shall be pleased with the work. As for the furnishings, I have left this to Ciarán, who knows your tastes and who takes much delight in making things more comfortable.

The construction is going well, and all should be ready for you by this coming winter. However, Sir, I must admit that Ciarán is extremely concerned about your well-being and fears that a winter crossing will be too difficult for you. At the same time, he has expressed his distress at the thought of you spending another season by yourself. He will not say outright that he would like you here as soon as possible, but I enclose the money necessary for your passage and leave it to your discretion as to when you will leave. Whether winter or spring, you will be welcomed here by your loving and devoted son, as well as your son-in-law,

Graham Shepherd.

Graham stared at the letter for a moment, his heart pounding with the weight of his words. He had tried to capture the essence of how he felt for Ciarán, how much he wanted Rory to feel comfortable in their home, how eager he was to make a space for him as part of their lives.

“I think I’m done,” Graham said, letting out a small sigh of relief.

Ciarán glanced over, his expression softening as he wiped his hands on a towel. “Do you want me to read over it?”

“No!” Graham said quickly, his face flushing slightly. “No, sweetheart. I had to speak

to him—son-in-law to father-in-law.”

Ciarán raised an eyebrow, a playful gleam in his eye. “I see. Well, finish up with your letter, and come here and try this jam.” He blew at a spoonful of jam before taking a sip, and when he pulled the spoon away, it left his lips a deep purple. “Mmm, it’s getting there.”

Graham carefully folded the letter, sealing it in an envelope before walking over to Ciarán. He caught the spoonful of jam that Ciarán offered him, but instead of tasting it, he leaned in and kissed him, tasting the sweetness of blackberry jam still lingering on his lips. The moment was warm, intimate, and sweet—a reminder of the quiet love they shared.

“Tastes just fine to me,” Graham said, his voice playful as Ciarán tried to swat him with the spoon.

“Hey!” Ciarán laughed, but there was a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Save that for later, Mr. Shepherd. I’ve got to perfect this recipe in time for the fair.”

Graham chuckled, stepping back as Ciarán resumed his work. The annual Larkspur fair was always an event to look forward to—there would be games, contests, and the highly anticipated cooking competitions. Two of Graham’s cows had won blue ribbons in previous years, and he was determined to add a third this time. Ciarán was also planning to enter a jar of his famous blackberry jam into the judging, and Graham could already tell it was going to be a hit.

“You’re hard at work,” Graham teased. “Got to take my pleasure when I can.”

Ciarán tolerated another kiss before gently pushing him away. “You can take me however you want when we go to bed,” he said, grinning.

“I’ll hold you to it,” Graham replied, his heart light with affection..

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He decided to take Roisin for a walk around the ranch, a quiet patrol of the perimeter before he called it a night. The evening air was crisp, the last light of the setting sun casting long shadows across the fields. Roisin trotted happily at his side, his tail wagging in that way it always did when he was content, which was almost always. As they strolled, Graham’s thoughts wandered in a different direction—reflecting on how much his and Ciarán’s relationship had changed in the months since they’d married. It felt as if they’d stepped into a new life, one built on trust, love, and a comfort with each other that he hadn’t known was possible.

There had been a time when the simple act of holding hands had been enough to make them both blush. He recalled the awkwardness of those early days—the stolen glances, the bashful touches, the shared silences filled with unsaid words. They’d stumbled their way through those first few months, learning each other’s rhythms, finding their way. There had been misunderstandings, missed moments, but also laughter, tenderness, and patience. They’d spent more than a few nights tangled in the sheets, unsure of what they were doing but equally sure that they wanted to do it together.

Now, the intimacy between them felt natural, like breathing. Their touches were no longer hesitant but firm, full of assurance, of knowing. They didn’t need to fumble with their words or wonder if the other felt the same way. They simply knew. The easy affection they shared had transformed into a deeper kind of love, one that was as comfortable as it was passionate. Graham grinned as he remembered the teasing that had happened just that morning in the kitchen, how Ciarán had playfully swatted him with the spoon after he’d kissed him, jam still on his lips. Once, they would have been embarrassed by such displays, but now, it was second nature. They were at ease with each other, even when the moments felt silly.

And then there was the physical side of their relationship. At first, the idea of being so intimately connected with another person had been daunting. They'd both been unsure of how to navigate those waters, not just physically but emotionally. But now, they had become so attuned to each other's bodies that they moved together with a kind of effortless rhythm. They made love with the same ease with which they shared their thoughts or their smiles. It had gone from tentative to urgent, from quiet to loud, and sometimes, there were no rules—just the spark of desire and the comfort of knowing they were wanted.

Before Ciarán, Graham had a ranch. It was a simple life, one of hard work and solitude. He grew crops, raised livestock, and tended to the land with a steady hand. He'd been self-sufficient, driven by the need to provide for himself and for the small community he was a part of. He sold his goods in town, made enough money to live comfortably, and by the standards of most, he was considered prosperous. But prosperity, he realized now, had always been an empty word until Ciarán entered his life. Yes, he had a ranch, but he had no one to share it with. He had work, but no one to laugh with at the end of the day. He had the occasional visit from a friend or neighbor, but no one who stayed. It was a life full of tasks, but devoid of the warmth of companionship.

Now, Graham had everything he could have ever hoped for and more. He had friends—people who invited him to their homes for tea and long conversations, people who cared about him and his well-being. He had Roisin, the loyal guard dog who was as much a companion as he was a protector. He spent more time lounging by the fire or nestled into Graham's lap than he did on actual patrol, but that was fine by him. And then there was the house. A house full of trinkets, knick-knacks, and the chaotic beauty of two people building a life together. There were jars of blackberry jam lining the shelves, a testament to the work they'd done together, the simple joys they'd found in making something from the fruits of their labor. The house was no longer just a building—it was home. It was their home.

And of course, there was Ciarán. Graham thought of his husband now, curled up in their shared bed, snoring peacefully, always with that half-smile on his face when Graham shook him awake in the mornings. Ciarán, who loved him with a depth he'd never thought possible, who made him feel seen and wanted every single day. Ciarán, who had given him a kind of love that had filled every empty space in his heart. No more loneliness. No more wishing for something more. He had it all now. The way Ciarán smiled at him, the way he spoke his name, the way they fit together so seamlessly, made Graham feel like the luckiest man alive.

“That’s prosperity,” Graham mused softly as he absently rubbed Roisin’s ears, his warm body pressing close to his side as they continued their walk. The last rays of sunlight cast a golden glow over the fields, the grass swaying gently in the breeze. In the distance, the outlines of the barn and the house stood silhouetted against the horizon. He didn’t need riches or fame. He didn’t need anything beyond this—this life they had built together.

His gaze drifted back toward the house, and he thought of Ciarán, waiting for him inside. The love they shared was enough to fill every room, every corner, every moment of their lives. He could still remember how it had felt to be a solitary rancher, alone with nothing but his thoughts and his work. But now, with Ciarán by his side, he knew he was truly prosperous.

And tomorrow, they’d wake up together, ready to face whatever the day had in store, because with Ciarán by his side, Graham knew there was nothing he couldn’t handle.

As Roisin gave a contented bark and wagged his tail, Graham smiled, the weight of his thoughts lightened by the simple truth of his life now. He wasn’t just a man with a ranch. He was a man who was loved, who loved in return, and who had found a kind of peace he never thought he would have. He had everything he needed.

That, Graham thought, was prosperity.

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Their days were filled with work. Caring for the animals, tending to the crops, building an addition to the house. Ciarán took to construction with great enthusiasm—he wanted his father’s room to be absolutely perfect. Graham took to working alongside Ciarán on the project with similar enthusiasm, not only for the thought of how happy Ciarán would be when the room was finished and furnished, but also because Ciarán often took his shirt off while they worked. His husband made quite the sight, surrounded by sunlight, sweat pouring down his freckled chest, helping Graham hammer down the floor and put up the walls.

“You sure you never done this before?” Graham asked one afternoon as he brought Ciarán a bucket of fresh water from the well.

Ciarán dipped a tin cup in it and drank gratefully. Graham watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “Thank you, Graham. And no, never. I had my sewing, and my secretarial training, but never...” He trailed off.

“Must just take naturally to this kind of work,” Graham said, smiling.

“Maybe I just have a good teacher,” Ciarán said. He dipped the tin cup into the bucket again and poured the water over his head. As he gave his damp curls a shake, water droplets rolled down to his stomach.

Graham grunted. “Huh.” Then he went to his knees and pressed his tongue to Ciarán’s skin, intent on licking up all the sweat and dust and water from his belly.

Ciarán shrieked—he was ticklish—and his laughter quickly became a scandalized cry. “Not here! Not here, Graham! Take me to bed—”

“All right.” Graham hauled him up and carried him back to their room, and dutifully

took his husband to bed.

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With the arrival of autumn—marked by the cooler, crisper breeze, the leaves turning vibrant shades of yellow, red, and orange—came Larkspur’s annual fair. It was one of the town’s most anticipated events, a joyous celebration that bridged the seasons. A goodbye to summer’s lazy days and a warm welcome to the busy autumn months. It was a time for the whole community to gather together, before the chill of winter descended, to talk, to play, to eat, and to show off their year’s hard work.

Graham and Ciarán walked through the bustling town square, both of them soaking in the festive atmosphere. The streets were alive with colorful pennant flags fluttering in the wind, hanging from buildings and stretching from lamppost to lamppost. Flowerpots, overflowing with autumn blooms, lined the sidewalks, their bright colors adding to the vibrancy of the day. Everywhere they went, confetti rained down, thrown gleefully by children and adults alike, a symbol of the pure joy everyone felt. From the direction of the church, they could hear a lively band playing—though their enthusiasm outstripped their skill, the music had a charm all its own, adding to the day’s festivities.

They meandered from one vendor to another, often stopping to chat or buy something from the local sellers. They indulged in apple fritters, hot and sugary, their hands sticky with sweet glaze. They shared a paper cone of buttery popcorn, and enjoyed a small portion of tangy potato salad, the flavors dancing on their tongues. At one stall, Ciarán spotted a flower crown stall, and after a bit of bargaining, he bought them both crowns—one for each, made from delicate wildflowers and woven with dark green and blue ribbons. He laughed as they placed the crowns on each other’s heads, the simple gesture of wearing something so cheerful adding to the sense of joy.

A few stalls down, someone was selling handmade toys—simple wooden animals,

dolls made from soft fabrics, and knitted creatures that looked like they were meant for cuddling. Ciarán's eyes immediately landed on a patchwork puppy, stitched together from colorful scraps of fabric. Without hesitation, he bought it for Roisin, who had been a constant companion through thick and thin. Roisin would love it, he knew—he was always so gentle with the little things they gave him, his tail wagging in pure joy at any new toy.

They spent the rest of the afternoon playing carnival games, testing their luck and skill. They played ring toss and cornhole, and even entered their guesses for how many gumdrops were in a jar. Graham figured 150 was a nice, round number, but Ciarán thought a slightly higher estimate—174—might stand a better chance, so he entered it into the ballot box.

There was plenty of time before the main events—the cattle show and the jam and preserve judging—so they shared a sandwich under the shade of a nearby tree and sipped on apple cider, watching the flow of people around them. They waved at friends, exchanged pleasantries, and enjoyed the lively atmosphere of the fair.

Eventually, they parted ways in the middle of town—Graham needing to return to the animal shows at the corral and Ciarán heading toward the food-tasting tents beneath the church.

“I’ll come find you afterward,” Graham promised, giving his husband a quick kiss. “I know you’ll do well.”

“Good luck, Graham,” Ciarán said with a smile, his voice full of encouragement, before dashing off toward the tents with his jar of blackberry jam in hand.

Graham didn't mind the wait. The cows were one of the last categories to be judged, but he enjoyed watching the competition, studying the other entrants, seeing what qualities they prized in their livestock. It wasn't just about the ribbons—it was about

business, too. He'd been thinking of expanding his herd with a stud, and maybe even adding a few ducks. If the wait got too long, he could always rest in the stable with his animals until it was time for them to show off their skills.

Mr. and Mrs. Duncan were there, showcasing their two best horses—the very ones that had been stolen by Lachapelle and which Graham, Ciarán, and others had helped retrieve. The horses performed flawlessly, their movements synchronized to the point that it seemed like a single, well-oiled machine. The pair of them worked together seamlessly, guiding the horses around the pen, and when they finished their routine, the crowd erupted in applause. It was a well-deserved tribute to the skill and care that had gone into raising those horses.

It was no surprise that Liam and Ronan's sheep won first prize in their category. Graham congratulated Liam on both his recovery and his success with his ewe. "Where's Ronan?" he asked.

Liam grinned. "Ah, he's entered a chocolate cake in the baking contest. They're probably judging it under the tents now."

"Ciarán's over there, too," Graham said. "He entered his blackberry jam."

"Good luck to him—those old timers know how to make a preserve," Liam chuckled.

"Thanks. I hope Ronan does well, too. Congratulations again," Graham said, giving the ewe a pat on the head as she nudged him affectionately with her nose.

Soon it was time for the cattle show, and Graham led his cow—an elegant Shorthorn with a coat of white and red spots—into the arena. The judges inspected the animals with professional detachment, but Graham could see that none of the other cows quite compared to his. She had a regal bearing, intelligent dark eyes, and a temperament that made her easy to handle. As the other animals were judged, Graham watched

them closely, taking mental notes of the quality of the stock and the care their owners put into them.

When the judges awarded his cow first place, he kept his expression schooled, though he couldn't suppress the small smile that tugged at his lips. It wouldn't do to gloat, not in front of the crowd, but he couldn't help but feel proud. "Good girl," he murmured to his cow, and she preened as though she knew exactly how lovely she looked with her shiny coat and blue ribbon draped around her neck.

With his cow left to rest, Graham went to find Ciarán. He walked under the tents where the food entries were laid out—cakes, pies, cookies, candies, jams, jellies, and preserves in every conceivable flavor. Graham couldn't resist stopping to marvel at the delicacies—meringues, shortbread, caramels, and all kinds of colorful desserts. He could see the happy faces of those sampling bits and pieces of the treats, and it filled him with a warmth that seemed to radiate from the heart of the fair.

There, near the edge of the tent, Graham spotted Ronan, holding a platter that displayed a nearly empty chocolate cake. The judges had clearly liked it, as the top of the cake was missing most of its layers, leaving only a small portion behind. The rest of the cake was adorned with chocolate frosting, shavings, and brandied cherries, and pinned to the top was a blue ribbon.

"Look at that!" Graham said, stepping closer. "Two blue ribbons for you and Liam to take home. Your sheep won the show."

Ronan grinned, his face lighting up with pride. "Ar fheabhas," he said. "Graham, is buaiteoir é d'fhear céile freisin."

"I knew he would!" Ciarán beamed, before adding, "It's a lovely cake. You deserve it!"

Before long, Ciarán found his way to Graham's side, holding his jar of blackberry jam in hand. "Second place," he said, a little shyly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Second place? That's amazing!" Graham kissed him, feeling the thrill of the day's accomplishments. "I knew you'd do great. You're the best in town."

Ciarán chuckled. "Well, second best. Mrs. Alvarez's green pepper jelly took first place."

"Mrs. Alvarez has been sweeping the fair for years," Graham said with a smile. "But second place is incredible, and I'm so proud of you. First in my book, though."

Ciarán smiled and held up his jar. "We still have half of this jar. And they gave me a plate of biscuits as part of my prize!"

"Three dollars, too. Not bad at all," Graham said, laughing.

As they made their way toward the vendors, Ciarán spotted something that made his eyes light up. "Oh, Graham, look! We can have our portrait taken!"

A photographer had set up a booth in the middle of town, with a view of the fair in the background. The hustle and bustle of the fair's activities—the tents, the colorful decorations, the people—would all be captured in the shot.

Graham smiled, taking Ciarán's hand. "Let's go."

They waited their turn, patiently watching a small family and a few young couples before it was their turn. When they finally stepped up, the photographer adjusted her camera and commented, "Quite tall, sir."

"Should I sit?" Graham asked, trying to make himself more comfortable, though he

knew he would tower over Ciarán even sitting down.

“No, no, I can fit you both in just fine,” the photographer said, a smile in her voice.

Ciarán had gone to set down his jar, but Graham stopped him. “Keep it in the photo, sweetheart.”

Ciarán looked at him in confusion. “What?”

“Hold it like this,” Graham said gently, taking the jar and turning it so that the red ribbon on top was visible to the camera. “So everyone can see it.”

Ciarán blushed. “It’s silly.”

Graham smiled, wishing the camera could capture the beautiful shade of pink on Ciarán’s cheeks. “It’s not silly. I’m proud of you, and I want everyone to see it. We had a good day today, didn’t we?”

Ciarán smiled, looking down at the jar, then back up at Graham. “We did.”

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Two days after the fair, Oscar arrived at the ranch with a small cart, the sound of the horse's hooves echoing across the quiet land. He greeted Graham with a wide smile and handed over the prize—a bag of feed, the one Graham had won for his cattle’s victory—along with a letter addressed to Ciarán. Tucked carefully in his hands was the photograph of them from the fair, now developed and ready to be treasured.

Graham took the photo carefully from Oscar’s hands, his heart swelling with emotion as he looked down at the image. It was a perfect capture of the day, a reminder of how far they had come and how much love and joy they shared. There, standing side

by side, were him and Ciarán, both wearing the flower crowns they had made for each other. Graham's hand rested lightly on Ciarán's shoulder, a gentle, protective gesture that spoke of their bond. Ciarán's hands were clasped around the jar of blackberry jam, the red ribbon tied around it still clearly visible. They both wore smiles that could light up the world, so filled with contentment and shared happiness. Him and his husband.

Graham felt his throat tighten, and he had to look away for a moment, his eyes welling with tears. He swallowed hard, trying to regain his composure, but the overwhelming sense of joy and pride wouldn't quite leave him. He cleared his throat, trying to mask the emotion, and turned back to Ciarán. "What's that, sweetheart?" he asked, his voice a little hoarse, his attempt at casualness failing.

Ciarán had already started to read the letter in his hands, his expression quickly shifting to one of pure excitement. His voice shook with the energy of the news he had just read. "A letter from my father," he said, his eyes sparkling. "He says he'll be here in December! He's coming to visit, Graham! We have to get ready! His room still isn't finished, and he says he'll send some of his things to us, and we need to make space for them, and—"

Graham's heart gave a flutter at the thought of Ciarán's father coming to stay. It was a big step, a sign of the deepening connection between their two families. But he could see how overwhelmed Ciarán was getting, the flurry of thoughts and preparations starting to pull him in all directions. Graham placed a calming hand on his husband's arm, giving him a reassuring squeeze. "We have plenty of time, sweetheart," he said, his voice soft but steady. "It'll get done."

Ciarán paused, a deep breath escaping his lips, and his shoulders seemed to relax under Graham's touch. He nodded slowly, allowing himself to be comforted by the certainty in his husband's voice. "Yes, you're right," he said, a little quieter, more grounded now. "You're right."

With a gentle smile, Graham cupped Ciarán's face, leaning in to kiss his cheek. The warmth and tenderness of the moment enveloped them, and for a brief instant, everything felt perfect. Of course it would get done. They had more than a month to prepare for his father's visit. Time would stretch just long enough for all the little details to be arranged—Rory Ryan's room would be ready, his things would find their place in their home, and everything would be in order. When Ciarán's father arrived in December, Graham knew they would both be there to greet him, to welcome him into the home they had built together. A warm, loving home, one that would now be shared with a new member of their family.

And then, when the day came, the three of them would make their way back to the ranch. Graham could already picture it—the moment when they would all settle together under the same roof. It was the next step in this beautiful journey they had embarked on, a journey that was still unfolding with each passing day. No matter the challenges that lay ahead, they would face them together, hand in hand, as a family.

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By the time winter arrived, Graham and Ciarán had worked tirelessly to prepare their home for the cold months ahead. The cellar was stocked with the fruits and vegetables they had preserved during the fall—jars of jams, pickles, and vegetables lined up neatly in rows, ready to be enjoyed through the long, chilly months. The last of the summer grass had been carefully cut, stored in the barn, and set aside for feed for the livestock. They'd repaired and reinforced the chicken coop, barn, and stables, ensuring that they would withstand even the harshest of winter storms. The firewood was neatly stacked, ready to be used whenever the chill in the air became unbearable. And, just in time, the final touches were put on the addition to the house—a room for Rory, Ciarán's father, who would soon be arriving.

The first signs of their preparations came one cold morning when Oscar appeared at the door, hauling packages full of items that had arrived for Rory. There were clothes, knickknacks, books, and a surprising number of supplies for knitting—something Ciarán found a bit amusing considering that Rory had never been one to show much interest in the craft. But what caught Graham's eye most was the assortment of gardening tools.

“Gardening tools?” he asked, raising an eyebrow as he watched Ciarán sift through the small trowel and shears.

Ciarán sighed, a fond but exasperated expression crossing his face. “He said he wanted to help out around here. I told him that we had everything we needed at the ranch, but sometimes he just doesn't listen...” Ciarán gave a small laugh, clearly understanding the good intentions behind his father's insistence on providing more.

With some of Rory's belongings now in their home, Ciarán took charge of furnishing

the room that would become his father's. He spent hours poring over the general store's furniture catalog, making sure every detail was perfect. He ordered a new trunk, a sturdy desk and chair, a mirror, a wash basin, and a comfortable mattress. But his most thoughtful purchase was the rocking chair—a cozy, cushioned chair meant not for Rory's room but for the corner near the stove, where his father could rest and keep warm during the colder months.

Ciarán also requested that Graham build another bed for Rory's room—a sturdy frame to fit the mattress—and a large bookcase. Graham had his reservations at first, unsure of Rory's taste or what kind of furniture would suit him best. But Ciarán reassured him that as long as the bed was comfortable and the bookcase could hold a large collection of books, his father would be pleased.

With that, Graham set to work. He crafted a simple but solid bed frame, one that would fit Rory's specific needs. The mattress fit perfectly, and Graham could picture his father-in-law sleeping soundly in the bed, content with the comfort it offered. He also built a large bookcase, tall and sturdy enough to hold the wealth of knowledge he suspected Rory would bring with him. Graham chuckled to himself at the thought of how many books Rory might carry from Ireland. Perhaps an entire library.

“What about blankets?” Graham asked one evening as they reviewed their progress. “Pillows—we need to get pillows. I want Rory to step into his room and feel like everything is perfect. I want him to know we've thought of everything.”

Ciarán smiled softly, his fingers lightly brushing through the fabric of the quilt they were preparing. “I'll make the pillows. He's very particular about them. As for the blankets, he told me that he's bringing the quilts from our old house.”

Graham's heart swelled at the thought of those quilts—memories of Ciarán's childhood, a tangible piece of his family's past that would now be part of their home. “Is there anything else he needs?” Graham asked, unable to hide the sense of urgency in his voice. The date of Rory's arrival was fast approaching, and he wanted

everything to be perfect.

Ciarán paused, glancing over at Graham, his voice quiet as he said, “If there’s anything he needs, we can get it. I’ll find whatever he wants, if only he arrives safely.”

Graham could sense the worry in his husband’s tone. It was the same worry that had kept Ciarán awake the night before, thinking about his father’s journey. The long trip from Ireland, the uncertainty of navigating through New York City, finding the right train to take him nearly across the country to Larkspur—Ciarán couldn’t shake the anxiety that something might go wrong along the way.

Graham pulled him into an embrace, his voice soothing as he whispered, “He will, sweetheart. It’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

They made a silly pair, each of them fretting over different things. Graham’s mind was focused on getting everything just right for Rory, while Ciarán worried about his father’s journey and the possibility of something going wrong. But despite the anxiety, they found comfort in each other’s presence. Ciarán rested against him, sighing softly, and Graham kissed the top of his head.

“I just worry about him,” Ciarán murmured. “I hate thinking of him alone, especially with the weather turning cold.”

“You made the trip alone,” Graham reminded him gently. “You got on that ship by yourself. You found your way in New York by yourself, and then you came here to me—alone. You’re strong, Ciarán, and if your father’s half as strong as you, he’ll be fine.”

Ciarán smiled, a little softer now, the weight of his fears lightening. “Thank you, Graham. Do you think—maybe we could make a special dinner for him when he arrives?”

“Of course,” Graham replied immediately.

Ciarán’s face lit up, and he began to rattle off ideas for a welcome meal: a roast with a nice cut of beef, mashed potatoes, fresh bread with herb butter, pickled beets, and an apple cake made with the apples from the cellar. The thought of it all—comfort food, made with care and love—brought a warmth to Graham’s chest. It wasn’t just the meal that mattered. It was the gesture of bringing his father-in-law into their home and showing him that he was wanted, cared for, and loved.

“That sounds perfect,” Graham said. “It will be a wonderful way to welcome him.”

Ciarán smiled, his voice full of confidence. “And we’ll make stock with the leftovers. That will be good to have when it gets really cold.”

As his husband continued to plan for Rory’s arrival, Graham sat at the kitchen table, content to take a small break from his work. The house was filled with the promise of something beautiful on the horizon. Soon, the three of them would be together under one roof, and it would feel like home—not just for Ciarán and Rory, but for Graham as well.

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Graham woke one day to the first snowfall of the season. He didn’t see it, but he felt it; the dark of the morning with the sun behind snow clouds, the chill in the air, how comfortable and warm he was bundled up under the covers with Ciarán. As his eyes adjusted, he considered the day’s chores.

There wasn’t as much to do in winter. No crops to tend to. The animals were safe and sound in their shelters, only needing to be fed, brushed, and otherwise cared for. The eggs would still need to be collected and the cows milked, but there’d be less overall. The main chore for winter was to get through winter, and everyone, human or beast, put all their energy into seeing spring once more.

Beside him Ciarán stirred. His snores stopped with an abrupt snort and his large brown eyes were still drowsy as he blinked himself awake.

When he focused on Graham he smiled. “Dia duit, mo ghrá,” he murmured.

Graham’s Irish still wasn’t anything that might be called good. But he understood that just fine.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Graham said.

They kissed, slow and tender, until Ciarán pulled away with a mischievous expression. He said, “Warm me up, please,” and so Graham was, of course, helpless to do anything but pull him into his arms and rock against him until they grew too hot and flushed and sweaty for their night clothes and swiftly discarded them onto the bedroom floor.

There wasn’t a prettier sight in the world than Ciarán, blushing pink, naked, and laughing underneath the blankets as Graham tickled him with his beard, kissing and nuzzling every part of him, from the delicate, sensitive skin of his neck to his soft belly to his beautiful, freckled thighs.

With an impatient wriggle, Ciarán said, “In me, Graham.”

Graham laughed. “You’re bossy this morning.” He rolled away to grab the bottle of oil on their nightstand. It was getting rather light, he thought as he gave it an experimental shake. He felt Ciarán’s lips against his back, wet kisses pressed along his spine, and roving hands rubbing his shoulders and gliding across his ribs.

“Get ready, honey,” Graham said. Ciarán fell back against the pillows, legs spread, as Graham slid his oil slicked fingers inside him.

Ciarán moaned. “Oh, Graham.”

God, he loved it when Ciarán said his name like that. Soft and breathless, his chest heaving, lashes fluttering, mouth open and inviting.

Graham crooked his fingers just so and Ciarán cried out, scrabbling at the sheets. “Oh!” Another cry was cut off as Graham surged forward to kiss him, panting against his lips, sucking on his tongue. Ciarán whimpered when Graham poured more oil onto his hand and stroked his aching cock, precum spurting onto Ciarán’s stomach.

He’d never have his husband beg for him. Graham eased himself inside Ciarán with a groan. Every time they made love it was just as exciting, just as wonderful, just as sweet as that first time.

“Mo ghrá,” Ciarán gasped as Graham began to thrust. “Mo ghrá—”

He was just so gorgeous. Graham nibbled on his lower lip. His voice thick with arousal, a desperate rasp. “That’s right. I’m yours. I’m your love. I love you—I love you, Ciarán—”

Ciarán grabbed his ass, tried to pull him in further, closer, and Graham came as he kissed him, sucking a bruise onto his neck. He felt it—hot cum leaking from where they were joined, smearing on their skin, on the sheets.

“How do you want it?” Graham asked. He stroked Ciarán’s sides, kissed him again. “Tell me how you want it.”

“Your mouth,” Ciarán said. He smiled when Graham kissed him, moaned when Graham took him into his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the head of Ciarán’s shaft, greedily swallowed the taste of him, that mix of precum and sweat. He massaged Ciarán’s thighs while he sucked, marveling at their softness, and then he pinned Ciarán down and took him to the root, moaning as Ciarán yanked at his hair and cried, “Graham, Graham, Graham—”

Good, Graham thought when Ciarán's spend hit his tongue. He tasted so good.

There was still some time before they had to begin their day proper. Graham rested his head against Ciarán's chest, soothed by the rhythm of his beating heart, and sighed with satisfaction as Ciarán ran his fingers through his hair.

"Good morning indeed," Ciarán murmured.

Graham shook with laughter.

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Once, winter had been the loneliest season for Graham. He had always dreaded the long, cold nights when the days grew shorter and the snow blanketed the world outside. The isolation weighed on him, pressing down as the dark sky seemed to stretch on forever. Back when he lived alone, even the simplest trip to town, just to place orders for the ranch or pick up supplies, felt like a lifeline. But when he returned home, there was no one to greet him, no familiar voice to break the silence. The evenings would stretch on endlessly, each one a reminder of all the mistakes he had made and all the ways he had failed. The cold didn't just come from the outside; it seeped into his bones, a chill that came from within, from the emptiness of his life.

But now, things were different. The winter that had once felt so oppressive had transformed, like a storybook world come to life. The fire in the stove crackled with warmth, filling the house with a comforting glow that made every room feel like a sanctuary. The scent of cider simmering on the stove mixed with the warmth of fresh bread baking in the oven, and there was always the sound of Ciarán bustling around—his soft footsteps as he moved from room to room, busy with the tasks of the day. Sometimes he would warm cider for them both, sometimes he would sit by the fire, stitching together a new quilt, his fingers moving with the same care and tenderness that he put into everything he did. Roisin would chase after him, his little paws pattering across the floor, and the two of them would play together, laughing as

the puppy tumbled over Ciarán's feet. At times, they would stop whatever they were doing and dance together, slow, graceful movements that made Graham's heart swell. And Ciarán would sing—sometimes just a soft hum, other times a full melody that filled the house with joy. His voice was like the warmth of the fire, like a promise of home.

The snow outside would fall in great, lazy flakes, softening the world, making everything feel peaceful, timeless. And inside, Graham joined in, becoming part of the rhythm of life that Ciarán had woven around them. They experimented with cider recipes, each batch better than the last. Graham would sit beside Ciarán as he worked on the quilt, offering his help in any way he could, even if it was just threading needles or adjusting fabric. They tussled on the floor with Roisin, laughing until their sides hurt, and sometimes, when the mood struck them, they would dance together—swaying in each other's arms, feeling the closeness, the connection, the love that seemed to envelop them both.

They would sit at the table with mugs of hot cider in their hands, talking about everything and nothing. There was always something to discuss—plans for the ranch, ideas for the future, thoughts on the past. And, of course, the ever-approaching arrival of Rory, Ciarán's father, who would soon join them at the ranch. Graham imagined the three of them, living together under one roof, the dynamics of their little family shifting and growing. He thought of the conversations that would take place in their shared kitchen, of Ciarán and his father speaking in Irish as they cooked or worked together. He could picture Rory, sitting comfortably in the rocking chair Ciarán had bought him, perhaps with Roisin curled up at his feet, enjoying the quiet of the house. Maybe he would even take up some tailoring in the house, or perhaps, after so many years of hard labor, he could simply rest, content in the knowledge that he was surrounded by people who loved him.

One night, as they lay in bed, the darkness enveloping them like a blanket, Graham shared his thoughts with Ciarán. He spoke softly, his voice low in the stillness of the room, but Ciarán's response was gentle, his words full of emotion. "Do you know,"

Ciarán said, his voice trembling ever so slightly, "every night, when I say my prayers, I thank God for you? For giving me this blessing—to be married to you. To be your husband, and to go to bed with you, and wake up with you, and to be by your side."

Graham's heart caught in his throat. He wasn't sure how to respond, so he simply murmured his husband's name, "Ciarán."

Ciarán chuckled softly, the sound rich with affection. "You are a very rare kind of man, to dream about when his father-in-law comes to live with him!" His arm moved in the dark, wiping his face as if trying to hide the tears that had formed there.

Graham pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him, feeling the warmth of Ciarán's body next to his. He kissed his husband's tear stained cheeks, brushing away the tears as best he could. He understood what Ciarán meant—the changes that would come with Rory's arrival were inevitable. They wouldn't just be a newlywed couple anymore. They would be caretakers, a family. And while Graham was certain there would be challenges, there was also the promise of happiness, of sharing their lives with someone they both loved. How happy Ciarán would be to have his father with him again, to know that he wasn't alone in the world. And Graham would be there, too, to look after Rory, to make sure he felt at home.

"There's so much room in this house, Ciarán," Graham said softly, his voice filled with quiet certainty.

Ciarán's hand found his in the dark. "I love you, Graham."

"I love you," Graham replied, his heart full, his chest swelling with emotions he didn't have words for. His love for Ciarán was overwhelming, all-encompassing, and it felt like it would pour out of him, filling the space around them, the entire house.

And as they drifted off to sleep in each other's arms, Graham couldn't help but think that maybe that was what warmed the house—their love. It seeped into the very

walls, filling every room with a sense of peace, of belonging, of warmth that could withstand even the coldest winter nights.

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The day Rory was to arrive, the house was alive with nervous excitement. Graham and Ciarán had breakfast with Liam and Ronan, who had come to offer their good wishes. The conversation was light, but there was a definite undercurrent of anticipation in the air. The warmth of the kitchen contrasted with the brisk, chilly morning outside, where a blanket of snow covered the earth, sparkling in the early light.

“This is very good news,” Liam said as he took a sip of his tea. “When your father’s settled in, bring him here and we’ll have tea. And we’d be delighted to help introduce him to the rest of the community. Is that not so, Ronan?” He looked over at Ronan with a playful smile.

Ronan, ever calm and composed, spread a bit of marmalade on a biscuit, his actions deliberate. He glanced up, giving a warm, affectionate smile before replying, “Sea, tá sé amhlaidh, mo ghrá,” which meant “Yes, that’s true, my love.”

Ciarán smiled, but there was a trace of worry in his eyes. “Thank you,” he said softly. “We might keep to ourselves for a little while after this. Such a long journey, and in this weather—I worry papa will be quite tired. And it will take some time for him to get used to living on a ranch.”

Graham, sitting across from them, offered a reassuring smile. “If you two would like to visit, then we’d be glad to have you.”

Liam and Ronan exchanged a pleased glance, both men nodding with enthusiasm. “We’ll hold you to it,” Liam said with a wink.

The conversation shifted to other matters, but the topic of Rory's arrival lingered in the air, as if it could not be fully set aside until the moment had passed. Eventually, the time came to say their goodbyes, and Graham and Ciarán bundled themselves up in coats, scarves, and mittens, ready to make their way to the train station. The winter landscape was peaceful, with snow covering the fields, trees, and roads in a thick layer. It was a beautiful sight, but the coldness made the journey feel more serious, more important, as if the land itself were holding its breath in anticipation.

As they walked toward the wagon, Graham couldn't help but feel a tightening in his chest. Ciarán sat beside him, huddled under a blanket, his dark green scarf wrapped snugly around his neck. The scarf was a gift from Graham, chosen specifically because it complemented Ciarán's features so well. It was a small token of his love, something that warmed him from the outside in, just as Ciarán did for him in every other way.

Graham had always been a man of practicality, and while he disliked wearing anything on his hands when he was driving the horses, the cold didn't bother him as much as it did Ciarán. His husband, however, was bundled up tightly, his cheeks flushed from the cold. There was something endearing about the way Ciarán looked in his layers, his eyes bright despite the chill, and Graham found himself smiling without even realizing it.

"What if the ice delayed the train?" Ciarán asked, his voice tinged with anxiety. "What if it derailed?"

Graham chuckled softly, trying to calm his husband's nerves. "I worried about the same thing, you know. The day I came to collect you."

For a moment, Ciarán's anxiety seemed to dissipate, replaced by surprise. "What? Me?" he asked, his voice incredulous.

"I was real worried," Graham continued, his tone soft but filled with a mix of

nostalgia and affection. “I thought something would happen to the train. A fire, or a robbery, or anything, really. I had to stop and pull myself together, right on the side of the road.”

Ciarán blinked, clearly shocked by the confession. “You...you stopped?” he asked, his voice quiet as he processed the words.

Graham nodded, a small, knowing smile tugging at his lips. “That’s how I got your bouquet,” he explained. “I ran out into the field to clear my head, and I just needed to breathe for a moment. That’s when I saw the flowers around me. I remembered your sketches, the way you’d capture the world in your drawings.”

He glanced down at Ciarán, his heart swelling with the memory of their first meeting. The bouquet had been a simple gesture, but one that had meant more to him than he could put into words. It had been a sign of hope—a small, delicate symbol of the future he was starting to imagine with Ciarán by his side.

Ciarán reached over and placed a hand on Graham’s thigh, squeezing gently. His eyes were soft, filled with a deep affection that made Graham’s heart skip a beat. “I kept them, you know. Those flowers, and all the other ones you’ve given me,” Ciarán murmured. “I have them pressed in one of my poetry books.”

Graham’s smile grew, touched by the sentiment. “I didn’t know that,” he said, his voice full of quiet admiration.

Ciarán returned the smile, his cheeks rosy from the cold, his breath visible in the crisp morning air. The two of them sat there for a moment, the world outside their wagon slipping away as they shared a quiet moment, just the two of them. For all the anxiety and anticipation of the day, for all the uncertainties ahead, Graham knew that they were ready for whatever came.

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The train station was more crowded than Graham expected. The cold winter morning had drawn out more people than usual, perhaps because many were waiting to reunite with loved ones for the holiday season. Families huddled together, wrapped in layers of coats and scarves, their eyes scanning the crowd in anticipation. Some sat with neatly wrapped presents, their bright colors and shiny ribbons standing out against the stark whiteness of the snow. Others were pacing, their hands fidgeting with their gloves or clutching at the handles of heavy bags, their eyes darting back and forth in sync with the train station's large clock.

Children, bundled in hats and mittens, were racing through the crowd, their laughter ringing out in shrieks as they pelted each other with snowballs in a carefree game. The sight of it made Graham smile, the innocent joy of their play a sharp contrast to the deep, quiet anticipation that filled the air around him and Ciarán.

Ciarán, too excited to sit, was pacing the length of the platform. His steps quick, his eyes constantly darting over the crowd, waiting for the moment that would make everything real—when his father would finally step off that train and into his arms. Graham stayed close, his large strides easily matching his husband's smaller steps as they walked together, side by side. Their footprints marked the fresh snow, Ciarán's delicate marks alongside his own heavier ones, as they tried to pass the time with idle chatter.

"I'll make us some tea when we get home," Ciarán murmured, mostly to himself. "And I'll put the roast in the oven. I'm glad I remembered to make the apple cake and the bread yesterday. It'll take most of the day for the roast to cook. Ah, but it'll be such a heavy meal with the potatoes—and maybe papa won't be up to it after all his traveling. I should make something lighter, too. A carrot and beet salad, maybe?"

Ciarán's mind was already working through the logistics of their day, trying to anticipate what his father might need, what he might enjoy after his long journey. Graham smiled softly, his heart full of warmth for the way Ciarán cared so deeply, for his family, for him. His husband's voice was a balm to his nerves, even if the

anxious energy in the air was palpable.

“Whatever we can’t eat tonight, we’ll have tomorrow,” Graham said gently, squeezing Ciarán’s arm. “Makes breakfast and lunch easy.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Ciarán agreed with a small nod. “I think I will make the salad, though.”

It was a small comfort, but it helped calm Ciarán’s nerves, even if just a little. Graham, despite his own excitement, was grateful for the moment of quiet that fell between them. But that peace didn’t last long.

The shrill whistle of the train pierced through the air, and sparks flew from the tracks as the great metal machine screeched to a halt, its wheels groaning under the sudden pressure. People began to rush toward the platform, some with luggage clutched tightly, others with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The noise, the sudden flurry of motion, felt like a punctuation mark in the stillness that had preceded it.

As passengers spilled out onto the platform, Graham caught sight of the crowd, his eyes instinctively searching for the figure that would finally make their family feel complete. And then, like a beacon in the sea of faces, he saw Ciarán’s excitement light up as he spotted the one person they had been waiting for. Ciarán’s eyes widened, and he pointed with a burst of joy.

“There! There, there he is!”

Graham turned to follow the direction of Ciarán’s outstretched finger, his heart skipping a beat. There, standing among the bustling crowd, was a tall, older man, his hair and beard streaked with gray. His clothes were worn, patched in places, but finely repaired—practical and weathered from years of hard work, but still carrying the pride of someone who had taken great care in their appearance. His shoes were polished, his waistcoat a dark green, and his coat, though well-worn, seemed to hold

the promise of countless stories stitched into its fabric. He stood, looking down at the trunk at his feet with a slightly puzzled expression, as though he wasn't quite sure how it had come to be there—or how he would manage to move it all on his own.

Graham watched as Ciarán's face lit up, a radiant smile spreading across his features.

“Papa!” Ciarán cried, his voice filled with emotion as he took off toward the man.

And then, for Graham, it was like everything else melted away. Rory Ryan looked up at the sound of his son's voice, his face transforming with a warmth so familiar to Ciarán. It was as if, in that moment, the world stopped spinning, and there was nothing but the two of them. Rory dropped his bags to the ground with a thud and threw his arms wide, a smile blooming across his face.

“Ciarán!”

Their embrace was immediate, the kind of reunion that could only come from years of separation. Graham watched, his heart swelling, as father and son held each other tight, a powerful, silent exchange passing between them. There was so much love in that moment that it nearly knocked Graham over. He had seen reunions before, but nothing like this.

“Look at you!” Rory said, pulling away to hold Ciarán at arm's length. “You look wonderful. I've missed you so much, my dear.” His voice was thick with emotion, and Ciarán's eyes gleamed with unshed tears.

“I've missed you, too,” Ciarán replied, his voice shaky. “How are you feeling? Are you hungry? Tired? Did you sleep on the train ride? Let's get your things together—”

But before Ciarán could go any further, Graham stepped forward, offering a reassuring smile. “Here, let me help, sweetheart.” He reached down to grab the trunk and one of the bags with ease, offering to carry some of the weight.

Rory looked at him, his eyes scanning Graham with curiosity, and then a smile spread across his face. “You must be Graham,” he said.

Graham stood a little straighter. “Yes, sir. It’s—a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” Rory said, his smile warm and genuine. “It’s good to finally meet my son-in-law.” He gave Ciarán a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Thank you for looking after Ciarán.”

Graham felt a lump form in his throat, and though he didn’t know exactly what to say in response, he found the words anyway. “I love him.”

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Graham insisted that Ciarán ride in the back of the cart with his father on the way back. “You two have a lot to catch up on,” he said with a knowing smile, as he climbed into the front seat and took the reins. It was his way of giving them space, of allowing the two of them the chance to reconnect after so many years apart.

Behind him, Ciarán and Rory spoke together in Irish, their voices a soft, melodic hum in the crisp winter air. Ciarán’s words came quickly, a little breathlessly, his excitement spilling out as if he couldn’t contain it. Rory’s response was slower, more deliberate, his voice rich with affection, carrying the weight of years gone by. The sound of their conversation was like a balm to Graham’s soul, a reminder that the family he had come to cherish was growing, expanding, filling the space with love and laughter.

As they passed through the town, Graham could hear snippets of their conversation. Ciarán was telling his father about the shops, about the people they had met in Larkspur, and the little details of the life they had built together. Rory’s laughter, warm and deep, echoed through the air as he responded, clearly delighted by the stories his son had to tell. It was as if a world that had been closed off to Rory for so

long was beginning to open up to him once again.

When they left the town behind and the road stretched out before them, the pace of their conversation slowed. Graham could catch fragments of what they were saying now, enough to understand that Ciarán was describing the countryside when it was in bloom. He spoke of the hills covered in wildflowers, of the trees bursting into color, of the vineyards full of ripening grapes. His voice was full of pride as he painted a picture of their home—a place that was alive, vibrant, a world in which everything had a place and purpose.

Graham smiled to himself as he guided Ginger and Bó onward, feeling a quiet sense of satisfaction settle over him. And when the ranch finally came into view, with its barn nestled in the distance and the house rising from the earth like a warm, welcoming beacon, Rory made a startled sound. He seemed to catch sight of something unexpected, and for a moment, he was silent, simply taking in the sight before him.

“What a sight!” he exclaimed, his voice full of sincere wonder. The awe in his tone made Graham’s heart swell, and he couldn’t help but glance back to see Ciarán’s face lighting up with a smile as he leaned toward his father.

“It’s even better when there’s some greenery,” Ciarán said, his voice full of pride. “You’ll see, papa. It’s just like I told you—everything comes alive. The flowers, the trees, the fruit. It’s all so beautiful in the spring. You’ll be able to pick fruit right off the vine and—”

Rory’s chuckle cut him off again, his tone light and teasing. “Goodness gracious, lad, you don’t have to convince me of anything, I’m already here.” His eyes scanned the ranch with clear appreciation. “But it’s very nice. A very lovely home you two have made for yourself.”

Graham couldn’t help the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth as he looked

toward the ranch. There was something deeply gratifying in knowing that, after all the hard work, after all the effort and sacrifice, this was their life. This place—this home—was theirs to share with the people they loved.

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Roisin was immediately upon them when they walked through the door, tail wagging furiously as he bounded around their legs, his excitement unmistakable. They had barely shaken the cold and the light dusting of snow from themselves before the dog was leaping joyfully between them, barking happily at their return. His nose wiggled with curiosity, sniffing at Rory as if trying to figure out the new scent.

“This is the noble hound, then?” Rory asked, bending down to offer his hand to the dog, his voice warm and amused. But Roisin, in his boundless excitement, wriggled this way and that, and Rory’s fingers only managed to brush the top of his head before the dog dashed off again, circling around them like a whirlwind.

Graham chuckled at the sight. “I’ll get the fire started,” he said to Ciarán, eager to help make the house warm and welcoming for Rory. “If you want to give your father the grand tour.”

Ciarán beamed at the suggestion, looking at Graham with gratitude. “Yes, thank you, Graham. Here, papa, let me show you your room.” He motioned for Rory to follow him as they carried the bags to Rory’s room. Graham stood for a moment, listening to the sound of their voices, before he turned to the stove, placing some firewood and tinder into the stove to get a blaze going.

The fire caught quickly. Graham watched with satisfaction as the flames grew, the wood crackling and popping, sending embers dancing into the air. Roisin, tired from his initial excitement, plopped down on the rug beside him, his back turned to the stove as he warmed his rear. Graham reached down to give him a firm pat on the head, murmuring, “Good boy,” as the house slowly began to heat up, the chill of the

winter air evaporating into the warmth that was soon to fill the room. Soon, the roast would go into the oven, and the smells of dinner would begin to fill the house.

On the kitchen table were several bundles of silverware, one fork, one knife, and one spoon wrapped in a napkin, along with a small stack of plates. A ceramic pitcher of apple cider sat beside it, ready to be warmed. The loaf of bread and the apple cake that Ciarán had baked the day before were covered with a cloth, and next to them sat a bowl of freshly scrubbed potatoes. Graham grabbed the bowl of potatoes and placed it on the counter, then moved the cider pot onto the stove, heating it gently.

As the cider warmed, Graham took a quick sip to taste it. The warm liquid was sweet, spiced with cinnamon and cloves, just like Ciarán always made it. He poured it back into the pitcher, setting it on the table for later. “And we bought this rocking chair for you—” he heard Ciarán’s voice behind him.

He turned to see Ciarán gently moving the rocking chair closer to the stove, urging Rory to sit. Rory was already looking more relaxed, the weight of the journey starting to lift as the warmth of the house enveloped him.

Rory eased himself into the chair with a sigh of contentment, looking around at the room with a peaceful expression. “Oh, this is very nice. Everything has been so very nice, Ciarán,” he said, the gratitude in his voice clear.

Ciarán flitted about, making sure his father was comfortable. “Are you comfortable?” he asked, hands fluttering as he offered a blanket to Rory, who took it and placed it on his lap with a quiet murmur of thanks.

“Extremely. Thank you, my dear,” Rory said, his eyes softening as he settled in.

“You’re welcome,” Ciarán said. “Do you—do you need anything else?” His voice held a note of concern, as if he could anticipate his father’s every need.

“I’m just going to rest my eyes a bit, I think,” Rory said with a faint smile, his voice growing quieter. “Now that I’m here, I’m starting to feel the journey.”

Ciarán leaned in and kissed his father’s gray head, the gesture tender and filled with affection. “Yes, of course. I’ll get the roast started.”

It didn’t take long before Rory was softly snoring in the chair by the stove, Roisin curled up at his feet. The sight was so peaceful, so domestic, that it felt like a scene right out of a picture book—a moment of tranquility and love that had been a long time coming.

“What else can I help with?” Graham asked Ciarán, already turning back to the kitchen.

They fell into an easy rhythm, bustling around the kitchen together. Graham shredded carrots, sliced beets, and poked at the potatoes with a fork to check their progress. He pulled the roast out of the oven, checking it carefully, then pushed it back in with a satisfied nod. Ciarán was at his side, moving like a whirlwind as he checked on the cider, wrapped up the bread, and tended to the apple cake. He tutted as Graham grabbed a quick bite of the cake and playfully wiped the crumbs from Graham’s lips, warning him that he would ruin his appetite if he kept sneaking bites.

“Not likely,” Graham said with a grin, and Ciarán’s soft, sweet laugh filled the kitchen.

Graham bumped his hip against Ciarán’s, a quiet, affectionate gesture as he leaned in and asked, “How are you?”

Ciarán paused, glancing up at him with those large, dark eyes that always seemed to see straight into his soul. “I’m a bit tired, too,” he admitted. “All this excitement. But I also feel—all my worries are gone, now that my father’s actually here.”

Graham smiled, taking Ciarán's hand in his. "Are you happy, sweetheart?"

Ciarán met his gaze, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "I am. I was before, but now—now we're all together. I have the two people I love most in the world here with me. I'm happy. I'm very happy."

"Good," Graham replied simply, his heart swelling with the truth of it.

"And you?" Ciarán asked, his voice soft but full of meaning as he took Graham's hand in his, his thumb brushing the back of his hand. "Are you happy, Graham?"

Graham smiled, the warmth of his love for Ciarán filling him completely. "Of course I am. Happier than I've ever been in my entire life."

How could he not be?

He had a father-in-law snoring contentedly in a rocking chair beside the stove, and a dog snoring just as loudly at his feet. He had his husband right beside him, their lives intertwined in this simple, beautiful moment. They were cooking dinner together, the warmth of the fire and the delicious smells of the meal filling the house.

He had a family. He had a home.

Ciarán smiled and cupped Graham's cheek, leaning in to press a kiss to his lips. His scent—earthy, comforting, with the faintest trace of honey and milk soap and the apple crumb cake he'd baked—was intoxicating. Graham's hands moved to Ciarán's waist, pulling him closer for an even deeper kiss. His tongue brushed against Ciarán's lips, coaxing him into the kiss, and Ciarán gasped softly, his eyelashes fluttering shut.

Just as the kiss deepened, a loud snort broke the silence, followed by the sound of lips smacking. They broke away in a panic, their faces flushed as they turned toward the source of the noise. They both stared, certain that Rory had spotted them, but no—he

was still fast asleep in the rocking chair, completely unaware. He snorted again, smacked his lips, and then fell silent, the deep, contented breaths of sleep returning.

Graham and Ciarán exchanged a glance, and immediately, they burst into laughter, muffling their giggles with their hands. How reckless they had been! And how soon! They tried and failed to stifle their mirth, their laughter bubbling up uncontrollably.

“Everything all right?” Rory’s sleepy mumble came from across the room, his voice thick with sleep. “Do you need my help?”

Ciarán swatted Graham’s arm playfully, still grinning. “No, no. We’re just fine, papa. Everything’s wonderful. Right, Graham?”

Graham smiled, nodding. “Yes,” he said with complete sincerity.

Everything was wonderful.