



The Wounded Warrior

(Rockin' W #1)

Author: *BA Tortuga*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Lukes lost everything when it comes to his job and more, but he always has a home with his brother to go back to

When Navy SEAL Luke Blanchard comes back to Northeast Texas after a devastating injury, he feels like the whole world has gone dark. In a wheelchair and feeling unmoored from his life, Luke has no idea what to do, even as his twin brother Matt is determined to help him heal, even if it takes a butt-kicking.

Rory McConnell is a local prodigy, a real estate lawyer with a plan to buy up land before his sworn enemy gets a hold of it. When the Blanchard ranch goes into the red, he offers to buy out the debt. Luke backs his brother instead, but he doesn't believe for a minute that Rory is a bad guy like so many locals say he is. No one that sexy and hilarious can be, right?

As Luke claws his way out of depression with a crazy idea to run a therapy ranch, he and Rory start to explore the need growing between them. Will Rory's need for revenge against the man who damaged him forever come between them, or will it be the force that binds these two men together in a better life than either of them believe in?

This is a second edition of a previously published title. The publisher has changed.)

Total Pages (Source): 50

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter One

M att took a deep breath, trying hard not to scream at his twin brother Luke.

Shouting did more harm than good most days, but that fact didn't ease the temptation, really.

The truth was that Matt needed help on the ranch, and Luke should've been able to do some of the lighter jobs, but he was still sitting around on his ass feeling sorry for himself.

Guilt immediately clawed at Matt's gut. Luke deserved some downtime.

Thirty-two missions with an eighty-two percent success rate meant nothing to Uncle Sam once that rate went down the toilet, thanks to an IED, a bunch of shattered bones, two surgeries, and a scad of scars.

Luke had given up a lot to be a SEAL and was now giving up even more of his life trying to recover.

But that didn't mean Matt didn't need help.

So, instead of ramping up and stomping his damned boot heels, Matt counted to ten. "Hey, bud. I need some help with the foals."

"Help doing what? I'm no cowboy."

He peered into a face that ought to have been as familiar as his own, but somehow it wasn't. He was older by eight minutes, but Luke seemed like he was in his forties already, lines around his mouth that Matt didn't share, a hardness in his eyes.

"No, but you're what I got, and I need help." Luke was all about helping people, right? Matt was trying to appeal to his basic nature.

"Okay." Luke moved himself from the sofa to his wheelchair using his upper body strength, the heavy braces on his legs brutal as all get out. The doctors said he'd walk again without them and the crutches as long as Luke did his therapy, but Matt knew Luke didn't believe it.

Matt needed Luke to start believing.

Hell, he didn't give a living shit what the ornery son of a bitch believed in—Santa Claus, flying monkeys, yetis. He was easy. Matt wanted his easygoing, laughing twin back. Damn it, he was the quiet, serious one. The frickin' cowboy.

He held the door open for Luke, waiting for the wheelchair maneuver that caused the most trouble. Door jambs.

He'd fixed the ramp up, but the door would have to wait until he figured out where Luke was going to light for good. God knew his brother had always said he hated living in the back of beyond, which was why he'd gone into the Navy.

Luke managed to get out of the doorway without scraping his knuckles too bad. He'd suggested those fingerless leather glove deals, but Luke had responded poorly. His belly showed the bruises from Luke's no.

Luke still packed a hell of a punch.

They got down to the barn without too much trouble because Matt had graded the path a bit, and the foaling stalls would be a simple in and out, even with the wheelchair. He'd stabled a couple three foals when he fed, just to give Luke something to do .

The horses knew they were coming, hooves slamming against the dirt. In the barn, the whinnies started right away.

"They love you," he told Luke. "I don't fucking understand it."

Luke snorted. "They love the idea of some company, is all. Takes me longer to groom them, so I stay with them. They like that."

"Uh-huh." Matt didn't give a shit on the whys. He just cared about the love. His best mare, Shana, nosed over the stall door, her time in quarantine obviously chafing her. She had a cut just below her hock and had to stay in. "Hey, baby girl. How you doing today?"

He rubbed her velvet-soft nose, let her nibble on his palm.

She blew, bobbing her head up and down.

"Soon. I promise. Maybe today." He looked over at Luke. "You need help, or you good?"

"I got it." Luke started with the last stall, and Matt headed out to check the yearlings.

He was beginning to think this whole thing was going to work; he really was. The horses were thriving—the cattle were working the back forty. All he had to do was hold on for a little longer.

Luke would never tell Matt, but working with the horses soothed him deep down. Calmed his rage, for sure.

He had a lot of rage these days.

There was no way to be pissed around these long-legged beauties, though. No way in hell. The foal he was working with, a bay with a white star on her forehead, nuzzled his cheek, that nose so soft .

“Hey, sweet baby.” He grabbed the brush and started working, making sure to touch the foal all over, gentling her as easily as he could.

She nibbled at him, curious but not nervous. She trusted him, and Luke felt honored. This was the one good thing in a mess of shit. He worked up a sweat grooming her to make up for the big plastic syringe of meds he was going to stuff down her throat.

It was necessary, though, and Matt was a psycho about taking care of things—horses, and broken soldiers, and Dad, and everything.

He did love Matt for it—he really did. Luke grinned. Loved Matt, but wanted to beat him.

Like, with a hammer.

He chuckled when the foal lipped at his shirt because he’d stopped.

“You greedy girl, pushing me.”

She snorted hard, blowing his pocket open. Yeah, she was hunting treats.

“So smart!” He rubbed her ears, giving praise. He could hear Matt in the pasture,

whistling up a storm, the sound as familiar as his very bones, sunk deep into Luke's skin. His chest tightened, because he loved his brother, damn it, and that was what kept him going right now.

The whistles stopped for a half-second and he knew Matt was wondering if he was okay, if Matt should come check on him. Luke held his breath, willing Matt to just go back to work. Fine. He was fine.

Sometimes being a twin sucked. When he'd learned all he wanted to know about shrapnel, Matt had been in the ER with a migraine bad enough that he'd been convulsing. There was a thing between them, whether or not they wanted it.

The whistling started up again, and if it sounded strained, well, who was gonna mention it .

Not him, sure as shit. He just wanted to play with the foals and pretend he wasn't broke-dick.

The foal's head lifted, the sound of a pickup truck that wasn't Matt's humming in his ears.

"Oh, goddamn motherfucker." Matt's words floated in, carried by pure rage.

Interesting.

He eased out of the stall after giving a piece of apple to the foal and rolled to the barn door to peek out. A shiny black GMC king cab sat out there, and a man stood next to it, his pressed Wranglers and suit coat speaking money.

Now, who the hell was this and why did Matt look like he was fixin' to open a can of class A certified whup ass?

The guy was young enough, maybe early thirties. He had pretty smile lines and a flat belly under a big silver buckle, and he was giving Matt a wry grin. “Now, don’t be sore, Matt,” he began. “You’re still having trouble making payments and you know it.”

“Go to hell, McConnell. Shit, go to fucking Arkansas. I don’t care but get off my land.”

“They’re going to drive you off, Matt. It’s inevitable. I’m trying to get you a fair deal in the process.”

“No, you want that acreage, and that’s all you give a shit about.” Matt slapped his hand against the hood of the pickup. “Off.”

“You are one stubborn, stupid asshole, Matt LeBlanc.”

Oh, now. That was getting personal. Luke wheeled out into the yard, following the path he knew Matt had graded for him. “Who the hell are you to call my brother an asshole?”

“You must be the soldier come home from the war. Thank you for your service.”

“I was a sailor.”

“Right.” The guy chuckled. “Rory McConnell. I went to school with your brother John.”

He tilted his head. John was the baby, a good five years younger than them, eight years younger than Mark. “You’re just an infant then.”

“It’s not the age, it’s the experience.” Rory winked at him, blue eyes merry. The

expression made Luke want to smile back, except that this guy had called Matt an asshole.

“Get off my land, McConnell. I mean it.” Matt sounded about as mean as a snake. Luke glanced at him, noticing the narrowed eyes and pressed-together lips.

“I’m going. I’m not trying to be a dick, Matt. I’m really not. Better to sell now than to get your ass foreclosed on, you know? Just think about selling me that back fifty acres, if nothing else.” McConnell slapped the hood of his truck before walking back to the driver’s side door and hopping in.

“Sell? Foreclosed? What the fuck, Matt?”

“I missed a few payments back when Dad went in the hospital.” Matt’s shoulders drew up around his ears. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

The big pickup pulled out in a rush of gravel and exhaust, McConnell not smiling now.

“Matty! I got cash. I wouldn’t fucking leave you hurting.”

“I know that, Lu. I do.” Matt relaxed enough to give him a wry smile. “You also have a long recovery ahead of you, and the VA sucks.”

“Yeah, yeah. How much? And don’t lie.”

Matt swallowed hard, his throat working visibly. “I’m catching up. I am. I was three months in the hole, and I still owed half the taxes. I only owe about three thousand.”

“I’ll give it to you. I can write you a check right now.”

Matt's mouth took on a stubborn, flat line. "I can do it. I've got a sale coming up, and I think that one yearling I have will pay off the whole back debt."

"Fine, but let me cover it until you do. Hell, I'm staying here, eating your food, everything. Let me have some fucking worth, would you?"

Matt blinked for a moment, then nodded, coming to put a hand on his shoulder. "Okay, Lu. I get it. I do. We'll draw up a quick loan, though. So, you're actually the owner if I default somehow."

"What? We're going to be partners now?" He smiled, though, because the thought didn't suck.

A slow smile spread over Matt's face. "Would that work for you? I like the idea."

"Don't you grin at me, Matty." Still, they just smiled at each other like monkeys.

"Yeah. Well. Let me finish with the yearlings, and we'll clean up and go into town. We'll need a notary."

"Does that mean you'll feed me Mexican?"

"Hell, yeah. I'll even spring for El Chico." Matt gripped his shoulder a moment longer, the gratitude clear in his expression. "Did you finish up with the babies?"

"I got one to dose, that's it. I was wondering what the fuck was up with McConnell there."

Matt snorted. "He's in some development war with that asshole Doug Harris down at the bank."

“Development war? Here? Are you shitting me?”

“Nope.” Matt sighed. “Harris bought up about three hundred acres before anyone knew what he was doing. This place is like the iceberg blocking his cruise ship or something. McConnell owns about fifty acres behind us, but there’s no road access.

It was a stupid buy. I reckon he’s going to try and buy me—us—out and then sell to Harris and make a fortune. ”

“Well, he can’t have it. Either one of them.” Luke put on his determined face, knowing it would make Matt laugh.

“No. No, this is ours.” Matt grinned when he said ‘ours’. Hugely. “Okay, get the dosing done. El Chico awaits. ”

“Dude, tableside guacamole and apple pie.”

“You pig.”

“Oink oink.” Luke winked before turning his chair and rolling back to the barn. He felt better than he had in weeks, as if he finally had a purpose.

He wasn’t sure what the fucking purpose was, but at least he had one. For right now, he’d take it.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Two

“Rory. I just saw Matthew LeBlanc at the bank.” His assistant, Lori, bustled into his office and dropped a Subway bag on his desk.

“No shit?” His cotton-candy-haired, gum-popping girl missed nothing that happened in Mt. Pleasant.

“No shit. He’s got his brother with him. The dude-I-got-wounded-at-war one. He’s a hottie.”

Again, no shit. Somehow, Matthew LeBlanc was just another cowboy while Luke LeBlanc oozed hot asshole.

Too bad said hot asshole was one, in a wheelchair, two, most likely straight and a former SEAL—making the possibility of getting to the aforementioned asshole highly fucking unlikely—and three, Matthew LeBlanc’s twin brother.

Of course, Rory did love a challenge. “Did they have a big bag of cash to deposit?”

“He looked pretty damned smug, boss.”

“Huh.” He bit his lower lip.

“I know, right? Weird.”

“Well, people are allowed to go the bank.” He hoped it had been to pay off the back

payments .

“Yeah, and I’m allowed all the conjecture I want.”

“True.” Rory winked at her. “Thanks for lunch.”

“You bought it,” she said, waving before flouncing off.

Little turd. He did adore her. Rory stretched out in his chair, his back popping furiously. Damn. Maybe he needed to get out more. He felt as if all he’d done in the last few months was plot and scheme against a certain land developer.

Skullduggery was not a physically active job.

God, he cracked himself up.

He stood up as his phone rang and he tapped the Bluetooth headset. “Yeah, Lori?”

“I have Mr. Takashi calling from Tokyo.”

Oh, cool. Maybe there was something interesting going on—a catastrophe of mammoth proportions that would give him something fun to do. “Patch him through.”

“You got it.”

Rory geared up for a long discussion in Japanese-glish, glad that it would keep him from calling Elaine down at the bank and bullying her into jeopardizing her job by telling him what Matt and Luke LeBlanc were up to.

He kept telling people it was dangerous to let him get bored. No one ever believed

him.

“ Konnichi wa, Takashi-san . How are you today?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Three

L uke wheeled his chair through the aisles at the Walmart, keeping his head down a little so he didn't have to talk to anyone.

God knew he hated this frickin' store, but it was the only game nearby for some of the shit on Matt's shopping list. Matt had taken off with the damned cart, and Luke had a lap full of toilet paper and Ziploc bags.

He couldn't reach the fucking paper towels. Asshole stockers. Why did all the Brawny ones have to be on the top two shelves?

"You need a hand?" a warm, vaguely familiar voice asked.

The urge to snarl was huge and didn't fade when he looked up and saw a hard body with the brightest blue eyes he'd ever seen and a shock of white-blond hair peeking under a 10X Stetson.

Fucking rhinestone cowboy banker butthead.

"Brawny," he ground out.

"You got it." The man attached to the voice pulled down a three-pack for him. "Here you go. Luke, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks. "

“Anytime.” He got another of those smiles, like this McConnell dude wasn’t trying to buy the county. “I bet Matt is glad to have you home.”

“Yeah. I guess. Sure.” Christ. Small talk. Fuck. This guy was a real piece of work.

“Are you okay?” McConnell sounded genuinely concerned, which had to be put on, right?

“Luke. Hey. What do you want, McConnell?”

“I was going to hand your brother paper towels and then turn him to the dark side. We have cookies.”

“Ha.” Matt scowled at the man, then at him. “You disappeared.”

“Right,” Luke said. “I blend in.”

“Like a goddamn ghost. You need anything else, McConnell?”

“You are a prickly old fuck, aren’t you, Matt?” Another one of those wild grins showed up, McConnell looking damned fine, which Luke would never admit out loud.

“Damn right. I’m paid up, too, back on schedule, so fuck off.”

“Good for you.” The dude didn’t sound sarcastic. Luke stared at him, but McConnell only smiled, cheerful as fuck. “You holler at me if you change your mind, though. Not Harris.”

“Like I’d ever sell to you.”

McConnell staggered back, hands clasped over his chest. “Matt, you wound me to the core.”

Oh, Matt was going to kick this guy’s ass. Luke would watch. It would be a hoot.

Matt bared his teeth. “Go away.”

“Your brother is a mean man. If he starts abusing you, or hell, versy-vicey, let me know. I’ll either save you or pay to watch.” With that, McConnell sauntered off.

What the fucking fuck?

Matt stared at McConnell’s back, mouth hanging open. “Was he just coming on to you?”

“Who would come on to me, man?”

Swatting at him, Matt clucked like a mother hen. “Maybe he has a thing for meals on wheels, bro.”

“Oh, fuck you and the horse you rode on.”

“Luke LeBlanc! You watch your mouth!”

The sound of Miss Feezle’s voice was still as sharp as it had been when he was taking freshman English in high school. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

If Matt laughed even once, Luke was going to kill him.

“You are a decorated war hero, and I expect you to act as such, young man.” She glared down at him, and he had one of those weird out-of-time moments.

She seemed just the same. It had been, what?

Fifteen years? Sixteen? And she hadn't changed.

"Thank you for your service and your sacrifice. You must wear the label of hero for those young people looking up to you."

"Have to be pretty damn short to do that, bro," Matt spoke so softly that only he caught it.

Luke summoned a smile. "Thank you, Miss Feezle." He wanted to scream that it didn't take any courage at all to get surprised by a kid wrapped in an explosive vest under his clothes. He didn't. Go him.

"Goodbye, boys. Say hello to John and Mark for me."

"Will do." Matt's eyes rolled like dice across a slick table.

Miss Feezle whapped Matt on the butt, the sound just like when they'd taken licks at school rather than do detention. Not that Miss Feezle would admit to administering illegal capital punishment.

"Lord have mercy." Luke shook his head. "I'm so glad to be home." Sarcasm dripped from him like venom.

Matt shot him a sympathetic glance. "It'd be the same anywhere, you know. Hell, the hospital made you homicidal. "

"I know. I know, man. I just wish..." Well, it was pretty obvious what he wished. He wished that the scars and the weakness and the pain and the horseshit was a fucking nightmare so that he could go back to work.

And if frogs had wings they wouldn't bump their froggy butts.

"Well, at least you know you have an admirer," Matt teased.

"Hey, so do you." He dropped his voice. "Miss Feezle the Dominatrix."

"Dude! You are totally a perv! Do you kiss our momma with that mouth?"

"Like Mom doesn't swear like a sailor. She's the toughest broad alive. She eats nails to sharpen her teeth." Luke adored her.

Matt chuckled, grabbing all the shit out of Luke's lap and putting it in the cart. "She's a tough bird, for sure. Had to be with us around."

"Well, she is married to Preacher." Dad's name was in no way an indicator to his personality.

Preacher was salt of the earth, stubborn as a bull, and stronger than an ox.

He'd been a bulldogger and had still roped on the circuit up to the stroke.

He said that since the years of being a baseball and a football dad were done, he got bored.

"She is, for sure." Luke chuckled. That was how they all got named for apostles... She was a sick, amazing old girl.

"Come on. We need to buy hummingbird food."

"You pansy," he teased.

Matt snorted. “Sue me. I like tiny birds.”

“And cardinals and blue jays and finches...” Crazy obsession, bird watching. Matt even liked mockingbirds.

“There’s nothing pansy about feeding birds.”

“No?”

“Nope. Now, being your twin is like inevitable pansiness. ”

Luke looked over at Matt. “What does that mean?”

“Shit, you’re a fucking stud. I’m a broke-dick cowboy. What is it supposed to mean?”

Luke raised an eyebrow. “I’m the one who’s short now. Bird food.”

“You’re still my hero. It’s in the garden center. Come on.”

Luke had to shake his head and grin, wheeling around to follow Matt. Still Matty’s hero, and he didn’t even have to stop cursing to be an example.

Felt pretty fucking good, to be honest.

Chapter Four

“Now, are you sure you don’t want to sell that other three acres, Mr. Lyons?” Rory asked. “I’ll let you use it indefinitely as long as you utilize it for pasture, and that way I’m paying the taxes on it.”

Poor old guy couldn’t afford the taxes on his hundred-acre spread, and Rory would be damned if Harris would get this parcel, as close as it was to the state highway. The three acres the house and barns sat on Lyons wanted to keep, and that would be enough for his two horses and dozen chickens.

This game of checkers he was playing with Harris was an expensive one, but it would be worth it. Harris wanted to sell to developers, but this was ranch land. There were condos everywhere—the world didn’t need more.

It didn’t hurt that Harris had outed Rory five years ago and tried to ruin his reputation. Well, tried was more like managed, and reputation was a strong word because, damn, folks discovered that a rich queer cowboy was just fine to do business with.

The rich part had taken some work and a lot of fast talking. The occasional blow job. Good thing Rory was exceptional on his knees.

He grinned as Lyons agreed to the deal. “I’ll come out to the house with the paperwork tomorrow, then. Sound good?”

“It does.” If the old feller had a tear in his eye, Rory wasn’t gonna mention it. “Thank

you, boy. I couldn't stay if you didn't do this for me, and that damned Harris is pushing."

"I want you to stay. If your son changes his mind and decides to come back, I'll offer it to him before I do anything else, okay?" He clapped Mr. Lyons on the shoulder.

"You're a good 'un. One of our own."

"That I am." The McConnells had been landowners here since before Texas had bowed to statehood.

Rory intended to keep that going for generations, even if he had to adopt or something.

Hopefully, his sisters would produce heirs at some point.

They really needed to graduate from college and high school first.

Teenage girls were evil incarnate.

He waved at Mr. Lyons, then hopped into his truck. He had three messages. Mom. His cousin Dooley. One from Lori. Hers just said, "Check in."

"Mmm. Czech Inn. I should go to West soon." He dialed the office. Maybe he'd run down to Austin this weekend and get laid. "Hola, Chiquita banana, what's up?"

"Hey, boss. Two things. Your mom called and says to stop avoiding her, and Harris just tried to put a lien on Lilly McAllen. Did you get the contract signed yesterday?"

"Yep. Her check should fund today and she can pay off his loan." Ha! Score . Looked like Lilly's Café would be staying right where it was.

“Excellent.” Lori was having almost as much fun as he was. “How did it go with Mr. Lyons?”

“We’re in like Flynn. ”

“Harris is going to shoot you in the face with a bazooka.”

“He’s gonna try.” Rory wasn’t stupid. He knew he’d lose some in this game, but it was a numbers thing and he intended to show Harris how a McConnell played hardball.

He would never forget the man slapping him in the face with his dick, calling him a whore. He’d taken Fred Miller down, Chris Baker, too. There was only the big dog left now.

“He sure does hate you,” Lori said, sounding fiendishly pleased. “Don’t forget you have that charity dinner tonight.”

“Right. Suit or formal cowboy attire?”

“Cowboy. This is rodeo relief fund stuff.”

“Got it.” He made a mental note. Not that Lori wouldn’t put a reminder on his electronic calendar. “Tell me we got my white shirts to the cleaners.”

He counted on her to remember for him.

“Starched and pressed. Here at the office. Call your mother.” She hung up without letting him growl.

He rolled his eyes. Just what he wanted, another session of the ‘I’m going to kill your

sisters' club meeting. Still, he supposed he could fake a dead spot when she got going.

The idea left him with a smile on his face when he dialed and when Mom answered. "You rang?" Rory said.

"Actually, that was you. Did Lori finally bully you into calling?"

"Yup!" he answered, just as cheery as could be. "I saw you texted, too. How's your very own personal episode of Cruel Little Girl Liars or whatever it is?"

"I'm fairly sure she's a vampire. Possibly an extra from Salem."

"That's witches, or is it teen smoking?" He chuckled. "I can take her to the mall Sunday."

"Oh, would you? Your dad is on the 'Rowenna's never leaving the house again without supervision' thing and I have to run to Austin to help Aislin buy her spring formal dress. "

"Yeah." So much for his own trip to Austin. "As long as you bring back kolaches and pecan rolls."

"I can do that. How are you? Keeping busy?"

"You have no idea." He grinned, thinking how Harris really might try to shoot him over this Lyons deal. No more strip mall plans, thank you. "I have some charity thing tonight. Pray for me."

"Oh, poor baby. You have my sympathies."

“Thanks. You know how much I adore some of the folks who come to these events.”
Only not.

“You live for this shit and you know it.”

“Listen to you!” Sometimes she could still shock him.

“It’s true. No fighting.” She chuckled. “I have enough of that with your sister and your daddy.”

“Teenagers suck.”

“Yep. You should remember that well, you little hellion.”

“Hey!” He cracked up. “I was an angel.” Rory had been trying, and he knew it. Oh, not because he’d been a bad kid. No, he’d been a geek and something of a prodigy, and his folks were left scratching their heads most of the time.

“Yeah. You were mine, that’s for sure. Aislin is just like your daddy. Rowenna is... Christ, I don’t know. A changeling.”

Yeah, sixteen was just hard, especially when you were a dark little gothy thing and your big sister had been the homecoming queen and class president.

“Like I said, I’ll pick her up Sunday. After church, or is she still protesting that?”

“Pick her up at eleven. The stores won’t be open before then, anyway.”

“Will do. Love you.” That had gone well. Mom did like to hear he was doing shit for charity.

Hell, she liked to hear that she was going to get time away from Ro. Those two were like fire and matches.

“Love you, too. Bye.”

He shook his head and headed back to his office, leaving himself a voice memo to get the paperwork ready for this deal and to pick his baby sister up on Sunday.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Five

“S eriously?” Luke was so not going there. He would let Matt drag him out of the house for charity, but this was not ‘some cowboy assistance get-together’. This was some kind of formal do at a fancy-assed hotel. He put the brakes on his chair and dug in, glaring at his twin.

“You don’t have to wear your dress blues, for fuck’s sake. I got your good jeans creased.”

Jesus save him from fucking cowboys.

“Great. I can itch all night.”

“I’ll spray the insides with Caladryl.”

“Funny.” Luke gave in. “Fine. Cowboy duds it is.”

“I do love it when you’re easy.” Matt gave him a shit-eating grin. “The food should be good.”

“I sure hope so.” Luke deserved something fried. Or cocktail wieners.

“It’s gonna be brisket and sausage.” Right. This was Texas, after all. Barbecue was king and way cheaper than chicken-fried steak.

He could live with that.

Half an hour later, they arrived at the event thing, and damned if some dude didn't let them out of the vehicle and take Matt's keys to valet park the truck.

Matt grabbed his wheelchair, then helped him out of the truck and into the chair. "There you are. Let's go."

"I can wheel myself, you know." He didn't need Matt to push; he wasn't totally helpless.

"Do you want to? I'm easy."

"Just help me get through the doors." They had a revolving monstrosity here.

"It's a deal." Matt eased him in, then shot him a grin. "Thanks for the company, Lu. I appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah. Just because you can't find a nice man to hook up with."

"Shut up, fuckmonkey."

Yeah, Matt wasn't in the closet as much as he was the pickiest motherfucker on earth.

They squeezed his chair through the door, and boom. Sparkly ballroom with lots of glamorous folks in cowboy finery. Jesus. His balls actually tried to crawl up into his body at the thought of dealing with this.

"We'll stay through my part of the auction, I'll go up and stand and smile, and we'll leave. Okay?"

"Yeah." Luke bared his teeth in what he hoped was a smile. "Thanks, bro."

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I owe you. I’ll cook for a week.”

“Mac and cheese, and it’s all good.” Luke winked.

“You know it.” Matt grinned, then sighed. “I see old man Lefevre waving. You got this?”

“Yeah. Hopefully, the chair will terrify folks.”

“If it doesn’t, start drooling. That always works.” Matt patted his shoulder and left him. Asshole.

He glanced around. Ah. Cash bar. He could get a Coke and hide behind the ferns .

He rolled up, managing to get around the side where the bartender could actually see him. “Coke, please.”

“I’ll get this one, Jim, and I need a Corona.” A twenty was handed over, and Rory McConnell leaned over to offer him a grin. “How’s it going?”

“Uh. Well, I feel short.” Brilliant, LeBlanc . Fucking A.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s got to be a little screwed up, talking to people’s crotches all day. That would piss me off.”

“Depends on the crotch.” Did he just say that? Okay, he was officially brain-deficient.

McConnell let out this amazing sound that was part duck call, part horny moose. “That, I also understand, believe it or not. You mind if I sit?”

Did he mind? Probably not, but his twin sure as shit would, and he had to live with Matt. So Luke glanced around and brazened it out. “Where? On my lap?”

“As much as I’d love that, I imagine that your brother would cut my nuts off with a pair of rusty spurs, so I’ll pass. This time. Next time you ask, though, I’ll ride you like a prize pony.”

Luke’s cheeks heated until he thought they might burst into flame. “You don’t need to mess with me, man. That’s not right.” No one would want to ride him in this condition.

McConnell gave him a weird look, then his eyes went wide. “I didn’t mean offense, man. You’re still a stud, even when the big queen makes a pass. I promise.”

“What?” Now, he was confused as fuck.

“I’m the only openly gay guy in this whole county over the age of fifteen, honey. It’s okay. Here’s your Coke.” McConnell handed him his drink, then took a steady pull on the longneck the bartender handed over.

McConnell wasn’t even blushing; the words just straightforward as fuck .

Luke decided to give as good as he got. “Well, woo-hoo for you, honey . That means your gaydar is working. Thing is, you don’t have to try to fool me into thinking you’d look twice at me.”

“Why exactly wouldn’t I?”

Luke blew out a breath, motioning at his wheelchair with a sweep of his bruised, cut hands. “Hello!”

“Shit.” McConnell looked at him like he was a moron. “I had an earth-shattering six months with a paraplegic who played for a wheelchair basketball team. He turned my ass inside out.”

Luke’s mouth fell open, and he stared. That was all he could do. Was this guy for real?

McConnell found a chair tucked away behind the potted plants and plopped down, sucking back another long swallow of beer.

“God, this thing tastes like ass. I hate crappy beer.”

Luke chuckled. “It’s a Bud. How bad can it be?”

“I know, right? It’s not like I have the palate of a conoisseur...a coneseur...a fancy pants.”

Luke frowned. How many had McConnell had before he showed up? That would explain a lot, even if the guy didn’t smell like booze. Just what he needed—a sloppy, rich bitch drunk.

McConnell shook his head like he was confused. “At any rate, I would totally ride you like a prize pony. You ooze sex appeal.”

“Thanks.” It meant a lot less knowing McConnell was fucked up, but it was nice to hear.

“Anytime.” McConnell put his mostly empty beer aside, frowning at the bottle. “Seriously. I like a challenge.”

“Just don’t, man. Let it go.”

“Isn’t that a song?”

Christ. Luke started looking for Matt to save him. He didn’t need this .

“Oh, yeah. The big gay song. Let it go !”

No. No singing. Luke backed his chair away from McConnell, hunting enough space to turn around, but he didn’t get far.

McConnell rose and stumbled over to him, hands landing on the armrests of his chair. He expected a blast of whiskey breath, but there was only the faintest whiff of beer. “I dance, too.”

“I don’t. Back off, man.” He shoved McConnell back, but the guy had a good grip on him and he lurched forward. “I said, back off!”

“Stop.” McConnell almost ended up in his lap. “I can’t?—”

Luke shook his head and popped the guy in the jaw hard enough that Rory went ass over teakettle, landing with a thud on the floor, the sound of his head cracking like a shot.

Fuck.

Someone—a gal in sequins and rhinestones with her hair jacked to Jesus—came over, her heels click-clacking away. “Boss? Rory, honey?”

Rory’s eyes popped open, and the man stood like he’d been hit by an electrical wire. Boom, from flat on his back to standing. “Where...”

“Come on. Let’s go.” The woman shot Luke a look, the expression dripping with

rage.

“Something’s wrong, Lori.” McConnell staggered, and the Lori chick caught him.

“Yeah. Obviously. Now.”

McConnell walked out, and Luke could see where blood was leaking from the man’s scalp. Dammit. He hadn’t meant to...

He’d just wanted to...

Goddamn it.

This was what happened when he tried to go out in public. Matt appeared next to him, frowning after McConnell. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, he was drunk off his ass, man. Like totally wasted.”

Matt’s eyebrows rose. “Huh. That’s a first. I hope he left his check.”

“A first?” Who would pick a fancy-assed function to be the time to get fucked up?

“That I’ve ever seen, yeah.” Matt shrugged. “Come on and sit up by the stage. You can be my excuse to leave when we’re ready.”

“Yeah. I’ll just threaten to hit whoever I don’t like, okay?”

Matt beamed at him like he was brilliant. “I like it. It’s a plan. This is a cowboy thing, so it ought to work.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Fab.” He had a feeling it was going to be a long night.

Like, eternal.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Six

Rory watched the lights in the truck spin as Lori drove him home.

“You need to go to the fucking hospital, boss.”

“No hospitals.” His tongue felt like it belonged in someone else’s body, too big, too thick. Like a dead man’s tongue, a corpse’s... “Oh, God. Pull over. Pull over right now.”

She jerked the truck to the right and screeched to a halt. He tore the door open and landed on his knees, heaving violently.

“Hospital. You have to go to the hospital.”

“No.” He slashed the air with one hand. “I need to go home. I can sleep it off.”

“If you have a concussion, you’re not supposed to sleep!”

“I don’t have a concussion,” he snarled. There was something wrong with the motherfucking beer. It had gone off, made him loopy with only a few sips. “Made a dick of myself.”

Self came out like ‘shelf’. Maybe he would pass out. That might feel better.

“Yeah, well. Come on, back in the truck.”

His head rang with crazy sounds, but Rory didn't think any of them were real. He groped out, trying to find something steady.

"Boss. Seriously."

"Take. Me. Home." He would fire her ass, right here and now.

She clenched her jaw, studying him for a moment. "Okay, but if you're not better when we get there, I'm taking you in."

"Fair enough." He'd be better if it killed him. His stomach heaved again, and he turned away from Lori, just letting loose.

"Oh, honey..."

"I'm sorry." She'd seen him like this once before, back when they were in high school and his one date with a guy had ended in a terrible detox from Jell-O shots. He'd hoped never to put her in that situation again. "You only had one, right? A beer?"

"Half." He gagged, breathing through his nose. "God, Lori, kill me, okay?"

"Was it bad?"

"Had to be."

"God. Food poisoning and a concussion." She shook her head. "I think you need to go to the ER. Please, boss? I don't want to sit up at your place all night, nice as it is."

"Please. Just let me get home and drink a glass of water."

“Jesus.” Lori bundled him back into the truck and handed him a Brookshires bag in case he needed it.

“Thank you. This sucks.”

“It does. Are you sure it was the beer? What did you eat?”

“Nothing. I ate whatever you brought for lunch.”

“Oh, man. Skunked beer on an empty stomach.” Lori drove him home and his brain began to slow down finally, the spinning easing.

“Yeah. Yeah.” He felt better, though, less like death walking.

“Here we are. Inside, boss. You need water. ”

“Yeah. Yeah. God, this sucks. I’m so thirsty.” He felt as if he was in Hell all of a sudden—he was so hot, dry as a bone.

Lori dragged him inside before easing him down on the couch.

He didn’t fight it. God, he felt like hammered shit. He let her ease off his shoes and get him a bottle of water with a straw. “My phone says I should get you medical attention. Bad alcohol can poison your kidneys and all.”

“Let me rest, honey. Please.”

“Okay, okay. You sleep it off.” He heard her moving around, heading to the kitchen.

“Good girl.” Thank God. Rory wrapped his arms around his middle and closed his eyes, one foot on the floor, copying an old drunk trick from college. Kept things from

spinning any more than they had to, though that sensation was way better.

He took one deep breath after another. He could do this. He could. Food poisoning. How did beer go that wrong? Mold?

Oh, God. No thinking of mold.

No mold. Black mold got in people's brains and they disintegrated from the inside out. Ugh.

The last thing he needed was to have melty brains. He moaned and scrubbed his hand over his eyes. Okay, sleep it off, asshole .

Lori wandered around the kitchen—fixing herself something to eat, he was sure. He hated that she was missing the party. She loved them.

“You should head back. I won't tell.”

“You're supposed to be asleep.”

“I'm just concentrating on not dying. Someone has to give them my check.”

“Yeah. I left it there. You made a bit of a spectacle of yourself with the little hottie in the wheelchair. Is he straight? Tell me he's straight.”

“I imagine he's straight. Rumor is that his brother's a little bent in the middle, but incredibly careful not to advertise.” Wasn't it supposed to be a seventy percent chance if one twin was gay, then the other would be? The odds were in his favor.

Well, the gay odds were. The attraction not so much, after he'd made an ass of himself. “I need to—Gotta apologize...” Rory couldn't hold a thought with both

hands.

“Later. When you’re not dying.” Lori’s hands were cool, comforting.

“Okay. Thas goo.”

“Uh-huh. Go, coherence boy, go.”

Go. Yeah. That was it. He could just go.

Right to sleep.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Seven

Something was buzzing, clicking. Something...huge.

Rory shook his head, trying to make himself wake up. Come on. Come on, man. You have to move. You have to get the fuck out of here.

A rush of bile flooded his mouth and he screamed, the sound muffled, trapped in his throat.

“He’s choking. He’s choking. He’s choking.”

What the fuck was that?

Wake up, Rory. You have to move. He knew he had to crawl, he had to get away, but he was tied like a calf at a junior rodeo.

He bucked, his head slamming against something hard, and he couldn’t breathe from the acid and the burn, his lungs on fire.

Oh, please, just let him have some air, an ease from this nausea he couldn’t shake.

Sparkles showed up behind his eyes, which wouldn’t open for love or money, and he convulsed, desperate to catch a single breath of air.

He landed on the floor of his bedroom with a thump, the blankets wrapped tight around him, the light on in the en suite.

Rory sucked in a huge breath, relieved when his lungs worked, when no gag filled his mouth. Oh, Jesus, what a shitty dream.

He crawled into the bathroom, where three bottles of water in an ice bucket waited.

Oh, he totally owed Lori a raise.

Rory snagged one and let himself collapse in the tub, thanking God, not for the first time, that he had invested in the tankless water heater. He could just let the water rain down on him, steam beginning to rise almost immediately. He needed to scrub.

Soaking, scrubbing, then sleeping. No more beer. None. Then he would go find Luke LeBlanc and say how sorry he was.

How he was obviously being poisoned by manky beer. Maybe he'd even offer to take the guy out to lunch. Probably get shot down, too, but Luke had gotten under his skin.

Figuratively, not literally, because oh, Jesus fuck, no. Rory shuddered. Right. No more thinking.

Thinking bad. Fire angry . Soaking in the tub? Good .

Rory lay back, tilting his head over the edge of the tub so he didn't drown. He frowned, wondering what had made him think he was tied and gagged. Dreams were odd things.

He guessed the lingering nausea was just flavoring everything. Flavoring. Right. Gross! He needed to have calming thoughts. Breathe. Meditate.

By the time the water cooled, Rory was sound asleep, snoring and dreaming of Oompa Loompas doing the can-can.

It was better than drowning.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Eight

Physical therapy sucked giant hairy donkey dicks.

Luke did it because he had every intention of getting out of the wheelchair, no matter what he told Matt about giving up. He really did.

Still, the cheerful chirp of Avery the therapist's voice as Luke pushed his newly changed body to do things that used to come easy as breathing... Well, it made him want to hit something.

So he'd let Matt in the house when they got home and gone to the yearling barn. He needed some horse time.

The babies nickered and tossed their heads, calling to him.

He loved that, loved that they knew him and that they weren't scared.

They had been, that first bit, but he didn't mind.

He'd been afraid of them, too, and he'd been raised with them.

Everything was different in the chair. The whole world looked huge, and everything seemed designed to tip a man over.

Now, he knew they wouldn't hurt him unless he did something stupid. "Hey, guys. Guess who brought apples."

Tom-Tom peeked over the gate, chin banging on the wood .

“Me, that’s who.” He cut off a bit of apple with his pocketknife, then held it out, palm flat.

The yearling’s lips were soft as satin, tickling the shit out of his palm. He managed not to laugh or slap, then he rubbed Tom-Tom’s nose.

He could feel the tension of the day letting go, simply lifting off him like he was shaking off a mood. Like a dog coming in from the rain. He chuckled, and more long noses appeared, Lula and Fayla and Robbie.

One by one, he visited with them, getting them used to human touch and letting himself enjoy the simple act of taking care of something. They didn’t care if he was oddly shaped or awkward. They listened to his voice, nibbled at his shirt. This. This was therapy.

“I keep telling Avery that this is the way to go. I’m so tired of the wires and pulleys and weights and shit, guys. I swear.”

Fayla nipped at his ear, but he didn’t scold her. She deserved her apple. “I know, right? All you guys need is what you need.”

He reached up and rubbed Fayla’s ears, feeling the muscles in his lower back creak and protest. The stretch made him want to cry out, but he held it back. The horses made Luke hyperaware that he wasn’t the only one there.

She bobbed her head, pulling at him, helping him move and stretch.

“Such a sweet girl,” Luke murmured, laughing when she nibbled his chin.

God, it felt so good to laugh. Luke did it so rarely. This was a good place. A place a veteran like him could find a balm for his soul.

Maybe Matt would let a couple of Avery's other PT patients come by.

Oh, wouldn't that be something? Was that stupid? Maybe it was, but it couldn't hurt to talk to his twin. Matt wanted to help him, for sure.

Matt came into the barn, searching the dark corners for him. "You okay, Lu?"

Sensitive fuck.

"I'm better. Therapy sucked today. This is good, though."

"This is good a lot of the time."

"It is." Luke hesitated. "Do you think I could have a couple guys over? Maybe with my therapist?"

"Of course." Matt blinked at him, owlish as all get out. "This is your home, Luke. You bring whoever you'd like."

"Well, I meant to work with the horses, and those are yours. I think it would be good for Jake. Maybe Robbie."

Matt shot him a curious look. "You can, sure. I mean, I trust you not to let the babies get hurt."

"Cool. I would want you around to supervise, but Avery grew up on a ranch, too. I think—Well, maybe it's stupid, but it's calming. Working with the horses."

“You think? I remember when you were a kid, you hated it, hated being here.” Matt headed into the stables, loving on one horse after another. “I’m tickled to hear you don’t hate it now.”

“I don’t.” Luke shrugged, wheeling down the line with relative ease now that his arms weren’t screaming at him. “I guess I thought I wanted something else back then.”

“Well, sure. You... I mean, I’m just a broke-dick cowboy running horses and trying to keep Momma and Preacher on their land.”

“Bullshit.” Luke reached over to pinch Matt’s leg. “You’re my hero.”

“No pinching, asshat.” Matt’s cheeks went all pink.

God, Luke was proud of him for working so hard to make this ranch a good, solid place. “You asked for it. ”

“I just... I wanted you to know that I’m glad you’re here. I missed you something fierce.”

“You getting all maudlin on me?” That was Luke’s way of saying ‘I love you, too’.

“I’m starving, man. What are we having?”

“I was thinking we could have chicken and veggies on the grill. There’s a cherry pie from Brookshires in the freezer.”

“That sounds like a plan. I’ll chop and thaw, you make fire.” This was the best part of being here with Matt, these little things that they’d never gotten to do together as adults. Normal things.

“Man make fire.” Matt thumped his chest. “Momma wants us to drive up for supper Sunday. Asked us to bring rolls.”

“We can do that.” Time with Momma and Preacher could be...exhausting. They worried so. But Luke did love them.

“Yeah. I need to get out there and work on the barn roof before it gets too hot.”

Matt worked harder than any man he'd ever seen. “Be careful,” he murmured. He'd go make himself a sandwich to tide him over 'til supper.

“Eh. Let's go have a beer. It'll wait 'til tomorrow.”

“Yeah?” He grinned hugely. Beer was better than a pain pill any day.

“You know it. All work and no play, blah, blah, blah.”

“I do.” He'd humped his load in the military for long enough, for sure.

“Let's go have a sit.” Matt gave him a grin, one that was more familiar than the one he saw in the mirror. “Maybe I'll pull out the dominoes.”

“Oh, Christ. You've become one of those old cowboys who plays Mexican Train on the porch.”

“I will beat your ass down, man.”

“Never happen.” Luke grinned, feeling better every moment. He wheeled up toward the house and didn't even protest when Matt gave him some help on the hill.

“Harder, Matty! Work those hamstrings!”

“Fuck off, you dipshit.” Matt cackled, though, the laughter ringing out.

Days like this, Luke thought he might just make it through the recovery, no matter what it took. These kinds of moments were worth all the pain in the world.

Now, he just needed more of these days.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Nine

“Hey, sweetie. How’s it going?” Rory grinned at Sue Ann over the counter, the scent of doughnuts finally smelling good and not like he wanted to die.

“Good. Miss Lori said you got food poisoning and were real sick for a couple three days.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He’d lost ten pounds when all was said and done. He kinda looked like a victim of some type of scourge.

“Well, I’m glad you’re feeling better. What would you like today?”

“Two apple fritters with coffee for me and a half dozen chocolate glazed for the office.”

“Lori in a mood?” She winked, the joke an old one.

“My sweet, even-keeled assistant? Never say so.”

“Ha! I went to high school with y’all, don’t forget. Puberty was something. I can’t wait to see her with menopause a few years down the road.”

“Yeah. Then I’ll need a full dozen.”

“You got it. I’ll throw in a couple of these new cinnamon bun crullers. Tell me what you think.”

“Oh, man. You rock, honey. Thanks.” He paid his bill and put an extra five in the tip jar before grabbing his sack and his cup of Joe and heading out.

Grinning, he hummed a little bit of some song Lori kept playing at the office. Rory hated being sick, so today was a banner day, since he was all well.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the resident fudgepacker gracing our streets.” Doug Harris stood there, the portly fuck looking like Boss Hogg and Fred Gwynne had had a spectacularly ugly baby.

“Indeed, it is. Given that my family founded this town, I think the reverse is true, don’t you? You’re”—he wrinkled his nose—“gracing our streets.”

Harris scowled. “Your people were trash from the start, McConnell.”

“Oh, how frustrating for all you classy types that we ended up with all the money and toys, then.” He was not going to get into a growling match.

In fact, he felt like a million bucks, thank you.

Harris blew out a hard breath. “So full of yourself.” The man lowered his voice. “It doesn’t take much to bring you down. Just remember that. I do.”

“I’m not a wet-behind-the-ears kid anymore, old man. You just remember that.” He met Harris’s eyes dead-on, letting the icy cold determination to bring this man to his knees and make him suffer show. “I do.”

The words were low, soft and pointed enough to make Harris back away.

That’s right, you sorry son of a bitch. Run. Rory put his cheerful smile back on. “They have cinnamon things, Harris. Not that you need sweets. Your arteries, you

know. Glug glug.”

“I am going to—” Harris stopped, fists clenched, and took a deep breath. “I know what you’re doing with the land buy up, McConnell. I intend to stop you.”

“You’re welcome to try.” He pushed up his sunglasses with his middle finger. “Have a glorious day, you old fuck.” Rory walked away before he said another word. That was the perfect ending to the conversation. Why didn’t he have a freeze ray or a fart gun or something?

Oh, he would be fabulous with a freeze ray. Amazing. Possibly epic. Zam! Zow! He’d freeze Harris’s penis, for a start.

Rory breezed into his office, singing If You’re Happy and You Know It . Loud.

Lori looked at him, eyes wide. “Someone’s feeling better.”

“So much. Coffee. I got you doughnuts, lady.”

“You are the best boss ever.” She stood and kissed his cheek.

“Of course I am. When I’m not puking on you. Hey, do I have anything open this afternoon?”

“You can, absolutely. I kept things liquid until I knew you were better.”

“Excellent. I have someone else besides you to apologize, too. Maybe I’ll take the cinnamon roll crullers.”

“Hell, no.” Lori grabbed the bag of pastries. “They’re boys. Take Whataburger.”

“Oh-ho! Listen to you, acting like you know where I’m going.”

“I do.” Her smile faded. “I know you, and while I appreciate why you want to apologize, I think it’s a bad strategy.”

“This isn’t strategy, Lore. It’s common decency. That’s what separates me from Harris.”

“There’s more than that. That bastard doesn’t deserve to be in the same sentence as you.” Lori had been there, back then. She knew. She understood.

“Yeah, he was breathing in my space out there on the street. I stared his skanky ass down, though, and I never hit him once.” He was damned proud. You never knew how a meeting with Harris would go.

“Good on you. I mean, there’s no telling what that smarmy snake in the grass will try, but I hate that he’s...hell, I hate him, full stop.”

“Me, too.” His momma would tell him hate poisoned a man, and it was a worthless emotion. The old man would say take an eye for an eye.

“We’ll manage it. I’ll clear your schedule for this afternoon.”

“Thanks. I know it’s just the doughnuts making you so nice, but I appreciate it.” Rory winked at her, then headed for his office to read email and suck back his coffee.

Thank God he felt better. Now, he could face apologizing to Luke.

Chapter Ten

L uke was literally shoveling shit. He filled the wheelbarrow from the yearling barn stalls and Matt rolled it out so they could lay out fresh bedding.

Matt had already tackled the water buckets, and Luke had refilled them.

When had this become the best part of his day?

The horses, the work, the rhythm of ranch life. It eased him down to the bone. He grinned, still kinda stunned at himself. Mr. Next Mission was settling down, he guessed. That didn't bother him as much as he'd worried it would.

Maybe it was time to start thinking of himself as something other than an ex-SEAL.

Maybe he could be... Luke the Sometime Cowboy.

He hooted. Yeah. Luke the Not So Awful? That would work.

“What’s funny, Lulu?”

“Lulu. Hilarious guy.” He flipped off Matt. “I was just thinking how I didn’t suck.”

“Oh, that’s good. If I throw the feed sacks over the truck, can you catch them? ”

“You know it.” He was a pretty good catch. That thought made him chuckle again.

“Rock on. Let’s go. I want to get it unloaded before it starts raining.”

Yeah, his chair was not mud-friendly. Hell, not terribly water friendly. He rolled out into the yard, frowning when a big pickup came roaring down the lane.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Matt rolled his eyes. “Maybe they’re looking for someone else, huh? I’m busy.”

“Maybe.” That wasn’t Rory McConnell’s truck this time, and Luke was kinda surprised at how disappointed he was. Only because he wanted to see for himself that the guy was okay, mind.

It was a huge monstrosity of a truck that rumbled to a stop, and this giant beefy old dude squeezed himself out of the passenger side. Damn.

Matt went stiff and angry in a heartbeat. “What the hell do you want, Harris?”

“Must be nice to be courted by every landshark in Titus county,” he muttered under his breath.

“I came to make you an offer you can’t refuse, son.”

Oh, Matt wasn’t gonna love that...

“I can refuse you all I want.” Matt’s chin jutted out. “My note is paid up.”

“Look. I want this land. You obviously need help running the outfit. I’ll offer you twenty thousand over what it’s worth.”

“Not good enough.” Matt didn’t even hesitate, which worked, because Luke had just learned to be at home here. “I already have another investor, so back the fuck off.”

“Look, son...”

“He’s not your son, man,” Luke snapped. He hated his shit. “You made your offer. He turned you down flat. Period. Get the hell off this land. ”

Matt glanced at him, eyebrows raised, but Luke meant it.

Harris snorted. “You and whose army will make me, boy?”

“Pardon me?” He rolled up, the rage and fury that lived under his skin bubbling right up to the forefront. He didn’t need some doughy fuck threatening him on his own turf. He’d faced down the scariest motherfuckers there were. This prick didn’t even register.

Matt backed away slowly, giving him room. Just like old times. Matt was a lover, really. Luke had always been the fighter.

“Come on, now. You’re a hero and all, but I?—”

Luke didn’t monologue. He grabbed the old man’s wrist, spun Harris about and had the thick, meaty arm behind the guy’s back before his driver could get out of the truck.

“I am a Navy Motherfucking SEAL. I have caused more damage before pancakes and sausage than anyone you’ve ever met. You get off my land and do it quick before I show you some of the tricks I learned involving explosives.”

“I’ll have you for assault...”

Matt laughed, a short bark of sound. “On my land? Who’s the sheriff gonna believe? You’re trespassing.”

“Not only that, but I’m wheelchair-bound. A decorated war veteran. Fuck off and tell your muscle that if he pulls that rifle out of the truck, I’ll fuck him with it.”

Harris staggered forward when Luke let go. “You’ll pay for this,” the old man blustered. But he waved off the hired muscle and headed back to the truck.

“Undoubtedly. Question is, is it worth you collecting? Make sure you ask yourself that.”

Harris gave them what was no doubt meant to be a death glare and roared out of the yard.

Matt laughed a little, coming to put a hand on his shoulder. “My brother the stud. You’re something else, you know that? That was amazing. ”

All Luke could do was snort. “He’s a rich, soft old man. His rotten core makes it easy to hit him where he lives, which is in constant fear.”

“Still, if you weren’t my brother, that would have been hot.”

“I’m totally telling Mom you said that.”

“Oh fuck, no. She’d put me in therapy.” Matt squeezed his shoulder. “How about some lunch? Lupper? What time is it?”

“We’re unloading feed, first, ‘o distracted one. Pay attention.”

“Right. Sorry.” Matt nodded, moving away so they could get back to work.

“Then I was thinking beer and burgers on the grill.” Luke rolled up and put on his brakes.

“I like it. I got bacon and blue cheese.”

“Uhn.” The yummy sound was pure instinct.

“Yep. I liked the mushroom swiss okay, but—” Matt stopped, tilting his head. “You hear that? Sounds like Rusty barking his fool head off.”

He frowned, pushed himself up on the chair arms. “You see anything?”

“No. Shit, I hope he doesn’t have another copperhead or something.”

“He’s been bit enough that he’d just swell some.” Lord, had he just said that? Had that been him? What the ever-loving fuck was wrong with him? Country boy, ahoy.

Matt started up toward the main road, tromping across the tall grasses. Cussing. Luke had to grin, because he got out of shit like that right now thanks to the wheelchair.

“You see anything?” he yelled.

“No!” Matt was disappearing on the horizon, so Luke shrugged, figuring he’d finish moving what feed sacks he could.

He really wanted that burger.

Chapter Eleven

“ T ext Lori,” Rory told his hands-free. He waited for the prompt, then went on. “Get brisket for bonfire on—shit!”

He damned near ran off the road in order to miss the bay mare standing in the middle of it, staring at him. He squealed to a halt, the tires throwing gravel.

He stepped out of the truck as soon as his heart stopped pounding, intending to get the bay out of the road and figure out which piece of LeBlanc’s fence was down so he could tell them.

The mare bobbed her head as if to say Good plan, dude . At least she wore a halter.

“Hey, sweetheart. Aren’t you a pretty girl?”

She nodded again and stepped toward him, then another two horses came up out of the culvert. Well, hell.

He grabbed his phone out of his pocket. “Call LeBlanc.”

The call went right to voicemail. Fuckkity fuck. “Okay, guys, we have to get out of the road.” He waved his arms at the newcomers, hoping to turn then back the way they came .

“Call Lori,” he told his damned phone, which had to be good for something.

“Hey, boss! ’s’up?”

“I’m almost at the LeBlanc ranch, and they have a fence down. I got horses in the road, and Matt isn’t answering. Keep trying his number, will you, and see if you can get someone out here to help me.” He could cowboy up, but he was no horse whisperer.

“No problem.”

He hung up and headed for the truck. He had rope in there and he could...

Another half dozen horses, these guys yearlings, came over, dancing and worried, snorting and tossing their heads.

What the ever-loving fuck? These guys shouldn’t even be pastured up here. What was Matt thinking?

Okay. Plan B. He got into his toolbox and found his roadside kit, setting out cones so anyone coming their way would slow down. Then he went for his rope, hoping if he got that lead mare the rest might follow.

A dog trotted down the road, barking furiously.

“You’re not helping, pup. Be quiet. Why couldn’t you be a border collie? Something quiet and useful. Herd, boy. Herd!” Rory cackled maniacally at himself. God, he cracked himself up. “Okay, sweet girl. You and me, we’re gonna save the day.”

He hadn’t been a savior in years, so it was probably about time.

Rory drew up a loop, glad that the old girl seemed pretty placid. The yearlings would be another matter altogether. They were obviously scared. Horses liked to know

where they belonged.

“Okay, girl. Whoa, now.” He remembered his dad had a trick of distracting a horse’s attention with one hand and roping with the other.

He saw a truck heading down the road, moving way too fast, and he started moving quicker. Come on, come on and let’s do this . “Off the road, everybody!”

Rory swung the rope in wide circles, herding now instead of trying to catch. Even if the damned fool animals went the wrong way it was better than being hit. He shouted unintelligible shit, just needing the herd to move.

The yearlings went first, kicking and snorting, but running back the way they’d come.

“Good babies. Good deal. Off the road.”

The truck just kept coming. Like really fast. Jesus. Rory went a little nuts, charging at the damned horses until they all scattered back into the culvert, except the frickin’ mare that had some kind of fucking road fetish or had fallen in love with him or something.

Jesus Christ. There was a gun. Someone had a gun.

He shook his head, slapping the mare’s flank with the rope. “Move it. I have to get the goddamned dog, too!”

Her head tossed and she whinnied, then she reared up, the rope that was around her neck jerking and tangling around his wrist.

“Fuck.” He tried to stay calm, but the truck was drifting into the wrong lane like it was fucking aiming for them. “Come on, you bitch.” He ignored the grinding pain in

his arm and used the snarled rope as leverage to drag her sorry ass off the asphalt.

“What the hell? McConnell? What the fuck are you doing?”

“He’s got a gun!” Jesus Christ. Rory screamed at Matt LeBlanc, hoping the man understood. “He’s got a gun!”

He dragged the mare down the culvert, putting himself in front of her, even though he was pretty sure she was too big to hide.

Three shots blasted out, and the mare took off, yanking him off his feet and sending him bouncing along the ground for what felt like forever. His arm was gonna pop right out of the socket. He knew it.

Then the rope snapped and he slid to a stop, every bit of his breath gone.

“McConnell! McConnell? Are you hurt? Did they shoot you?”

“Is...is the mare okay?” Rory wasn’t sure he could move, and he was terrified of looking at his hand. What if it was gone?

“She’s fine. Still running, I think, but back in the fence line.” Matt dropped to the ground next to him. “Christ.”

“Uh-huh.” He was going to stop dealing with these brothers. Every time he did, he ended up on the floor or the ground or—“Is my hand still there?”

“Yeah.” Matt helped him sit up. “It’s pretty cut up and bruised, but not even mangled bad. You got off easy.”

“Good deal. You got fence down?”

“Yeah. Someone cut the shit out of it. Your girl called in the cavalry. I got fifteen guys out here.” Matt checked him over quickly, but not rough by any means.

“Cool. Cool. I was coming to apologize to your brother.”

“Well, we’ll get you checked out. The cops should be on the way. I didn’t get a plate on the truck, but damn. They were frickin’ shooting.” Matt helped him to his feet, and he looked down at his jeans.

Well, fuck.

There was a lot of fucking blood.

Like whoa.

“It works better if you just don’t look.” Matt might have a point.

“Okay. Can you? Or someone. I’m real glad to have my hand, but if my dick is gone, I won’t have anything to use my hand for. ”

“No worries. Let’s get you to the ranch, man. We’ll clean you up and, uh, make sure you have all your parts.”

Okay. Okay, yeah. Except no. What if he was really hurt...?

Matt half carried him to the truck. “Thanks for coming out, Wacey. You got this?”
Matt called over Rory’s head.

“We’re good, boss. We got it handled.”

“If the sheriff shows, send him to the house. This one needs cleaning up.”

“Yessir.”

“Your keys in the truck, McConnell?”

“I sure as shit hope so.” If not, they were gone.

“I do, too.” Matt chuckled, then lifted him up into the passenger seat.

Matt drove like a bat out of hell, and they blasted down the road, the asphalt burning.

“None of the horses got shot, right?” Rory leaned against the window, trying not to hurl.

“Don’t think so.” Matt grabbed his phone. “Brother? Brother, get the first aid kit. McConnell got shot at and dragged saving horses.”

All he could hear of Luke’s side of the conversation was the raised tone, but Rory had a feeling a ‘what the fuck’ might be involved.

“You know as well as I do that fucker cut it, but then someone came down shooting.”

That motherfucker. Rory didn’t even have to ask who they were talking about. It had to be Harris. Jesus, the man would stop at nothing.

Rory leaned his head back, eyes dropping closed. Well, at least he was the fucker land guy who’d saved the horses instead of the one who’d let them out.

The truck stopped and Matt jostled him up and into the house. “Luke? Where do you want him?”

“Put him in the kitchen, Matty. ”

Rory blinked, trying to get his eyes to work.

“You’re okay, man. Just shocky.” Matt got him sat down in a kitchen chair.

“Dammit. Sheriff’s here. You got this, brother?”

Was LeBlanc speaking English?

“Got it.” Luke rolled right up in front of Rory, brandishing a wicked sharp pair of scissors. “Hold still, man.”

“Don’t cut anything off. I was coming to apologize.”

“I promise not to amputate anything but the jeans.” Luke smiled at him, sympathy plain.

“I’ll trust you. Just tell me my cock’s intact. Petty, I know, but a thing.”

Luke snorted. “That was one of the first things I asked when I woke up in a field hospital.” Luke cut off his jeans and eased them away. “Let me have a peek.”

“Jesus.” The sight of his ragged, bloody jeans was enough to make him consider immediate death. Now he knew why people were dragged to death as a way to intimidate peasants and shit. It was a hell of a way to die.

“Yeah. Tore the hell out of you. I have basic med training, but if your dick is falling off I’m calling an ambulance.” Luke peered into his boxers. “Hey, you’re in luck. No damage that I can see.”

“Thank God. I like it, and I intend to keep it.”

“Well, sure.” Luke chuckled. “Let me get some dressings and all. You have one cut

bad enough I need to butterfly it.”

“I’m in your hands, and I don’t mean that in a naked sort of way. I was coming to apologize. I was sick as a dog that night. I think that beer was spoilt.”

Luke glanced over one shoulder at him, but didn’t say anything much while digging out first aid supplies. When Luke came back, he nodded easily at Rory. “I can see that. You sure did a quick change. Okay, this is gonna sting.”

“I promise not to scream like a fainting goat. ”

“Oh, feel free. I just don’t want you to kick me.” Luke laid what felt like a line of fire down one of Rory’s legs.

“Jesus.” He arched some, hissing. “I’ll be more sorry.”

“You apologized just fine by helping those horses. Matt told me a little. I appreciate it.” Luke glanced up again, as if checking to see if he was still conscious.

“I’m here. I swear to God Matt owes me a... Not a beer. I may never drink beer again, but really good coffee.”

“Yep. Maybe chili and cornbread.” Luke chuckled. “Since that was what we’re having. We’re out of raw hamburger and blue cheese. You have some abrasions on your chest I need to treat, and then I need to look at your hand.”

“Matt swore it was still there.”

“It is, and it looks like the rope burned you pretty good, but there’s none of the serious bloody swelling I’d associate with compromised blood flow. Trust me, if I thought it had really hurt the underlying tissue you’d be on the way to the hospital.”

Luke was gentle but efficient. Admirable.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

“Were you trained as a medic?” He knew nothing about the service. He was the ‘college at fifteen’ guy.

“We all got basic medical. We go in as a team, and we all have specialties, but yeah, I got some training.”

“I’m sorry for asking. I do that. Ask inappropriate questions after worrying about losing my hand.”

Luke chuckled. “You’re beat to hell. I can let it slide.”

“I appreciate it.” He found himself beginning to shake, the room seeming cold as fuck.

“Let me get you a blanket.” Luke wheeled away for a moment, then came back to toss a blanket around Rory’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” His teeth were chattering.

“You’re in shock. I need to get your feet up, but I have to get the wounds cared for first.”

“What can I do?” Matt asked, ducking in the back door again.

“No beer.” Rory felt a little hysterical, and he set his teeth together to keep it in.

“Something warm, Matty. Hot tea? And I need to get him prone.”

“Coffee? Put him on the sofa. He can’t hurt it.”

What? Luke was going to give him a ride?

Luke must have felt the same way, because he snorted. “I have a leverage issue, bro.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come on, McConnell. Let’s get you up.”

“Up? Can I just crawl?”

Luke shook his head. “Way you’re tore up, that will hurt worse. Trust me.”

“Don’t be a pussy, cowboy. Get your ass up.”

Rory glared at Matt. “Screw you, LeBlanc.”

Rory growled and levered himself to his feet, stumbling toward the other end of the kitchen. His brain shut down everything not important, working his feet, one and two and three and four.

“You think we need to get an ambulance here, Luke?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“Shut up,” both brothers told him.

“I don’t like that one cut on his leg, but I think if the blood stops flowing so hard under that bandage he’ll just need to see his family doctor tomorrow.”

He wasn’t sure, but he was beginning to understand these twins were bossy fuckers.

Matt helped him stretch out on the couch, and that put him at a level where Luke could tug off the rest of his clothes. There was hot water, some kind of pills he thought were Tylenol with something else in them, and some floating ...

He wasn't sure this was how his afternoon was supposed to go.

"So, did you accept my apology?" Rory finally asked through chattering teeth.

Luke finished the last bandage wrap and grabbed blankets to bundle him up. "I did."

"Oh, good. I'd like to be friends."

"Yeah? Stop trying to buy out my brother." Luke winked at him. "I could use friends."

"I'm trying to keep Harris's hands off the land. If I knew Matt was going to be able to keep it, I'd be fine."

"You got a thing against Harris, huh?" Luke tucked the blankets around him. "Want that hot drink now?"

"I do." On both accounts.

"I think Matt is making broth, but you could have coffee."

"Broth? You boys have broth?"

"Well, we have boullion, I think. Hell, for all I know he's out there killing a cow."

He didn't want to ponder imminent cow death. No way. Rory had grown up on a ranch—he got it, but, dude. Not just for soup.

“Coffee is fine.”

“You got it.” Luke left him, and Rory tried to keep his eyes open so he could get a feel for Matt’s house. He’d always been so curious.

It was pure cowboy—leather and antlers, creams and browns and oh, look at those exposed beams. He really liked it, though they ought to get a more comfortable couch. This one was old and a little flat. Droopy under his butt and hard under his shoulders.

It was a thing. Couches should be good to sleep on.

He could buy them a new couch instead of buying their land. Man, he was thirsty, and oh... The pills began to kick in. Yay .

That made life better.

“How’s it going, man?” Luke leaned over, peering at him.

“I feel like I might die, but I wouldn’t care. Is that bad?”

“Yep. Then again, it might just be the pills.” Luke winked. “I got your coffee. There’s a lady here named Lori. Says she wants to see you.”

“Oh, she’s my guardian angel. Sorry if she’s bothering you, but I would see her.”

Lori came roaring in. “Oh, God. Rory. Honey. Oh, God. Your poor baby body. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. I was saving horses.”

“You look like you were being trampled by them.” She knelt next to him.

“Dragged.” He glared at her and rolled his eyes, the world spinning. “I was coming to apologize.”

“These men are bad luck for you, Rory. No offense.”

“None taken,” Luke said. “Want some coffee, ma’am?”

“No thank you. Do you want me to take you home?”

No way. He’d been promised food. “They’re making chili.”

“I like chili.” Lori smiled. “Do I need to call in a doctor?”

“Ask Luke—he’s in charge. I’m just hanging out.”

“Hanging...” Lori stared. “Did he hit his head?”

Luke chuckled. “Maybe. Honestly, I patched him up and he was pretty adamant about no hospitals. I do recommend seeing his family doctor tomorrow.”

“I’m okay. I’ll be sore as fuck, but I’m okay.” And hanging out on the LeBlanc’s sofa like he belonged here. God. Have a little self-respect and get up .

A sheriff’s deputy appeared next to Lori, staring down at him. “Mr. McConnell. Are you up to giving me a statement?”

“I am, sure.” He levered himself up, keeping the blanket wrapped around his lower half. “I guess I was the one was was there. ”

“Yes, sir. Just tell me what happened. If I have any questions, I’ll save them until the end.”

That part was easy. Horses, truck, gunshots, assholes— boom, boom, boom .

“Do you remember any details regarding the truck? Color? Make or model?”

“Silver GMC king cab.” That much he knew. “I didn’t see the driver, and I sure didn’t see a plate.” They’d started shooting a ways off. “I was parked in the middle of the road, because I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

As terrible as it would have been to hit and kill a horse, the person driving would have been in a world of hurt too.

“You had your emergency flashers on?”

“Shit, man, I had set up cones. I didn’t do flares since it was still daylight, and it would have scared the horses.”

“Huh. So, they had to see you.”

“You think?” He was trying not to lose his shit, but he was quickly running out of patience. “Look, they were shooting at me. At Matt. Not at the horses. This was not someone just having fun or pissed off because the road was blocked.”

“Do you have any idea why?”

“Hemorrhoids?”

Lori whacked his arm. “Boss!”

“Sorry. Pain addled, you see. I’m pretty tore up.” ‘Pain addled’, his ass. This was bullshit.

“Well, I’ll let you rest, then. If you think of anything else, here’s my card.”

Lori took the card. “I’ll call. I’m his assistant.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The little deputy stared at her like she was a redneck-eating tiger with a yen for someone who used too much Axe body spray.

Lori snorted. “As if. I’ll call if and when my boss thinks of anything, Barney. Off with you.”

Matt LeBlanc was chuckling, the smell of the chili was actually appetizing, and Rory thought he might live.

As soon as the deputy was gone, Rory glanced at Luke. “Did you see him gawking at my personal assistant?”

“Yep. That was something else. I couldn’t tell if he was afraid or interested.” Luke winked. “Hey, Miss Lori, I don’t suppose you have a cornbread recipe up your sleeve? My last attempt was bad.”

“That’s what smartphones are for, Mr. LeBlanc.” A couple of taps and there was a recipe, called right up.

Luke laughed. “Sure, but I suck at sorting through. I should just buy a box, but I’m stubborn.”

“I don’t know anyone like that,” Lori said, side-eyeing Rory.

“Shut up, you evil old bat.” God, he adored her.

“I’ll come look at your oven and your pan.” Lori rose. “Sleep for a bit, boss. Lead the way, Wheels.”

So PC his Lori.

“I could kill you without leaving a mark, you know,” Luke said, heading toward the kitchen.

“What fun would that be?”

Rory smiled, letting his eyes go unfocused like he wanted to. Lori and the LeBlancs in one place. Again. And he was the one who was half-dead. Go figure.

Life was a weird and wonderful thing.

Now, he just had to survive long enough for chili.

Chapter Twelve

L uke had to admit, Rory McConnell was a brave guy. He'd been dragged, shot at, drugged, and yelled at by his assistant, and now he was sitting by the fire in Matt's front room, eating chili and cornbread.

This was utterly fucking surreal. All the shit he'd done in the service—all the missions, the bombs and explosions and pain—and this was weirder. Scarier.

This was an attack on his brother, on his brother's land. Deliberate. Now, it was Rory who'd been hurt, but that fact didn't lessen the impact at all.

He had to say, the son of a bitch had cowboy'd up. Matt said the whole time Rory had been focused on the horses. Luke watched Rory sip a cup of coffee, then have a bite of chili. Gingerly.

The next bite was a little more eager, and Rory smiled in obvious approval.

"This is good shit." Rory said. "Cornbread, too? Man, you guys are awesome."

"Thanks, man. I... I really appreciate your help with the ho rses today. That was neighborly." That had to sting Matt's pride to say it.

Rory snorted. "I was on the way to apologize to your brother. I figure I went above and beyond, so now Luke can buy me lunch."

Luke blinked over at Rory. Seriously? Did the man never let up?

Rory winked at him. Lori, the assistant, snored a little where she'd sacked out on the couch.

What a weird day. He didn't know exactly how the hell he'd gotten to this point, but he was sitting in his brother's house, in a wheelchair, with a girl, a man who may or may not be Matt's mortal enemy, and a bowl of chili.

Luke began to laugh, making Matt stare at him.

Rory, though, nodded and chuckled, then began to really hoot.

They were grinning at each other like idiots, cackling madly.

"You've lost your minds." Matt shook his head, rolling his eyes.

"That surprises no one, yes?" Rory didn't seem the least bit sorry.

"No, sir. I knew you were insane a long time ago."

Luke wailed with laughter. "What's my excuse?"

"Shell shock?"

He flipped Rory right off.

"Name the time and place, man. I am totally in." Rory's eyes crossed as if he was trying to look at his own mouth. Like he couldn't believe that had popped out.

Luke snorted, but this time it didn't hurt so bad. In fact, he sort of thought McConnell meant it, and that felt good. Why else would the man keep after it, even when he was clearly in no condition to go for it ?

“Don’t push it, or you’ll owe him another apology,” Matt muttered.

“Yes, sir, Mister Older Brother, sir. Although y’all have one ahead and one behind, don’t you?”

“Yep.” Luke chuckled. “Mom worked hard to get that last gospel.”

“What would she have done if Johnny’d been a girl?”

Matt snorted like a rampaging bull moose. “Called her Joanna.”

“Johnette.”

Rory cackled like a big bird, and Lori shifted on the couch. “Juanita. Oh, I’m gonna have to call Johnny that when I see him next.” Rory was altogether too tickled.

“Y’all get together a lot?” Luke asked. John was living outside San Fran, working at Google and making babies as fast as he could. Totally different from them and Mark, who was bartending at some little dive in Guadalajara and being clear about how he wasn’t interested in familial complications.

“We Skype sometimes, yeah, and I see him when I’m on the West Coast.”

“You get around, huh?” Luke had really had enough travel being deployed all the damned time. He was ready to settle for a bit.

“Less than he used to. He’s becoming a regular homebody.” Lori waggled her painted-on eyebrows playfully.

“I have teenaged sisters.”

Like that explained anything. Luke shook his head. Maybe Rory was a little addled from the dragging after all.

Rory smiled. “Sorry. I get cryptic.” He set aside his chili. “I think I’d better head home.”

“Are you sure you can drive, boss? I’ll...”

“I got this. I came to apologize, which I did. Now I need to get home to lick my wounds. ”

Luke stared a moment. “Look, let Matt follow you, at least.”

“Thanks, but I’m starting to hurt and, let’s be honest, so far I’ve handed you paper towels, almost puked on your lap, and let you check out my bloody cock.

It’s not a love match, I’m thinking.” Rory winked at him, the expression shockingly self-deprecating.

“Shame as it is. Someone is a lucky guy.”

Luke opened his mouth, then snapped it shut, not sure what the fuck to say to that. Then he pulled out his phone. “Give me your number.”

Rory rattled it off, and Lori handed him a business card, the action automatic.

“Thanks. This way I can call you when you’re not so addled. About lunch.”

Matt stared at him as if he’d lost his mind, but Luke trained his gaze on Rory.

“I’d like that, Luke. Very much.”

The soft, serious words went right to his balls. Rory McConnell was not teasing him, not at all. Rory wanted him and wasn't ashamed of that fact, not one bit. His mouth went dry, and he set his chili aside in favor of rolling toward the door.

"Come on, man. I'll see you to your truck."

"Thank you. Thanks for the rescue and the chili, Matt."

"I owe you one, man."

Rory winked again, all his sly humor back in evidence. "You so do."

"I'm going to head out, boss. I'll call first thing and get you in at the clinic." Lori kissed Rory's cheek. "Stay home until I call."

Rory nodded easily, but his mouth firmed in a stubborn line. "Sure, hon."

The way she rolled her eyes proved that Lori and Rory played this game together a lot .

A lot like him and Matt, he thought.

Rory walked next to him, limping a little, but otherwise steady. Surprisingly so.

"You sure you're good, man?"

"I've driven more torn up than this, Luke, but thank you."

Luke stared. "That's a story you'll have to tell me sometime."

"Mmm." Rory shut right down. Luke saw it happen. "Thanks for the meal."

“Hey.” He grabbed Rory’s wrist—not the tore up one, thank God. “Thank you for your help. Seriously.”

“I would say anytime, but that would be pushing even what I will do for goodwill.”

Luke laughed. “I bet. Next time I see your dick I want it to be not torn up.”

Rory grinned at him, then leaned down and kissed him, right on the mouth, bold as brass. “It’s a date.”

Luke tried not to sputter when Rory creaked down the steps, waving when he climbed up into his truck. The big diesel roared to life, and Luke was still staring, his fingers on his lips.

He heard Matt walk up behind him. “He kissed you.”

“Uh-huh. Does that make me a traitor?”

Matt snorted loud. “Hell if I know. I never expected him to get shot at for our horses.”

“I didn’t, either. What’s his story, do you know?”

“I got nothing, man, except that he’s out and proud, and that’s not something you see here every day.”

“No shit? Like everyone knows?” Luke hadn’t ever heard of anyone surviving that around these parts.

“Like everyone. I swear, he doesn’t hold back, but the McConnells are old money and, as much as I hate it, every old guy he’s bought out is living on that land and

working it. ”

“So why is he buying?” Luke scowled, ready to pick apart the mystery.

“Ask him at lunch.” Matt cuffed his shoulder.

“I will.” He did love himself a puzzle.

“Freak. Let’s go make sure no one got injured, huh?”

“Mother hen.” Luke would finish his chili later.

“Yep. I can’t believe that bastard kissed you, man. He’s ballsy, I’ll give him that.”

“He’s something else.” Luke wasn’t sure what, but he sure hoped he’d find out. Soon.

Wasn’t that amazing? He wanted to know about Rory McConnell. Wanted another kiss, too.

He’d call tomorrow.

Surely that wasn’t too soon for lunch.

Chapter Thirteen

Rory woke up in the morning so sore he could barely move, and he agreed to see Dr. Mellon, even if he didn't want to.

The bandages were redone, and the cut in his leg ended up getting a couple of stitches, but that was it.

Too bad Lori had called Mom and Pop, who were waiting in his front room when he got home.

"This thing with Doug Harris has gone too far."

"Hey, Mom. Did you want a cup of coffee or something?"

"I mean it, son." She put her hands on her hips, making mom face.

"I was helping a friend. Horses and bullets were involved." He went to the kitchen, limping along. "Y'all always wanted a more redneck son. I'm just a late bloomer."

"Rory!" Mom sounded horrified, but he needed a glass of water to take his antibiotic and his pain pill, then maybe a cup of coffee.

"Hey, I told her I thought you manned up well. She hit me." Pop sounded tickled as hell.

"Yeah, imagine the gay boy getting dragged by a horse, bullets flying." He turned on

the espresso machine.

“I’d prefer that the bullet part be tossed out,” Pop pointed out.

“It was the horse that did the damage.”

“You had to get stitches!” Mom’s voice rose dangerously high. “Damn it, Rory, you could have died. He’s not worth it.”

“You think I did that for Harris? I mean, his people were responsible, yeah, but I did what I did for the LeBlancs.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re neighbors, and because it was the right thing to do.

Hell, I’d have stopped to put Doug Harris’s goddamn horses back in the fence.

” He put the coffee cup down a little too hard and he’d be damned if the handle didn’t snap right off.

“I swear to God, I get bitched at if I’m not cowboy enough, and I get bitched at if I’m too redneck for my own good. Pick one!”

“I don’t have to.”

“What?” He blinked at his mom, confused as all get out.

“I’m the momma, and you’re my son, and you’re hurt. I don’t have to make sense. It’s in the handbook.”

“Oh.” He blinked some more. “Well, if it makes you feel better no one drugged me this time.” He could have bitten off his tongue when her face went slack with shock. Not cool, Rory.

Pop’s eyes narrowed. “What? Talk, boy. I mean it. That is serious. Did you see someone? Get blood work?”

Oh, fuck him. Nothing like getting Mister Orthopedic Surgeon of the Stars riled up.

“I didn’t know that was what it was. I still don’t for sure.”

“Was that when you had food poisoning?” Mom asked. “I thought it was a bad beer?”

The words almost popped out again, those sarcastic words like, ‘I ought to know when I’m drugged’. He kept them in, shrugging instead. “It seems a bit much to be a coincidence.”

“Maybe we should shoot him,” Pop offered.

That made Mom pop off with, “We could sic Rowenna on him...”

“You could, I guess, but I would much rather put the bastard in jail after I make him destitute.”

Pop grinned over at him, jolly as fuck. “Get him where it hurts, eh, son?”

“Yessir. I intend to make him bleed.”

“Men!” Mom threw up her hands. “I’ll make eggs.” She stalked to the stove and tossed his pan on the burner.

“Let me look at all your things, son,” Pop murmured. He tried to protest, but he couldn’t argue. This was his daddy, after all, and the man loved him dearly.

He sighed, leading Pop back to the bathroom. “Doc did a good job patching me up.”

“I’m sure he did. I just want to look.”

Pop checked his leg cursorily, then turned to his hand, taking special care there. He flexed as much as he could so Pop could see the motion.

“Lucky it didn’t come right off, kiddo.”

“I know.” He smiled wryly. “I wasn’t thinking, just reacting.”

“That’s what we do in emergencies. I’m proud of you, son. That takes balls.”

“Thanks, Pop.” He meant it. His pop wasn’t exactly stingy with praise, but he was a tough call for a Texas daddy to get behind the gay real estate lawyer.

No matter what Pop might think, he’d never once made Rory feel like he was ashamed. Not even when the shit had hit the proverbial fan.

Pop clapped a hand against his shoulder. “You got something going on with one of them LeBlanc boys?”

“Not yet. Give me time.”

“Lord, son. You be careful. ”

The smell of bacon reached them, and they grinned at each other.

“Don’t worry, Pop. I’m fine.”

“I worry about you all the time. I’m a dad.” His pop chuckled. “Come on, before she makes refried beans and biscuits and quiche or some shit.”

“This is bad?” Well, quiche was bad, but he liked eggs.

“Well, I suppose that all depends on what you got in your fridge.”

Oh. Right. Mom got creative.

“Bacon, beer, and there’s possibly a leftover Cadbury Creme Egg.”

“I wonder how that is fried.”

They stared at each other and cracked up, just roaring with laughter, which made him think how good Luke had been the night before, laughing like a kid.

He sure hoped that Luke decided to take the chance and call today.

“Lord, look at you all grinning.” His dad sobered. “I do mean it. Be careful. With Harris, too.”

“I will. I intend to win this war, though.”

“I’m right behind you with a bazooka and a bucket of salt for the earth, Rory. I just want you in one piece.” Pop steered him back out to the kitchen.

“That’s the goal, Pop. I don’t have a death wish.” Just a finely tuned sense of vengeance.

“Good. Now, be apologetic to your mom so she doesn’t kill you, either.” Pop grinned hugely.

“Right on. Also, I need coffee.”

“God, me too. Your mother had me up at the ass-crack of dawn.”

“His mother is here,” Mom said, waving a spatula.

“And she’s gorgeous.”

“Nice, Pop. ”

“Thanks.” Pop winked and began pulling out plates and putting mounds of food on the table.

“How do you do that? That’s magic, Mom.”

“It’s my job.” She handed him a cup. “Coffee for me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Coffee he could totally do. Back to the espresso machine. He made them all a coffee before sinking down at the table, his hand and head throbbing, his stitches on fire.

“You look exhausted, baby boy.” Such a mom.

“I am.” He wanted to just set everything down for a bit and rest, but he had too much to do.

Life was never-ending when revenge was on the line.

“Eat something. It will make you feel better.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He took a biscuit and some bacon and made himself a sandwich.

Pop did the same, and for a few minutes he was spared having to chat. He took his pills, chugging them back with his coffee.

“Antibiotics?” Pop asked.

“And a pain pill. I promise not to abuse them.”

“No one has ever worried about that with you, son.”

“No?” Rory grinned, his sore jaw stretching. “You mean there’s one sin I’m not notorious for?”

“Just one,” Mom muttered. “Although you’re not huge on sloth, come to think about it.”

“So I get off the hook for gluttony and sloth.”

“Well, you do have some rage, son,” Pop said. “And you are a fudgepacker.”

“James!” Mom stared, but Rory just bowed with an evil grin.

“I totally am, thank you.” He fought the urge to stick his tongue out at his mom.

“Good to know where you fit in the universe. Are those grits, Helen?”

“You know it.”

“You’re a miracle worker, Mom.” He hadn’t even known he had grits in there.

She gave him an arch look and passed the grits to Pop. “Aunt Barbara gave them to you for Christmas. I found them in the pantry. If you cooked once in a while in this well-stocked, fancy-assed kitchen...”

“What?” Rory widened his eyes. “I have to uphold the gay stereotype and eat out. If I ever hook up permanently I’ll take cooking classes and have dinner parties.”

“Promise? Will you have wine tastings, too? That’s one thing this town needs, a gay man that doesn’t drink horse-piss beer.” Mom’s voice was dry as dust.

God, he adored them both.

“Oh, good idea. I’ll have Lori look into it.” He winked. “Thanks for coming over. Really. I didn’t even know I needed to see y’all.”

“Anytime, son.” Pop grinned over the island at him and suddenly he was ten again, having his breakfast, knowing that all was right with the world.

The Cowboys and Rangers were in Dallas, the Spurs were in San Antonio, and he was going to grow up to be a country singer and a roper, just like King George.

Rory let go of everything else to bask in that feeling a bit. It was rare these days, and a man took his comfort where he could.

There would be plenty of time to pick up the revenge thing later.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Chapter Fourteen

L uke stared at his phone.

He'd opened a new text and filled in Rory McConnell's name. Yay. Now he had to decide what to put in.

'Lunch?' seemed too casual. 'Wanna hook up?' was sleazy. 'Why did you kiss me?' Yeah, that was too clueless.

So he sent a selfie with the caption,

Starving to death.

Let me feed you

came the gratifyingly quick response.

He nodded, then realized he was texting, not talking in person.

Okay

he sent back.

When? Do I need to get Matt to drop me off?

If he can, 12. If he can't, 1230 & I'll be there.

Let me ask.

His cheeks flamed, having to ask his brother to drive him to town for a lunch date, but he wanted this badly enough to do it. “Matt? Matt, where you at?”

“Doing taxes.”

Oh, ew. “You up for a break? I need a ride into town.”

“Yeah? You gonna go mack on McConnell?”

“I am.” He squared his jaw. Might as well hang for a sheep as a lamb.

“Huh. Sure. Why not? I need to run down to the feed store and the Walmart.”

“Thanks, Matty. I can spy for you.” He winked broadly, hoping the joke didn’t fall flat.

“Rock on. Don’t let anyone serve him bad beer.”

“I’ll watch like a hawk.” He wasn’t sure what had really happened with Rory the night of the fundraiser, but he didn’t seem like the type to get shitfaced and hit on someone.

There had to be more to the story than food poisoning.

And he had to admit, it was easier to believe after that shit with Harris and the shooting.

Jesus. Shooting. Letting their horses out. What a mess.

“Good deal. Something tells me he needs it.” Matty stood, then stretched hard.

“Listen to you, cracking and popping like an old man,” he teased, and Matt nodded.

“You know it, Lulu. I’m getting older every day.”

Luke spread his hands, indicating his wheelchair and current broken state. “I win.”

“I don’t know...” He glanced up to Matt, who shrugged and went on, “Looks to me like you’re getting younger, man.”

“Yeah. Well. Shut up.” So clever. Luke rolled his eyes.

“Uh-huh. Let me put on a decent shirt.” Matty looked him over. “You might oughta do the same.”

Luke glanced down at his chest. Horse goo. Lovely. “Right. I’ll meet you here at a quarter to?”

“Works for me.”

He texted Rory with a

cu@12

then rolled into his bedroom. Luke whacked his elbow on the doorframe, then closed his eyes and counted to ten. Now was not the time to get his panties in a wad.

Now he needed to pick a shirt that would make Rory forget about his legs.

Luke stared at his choices. Huh. The green button-down was clean, at least. Maybe he

needed to go shopping.

“Matty? Can I borrow your gray button-down? The ones with the pearl snaps?”

“Are you cowboying up or what? I think it’s been to the cleaners. Gimme a sec.”

That was the point. The gray would be pressed and not smell like... Dog? Something.

“Got it. You need me to pick some shirts up at the Wallyworld?”

“Yeah. Something dressy enough I can stop borrowing yours.”

“Man gets a lunch date, and he’s suddenly all worried about elegance.”

“I will beat you down, asshat.”

“Duly noted.” Matt handed the shirt over, along with a pressed pair of jeans. “We’re of a size.”

“Thanks.”

“One of us needs to get him some.”

Luke chuckled. “I figured it would be you. With your legs all intact and all.”

“Highly fucking unlikely.”

Now Luke studied his brother more closely. “Why? I mean, I know this is East BumFuck, but you could go to Dallas...”

“Get dressed, Luke.”

Wait. Wait, there was a lot of pain there, and that didn't work for him. "Matty? Did something... I mean, was somebody mean to you?"

"Get dressed, little brother, or we'll be late."

He stared, but Matt wasn't playing chicken. He just turned and left the room.

So not fair doing that when Luke was about to leave.

At least he lived here, right? He had all the time in the world to work it out of Matt. They were twins. Matt never could keep shit from him.

Now that he'd found the crack, he was going to dig.

Luke dressed, the jeans a challenge, but he managed it. He tugged on one boot, his other foot still too swollen to fit. Still, it was better. It was getting better.

He slicked his hair back and even threw on a little Old Spice. Their momma gave them each a bottle every Christmas. He had Old Spice from 1999 when she began to give him smell good as gifts. His sixteen-year-old self had used it like kids used Axe body spray nowadays.

"You look good, Lulu. Come on." Matt didn't sound a bit ironic.

"Thanks, bro." He grinned a bit, willing to actually believe it. "I smell like Christmas."

"You do. I always think Old Spice smells like winter."

Luke nodded. "Wood smoke and cinnamon. Preacher insists on a fire. Remember that Christmas it was almost eighty? Freaky day."

“Or the one where it was eighty at noon and twenty at nine p.m.?”

“Yes! Frickin’ blue northers. I remember Mom was freaking out because she wanted to make those green and red meringue cookies.”

Matt helped him into the truck and loaded up, still hollering back. “Don’t forget the year of the gingerbread single-wide.”

“Oh, God. That roadkill armadillo you made was awesome.”

“Thank you. I am the King of the Grill.” Matt waggled his eyebrows.

“You’re an ass, but I love you.” Luke grinned over at Matt. “Thanks for not giving me a raft of shit about this.”

“I might have before the horses, but he proved himself.”

“He did, didn’t he? I’m sorta surprised.”

Matt snorted. “Shit, I’m stunned.”

Luke nodded. “I hear you. I mean, he seems like such a...city boy. I wonder why he wanted your land so bad?”

“Our land,” Matty corrected. “Don’t you forget it.”

“Right. Our land.”

“Ask him.”

Luke nodded easily. “I told you I would totally spy for you.” To a point. He really did

want to get him some.

“Try asking first. I feel like he’ll just answer. He doesn’t seem too much like a liar.”

“I’m not a good spy, Matty. I intended to just ask.” Luke shrugged. “Worst he can do is punch me.”

“My money’s on you.”

“Matty, you’re supposed to offer to kick his ass if he does.” Luke watched the side of the road, every mile still as familiar as his own reflection. More than these days.

“Oh, brother, there’s never been a man that could take both of us.”

“No way, no day.”

Matt parked at the courthouse, which Luke guessed was close to Rory’s office or something, and they fist-bumped, grinning like fools.

“Text your date, Lulu.”

“Yeah.”

Matt slipped out of the truck and got his chair out, made sure he was settled before Rory popped out of one of the crazy little Victorian houses on the square.

“Hey!” Rory grinned, and, God, his bruises looked amazing in the light of day. Like maybe he had leprosy. He was moving easier, though.

“Hi. Am I dressed okay?”

Matt snorted, and Luke's cheeks heated. Okay, so there was nowhere in town where he would be underdressed.

"Perfect. I love the gray with your eyes."

"Thanks." He glared at Matty. "Thanks for the ride."

Rory held out a hand to Matt. "Thanks for riding him into town. I'll drive him back out to the ranch."

"Works for me." Matt shot Luke a look that said, 'If you need me, I'll be there'.

Luke gave him a thumbs-up, then waved him away. "Don't forget my shopping."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't molest my little brother, McConnell."

"I'll do my best, LeBlanc."

Matt finally left them, waving out the window of his truck.

"He worries about me," Luke said, trying not to feel like a fool.

"He's a brother. I bet you worry about him."

"I do." He thought about Matt's face when he'd said there was no way he was hooking up with anyone. "You have sisters, right?"

"Two. Nineteen and sixteen. Pity me."

"Shit. I wouldn't want to be a teenager now for anything." It had sucked before, now it would be a nightmare. So much pressure, so much input.

“My sisters excel at it. One mean girl, perfect cheerleader-type, one misunderstood goth girl with an attitude from Hell.”

He shook his head. “Your poor folks.”

“Indeed.” Rory chuckled. “There’s a decent sidewalk between here and the café. Is that cool? Do I need to push?”

“That is cool, and I got this. My PT guy is right down here, believe it or not.”

“I can believe it. He’s good at his job, from what I hear.” Rory indicated the direction and they set off. “You get all the gossip if your office is down here, you know?”

No, he really didn’t, but Luke knew how to nod and agree. He had to concentrate on not rolling right into the street when the crossing ramp was a little too steep. Learning his wheels in a hospital was one thing. Using them out in the world was another altogether.

Rory hit the button to cross, one hand on the handle of Luke’s chair. “No running into traffic to get away from me. I swear, I can do charming. I just need to take a Tylenol with lunch.”

“You look like you got dragged by wild horses, man.”

“You think?” Rory had that eye-rolling thing down to an art.

Luke chuckled. Rolling. He knew a little about that, right?

“I’ve decided I’ve learned everything being dragged can teach me. Also, not a huge fan of being shot at.”

That was something he could totally understand. “That does suck beyond sucking. I can give you some advice about it, though. Duck.”

“Right. I’ll totally keep that in mind.”

The light changed and they crossed the street, Rory helping him down the ramp. Chugging up the other side was way easier, even if it made him pant a little. Working with the horses was rebuilding his muscles. Avery said he’d even be walking soon.

He’d suck it up and take arm crutches over the wheelchair any day.

“Something smells amazing,” Luke said.

“It’s meatloaf day.”

“You like meatloaf?” Luke was undecided. His mom’s had not been great, but after the army he wasn’t picky.

“I hate it. I am going to have a patty melt. Hey, Sue Ann, how goes it?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Sue Ann Landers—who had been one of Mark’s conquests back in the day—was obviously a rockabilly fanatic, the bright crimson beehive matching her cat-eye glasses exactly.

“Faboo. The new girl is pregnant, cries at the drop of a hat, and spilled an entire tray of drinks on Miss Hattie’s church group. ”

“Wow. If I let her wait on us and don’t make her cry, do I get our pie for free?” Luke reckoned Rory couldn’t not make a deal. It must be in the man’s bones.

“You’re on.”

They ended up at a table in the back, out of the way. Bless her red head, Sue Ann didn’t want his chair messing up the flow, but that worked for Luke. Less gawking.

“Good deal. About the meatloaf,” Luke added when Rory looked at him strangely. “Now I don’t have to think of getting it just to impress you.”

“Nope. You get whatever you’d like. I am splurging on meat and cheese and amazing onions.”

“I like a patty melt, but breakfast all day is gonna be my choice.” He peered at the menu. Migas and pancakes. Maybe gross, but that was what he wanted. Hey, eggs went with pancakes, right? God, he’d missed the whole migas on demand thing. Life was good .

“You’re grinning wide,” Rory said.

“Migas . People outside of Texas no comprende .”

“No shit?”

“Nope.” Wait. Okay, that was weird. Rory had to have traveled, right? Fairly extensively? He was rich, did business all over the world, right?

“Huh. People are strange.”

“You know it.” Luke nodded solemnly. “They had something similar in the Middle East, but it was weird and tomato-y.”

“They have a restaurant in Austin that has falafel and hummus that’s amazing.”

“I love falafel. I swear, it tastes like breakfast sausage.” The food had been one of his favorite things about being deployed.

“And the tzatziki. Uhn.”

“Yep. Cucumber and dill so strong it draws up your lips.” He hummed. “Yeah. Not gonna find that here.”

“Next time I go to Austin, I’m totally stopping. What’s your position on the Live Music Capital of the World?”

“No clue. I mean, I’ve been through there.” Luke felt a little small town at that.

“Maybe one day we could go. I go for business a lot and my sister is at UT.”

“Yeah? That would be cool.” In fact, it would be more than. A little road trip. Matty could feed for one day on his own, right?

“So, I really did come out to apologize. I think someone spiked my beer.”

“How?” He tilted his head, trying to figure out how someone could do that at such a busy party. With a longneck.

“I don’t know. I was the only one sick, but man, I thought I was fixin’ to die.”

“Sick how?” He knew a little bit about the kind of chemistry meds gave versus bad food .

“Well, it wasn’t like just food poisoning with the puking and pooping.

I was hallucinating. Sweating. My head felt three sizes too big.

I couldn’t coordinate my body parts. Obviously, I couldn’t shut my mouth up.

” Rory went bright red and Luke had to admit it was pretty damn cute.

“Don’t get me wrong, I meant every word.

I don’t have a wheelchair kink, but I’ve had some lovers who made me a very happy man who were in chairs. Still, it wasn’t appropriate.”

“It sure was a surprise.” Luke chuckled. “I assume you were under the influence of adrenaline and pain when you kissed me.”

“No. I did that because I wanted to.”

Now it was Luke’s turn to have hot cheeks. And ears. Along with his crotch. “Good. I mean, I damned well liked it.”

“I did too.” Rory just looked at him, straightforward as fuck, unashamed.

“Okay.” He leaned his elbows on the table. “So, before we go anywhere with this, I have to ask you something.”

“Shoot.” Rory held his gaze, direct as all get out.

“Why are you trying to buy out all the land? Matt is my big concern, but you’ve bought a lot, and you’re not developing it or moving the owners off.”

“Because I intend to make sure Doug Harris can’t have one acre more than he does right now.” The goofy, dear man he knew faded, leaving an ice-cold bastard with venom on his lips.

“So, this is all about Harris?” Luke watched Rory carefully. “What’s your beef?”

“We have history.”

The clipped answer spoke of a history of deep hatred. The expression in those bright blue eyes was forbidding enough that he dropped asking what history. “So, you’re just spending money for revenge?”

Rory’s smile returned. “Consider it an investment in agriculture in our county.”

“Uh-huh. Remind me not to piss you off, man.”

“It’s a deal.” Rory leaned back in his chair, stretching gently. “Man, my hand is throbbing, and so is the leg with the stitches.”

“Shit, man. I could have brought lunch to your place.” Well, Matt could have brought him bringing it.

“I’m apologizing. I buy and bring and all.”

“Still, stitches.”

“I’ll live. I promise.” Rory winked at him, that smile making all sorts of things sit up and take notice.

Man, Luke was all of a sudden worried his body was gonna betray him.

Worse, he was afraid that Rory would be all over it. Maybe in a way he wasn’t ready for yet, and God knew, the man had stitches in his leg.

Rory sobered. “You look like a thundercloud. Did I do something wrong?”

“No. No. Of course not. What could you have done?”

“Well, I promised to live.”

Luke hooted. “Matt might want you out of the way, but I’m getting to like you well enough.”

“I’m a basically decent guy.” Rory shook his head sorrowfully. “But that’s not the most ringing endorsement ever.”

“You didn’t let them hurt the horses.”

Rory went serious on him again. “No. No, I couldn’t do that. That’s a shitty way to get back at Matt or me or anyone.”

“That means a lot. Do you have any?”

“Horses?”

He nodded, and Rory shook his head. “No. I have enough land, but that requires a commitment to being home that I don’t have yet. ”

“You travel a lot?” He grabbed his iced tea, wanting something to do with his hands.

“Mostly between here, Austin, and Houston.”

“Ah. I got the impression you were like, a globetrotter. The way people talk you’re as exotic as a tropical bird.”

“I’ve been to Mexico, Canada. London once for a weekend.”

“Just a weekend? I had a layover in Paris once, but it was a military hop, so I saw nothing.”

“Just a weekend. I was interviewing for a position at a company there.”

“Doing what?” He hoped he didn’t sound too nosy, but he wanted to know. Everything.

“International law. They wanted someone less Texan.”

“No shit? They didn’t know the breed then.” They shared a grin.

“I’m not quite suave enough for London.”

But here Rory was high-dollar fancy. Weird. He guessed that was the way of the world.

“You’re damned smooth, man. Even drugged, you hit on me.”

“I did. I think you’re smoking hot, and I could turn your world upside down in the best way.”

“As long as you’re not trying to steal from my brother, and you give us both time to heal up a bit more, I’ll take you up on it.” Their gazes locked, and they stared at each other, ramping up the heat, until their food arrived.

“Fair enough. I want the people who work the land to keep it. This is my home.”

“I like that.” He did. A lot.

“And, to be fair, I want Harris to pay.”

“What did he do to you, Rory?” Luke scooped up food as if he was still in the military, but he saved his pancakes to savor.

“Is the food good? ”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s great.” He looked askance at Rory. “Eventually you’ll have to tell me.”

“One day. Not here. We’re having a nice lunch.”

Ouch. Okay, so it was a bad story. Another reason to dislike Harris, for sure. “I can see that.”

Now, time for pancakes. He poured on syrup, licking his lips.

Rory chuckled at him, the sound husky. “Damn, Luke. That’s dangerous.”

“Huh?” He glanced up, then laughed. “Sorry. I love pancakes.”

“I will keep that in mind.” Rory waggled his eyebrows.

“I bet you don’t forget much.”

“Nothing.”

Luke nodded, fork poised over his pancakes. “I didn’t used to, but these days shit falls out of my head.”

“You have a lot to work through, I bet. Deep stuff.”

“Less than I did a week ago. The horses help.”

“Yeah? You enjoy working with them? Have you always?”

“I wasn’t much of a 4-H kid,” Luke said. “I mean, I did my share with all the weird shit Preacher brought home, but I got out three days after graduation.”

“So you’re more like John than Matty?”

“I am.” He chuckled. “Well, I was. Now I have no idea what I am.” Now, his favorite part of the day was the horses. That made him feel important. Trustworthy.

Hell, the way they snorted at him impatiently, waiting for their feed and grooming, made him laugh every day.

“Seems to me you’re a cowboy.”

His cheeks heated. That was a hell of a compliment and not one he was sure he

deserved. “Damn. Thanks.”

“Mr. LeBlanc?” A young woman and her kid, a boy of maybe eight, stopped at the table. “Sorry to interrupt, but Joshua here wanted to say something. ”

Luke looked at the kid, trying not to scowl. “Fire away, kiddo.”

“Thank you for your service,” Joshua said solemnly, then held out a hand to shake.

“You’re welcome, son.” Luke shook the kid’s hand and held his gaze.

Joshua nodded and they moved on, leaving him with a goofy grin on his face. From the kid it was sweet, not unnerving.

Rory didn’t mock, didn’t say a word actually, just nodded once.

“Every time someone says that I want to look over my shoulder to see who they mean,” Luke confessed.

“Yeah? I bet it’s weird. Do you miss it?”

“No.” Luke had thought he would. He didn’t, not at all.

“Good.”

He blinked and Rory shrugged in an incredibly expressive move. “I intend to seduce you and have a torrid affair. I’d like you to stick around.”

Luke’s surprise turned to laughter again, and he liked that, how he and Rory could just wheeze and slap their knees together.

“Pancakes are all you can eat,” Sue Ann said while refilling drinks.

“Yeah. I could have another serving, if you have time.” Luke was all over that. “You want to share some? Could be dessert for you.”

“I have time, and sure, why not? I’ll share a bite or two.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Tickled as anything, Luke nodded at Sue Ann. “Make it a double.”

“You boys and your hollow legs...” she muttered, giving him a wink.

He laughed, and when Rory raised an eyebrow he jerked his chin at the tabletop. “You get too full, your stitches will pop.”

“There’s only three and my pop can fix them.”

“Yeah? Your dad is a...what, a surgeon? I kinda remember that.”

“Yep. Orthopedics. He works with the Rangers, the Mavs, some of the local rodeo riders.”

“Cool. Your mom work?” He felt like he should know this stuff, but he didn’t. He would bet Rory knew everything about Momma and Preacher.

“She’s a social worker in Dallas part-time.”

“Y’all all do brainy shit.” Luke chuckled. His people worked with their hands. Mostly.

“Now I know John is a computer geek of massive proportions. What does Mark do?”

“Mark is a bartender in Mexico. Like whoa, cantina of doom. Very Dusk Till Dawn .”

“No shit?” Rory gave him a wide-eyed look.

“None at all. He chucked it all, took the dog, and moved to Mexico.”

“Good for him.”

“You think so?” He sorta thought it was a bullshit move.

“Yep. A man has to go where the wind takes him.”

“And yet you’re still here.”

Rory nodded and offered him a grin that didn’t seem to hold any regrets. “This is my home.”

“You’re a brave man or a fool, buddy.”

“Six of one, half dozen of the other.” Rory winked at him, playful as all get out.

He shook his head, trying for serious. He couldn’t keep a straight face to save him, though.

“Not every bright boy ends up in the big city, right?”

“Right. Most out ones do, though. You don’t hide.” He had to admire that. Shit, he liked Rory McConnell. A lot .

“No. I tried that once. It didn’t work out for me.”

“Yeah. That’s one reason I don’t miss the military.”

“I can only imagine. Did you have a...a lover? A partner? Fuckbuddy?”

“No. I got some good help once in a while...” Luke raised a brow. “I assume you’re not involved. Right now.”

“No. I am not involved. I am also not a cheater.”

“I just wanted to make sure.” He didn’t want to offend, but he couldn’t cope with competing or breaking someone up.

“It’s fair. I may be a giant flaming queer asshole, but I’m not a bad man.” Rory wagged his eyebrows at him, but the words were totally serious.

“No. No, I get the feeling you’re a decent human being.” The pancakes came along with clean forks.

“Sometimes. Oh, syrup!”

They buttered and syrugged and Rory ignored the extra plate, which weirdly was the hottest thing ever. Was that even weird?

Maybe Luke was just desperate. It had been a long time, and Rory did it for him more and more every minute.

“I really want to kiss you again,” Rory said, voice low, soft. “I know I can’t, not here, maybe not even today, but I want to.”

“I want that, too. A real kiss. One we can take our time with.” Luke hushed his voice, as well, not wanting everyone to be all up in their business.

“My place or yours?”

“Mine has a nosy brother.”

“My back porch has a ramp.” Rory licked his fork and caught the drop of syrup on his tongue.

“Your place it is.”

“Excellent. I have the afternoon off.”

He looked at Rory, trying to decide what they were doing. Rory was in no shape to have anything more than a make-out session, but there was value in that. Real, not cheesy high school value. So, okay. “I’m in.”

“Good deal.” Rory took another bite of pancake, like they hadn’t just made plans for a rendezvous.

“No sense wasting pancakes, right?” Luke helped scarf them down, anticipation riding high.

“Not a bit. I cleared my calendar for the afternoon, so we’re gold after we’re done eating.”

“You had high hopes, huh?”

“Honestly, I thought I’d go home and fantasize.”

“Well, we might only get so far.” Luke met Rory’s hot blue gaze. “I have no idea how I’ll react once things get going. My body is still...sometimes it doesn’t feel like mine.”

“Luke, I have a tore up hand and stitches in my thigh, bruises like you wouldn’t

believe. I want time. Kisses. That's my best game."

"That sounds real fine." Luke relaxed, appreciating the ground rules.

"Oh, good." Rory gave him a grin. "I'm not in top form."

"Hey, you look great to me. I saw you the night it happened."

"Yeah. I was a little green around the gills."

"Swollen. Scraped. I felt for you." Luke polished off his half of the pancakes.

"I felt for me, too. Seriously."

"I bet. Why would Harris try so hard to kill you?" He could be a dog with a bone sometimes.

"Oh, we have history," Rory said again.

"Still sounds pretty crazy."

"Yes."

God, what had Harris done? That stony expression on Rory's face did not bode well.

"I'm sorry? "

"Thank you." Rory scooped up the last bite and held it out to him, as if daring him to get into the game.

He arched one eyebrow. He'd faced war. He could flirt in public with a small-town lawyer. He snapped the bite off the fork, then licked it, his tongue catching all the

syrup.

The grin on Rory's face let him know that he'd passed a test. Woo-hoo. He guessed if you were out and proud, any feller you dated had to be willing to be public. What did he have to lose? He was who he was, and he was too fucking old to lie.

Sue Ann came back over a few minutes later, bright-eyed with curiosity. "You boys need anything else?"

"I'm good, honey. You want another round, Luke?"

"No, no, I'm fine." He was ready to go, in fact.

"Just the check, then. Thank you."

"You got it." She bustled off, coming back in a few moments with the bill.

Rory checked it quickly, then pulled some bills out of his wallet. "Here you go, lady. Keep the change."

"Thanks!" Sue Ann bebopped off, and Luke looked at Rory.

"Sure I can't pay for mine?"

"This was my apology lunch. You can get the next one."

"I can." The next one. Woo .

"Excellent. Sue Ann, I'll see you later in the week."

"Have a good one. You too, Luke. Thank you for your service."

Luke nodded, trying for one more smile. He worked it, he thought, and he was proud.

They managed to get him outside and rolling toward Rory's office before Rory asked, "How tired are you of hearing that?"

"A lot. I mean, I get it. I appreciate it on a purely academic level. Still want to hit things. "

"I would say you can hit me, but I'm not into that and also, I'm sore. You can totally hit your brother if you want."

"We had it out a few times already." Luke thought Matt was a damned good guy.

"Good for you!" He glanced up at Rory, who was obviously being a shit, with the way he was grinning like a monkey.

"Yeah, yeah." He shook his head. "I do adore him."

"Well, y'all are twins. It would suck if you hated each other."

"I bet it would." He couldn't even imagine that. He and Matt were so connected. So tight.

Matty believed in his ass, even when they were at each other's throats, for fuck's sake.

"So, do you live where your office is?" Luke asked.

"No. I park where my office is."

"Oh." He hoped to hell he could get in that truck without killing himself.

“I have my Mustang today. Is that cool? I’ll fucking rent whatever you’re more comfortable with.”

“No, that works. If you can help me out, I can handle everything else.” A sedan body was a far better bet for him.

“You tell me what to do, I’ll do it. I have more of a driveway than a parking lot, so we’ll have some privacy.”

“I can do that.” He would just remember what his therapist had told him.

“Rock on. I don’t intend to embarrass you and, like I said, I may have had a wild fling with a man on the wheelchair basketball team at UTA.”

“Why? I mean, what was it about him?” He wasn’t panting, but he was sweating keeping up.

“I met him at a mixer at SMU. He was fucking fierce. He came onto me like a freight train, and I... I was twenty years old and putty in his hands. ”

“That sounds kinda sweaty.” Okay, little hill. He could do this.

“Kind of.” Rory grabbed the handles of Luke’s wheelchair. “This cool?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” He didn’t want to be gross when they were making out.

“No problem. Derek always said hills sucked.”

“They burn. I’m getting better, but Matt’s put a rope up from the barn to the house just to help me get back up that rise.”

“Oh, that rocks. Seriously. I have a single story.”

“Yeah? Someday I’ll do stairs again.” He would. If it killed him.

“That would make things easier, huh?”

“Walking sure would.” They made it up the little rise, and he got his wheels moving on his own again. “Therapist says months, not years, so I just have to keep working.”

“Months. Damn, that’s pretty fucking cool.”

“I hope so. I keep trying not get my hopes up.” He would be devastated if he thought too much on it and it didn’t happen.

“Yeah. I can’t imagine. I mean, I can imagine, but I’d probably get it wrong.”

“Probably.” Luke laughed when Rory pinched his arm.

“Butthead. Aren’t you supposed to be stroking my ego?”

“Nah. I am fixing to stroke other things,” Luke murmured.

“Oh, listen to you. I like it, cowboy. I like it a lot.”

“Yeah?” Luke liked a little dirty talk now and again. This was the best part of dating someone new, wasn’t it? Learning what each other liked.

“Indeed. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I’m not a shy man.”

“No!” They made it to the parking area, the Mustang gleaming in the sun. “Nice ride.
”

“She is, isn’t she? I bought her in law school and restored her.”

“You did?” Now that was unexpected. Somehow, he didn’t see this man in his pressed and starched jeans, Luccheses, jacket and tie working on a car, covered in oil.

The vision didn’t turn him off one single bit.

In fact, it kinda revved his engine. Luke liked a man who was good with his hands.

“I did. Keeps me out of trouble. How do we do this?” Rory asked.

Luke turned his chair back around and wheeled up to where the door would open.

“Okay, you open up, and I’ll get my chair in the right place.”

“I’m on it.”

Somehow, they managed. It took some finagling, a near disaster, and some up close and personalness, but they managed.

They were both sweating and panting by the time they got him in the car.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

“Ta-da! Easy as pie.” Rory grabbed his chair and took it to the trunk, leaving him feeling vulnerable as fuck. He was hiding in his chair these days, wasn’t he? Weird. It wasn’t like Rory was going to leave him here, deserted.

He just... It was like a shield now. A part of him, and he hated that in a way.

“Okay, you want to let your brother know that I didn’t kidnap you?”

“Oh! Sure.” Luke pulled out his phone to text Matty.

Going to Mcconnells

What? Why??

To make out, of course

You’re not serious. You dog! Do I need to stay in town to fetch u?

Nah I’ll holler.

k

And that was that. Just ‘k’.

Since the whole injury drama, Luke had kinda forgotten what it was like to be trusted to take care of himself. Matty knew him, though. Knew what he could do.

And he could fucking take care of himself.

“So, where is your place then? On your mom and dad’s property?”

“No, I bought fifty acres just west of them. It was going to be industrial, and I wanted it more.”

“I love that.” Luke would never have cared about keeping land agricultural until Matty showed him the way horses could heal a man.

“It’s not bad at all. I have a line of properties between my place and y’all’s.”

“Yeah? Weird. Which way? Miz Owen still has the place to the east. She was telling us Harris tried to buy her out. Even tried to help auction her goats.”

“North from you, south from me.”

“Gotcha.” He thought about the three small spreads between them and the next big expanse of fence. Two small horse operations and a rescue for unwanted animals. Both horse operations were closing down soon. “What are you gonna do with that fifty or so acres closing down?”

“I’m not sure. They’ve got solid barns, good bones, all of them.”

“Yeah. Holler when you want to talk about maybe renting one of them. I think Matty is underestimating what we can do with the horses.” He had ideas. Nothing to have deep conversations about yet, but ideas, anyway.

“Yeah? You going to expand?”

“Maybe. I have a good bit of money to invest. I didn’t do shit with my salary for

years.”

“Good for you! I love when people invest in their hometown.”

“I never thought I would at all.” The sides of the road flew by, grass knee tall and green, the sky overhead blue as could be.

“No. Did you have another plan or were you winging it?”

“Oh, God, I have no idea. I guess I thought I would go down in a blaze of glory and die in battle.” He was an asshole and he knew it.

“That sounds painful.”

“It is.” He snorted. “And less interesting than it should be.”

“Well, I promise to make things interesting for you here, honey.” Rory didn’t sound like he was making fun at all.

“I like that.” Luke would have reached over to touch Rory’s leg but he couldn’t remember which one was all stitched.

They drove down a long, graded road and ended up at a pretty ranch house in the middle of a bunch of mature pecan trees. “This is right nice,” Luke told him. “Private.”

“I swear I’m not an ax murderer.” Rory coasted to a stop by the back stoop. “Voilà . Ramp.”

“Why’s there a ramp?”

“Lady who lived here had a stroke. I kept it for carrying heavy things into the house.”

“Ah. Well, I’m glad. I can be heavy.” There. A joke. Ha.

“Honey, you’re stacked to the fucking ceiling. I couldn’t pick your fine ass up.”

“No?” His cheeks heated again. This man had an amazing effect on him. “Well, you’re gonna have to dance with me again to get me out of the car.”

“I can’t wait. Let me grab your chair.”

“Thanks.” He leaned his head back and took a few deep breaths, gathering himself for the effort this was fixin’ to take.

Rory opened his door, the chair unpacked and unfolded for him. “How do you want me?”

“In front of me. You right- or left-handed?”

“Left.”

“Okay. So when you get me up, you turn your butt to the car door, and I go the other way into the chair. Make sure the brakes are on.”

“Right on.”

It shocked him how well Rory did, at least until Luke remembered that Rory had dated someone in his position.

He wasn’t sure whether to be tickled or offended by that.

“Come on in. Watch out for the cats. They love laps.”

“Well, I come with one built in.” He laughed. “Cats go in a barn, you know.”

“Not these babies.” Three gorgeous long-haired cats sat in a line, staring at him. “See? I have Persians. Ariel, Esmerelda, and Merida.”

Persians named after Disney princesses, nonetheless. “You are the queerest man I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you! Wait until you meet Maleficent.”

“Maleficent. Wow.” They were glorious. “Good to know you’re tactile. They take a lot of grooming.”

“They’re neat critters, and they like me.”

“Pretty girls.” Cats aren’t like dogs. You let them come to you. Luke nodded at them. “Ladies.”

They came up, nuzzling him, nudging his fingers, biting the tips gently. Look at that. Sweet babies.

A huge sleek, totally not Persian beast came slinking down the stairs. “Jesus Christ, Rory. Is that a fucking jaguar? ”

“My baby girl? No. I’ve had her for twelve years. She’s the first.”

“What the hell is she?” She was fricking glorious.

“She’s a Chartreux. Striking eyes, huh?”

“Amazing.” He wasn’t sure if holding out his hand was okay, but he did it, anyway.

She stared him down with amber eyes that seemed to judge him, then, with one leap, she was in his lap.

“Well, hey!” He kept his voice steady by sheer will. “Chin or ears?”

“Chin. Totally.” Rory shook his head. “You want me to take her?”

“Nah, we’re good.” He stroked her chin, and damned if she didn’t start to purr and lean.

“She’s a sweetheart. I know that it’s weird around here to be a cat person, but I am. I’d have a dog, but I’m not home enough to feel comfortable.”

Luke grinned because, as weird as it might be, that said a lot about Rory McConnell as a man.

“Anytime you need dog time you come on to the ranch. We got ’em.”

“I might take you up on that, assuming your brother doesn’t try to kill me.”

“Hell, I bet you could take riding lessons.” Luke winked, stroking that ridiculously heavy cat.

“Riding lessons.” Rory stared at him half a second, blinking. “You think he’d let me?”

“Sure.” Luke tilted his head. “I’ve screwed up, haven’t I?”

“Rodeo club roping champion for four years of high school, honey.”

“Shit. Sorry.” Luke chuckled. “I assumed you were like me. Never had time to learn all that.”

“Why be sorry? Those assumptions work in my favor a lot.” Rory set to light on a low couch, grunting as Maleficent leapt onto his chest as soon as he sat. “Honestly, my mom says if you assume something about me, you’re probably wrong.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He wheeled over, gauging how hard it would be to get back in the chair if he wasn’t welcome on the couch.

“Do you need help to get on the sofa? I can help.”

“I might, yeah. It’s a little low. Now, sofas are a trick I’ve been working on, so lemme give it a shot.”

“I can do that. Both of them even. Should I just sit here?”

“Just be ready to leap to my rescue. Oh, and the cat?”

“Mali, go bite your sisters or something.”

The cat gave him a glare and a flicked tail, then slithered off the couch.

“Thanks. I don’t want to land on her.” Luke took a deep breath, then maneuvered about so he was parallel to the couch. Then it was a matter of brute strength and balance.

Good thing he had both in spades. He ended up sitting in the couch, breathing hard.

“That was impressive.” There was no irony in Rory’s voice or expression.

“Thanks.” Whew. Go him.

“You want a glass of water? A beer?”

“You got anything with bubbles that’s not alcohol?” He was partial to Dr Pepper but would drink any other kind of Coke.

“Dr Pepper, Sprite, Coke. I have a Coke machine in the game room.”

“You’re shitting me.” God, his whole squad would be over here daily if they knew a guy like Rory.

“I shit you not. I have the game room of joy.”

“Dr Pepper, please.” He grinned, tickled as shit.

“I’ll be right back.” Rory stood up, stretched. “You mind if I take off my tie?”

“Oh, I stand on ceremony…” He snorted. “Not one bit.”

“Good to know. I’m strangling in this thing.” Rory disappeared deeper into the house, and Luke leaned back. The place was high dollar, but simple. Sort of like a frat house with class. There was a huge leather sofa, a big screen hanging on the wall, and a footstool that had to be vintage 1973.

What did the old captain used to call it? Eclectic. Every time he’d said it Luke had thought he was the most sophisticated feller ever.

His people were more early American garage sale with owls. Momma collected owls.

Preacher liked velvet paintings.

Rory came in with two Dr Peppers, shirt unbuttoned at the neck.

“What is your position on velvet paintings?” he asked.

“What? You mean like dogs and matadors and Jesus?” Rory plopped down and offered him a can. “I prefer dogs playing poker.”

“See how you are?” Luke took a long swallow of the fizzy drink, loving how it tasted better in Texas. It just did. “Preacher collects. I stand to inherit the biggest collection west of the funny car races in Paducah, Kentucky.”

“Impressive. I like it. I collect things, but not specific things.”

“Yeah? Do you do flea markets and stuff?”

“Canton. I take First Monday off, man.”

“Aw, man I haven’t done that since I was a kid. Preacher used to go for yard art supplies.”

“Wanna go? We’ll have a blast. I’ll help on the rough parts.”

“I’d totally dig that.” He so would. Luke chuckled. They were making future dates.

“Cool. I also would dig it. Can I kiss you now?”

“As long as I don’t have food in my teeth.” He bared his teeth at Rory. Might as well start out as he intended to go on .

“You’re safe. Is there any place I shouldn’t touch?” Rory turned to face him, full on.

“I’ll let you know,” Luke said wryly. “No one has touched me since I left the hospital but Avery.”

“My stitches are here.” Rory took his hand and placed it on his leg. There was a ridge of bandages, right there under his fingertips. “It’s a little tender.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

“I’ll try not to put my hand right there and lean.” He’d never had such careful negotiations on a kiss before. Finally, Luke just put one hand behind Rory’s head and pulled him close enough for their mouths to meet.

“Oh. I’ve wanted this for weeks.” Rory leaned in the rest of the way, pressing their lips together.

Luke let it happen, let the feel of Rory’s surprisingly soft lips wash over him. He closed his eyes at the last moment, his free hand trying to decide where to light.

Rory must have had a mint when he grabbed the Cokes, and that made him smile. So thoughtful. Luke wasn’t gonna let himself think of what migas and pancakes had done for him.

Instead, he explored, tracing Rory’s mouth with his tongue.

Rory’s hand slid up his thigh, the touch gentle as all get out, and all the while, Rory let him lick and lap, let him explore.

He avoided the thigh that was all stitched, putting his hand on Rory’s chest instead. Damn, that heart was thundering. He loved the feel of Rory’s nipple, which drew up tight under his palm.

They broke for air, but dove right back in after, and Luke figured they were going to set the couch on fire. Chemistry? Hoo yeah .

Rory touched him, stroking his thighs fearlessly, like no one else had in recent

memory .

He shivered, his cock rising in his loose pants. God, it had been forever, and he was almost tempted to stare down at his crotch. Really, Luke was kinda amazed.

“Mmm. You taste good, man. I approve.”

“Thank you. You feel like heaven.”

Rory grinned, eyelines showing on his face. “Excellent. Let’s go another round, huh?”

“Hell, yes.” Luke felt like a million bucks.

“I like your enthusiasm.” Rory bent back to his task and kissed him like it was the only thing the man ever wanted to do, ever .

Luke could totally get behind that. He really could. He allowed Rory to take the lead this time, to taste him thoroughly. Rory pressed close, bandaged hand cradling the back of his head.

They kissed, changing positions of lips and heads several times to give them more access. It was like being in high school, but only in terms of the anticipation. The action was way better.

The whole idea that there was no one that could interrupt them, that they weren’t doing anything wrong, was even better. No ass kicking. That was a great thing.

He leaned a little closer, almost overbalancing. “Oof. Sorry.”

“No worries. You’re fine.”

“So are you, bud.” Cheesy, but true. Rory was quickly becoming the finest thing he’d ever seen.

“I’ll take it.” Rory scooted closer, tongue tracing his lips, teasing him.

“Mmm.” Now he could lean, and damn, Rory felt good. Hot as fire and solid as a rock to boot. It wasn’t often that a man could take his whole weight, but Rory used his height well. “Tell me if I’m hurting you,” Luke murmured.

It had been a few days, but Rory was still tore up .

“Will do. So far, so good.”

“Better than good.” He moved his hand, fingers pressing at Rory’s other nipple through the button-down shirt. Oh, that went hard and stiff, nudging his palm.

Luke wanted to get more of that, so he touched the topmost button that was done up. Sort of a universal question.

Rory groaned and reached out, opened two buttons, and nodded.

That skin was heated, a little damp with sweat, and he touched everywhere he could reach. Then he opened two more buttons, needing this like his next breath.

“That’s it, honey. I won’t break.”

“Promise?” Luke teased. “Every other time we’ve gotten close something awful has happened.”

“No shit on that. I am not responsible for any earthquakes or tornadoes.”

“Me either.” Luke stroked Rory’s chest, then kissed his throat.

Oh. Old Spice. God, that was cute was fuck. Complementary scents. Go them.

He nibbled a little, just for fun.

Rory shivered, then lifted his pointed chin, letting Luke in.

All he had to do was keep loving on the man, which was the easiest thing he’d done since he got out of the Navy.

Rory made the best noises, all rough and wanton, raw. Every new piece of skin Luke touched drew forth another, then another.

“You are a vocal bastard, aren’t you?”

“I am. Weird or a turn on?”

“Hot as hell. I’ve never been able to get loud before.”

“I don’t imagine so. I’m tickled to be able to get loud with you now. ”

“Good.” He petted Rory’s hair, fascinated by the heavy stuff.

Rory took his little round glasses off and put them on the end table, then he started unfastening Luke’s buttons too.

His initial instinct was to protest. He didn’t let people look at him. That wasn’t fair, though, so he shrugged out of his shirt.

“Oh.”

“Is that good or bad?” It was his legs that were the worst, but nothing had gotten away unscathed.

“God, you’re built like a brick shithouse.”

Luke snort-laughed at that. “I’ve been working my upper body something fierce to make up for what I’ve lost in the legs and stuff.”

“It shows. God, I could get on my knees and worship you.”

“If you weren’t all beat up I’d let you.” He pinched Rory’s nipple. “For now we just play.”

He felt daring as fuck, like he was ten feet tall and bulletproof, seriously, flirting with this man. Hell, he felt sexual for the first time in an embarrassingly long while. Luke was gonna ride that for all it was worth.

“Right on. Just play. And kiss. Lick. Suck a little.”

“Yes, please. And then some.” He stroked down Rory’s ribs, hoping he wasn’t ticklish. Rory stretched up, the move careful but willing.

He reached those hips and touched carefully, then traced in along the line of Rory’s waistband to the button. Rory sucked in, the offer just clear as glass.

Luke nodded, mouth dry as dust, and undid the button before tugging at the zip. He fumbled a tiny bit because he didn’t want to tear anything or get stuck on briefs or any of the other stuff that brought down a good make- out session.

Rory, he had to admit, was damn patient, easy in his skin and willing to let him find his way.

The pants struggled with him a bit, the cloth stiffer than Luke expected, but he got his fingers in there, discovering soft boxer briefs.

“Silky,” he muttered under his breath. “Decadent.”

“You should always have things that feel good next to your penis, Luke. One of the basic tenets of life.”

“The Navy disagrees.” Luke stroked Rory through the cloth.

“What does the Navy know about seamen?” The tease would have been better if Rory’s voice hadn’t been husky and rough.

“Not much,” Luke said. He found the opening in the boxer briefs and touched skin, moaning at the heat he found.

“Oh, fuck.” Rory arched a little, lips parting, eyelids dropping closed.

“Uh-huh. I mean, eventually. Right now, I want to see you.” He slipped his palm underneath that hardness and pulled Rory’s cock up and out.

Long and lean, just like the man himself—Rory filled his hand with heat.

“You approve?”

“Hell, yes.” He grinned into those bright eyes. “Fishing for compliments.”

“Absolutely. I’ve been presented with this gorgeous body. I need reassurance.”

“Shit, Rory, you’re amazing. And this is a work of art.” Luke stroked up and down, gentle to begin with.

Rory arched for him, driving nice and slow into his hand. That was perfect, the way Rory took what he wanted, showing Luke what he wanted.

“I swear to God, you’re gonna send me over the edge.”

“So? I want to see what you look like when you come.” He rubbed the head with his thumb, then pressed at the underside just below the flared tip.

Rory grunted, and his hips bucked up. Oh. Hot spot.

Luke massaged it again, really pushing it, feeling damned powerful. He was doing this. He was making Rory arch and moan, making the sweet son of a bitch need. He could do this forever, just stay right here and touch.

Rory’s eyes were the brightest thing he’d ever seen and they were fastened on him.

He stared right into pure pleasure, urging the man to let go, to give in to this ramped-up thing between them. Luke wanted Rory to come way more than he needed to.

“Fuck, man. No one’s ever made me... No one.”

“Come on, man. I want to see. I want to feel it.”

“I want to suck you off. Taste you.” Rory’s voice proved he was so close.

“Oh, yeah. I want all the things. I want to see you all naked and stretched out on a bed.”

“I could ride you like a prize pony, I swear to God.” Each word got louder and by the end, Rory had lost it, shooting all over his wrist and hand.

Oh, Jesus. He panted, watching Rory's face. So damned beautiful.

Rory leaned into the sofa, resting hard, blinking at him. "Damn."

"That was hot as fire." Luke wasn't sure what the clean-up etiquette was. Licking was probably premature at this point.

"Uh-huh." Rory watched him for a second, then grabbed his hand and shocked the living fuck out of him by licking his fingers clean.

Well, that was as good as an endorsement for disease-free as he'd ever seen, so Luke took a kiss. A long, deep one.

Fuck, Rory tasted like heaven—salty, male heaven. Luke knew he was hooked right through the balls. He wasn't gonna be able to let this go easily.

"You next, hmm? You want my mouth?"

"Oh." He'd be an idiot to say no. "I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"I promise to take it easy with both of us."

"Then I'm all over it." Luke was in all the way.

"Lean back, cowboy. I need you."

Cowboy. It sounded so weird. But Luke loved it. He leaned back on his elbows, giving access. Rory got his jeans open, then leaned down and nuzzled the tip of his dick, the sudden contact stealing his breath.

His muscles pulled up tight, and Luke had to breathe a moment to let everything relax

again.

“You tell me if there’s anything you don’t like, Luke.”

“I will, I promise.” He stroked Rory’s hair, encouraging, and Rory took the hint, opening around his cock, tongue flicking the tip.

He shook a little, eyes wide while he watched. Lord have mercy. Was this really happening to him? Really? This beautiful man wanted him, didn’t think his mass of scars was... Well, okay, Rory hadn’t seen many of them. The thought had him deflating and Rory glanced up.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No. No, I’m thinking too much. I—my scars aren’t pretty.”

“Well, let me see them, and we’ll get that part over with.” Just as logical as shit and full speed ahead, wasn’t he?

Luke bit his lower lip, then nodded. Okay, why not? That way, if it was all over he was done now and not when he was too far gone and had blue balls.

Rory knelt on the floor and worked Luke’s boots off, so fucking careful, and he found himself trembling. Rory grabbed one foot, thumbs sliding over the bottom as he stared up. “You tell me if I hurt you, man. I’m not into pain.”

“No, me either.” He could do this. Hell, he wanted this so bad he might bust. So he needed to suck it up and breathe. Luke did, in and out.

The few minutes it took for Rory to take off his jeans, to bare him, were some of the longest of his life. He caught himself squeezing his eyes shut, not even breathing as he waited for Rory to say something.

The words didn’t come, though. Touch did. Rory ran deliciously warm fingers up along his thighs, not avoiding his scars, the horrible places where muscle was gone, ripped and torn up.

His heart slammed, rocketing against his ribs, and he fought his urge to shove Rory away, cover up. Scream. He’d been a soldier, damn it. He’d been able to do anything

and now he was this scarred fucking freak and...

“God, you smell like heaven.” Wet heat slid up his inner thigh and his eyes popped open.

He stared down at Rory, who seemed completely absorbed in him, not at all put off. His heart thundered, but he couldn’t look away, couldn’t stop the rise of his cock.

“Is this okay?” Rory spread his thighs, hands gentle as fuck. The touches never stopped, lighting his nerves up with fingers that never asked for more than pleasure.

“Yes. Yeah, it’s good.” His voice sounded blown. Raw.

“Rock on.”

The sight of Rory wrapping wet lips around his sac and sucking one ball hit way before the sensation.

Then both kicked in, and he panted, his body going into overdrive. “God. Rory. That feels so good.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Oh fuck . He felt that sound everywhere. Every-fucking-where .

Luke arched as much as he could without pulling anything tender. Now he had a new goal at physical therapy.

He wanted to fuck Rory’s mouth, take those sweet parted lips good and hard. Luke wanted to do all the things, but he knew he had to take it easy this time, just take what Rory gave.

And Jesus fuck, Rory was giving and giving. Once he was done with Luke's balls, Rory started sucking, working his cock like he was a Popsicle.

He'd never had the time or safe space to... This felt like a serious indulgence. Like the most perfect moment ever.

Best of all of it was the way Rory moaned and hummed, working him like it was the only thing he ever wanted to do. That voracious mouth was gonna kill him, and what a way to go.

Luke pushed one elbow into the couch to give him leverage. That way he could thrust a tiny bit.

Rory pushed his hands under Luke's ass and pulled in a long, gentle arc.

His whole body loosened a little, all but his cock. That was hard as a rock, dripping and aching. His ball sac was tight, pulled up close to his body.

Luke was ready. Really ready. He tapped Rory on the shoulder. "Gonna come, babe."

Rory's answer was to swallow over the tip of his cock.

The motion around his flesh made Luke shout, his ears ringing with it when he shot. Pleasure buzzed up his spine and burst in his brain.

His entire world lit on fire.

"Shh. That's it, Luke. That's perfect." Rory licked him clean as he came down, petting his hips and thighs, which eased his quaking muscles.

He found himself staring at the ceiling, absolutely fucking dazed .

Lifting up on his arms, Rory kissed Luke's belly. "You good?"

"Uhn." Come on, man. Say words. He nodded, hoping he wasn't drooling or something.

"Excellent." Rory's hand was heavy on his thigh, just resting there on his mangled leg like it was no big thing.

Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't a huge deal to Rory. That idea gave Luke a serious fit of joy. "You're amazing."

"Yeah? Thank God, because if you'd said I sucked hairy donkey balls I might have cried. I totally want the chance to do it again."

"Get up here with me. I need to sit up."

"You got it." Rory pushed onto the sofa and got him repositioned. "Better?"

He clenched his teeth for a moment, every part of him throbbing. Then it faded and he nodded. "Whew. Good."

"Cool. You want your Coke? I can reach them."

"I would love that." So weird and casual. Like they were lovers who had just snatched an afternoon delight.

"I have to tell you, Luke. This was the best first time ever."

"It was for me, too." He was half-ashamed to say even half-laid-up it was really his best time. No shame, no hurry, no hiding.

And Rory was into him and didn't hide it one bit.

He sipped his drink, but he couldn't stop grinning. His urge, in fact, was to bounce.
"Your leg okay?"

"Tender, but it was completely worth it."

"Mmm. Tylenol for all." He thought that was a fine idea, for real. They were gonna be sore, even if they hadn't indulged in heavy gymnastics.

"I can get some." Rory started to ease away.

"Not yet. Let's do some afterglow." He caught Rory's hand in his. "Thank you."

Rory gave him a quizzical look. "What for, honey? "

"For everything. For not freaking out. I expected you to."

That wicked grin made him smile back. "I never do what's expected of me, Luke. You'll figure that out."

"I'm a fast learner, I swear." He toyed with Rory's fingers. "I mean it, though. This has been the best day I've had since I got home."

"Well, shit. I hope so! Blow jobs are fabulous things." Fuck, Rory made him cackle.

"Hopefully hand jobs rank right up there, or I'm behind one."

"You have cowboy hands. You know how hot that is?"

"Every time you say that it makes me want to look over my shoulder." He laughed a

little. “I mean, I feel totally out of place still.”

“Really?” Rory arched one eyebrow in a weirdly Spock sort of way. “It doesn’t show.”

“That’s good, I guess. I’m making like a duck. Calm on the surface. Never let them see you paddling like mad.” He kept touching Rory, just little bits of contact that made him happy.

“That I understand.” Rory answered the touches, tracing random shapes over his chest and belly. The best part, weirdly, was the scars. Rory didn’t ignore them, but he didn’t linger, either. They were just what they were.

Part of him.

Luke blinked.

“You okay?” Rory asked.

“Uh-huh.” He’d kinda quit breathing for a moment.

“Good. You have a lot of thoughts. I like that in a man.”

Luke thought Rory had a lot of trapped thoughts of his own. Like, way more than he did.

It was a cliché, but Rory was totally an onion or something. Peel back a layer and you got another layer. He petted that poor leg right below the stitches. Those muscles were tight as bowstrings. “I reckon we ought to get that Tylenol.”

“I can do that.” Rory levered himself up, limping and stumbling a couple steps before

getting his balance. “You want to borrow some shorts?”

“Please? I stuffed myself into those jeans for you, but I’m not sure I’m up to them now. I’m all relaxed.” He was lucky he didn’t have baby head the way Rory had taken care of him.

“I’m on it.” Rory headed off toward the hallway, then turned back. “Thank you, huh? For coming to play.”

The words sounded young, somehow, vulnerable, which were two terms that he didn’t use for Rory.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world, babe. As long as you’ll drive me home, that is.”

“I promise I won’t leave you stranded. You have my word.”

“I believe you.” No, if Rory was gonna stop in the middle of a highway for some lost horses, he wasn’t gonna leave a guy hanging. Trust established.

Now he just had to take some Tylenol and see how Rory McConnell felt about snuggling. He was taking bets that the man was all over that shit.

Chapter Fifteen

“ I ’m going to fucking destroy you, boy.” Harris was screaming over the speakerphone, and Rory was enjoying the hell out of imagining the old fucker red-faced and sputtering.

“Now, now, Mr. Harris. Are you threatening me?”

“It’s not a threat! It’s a fucking promise!”

Rory chuckled and signed a sheaf of paperwork that would guarantee him another three hundred acres that penned Harris up tighter than a nun’s coochie. “That’s not very neighborly, sir.”

God, this was more fun than spinning turtles.

Lori came in to grab the papers, grinning at him when Harris went incoherent for a moment. Maybe he was having a stroke.

He gave her a thumbs-up, then went to checking his emails. “You swallow your own tongue, Harris? That would be a shame.”

“Your motherfucking whoreson. I swear to you, I will find your Achilles heel. I know you have one. Pussy boys like you always do.”

“You know those Greek guys, Harris. They were always fucking the shit out of somebody’s ass. Have a lovely day, would you?” Click.

He spun around in his chair just tickled as a pig in slop. If Harris was this insane then the latest deal had really hit him where he lived.

“Lori, do you have the plan I asked you to draw up?” The horse operation between him and the LeBlanc place had just stepped up their plan to close down, due to the elder Lawson having a stroke. He wanted to give Matt and Luke a proposal for leasing.

“I do. Boss?”

“What?”

“Are you sleeping with Luke?”

“I’m not sure one blow job is defined as sleeping with, but that’s the plan. Why?”

“You didn’t even mention my new hair-do.”

He tilted his head, studying her shorter, more fashionable... What did his mom call that? A shag? “I like it. The highlights really frame your face.”

“Yeah? It’s not too young for me?”

“Nope. I think it’s spot-on.” He loved that phrase. One of the things he’d picked up on his jaunt to the UK.

Either that or from the shows off BBC. Whichever. Oh, he wondered if Luke liked Doctor Who ...

“Earth to Rory. You’re too happy. It’s weird.” She winked at him. “Also, you do have a day job that’s not real estate magnate here in town. Conference call at ten on the

water rights dispute.”

“Oh, cool.” Sometimes it was good to do the job one loved best. “Can you order pizza for lunch? I have a craving.”

“Sure. Your usual?”

He nodded. He did love a nice green pepper and hamburger pie .

“Got it.” She beamed, and he knew she would order a personal Hawaiian for her, extra pineapple.

He blew her a kiss then pulled the Peterson file. Water rights. Right. Work that made them money instead of costing it.

Rory chuckled. He knew he was a lucky man in that he got to do both.

He got to pouring over the file, but he couldn’t help but grin hugely every time he thought of old Doug Harris screaming like a banshee. That dude was losing it. It was about time.

Chapter Sixteen

“ M atty?” Luke rolled into Matt’s office-y small bedroom. There was all sorts of other shit in there, including tack Matt was mending, and there wasn’t a whole lot of room for his wheels.

“Yo, Lulu. What’s up?” Matt was doing some sort of paperwork, but there was a genuine, happy smile for him. “You needing a ride out to McConnell’s?”

“No.” No, he’d been sitting in the front room watching some silly crime show and had seen a commercial for that wounded veteran charity. “I been thinking.”

“Explains the smoke, but spill. Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out.”

“You want a cup of coffee or something? I’ll even make you decaf.” Luke teased Matt about not being able to sleep if he drank coffee in the evening.

“Oh, dude. This is a serious conversation. Let’s have leaded.”

“Cool.” He backed out of the room so he could lead the way to the kitchen, which was where all real talks happened .

Matt followed along, pulling out the cookie jar while he made coffee.

“Cookies? Wow, you must be worried,” Luke said, his nerves settling a little. Matty must have been worried he was leaving. That wasn’t it at all. In fact, he thought he’d found just the calling that would lead him to stay in the area.

“Yeah, a little. Are you going to move away? Do I need to kill McConnell?”

“No.” He took a deep breath. “What do you know about horses for therapy? Like for PTSD.”

“Not a lot. I know that there’s a shitload of people doing therapy for kids—Down’s syndrome, for sure.”

“Right. I was thinking about it. Like, how the work has helped me. I know a lot of guys who are having trouble readjusting. Physically and mentally. I want to try to do a—well, a place they can come spend time with animals.”

Matt tilted his head. “They sure helped you. I mean, they seem to make you happier.”

“They do. And I know some of them are rescues, too. I mean, I wouldn’t want anyone messing with your roping horses, but Angel and Leaf and the damned donkey? They really need me as much as I need them.”

“Yeah, they need love, Lu. Seriously.” Matty handed him a cookie.

Luke traded it back with a cup of coffee. “Right? I mean, I don’t know where to do it, but I want to try. I don’t even know where to start.”

“At the beginning, I guess. We talk to Momma and Preacher.”

“That works.” Luke had to grin, because Matty figured their folks knew everything. Preacher did kinda seem omniscient.

“We’ll need land, horses, equipment and shit. Barns. Feed. Tack. Are you intending on having guys ride? ”

“I don’t know. I mean, I’m in no position to teach that yet.” He was like a newborn foal anytime he tried to stand up. Still, he was standing, wasn’t he?

“I probably could. I’ve taught lots of folks. Bet we’d have to have them wear helmets, though. Insurance and shit.”

“Sure. I mean, we can always start out with just the guys with PTSD on the riding. The injured guys can do grooming and feeding and stuff.” Luke’s heart swelled with pride and love for his twin.

Matty never even thought about saying no to him on this.

His brother was in, all the way, just because Luke wanted it.

Just because Luke needed this. “Thanks, Matty.”

“For what?” He got a curious look for about half a second. “We’ll need like a decent house for people to stay at. Having enough bathrooms for folks is gonna be a challenge there, as houses aren’t made to be equal that way.”

Luke chewed his lip. “Let me talk to Rory. He has a ton of properties. Maybe he has something we can use.”

“Tell him we want the land connected to us here. I know he’s got it.”

“He does. He’s got us mostly boxed in.” Luke chuckled. “I like to think he was protecting you from Harris. He sure seems to think that was it.”

“I don’t need protection, but that’s still kind, I guess.”

“Uh-huh.” Luke bit back a grin because Matt sounded more chagrined than grateful.

“I’ll holler at Momma tomorrow morning, make sure it’s okay to come to lunch on Sunday?”

Matty rolled his eyes. “Because she’s going to tell your happy ass no. Dork.”

“Hey, they might have plans. Preacher does actually work on Sundays sometimes.” Not much. He was mostly retired after the stroke he’d had.

“Yeah, yeah. So you want to work with rescue horses, huh? We might could get grants or something. Folks love that shit. ”

“I bet we’d get more grants for the horses than we would for soldiers.” Luke wasn’t bitter about that, really. He got it. Animals didn’t have a voice, and folks figured humans had people to care for them.

“There’s way more horses here than soldiers, Lu.”

“You think?” he teased. “I guess that’s totally true in Texas.”

“Least this part. In Killeen, I reckon not so much.”

“Right.” That was a big base, Fort Cavazos. He’d been Navy, stationed mostly in California when he wasn’t deployed. He’d loved it out there too, but this was home, and he knew now it always would be.

Luke grabbed a cookie so he could dunk it in his coffee. “You want to grab my laptop? I can do some research, let you get back to your paperwork.”

“Ew. Paperwork sucks, man. This is way more fun.”

“Cool. Then you can sit and brainstorm with me.” He beamed at Matty, so tickled he

might as well have had a feather up his ass.

“That works. You want another Oreo?”

“God, yes. But give me two so I can make a double.”

“Save the other sides for me.”

“This is why we’re twins.”

Matt nodded, happily taking the crispy cookies from him when he peeled them away from one side of the cream.

Maybe, just maybe this was gonna work.

Hell, between him and Matty, it didn’t have a choice.

Chapter Seventeen

You awake?

Huh. Rory was a night owl, but as far as he could figure, Luke LeBlanc was so not. A little chill raced over him.

You okay?

Yeah, I just wanted to call, but not if you weren't awake.

I'm just sitting at my laptop and watching infomercials, call away

Luke was totally breaking up with him and they were still at the first blow job stage. Bummer.

What else would keep the man from sleeping this late at night?

The phone rang, and he clicked answer. "Hey."

"Hey. Sorry, I know it's late."

"No worries. You know me. I don't sleep. What's up?" Maybe this was a booty call. That would work for him.

"You just need more orgasms, you know? Listen, do you have any property that butts up against Matt's? Something with infrastructure in place?"

“I do. I mean, need more orgasms, and yeah, I have the fifty acres south of me, and I just signed on Miss Owen’s piece, east of y’all.” He blinked, more confused than tired. “Why?”

“Well, I had this crazy idea. About a therapy ranch for military guys who have injuries or PTSD. Matt’s place is too small.”

“Huh. Okay. I get that. Yeah—there are three separate plots of land. One was a horse property already, great barns, no house. The other two have houses, but they’d have to travel through Matt’s land from Miss Owen’s to the horse property.

” Rory personally thought that might make the grumpy twin, well, super grumpy.

“Hmm. Okay, well, I can work it out if you think I can rent the horse operation from you.” Luke sounded super-excited. No way was he gonna say no.

“Sure. No problem. We’ll draw up papers.” That was easy. Way easier than breaking up. He was more than passing fond of the third LeBlanc brother. The second and a half. Whatever. “I was afraid you were calling to say you didn’t want to see me again.”

“Why would I do that?” Luke’s genuine surprise warmed him. “Hell, if it wasn’t so damned late I would get Matt to run me over.”

“I believe Mr. Up with the Sun might threaten to castrate your ass, and I have only just begun to explore those options.”

“Right? He just went to bed an hour ago. He was brainstorming with me.”

“Oh, man. He’ll be a grumpy puss in the morning.” Note to self, don’t harass the LeBlanc boys tomorrow. Much.

“I’ll try to let him sleep in. We just had too much coffee, is all.”

“Ah. So tell me about your plans. I love a new venture, so much energy.”

“Well, I still need to do a lot of work, but I was thinking rescue animals and wounded warriors. I mean, the horses have made me a new man.”

He grinned and took a long sip of coffee. Thank God for that. Luke had been thinking about a long, black slide, and Rory was selfish enough that he was glad Luke had clawed himself back out. “That’s cool. Are you going to draw from Fort Cavazos or all over?”

“I reckon that will depend on what kind of assistance I can get. I’d like to draw from all the service branches.”

“Oh, Marines have the best uniforms,” he teased.

“They’re also exceptional cocksuckers,” Luke shot back. “Speed bumps.”

Oh, this was fun. “You have personal experience?” Am I better?

“A few times. It was always weird and rushed, but you get off where you can in the service. Now, when you do it, I want time to stop.”

“Good. Sucking you off is one of my favorite pastimes.” And it felt damn fine—both Luke’s words and the way his made Luke groan.

“Phone sex is weird, Rory. You’re either going to have to come get me, or I’m going to have to go jack off.”

“Showing up at your brother’s house at two-thirty in the morning would be even

weirder.” And he didn’t want to imagine wheelchair wrangling with a hard-on in the wee hours. It was too much .

“It might get you shot, for sure.” Luke sighed. “Tell me I can see you by Monday.”

“I will pick you up after work. We’ll make burgers or pick up tacos or just starve and touch each other for hours. I’m easy.”

“Sounds like a plan. I have lunch with Momma and Preacher Sunday, and tomorrow I have to hit the auction with Matt. There’s a foal he wants to look at, and I want to see llamas.”

“Llamas? Do they spit?”

“They do, but they don’t bite much, and if they kick, it hurts but it won’t kill you.”

“Good to know.” His people weren’t ranchers. A couple of horses, tax-deduction cows, but that was really it.

Maleficent jumped into his lap, yowling imperiously.

“Is that my girl?” Luke asked.

“It is.” Mal was already ridiculously attached to Luke.

“Tell her and the girls I’ll bring them tuna.”

“You spoil them.”

“Excuse me? I’ve seen the kitty condo set up in your office. They have a better set-up than most people.”

“Everyone needs a hobby.”

Luke yawned loud enough for him to hear that strong jaw pop. “Sorry about that. I guess I ought to head to bed. Thanks for listening.”

“Any time, honey. I’ll talk to you later. You get some rest.” Think about me a little .

“I will. After I jack myself to sleep.” Luke chuckled. “See you soon.” The line went dead.

“Shithead.” He laughed as Maleficent head-butted him. “It’s true. He’s a shithead.”

Mal yowled at him, for lo, she would never hear a bad word against her Luke. He rubbed her ears, nodding. “I know, but now I need a cold shower. How’s that gonna help me sleep?”

Eh, he’d just jack off in bed. That would relax him and if he still couldn’t sleep he’d watch QVC. That shit always knocked him right out. Weird but true.

He climbed to his feet, leaving his laptop open. There was always work if nothing else relieved him.

Chapter Eighteen

L uke checked his jeans and boots one more time, making sure he hadn't really gotten things messed up from the truck to the wheelchair.

“Lu, it's lunch with Preacher and Momma. Not a wedding.”

“Shut up.” He knew that, but still...he knew from the service that, if you wanted someone to listen to you, you needed to be spit and polish.

“It's cool. We're just talking. Having lunch.”

A sidelong glance told him Matt was nervous, too. They had this idea... Well. It was just a shadow of an idea, but Momma and Preacher would be their first shot at explaining it.

“Uh-huh. That's why you're wearing a button-down instead of your Chris LeDoux concert tee.”

“It's in the washer.”

“Sure.” He'd folded clothes this morning. He knew better. Luke grinned. “Lord, look at that ramp Preacher built. I'd need a bike gear for hills to get up that alone.”

Matty chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah, I tried to mention, but you know how he is. He gets something in his head and it sticks.”

“What? He got American Ninja Warrior and the warped fucking wall in his head?”

“Oh, dude. Don’t tell him that or he’ll be in the back pasture building us a training compound.”

Luke pondered that. “It would keep him busy for a while. Momma’d like that, I bet.”

“I can hear you, boys.” Preacher came up behind them, scaring the bejesus out of him. “Looks like I’m underdressed.”

“We were doing laundry.” Butter wouldn’t melt in Matty’s mouth.

“Uh-huh. Are y’all gonna ask for money?”

“No, sir. We might ask for some advice.” Preacher knew everyone. He could tell them who to go to for what.

“Oh, I got shitloads of that. Come on, boys. Momma! The twins are here!”

Matt grabbed his handles and started manhandling him up the ramp of ab-muscly doom.

Momma came to the door, squinting into the bright sun. “Lord have mercy, old man, I told you that ramp was too steep.”

“So, is our stoop,” Preacher shot back. “It’s temporary, any road.”

“That’s right. The crutches aren’t, I don’t think, but the chair is.” Sometime in the last few weeks, Luke had decided he was getting out of this fucking chair.

No one wanted to go to a therapy ranch where a guy didn’t try his hardest. So he’d

started working it.

He was actually strong enough these days to make it out to the barn with the crutches while Matt brought the chair. He preferred using the chair with the horses, just because he'd hate to fall and startle them. Some of those guys were twitchy as all get out .

He couldn't blame them. Some of the rescues...well, they had scars as bad as his.

"The crutches are better than you'd thought at the beginning, son. You'll be rid of them too, at some point." Momma was the eternal optimist.

"I sure hope so." He let the smile come, because they loved him and they expected him to get up and fight, which was what he was doing. It was all good. "That's a pretty dress."

"Thank you! I bought it in town. I was being fancy for your daddy." She rolled her eyes. "What did that get me but a pinched bottom?"

"What did you expect, woman?" Preacher scowled. "The boys were coming. Now, if you leave it on until tonight..."

"Ack. Not listening," Matty muttered. Like there wasn't four of them.

Momma looked pleased as punch, though, so Luke couldn't fuss.

"We thought we'd have your daddy cook burgers on the grill, unless you boys want me to make something else."

"That sounds great, Momma." Matty bent to kiss her cheek once they were in the kitchen.

“Hey, baby. I love you.”

Luke grinned. Matty was the one who never left, wasn't he? The one that fixed the roof and was there when Preacher had his stroke. The steady son who never let anyone down.

The rest of them, not so much.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Luke teased. He knew his momma would fight a lion with her bare hands for him.

“Yep. My sweet little chopped liver boy.” She laughed and bent to hug him, the baby powder and rose scent of her familiar as breathing. “You look healthy. I approve.”

“Thanks. The work with the horses has been good for me. ”

“It has.” She took his hat off to hang it upside down in the hat hanger by the back door.

Matty was in the fridge already, grabbing the tea pitcher to pour them both a glass. “Anyone else need a drink?”

“I'll take some, kiddo.” Preacher hung his hat as well. “So, to what may I lend my expertise?”

Momma raised one well-waxed brow. “Before lunch?”

“I'll be less greasy that way. Besides, I'll make both boys change and help me.” Preacher sat, grinning in that lopsided way that he had now. “Spill.”

Luke looked to Matty, but Matty shook his head. “I just train horses, Lu. This is your

deal.”

“I want to...shit, I want to start a therapy-type deal. A place where injured guys can come, work on the horses, work out their shit. I’m thinking about renting some property attached to our place.

” The words all came out in a rush. He was needing them to approve, to give their nod and tell him he wasn’t stupid.

Matty’d done it already, but this was his folks.

Momma’s sharp, indrawn breath made him wince, but when Luke glanced at her, she was smiling, her eyes a wee bit misty. “You’re staying here?”

“I am, yeah. I mean, we have the VA close, and I really want to try this. The horses... I think they’re really a good thing. I’d work with rescue horses, too. Be good on both sides.”

“You need to look into insurance before you do anything.” Preacher nodded, words slow, but that mind quick still. “Sure as shit, some asshat will get stepped on and will pussy off to sue.”

Matt grinned, hooking a chair to turn backward and sit once he’d poured tea. “See? I knew we needed to talk to the old man.”

“Here.” Momma got up and pulled out a spiral notebook and pen to hand him. “You’d better take notes. ”

“Yes, ma’am.” He took it with a smile. “So, insurance. What else?”

“You’ll need safe fences, a good paddock. One of them spinny riding deals with the

chains and shit to make sure the horses don't bolt." Momma looked so pleased with herself.

Luke scribbled. Some of this him and Matty had talked on, but it was always good to have input.

They all started talking about whether he wanted this to be a day thing or more like a temporary halfway house deal. What kind of staff he'd need—nurses or therapists. How to get any VA support.

"You'll need assistive devices, too. If we rent the Lawson place you can always use that barn—it's got a way bigger breezeway than mine. You can rig some of those walking straps or whatever." Matty had that glow of conquest. He was ready to take this on.

"You just don't want strangers touching your barn," he teased and Matt snorted.

"Our barn, and no I don't." Matty shrugged. "I have a lot of time and energy invested in some of those fillies, and while I have rescues, too, I would want my breeding barn to be off-limits, you know?"

"I get it," Luke said seriously. "The Lawson place also has two houses, so we wouldn't have to worry about an invasion."

Him and Matt, they'd need their own space, otherwise it would overwhelm them both. He was used to lots of people, but his twin needed alone time.

Matt brightened. "That's a plan."

Preacher scowled. "Doesn't that McConnell boy own the Lawson place now?"

“Yessir. We’re leasing it, with an option to buy.” Matt was firmly in Rory’s camp now. It honored him, kinda, how much stock Matty took in how well Rory treated him.

“No shit? ”

“Abraham!” Momma popped Preacher on the shoulder.

“Pardon my French. Well, good on you, boys. There’s not a lot of acreage there, but there’s good grass, and you’ll feed supplemental.”

“Yessir. I’m not looking to run a breeding program like Mr. Horse Whisperer here. I just want—” Luke stopped, feeling his cheeks start to burn.

“He wants to help. It’s cool.” Matt picked up his glass and drank deep. “How much do you think we need to start, Preacher?”

Preacher took the notebook from Luke and made some scribbles.

“Well, I think you ought to get with Hannah Keeler and ask her to write you up some grants. She owes me five hours of work, gratis. Get what you can from other sources. See what you can do about starting out with a few trained animals from some local service animal organizations. You have that many soldiers, you’re gonna need space for dogs and shit, too. ”

He looked at Matty, giving thanks that his daddy had made it through the stroke. They still needed him. All of them.

Matty winked at him, and Preacher gave him back his notebook with some tentative figures. Okay, that was more than he still had in savings, but he knew he could be dogged with the best of them.

He could do this.

He could.

“We got this, brother. You and me.”

“We do.” Fuck, he was lucky. For a second he felt gobsmacked as all hell. How had he gone from feeling put upon by the good Lord Himself to knowing that he was blessed?

Preacher grinned hugely at him before rising to grab the tray of burgers Momma handed him. “There it is. I told you, son, you’d understand someday. ”

“You did.” And he’d snarled and hung up on the old man, then texted to apologize. He hadn’t been ready, but he reckoned his daddy knew that, too.

Preacher knew everything, at least about the Man Upstairs.

Preacher clapped him on the shoulder with his free hand. “You boys change into something worky. I’ll need you in the barn after lunch, and Matty, your momma needs a gutter fixed and she won’t let me get on the house.”

“I’m on it, sir.”

“You’re a good boy, Matty.”

“I love you too, Momma. You want a T-shirt, Luke?”

“I do, please.” Every day he was more confident he could actually help instead of just sitting on his pockets and watching. “Need me to chop anything, Momma?”

“Cabbage, please. I’m making coleslaw. Potato salad’s already made up.” Momma handed him a knife and a cutting board.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll shred carrots, too.” He did love to hear her hum and smell the good smells she made in that kitchen.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Matt brought him a T-shirt, grabbed his tea and bebopped out the door after stealing a piece of apple for the pie off the counter.

Momma laughed, the sound empty of the strain he'd gotten used to hearing in her voice when he was around. Yeah, Luke reckoned she was glad he had a plan, that he was interested in something. Being a momma had to be the hardest job ever.

"You heard from Mark, Momma?"

"He's in Mexico. He's busy. No, he doesn't want company. Mark has issues, honey."

"I'm not wanting to go to Mexico. I might call him, though, if you think he'll answer." Mark could have all the issues he wanted, but Luke was sick of respecting them. A man needed a kick in the ass sometimes. He knew that better than anyone right now.

"It can't hurt to try. John's talking about having another baby already. That boy is a nutter. Three is enough."

"You think so?" He didn't point out she'd had four since he and Matt were kind of a bonus.

"Well, I mean, I'll love them all, but Marlana has her hands full with the boys."

"Yeah. John is kinda gung ho." He winked at her and she laughed, trading him cabbage for carrots.

“John is my baby, and I adore him, but the boy is a horndog.”

“At least he seems to be a horndog for just one woman now.” He paused, glancing at her sideways. “You might as well know, Momma. I started dating Rory McConnell.”

“Did you? He’s young, but he seems smart enough. He, uh, he had a run-in with Doug Harris and some of his cronies a few years ago. The rumors were nasty. I felt bad for him and his momma.”

He stared, because this was what Rory wouldn’t talk to him about. “I know you’re not one to repeat rumors, Momma, but can you tell me what you know?”

“Oh, son, are you sure you want to hear? It’s nasty.”

“What is it you always say? Forewarned is forearmed?”

“They say he got real drunk and inappropriate. Naked inappropriate, and Doug and his cronies had to stop him, forcibly. The real rumor is that he got drunk and naked with the group, let them do things to him, take pictures and everything.”

Luke sat back in his chair. “Ouch.” He could see that, though. Rory might have been drugged or he might have been having food poisoning, but Luke was living proof that the man had trouble with controlled substances. If he’d gotten high as a kite there was no telling what he might have done .

“He was young—just out of college and home, so eighteen? But it was nasty. They got what was coming to them, though. All but Doug Harris are dead, in jail, or bankrupt now.”

Well, well. Rory did have a finely tuned sense of revenge. “I hope dead of natural causes.”

“Cancer. Prostate.” Momma sounded pretty damn pleased with that fact too. Someone had been evil, then. He felt totally out of step again, because he imagined Matty would know who all the players were if Momma named them, and he only knew Doug Harris’s name because of Rory and Matt.

Although really, Matt was in the closet and not the most social man alive. He wasn’t sure Matty knew Kurt Cobain was dead yet. He wasn’t totally sure Matt knew who Kurt Cobain was .

He grinned. Luke, on the other hand, knew all the words to Let It Go , knew which housewives lived in which city, and had friends who could do whole routines of Beyoncé choreography.

He guessed he was the hip twin.

“Well, Rory’s a good guy, Momma. He’s not a drunk. He’s not loose. He’s just very open.”

“I heard he was drunk as a lord at that awards dinner.” Concern shadowed his eyes. “I know Matt has changed his tune about Rory, too, but I worry. That’s all.”

“I know.” He worried, too, but more that Rory would figure out how not together Luke was and just move on. Still, fatalism would only get him so far, so he was gonna go with hope instead. “I’m not sure he was drunk, Momma. He thinks he was drugged.”

“Oh my God!” Momma put the rolling pin down, her eyes wide. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I put it down to food poisoning to begin with, but with what I’ve learned about him and his fight against Harris, maybe someone was messing with him.” A spur of anger rose in his chest.

“That’s...well, it’s criminal is what it is!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Luke decided then and there that while he was looking into the grants and funding and such, he would go ahead and look into who might have been able to get to Rory at that party.

“That’s not right. That’s not right at all. Why didn’t you invite him to lunch?”

“Well, we wanted to talk to Preacher first. I’ll ask him to go to lunch with us next week.”

“I’d like that. I met him, but what I remember is thinking how hard it must have been, to go to high school so young.”

“He was young for school?” His eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. “How young?”

“Honestly, son, you need to find more things out about your lovers before you start sleeping with them. He was twelve when he started high school.”

“Holy guacamole.” He had a whole list of exclamations that were not obscene to use with Momma. “That makes me feel a little dumb.”

“You weren’t in high school together. You probably never met him.”

“No, no I never knew him.” He shrugged. He couldn’t let the fact that Rory was wickedly smart scare him off. He had to hold his own.

Obviously Rory had found something about Luke he liked. A lot. And it wasn’t the hot monkey sex. Oh, they were fooling around plenty but neither of them were up to acrobatics. They talked a lot. Hell, Rory’d Skyped him at night when they didn’t have time to get together.

Rory liked talking to him, liked listening to him. They had fun.

They also kissed a lot. Made weird food. Rory had this crazy gourmet kitchen with all sorts of bizarre one-use-only appliances. A crepe maker. An arepa press. Luke hadn't even known what an arepa was.

Now he knew and he wanted them, daily. With pulled pork and pickled onions and cotija cheese.

“What are you thinking about, son?”

“Arepas. Do you know what those are?” He finished up the carrots for her coleslaw.

“No. Share?”

Soon he was waxing poetic about the cornmeal cake, the different flavors, the arepa maker.

She laughed all through. “Well, y'all need to make me lunch. No taking me out. I want those things.”

“I'll talk to him, sure.”

Rory seemed like the kind of guy you could introduce your momma to. What a thought. Luke had never once brought anyone home. Neither had Matty.

The world sure had changed.

Most of the times when folks said that, it was bad. This wasn't. This was fine.

“Thanks for your help, baby boy. Poke your head out and see where they are on the

grill?” That meant ‘I need to make this food so get out’.

“I’ll poke my whole self out, if Matty helps me down the ramp.”

“No falling,” she said absently.

Luke laughed, then wheeled to the back door. “Y’all need help?”

“Daddy will. I’m going to get up on the roof.”

“Be careful.” Luke waved at the ramp. “Help me down, and I’ll burn meat.”

Matty headed up, then wheeled his ass right down. So strong, his twin.

He peered at the burgers at eye level. “Nice. Okay, Preacher. What can I do?”

“Just don’t catch them on fire like your damn brother does.”

“I heard you, old man!”

“Where’s your hat, P?” Since the stroke, Preacher forgot shit like that, and the sun was beating down.

“I... I’ll go get it. Your momma must’ve stole it.”

He nodded easily, but the jumbled words made him hurt. “Grab us all a water while you’re in there?”

“Can do!”

He flipped the burgers, listening to Matty sing from up on the roof.

Luke had never thought he was going to be so grateful for time with his family, but now he knew he would never take it for granted again.

God, Rory would laugh his ass off at him. Not much of a sentimentalist, his Rory. His. Listen to him.

He could hear Matty growling, bitching about the gutters.

“Don’t you rain shit down on the burgers, Matty.”

“Fuck you, Lulu.”

“Boys! Language!” Momma could hear anything through her kitchen window.

“Sorry, Momma,” they said in chorus.

Matt appeared over the gutters, grinning like a monkey. “You got me in trouble, man.”

“I did.” Luke cackled like a bird. “That’s my job.”

“Be nice or I’ll...drop a dead bird on your head.”

“Gross! Is there really a dead bird up there?”

“There is really a dead bird up here. Wanna see?”

Let’s see...did he want to see a gross, swollen dead critter that had been there God knew how long?

No.

“I’ll pass. Burgers in about five.”

“I’m halfway done. Don’t forget to rest them.”

“I got this.” He resisted flipping again, knowing they needed to just hang out and caramelize.

Preacher returned with water and a plate of hot dogs. “Momma wants these done too.”

“They are best on the fire.” He tossed them onto the grill, trusting the burgers on the back to catch them.

Preacher dragged over a lawn chair. “I swear, the heat gets to me more these days.”

“Shit, the heat is worse now. Seriously. It’s brutal.”

“It is.” Preacher was smiling, though, looking less peaked now that he had his hat on.

“Don’t let Matty toss the dead bird down on you.”

“Dead bird?” Preacher was up again in a heartbeat. “Wasn’t a cardinal, was it, son?”

“No, sir. Mockingbird.”

“Ah. Well, that’s not good, but I can live with it. Momma loves those silly cardinals.”

“I promise I’d not have admitted if it was.”

“Good man. Let me go get you a trash bag.”

“Ball it up and give it to Luke to toss.”

Luke grinned. He did still have a good arm. He used the long tongs to turn the hot dogs before he pulled off the burgers to rest. He traded those for the bag. “Make sure she lets them sit.”

“You burned that one for her, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. We’ll eat when Matty’s done.”

“I’ll get the dogs, and he can bring me in.” He watched Preacher go in, and Momma waved a thank you from the window.

It was hot.

“Matty, come on!”

“Just a second,” Matt sounded rumbly, aggravated.

Luke started pulling hot dogs off the grill. He left two to char, knowing Momma liked the black stuff. His phone buzzed and he pulled it out. Rory had sent him a picture of his desk, a pile of papers teetering madly.

He chuckled and sent back a shot of the grill, the wieners burning merrily.

You’re burning the weinies!

Only Momma’s

Protect yours

she wants you to make her arepas

I can do that. When?

I'll ask her. Any days off-limits?

I'm busy Wednesday night

okay

There was a crash and a shout, and Luke whipped his head around to see the ladder Matty had been using on the ground. He dropped his phone into his lap and frantically worked the wheels of his chair. "Matt? Matty!"

"Luke!" Matt's legs were dangling from the roof. "Luke, please!"

"Hang on, Matt." He rolled right up to the end of the ladder and popped it up off the ground, gritting his teeth. He muscled it up into place next to Matt, then rolled and locked his brakes to brace it. "Go. Six inches left."

"Matty? Oh my God! Abraham!"

"I got this, Momma. Listen to what I said. Six inches left."

"On it." Matty scooted over, leg searching for the ladder.

"There. Come on. Two inches up and you'll hit the rung. I got the end. It's not going over again. "

“Uh. Uh-huh.” Matt finally got one foot on the rung.

“There you go,” he barked orders like he would to a recruit at training. “Shift your hips left and test your weight on the ladder.”

“Right. Don’t let go, Luke.”

“Never going to happen.” He would get Matt to the ground if it took every bit of his energy and strength. “I got you, bro. Always.”

Matt panted, his muscles quaking visibly. Then he got that foot firmly planted and was able to stand on the ladder and rest a moment, whooping for air.

“Oh, lord. Come down, Matty. Please, baby.” Momma was holding onto a dish towel, wringing it between her hands.

Preacher stood nearby, ready to help, but he didn’t try to step in. He trusted Luke, and that made him feel like he could climb that ladder and carry Matt down if he had to.

“Coming, Momma. I just needed a little help.” Matt’s legs were trembling like all get out, but he made it down.

Luke moved back gently after he unlocked his brakes, and for a moment, Matt slumped right on his lap.

Then Matty laughed and climbed to his feet. “That was close.”

“Yeah.” Too close. Jesus . “Can you save your hot dogs, Momma?”

“Oh!” She hurried to the grill, using her towel to grab the tongs and pull off the hot dogs. “Perfect!”

Matt grabbed his arm, squeezed. “Thanks, Lulu. You saved my bacon.”

“I did.” He laughed, but now that it was over he was shaky as hell. “Damn. Don’t do that.”

“Yes.” Matt winked at him.

“Shit.” He grabbed his phone.

Sorry, had to save Matt’s ass. Will call tonight

all is well????

All good. XXOO

He stuck the phone in his pocket. “Okay, can you wheel me in or do I need to crawl?”

“Shut up, dickmunch.”

“Boys! Get your butts in here. Matt, I want you to wash up good. Dead birds!”

Momma was losing her shit.

“Coming Momma,” they said, in unison.

Matt grabbed his chair and started up the ramp. Luke helped and they were both huffing and puffing and laughing helplessly by the time they got to the kitchen.

“Wash. Do you need your hands doctored, Matty?” Momma was in full-out fuss mode.

“I have no idea.” Matt strode to the sink to run hot water and grab soap.

“Luke, make Preacher a burger and a wiener.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He washed up too, so he could assemble food for all. He was dry as a bone. Luke refilled iced teas. Then he pulled out Momma a chair. “Two wienies, Momma?”

“Yes, son. Mustard and cheese, please.”

Like he didn’t know that. He would sprinkle a tiny bit of the onion she’d chopped on as well, and she would argue but eat it up.

Matty refused the hot dogs, grabbed two burgers and sat, hands still tremoring a bit.

They exchanged a grin, the adrenaline high.

“You two are still five, I swear,” Momma accused.

They looked at each other and started laughing, because Matt hadn’t fallen, and he’d fixed it, and Matty had believed he would.

That was something for Luke. Really something. A milestone.

“Why did we have twins again?” Preacher asked, and Momma snorted.

“Because you’re a horndog that can’t keep it in his pants?”

“Oh. Right. I remember now.” Preacher beamed, and Momma finally laughed a little, cheeks flushed.

Luke made himself a burger and two dogs, eating eagerly. He was starving, and he knew Preacher still had more for them to do.

Them. Him and Matt.

A rush of pure pride hit him like a line drive to the chest.

Matty glanced up at him again because a twin knew, didn't he? Matt nodded, and that was that. He'd barely finished the last bite before Preacher was up and moving again.

"Leave the dishes, Momma. We'll do them later." Preacher waved them outside. "Got sh-stuff to do, boys."

"Shtuff. Right. Have fun, y'all."

Matty rose to kiss Momma's cheek. "Love you. Come on, Lu. Shtuff won't wait."

He grinned and headed out with Matt, feeling damned good in his bones. Maybe he was finally getting his shtuff together after all.

Chapter Nineteen

“Come on, man. Just a couple more steps.” Avery was at the end of the parallel bars, encouraging him, cheering him on.

Luke was going to kill him. That blond surfer dude smile and ‘can do’ voice was so much harder to take than, say, a military trainer shouting at him to sink or swim.

“Trying,” Luke panted.

“Try harder. You’re rocking it. Your quads are ten times what they were when you started with me.”

Luke gritted his teeth, lifting his upper arms off the bars, using just his hands for balance as he forced out one more step. Then two.

“Right on!” Avery was right there, refusing to let him fall, easing him into his chair and handing him a bottle of water. Evil fucker.

For a long moment, all he could do was wheeze for air. Then he took a drink, pulling hard at the cool liquid.

Hot towels appeared like magic on his legs, wrapped tight around his thighs. Asshole that he was, Avery was damned good at his job .

Cold chills swept over him as his muscles seized up for a moment, then relaxed.

“Oh, fuck me raw.”

“Not my job, sailor.” Avery grinned at him like a monkey, those blue eyes dancing.

“Rumor is that you’ve taken up with Rory McConnell, though.”

“How widespread is this rumor?” They weren’t hiding it, but he didn’t want to cause problems for Rory, either.

“I heard it, but Rory and me, we had an ill-fated thing, so Lori made sure I knew.”

“Ah. A thing.” That was a little odd, but he could brazen it out. “Long or short?”

Avery snorted. “Infinitesimal.”

“Well that’s good.” He winked, feeling easier in his bones. Luke expected a long thing, damn it.

“No. It was awful. His cats hated me. He’s a good friend, though.”

“The cats like me. Well, the Persians love me for my tuna, but Mal and I are buds.”

“There? See? Made for each other.” Avery replaced the cooled towels with hot ones.

“Yeah.” He grinned, because he was beginning to believe that shit. “You like your job, Aves?”

“Huh? Sure I do. Why? You thinking about going into physical therapy?”

“Not exactly, no. If possible, once I get up and running, I’ll hire someone. I’m way more about logistics.”

“Up and running? Did you hit your head, sailor? Seriously. How many fingers am I holding up?”

Luke swatted at Avery’s hand. “Three. Sorry, I’ll start over. I been talking to Matt and Rory about a place for animal therapy. You know, injured service people, rescue horses.”

“No shit? How much does that rock, man? I love that. Hot men at every stall! ”

Jesus, he was surrounded by horndogs. Either that or he had managed to meet both gay guys not him or Matt in town. Score!

Luke shook his head in mock sorrow. “I think you’re overestimating the hotness of anyone but Navy SEALs like me.”

“Ah. Well, don’t you know any of those? Use what you got, man.”

“I know a huge amount, in the great scheme of things. I know two, in fact, who would gang up and take you from both ends at the same time.” Did he just say that? To his therapist?

“Okay. You have my number. I will volunteer on this horse ranch of yours for a chance at that.” Avery shrugged when Luke gave him the ‘you’re shitting me’ face. “You know how hard it is to get laid in this town? I already tried one, and you’re taken.”

“With the one you tried. Morg and Charlie have promised to come on their next leave. Three, maybe four months.” He really would hook Avery up. His buddies were...well, they were scary enough that he’d never taken them up on what they’d threatened to do with him.

“I will be your friend for eternity.”

“You remind me of that, after.”

Avery hooted. “I was serious, though. If you come up with some kind of ranch for wounded guys, I would volunteer.”

“Yeah? Because there won’t be money at first.”

“Hey, I have my clients here. I can do something for men who have given so much.” Avery shrugged. “Besides, it would look amazing on my résumé.”

“Ah, now the truth is out.” Luke grabbed Avery’s wrist when he would have moved the towels. “Thanks. I mean it.”

“You’re welcome. Seriously. Count me in.”

“I will.” He let Avery take his towels then, because that meant hot tub .

“Come on, sailor. Let’s soak your bones.”

“Yes, please. I ache.” He’d worked his damned ass off. He was gonna do this. He had his plans, his lover, now. They deserved the best of him.

Chapter Twenty

Rory sang with Tim McGraw at the top of his lungs as he headed into town to pick Luke up at Avery's.

They had plans that involved food and nookie—not necessarily in that order and not necessarily in single amounts.

Hell, if he was lucky he could have a three-fer tonight, interspersed with dinner and dessert, then a two-fer in the morning with breakfast between.

A guy could dream, right?

Luke was getting his stamina back, if not always his muscle control. There had been one awkward night where Luke's left thigh had cramped while Rory sucked him, two fingers inside that tight ass he had yet to test any other way. Disaster. Pure disaster, but Luke could laugh about it now.

They were working their shit out, no question.

There was a truck behind him, running lights on, coming fast, and he straddled the shoulder to let whoever it was pass. Probably someone from the Metroplex. They always seemed to be in a hurry, and to forget life was slower out this way.

Tim McGraw turned into Kris Kristofferson and he was off in his own world, singing again, when the truck slammed into his left bumper. He slapped his hand on the emergency button of his GPS before turning into the skid. Fuck a doodle goddamn

do.

The big dualie stopped twenty yards down the road. Then backed up.

“Is there an emergency in the vehicle, sir?”

“Yes. Yes, someone’s fucking trying to kill me.” He made sure the truck was running and straightened up in the seat. Harris wanted to play chicken? He had good insurance. “Send the sheriff, ASAP.”

“Stay on the line while I call the police, sir. What has happened?” The very calm voice made this all seem so much more surreal.

“Someone’s hit my truck, and they’re coming for another round.”

He slammed down on the gas when the truck got close and damn near killed them both, but he managed to get moving again, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. Rory peeled out, trying to put as much space as he could between them.

“Sir? Try to find a safe, public place to pull off.”

“I’m working on it.” He was three miles from Avery and Luke, and he didn’t know if that was safe or public, but it was where he was going.

“Stay calm and try not to run off the road.”

The bastard gunned it again, zooming up behind him. Rory swerved, which meant the jerk missed at the last moment.

“Doing my dead-level best. I’m heading into town. I’m going to stop at Avery Masters’s. He does therapy in his outbuilding.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hell, at this point the voice had changed, and he thought he was talking to the local emergency operator. “We’ll try to have a car there, as well as on its way to you on the road.”

“I’m close. I’m going to warn them.” He hit his hands-free. “Call Luke.” Now. Now, hurry.

The truck clipped him again, and the urge to turn this big bitch around and ram the fucker filled him up to the brim.

Thank God he wasn’t in the Mustang.

“Luke’s in the hot tub , man.”

“Someone’s trying to run me off the road. I’m three minutes from you!”

“What?” Avery’s voice rose.

“You heard me, you motherfucker! Help! Me!”

The next blow caught him on the left side, the guy trying to push him off the road and this time, he slammed on his brakes, the big Dodge screaming and shuddering to a stop as the other truck shot past him.

“Where are you? Have you called the cops?”

“Uh-huh. He just passed me. I’m pulling in your road. You armed?”

“I am now.” Avery sounded cold as ice.

“Rock on.” He wasn’t sure he could manage to find the pistol in his glove compartment, much less load and aim it. He was shaking but good.

Avery stood on the porch when he squealed to a halt. The tires threw up gravel and his springs were still rocking when he hopped out, Avery waving madly in the headlights.

He nodded and hurried over, his legs damn near too shaky to hold him.

“Come on.” Avery grabbed him around the waist and yanked him into the house. Luke sat at the window with a rifle in his hands, face set in stone.

“Cops on their way?” Luke asked.

“Uh-huh.” He blinked then shook himself. Come on. Focus. Focus, man. Luke is watching you .

Luke jerked his head at Avery. “Come man the window.” Once Avery took the rifle, Luke wheeled right over to him. “You in one piece?”

“Yeah. Yeah, don’t know about my truck. It’s running, though. Sheriff should be here soon. Hey you.”

“Hey.” Luke took his hand, then tugged him right down into the chair.

He leaned right in, hid his face for a second, and just breathed. If he was shaking, Luke didn’t mention it. Rory thought that was right decent.

Chapter Twenty-One

L uke waited until the cops had taken statements, until all the pictures of the truck had been taken, and until Rory had told the damned story fifteen times in a row.

The sheriff clearly thought Rory had provoked someone, but he refused to believe Doug Harris had dick to do with it. “You never saw the driver, and the vehicle doesn’t match anything from around here,” he’d said. “Road rage.”

“For what?” Rory had snapped. “Pulling off to let him pass? Man, I’m such a bitch.”

“Watch your mouth, boy.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You and I went to high school together. I’m not your goddamn boy.” Lord, Rory had a temper and a half.

“I wasn’t twelve.”

“No, you were nineteen because you failed first grade.”

“Jesus.” The sheriff leveled a finger at Rory. “Look, if any proof turns up then sure, I’ll run Harris in. But right now, it looks pretty much like you’re taking a bad fright and using it against someone you dislike pretty badly. Not my problem. ”

“No, of course not. Did you see how many times I had a bad fright?”

“I did.”

Luke was gonna fucking boil over, and by the time Sheriff Tyler left, the son of a bitch was shaking like fall's last leaf.

The door closed, and Luke pounded a fist on his wheelchair. "Jesus, what a fucker."

"Indeed. Our elected officials. I'm so proud."

"Y'all need me to drive you home?" Avery asked.

Luke winced. He'd kinda forgotten they were at Avery's.

"My truck's drivable. I'll take it home and call the insurance company in the morning." Rory met his eyes. "If you feel safe with me, of course."

"I'm coming back to your place." Luke just wanted to make that clear. Rory didn't need to be alone. Shock could set in anytime.

"Good deal." Rory offered him a shaky smile. "I have stuff for sandwiches."

"I'm still following you two home, just to make sure you make it." Avery looked stubborn as hell.

"I don't want to put you in any more danger than I have?—"

"Shut up," Avery cut Rory right off. "I'll be just fine."

"Thanks, Avery. Your help means a lot."

Luke nodded. "Thank God we were here and not out at Matt's."

"Let's go home, okay?" Rory was starting to look a little panicked around the edges.

“You got it.” Avery frowned. “I’ll drive you. You have the Mustang at home, and the adjuster can come here just as easily as not. Come on.”

“But...”

“Rory. Babe. Please?” He could beg. Luke didn’t want Rory driving if he was getting nuts .

“All right, but I’m fine. Really.”

“I know.” Luke grabbed Rory’s hand again. “Can you wheel me out?”

“Sure, honey.” Those long, fine fingers trembled, but they got him out to Avery’s truck. Rory’s pickup was beat to hell, but the thing had held up. He would totally buy himself one of those, as soon as he was driving again.

Rory couldn’t look at it.

Luke couldn’t blame him. Hell, he was peering at the damned truck and thinking about the troop mover he’d been in exploding and flipping. No. None of that shit. Rory needed him and he’d be damned if he was going to be psycho-PTSD guy right now.

They got to Avery’s truck, and it was Avery who managed to get Luke up in the seat, Rory slipping to the back of the king cab. Luke wanted to see Rory’s face, but Rory did put one hand on his shoulder, connecting them.

The rain was coming down now, the storm bashing at the world, the raindrops white in the headlights.

What a mess.

No one chatted. Avery just drove them to Rory's, then helped him out of the truck. "Keep an eye on him, sailor. He's had a rough day," Avery murmured.

"Thanks for the ride." Luke nodded, then wheeled over to the ramp for Rory to push him inside.

"Thanks for everything," Rory said. "I really appreciate it."

"No problem, buddy. You have the insurance adjuster come to my place."

"Will do." Rory gave Avery a one-armed hug before coming to help Luke inside. Jesus, he was pale.

Luke needed to get him in a hot shower, maybe, check him for injuries .

That sounded like something that could totally happen before food.

"How was therapy, Luke? I forgot to ask."

"Not too bad today. Good thing, too. At least I wasn't on the bars when you called."

"I'm sorry. I just knew y'all were the closest place from where I was."

"I'm glad. I would have shot the bastard if he'd followed you in."

"Good." Rory made sure all the doors were locked. "I need... Are you hungry?"

"I can wait. Let's get you changed. You bled a little." Luke touched his lip to indicate where Rory must have bounced off a window or bit his lip or something.

"Did I?" Rory leaned in toward him. "Hey. Hey."

“Hey.” He reached up to tug Rory down, wanting a kiss, and didn’t Rory give it to him, lips crashing down on his like there wasn’t a damn thing broken about him, like Rory believed he could take anything.

Luke slid his arm around Rory’s back, willing his damned body to prove it was true. He needed this man like he needed air.

“I want... I want to touch, Luke. I need it.”

Luke could damn near see the adrenaline flowing through Rory’s veins.

He nodded sharply. Yes. Now. “Bedroom.”

“Yes.” Rory led him back, stopping every few steps to touch him, kiss him. Those hands were still shaking, but Rory seemed to know what he needed, so Luke wasn’t gonna argue.

They shut the cats out of the bedroom, both of them shucking clothes as soon as the door closed behind them.

He was fucking proud of himself as he moved from chair to bed with relative grace, and Rory nodded as he did, the expression on the handsome face utterly appreciative .

“Are you going to think less of me if I beg to ride you?” Rory asked.

“No.” His heartbeat kicked into high gear, almost making him dizzy. “No, I think that sounds like the best idea I’ve heard in ages.” Luke spread his arms, making himself what he hoped was an inviting target.

“Oh, Jesus, you got my mouth all dry. You’re so fine.” The words would make him growl, make him protest, except Rory wasn’t putting him on. The expression on

Rory's face was one of pure hunger.

Luke beckoned with one hand. "Come show me how bad you want it, babe." He felt brave. Really fucking brave.

Rory crawled onto the bed, starting at his ankles with tiny little licks and sharp sucking kisses. Goddamn. Rory didn't shy away from him at all.

It wasn't gross, either. His injured legs got just as much attention as the rest of him, but not so much that he felt weird. Rory was just into him. Period.

He gave, too, stroking that heavy fall of gold hair, then rubbing Rory's shoulders, hunting tension and working it out.

It made him whimper when Rory took one of his balls in that burning mouth. There wasn't going to be a problem with keeping it up for Rory. Not a problem at all. His cock was so hard it hurt.

He panted, his belly rippling. No cramps. Please God, no cramps.

"Shh." Rory lifted his head, hands sliding over his thighs, his abs. "Breathe. No pressure, huh?"

He didn't know about that. Luke needed to prove to himself he could do this. He knew he had nothing to prove to Rory. "None," he agreed wryly.

"Okay, only good pressure." Rory winked at him, grinned just as wryly. "I ache for you. It's not just the let-down from the wreck, either. I've been having wet dreams since that first time."

Luke jerked, his cock pushing up, a tiny drop of fluid sliding out. "Well, no offense,

babe, but I'm not gonna last long. We'd better get to it."

"Uh-huh." Rory swooped down and swiped the tip with his tongue, not helping at all. "Let me grab the condoms." He got up and headed to the chest of drawers, then looked back over his shoulder at Luke. "You want to get me ready for you?"

Jesus. Luke gritted his teeth against the ache in his lower belly, his balls drawing up. "You got slick, babe?" He was in mostly unfamiliar territory now, but he read stories online. A lot. He had a pretty clear idea.

"I do." Rory brought the condoms over and then straddled his waist, leaning over his head to grab a well-used tube of ointment. "Ta-da."

"Nice." Luke hoped that was just for jacking off...

"I love ass play. I have a couple of toys for when the urge hits, you know?" Had there ever been anyone like Rory? Ever? The sheer honesty floored him.

"Well, if I get too far off what you like, you just tell me, babe." Luke got his fingers wet, got one pressed to Rory's hole, just like that.

"It's you, Luke. It's new and wonderful and fucking erotic. It's right."

"Thank you." He was humbled by this trust, by the need.

And God knew he wanted Rory more than he'd ever wanted anything.

He touched Rory, one finger becoming two easily, Rory never letting him doubt how good it felt.

He watched Rory grind for him, and he lost himself in it, his own need taking a

backseat suddenly.

He'd never believed for a second that he was going to have this, going to be able to see it—this gorgeous, lean man dancing on his fingers like a flame.

He pushed with that third wet finger, but he needed more lube. Now that was a complicated maneuver, but Luke was a SEAL. All in, all the time. He rolled up with his abs, reaching with his free hand to gently apply more slick stuff.

Rory grabbed the rubbers while he was re-lubing and started working the packet open. They were going to do this.

Luke took one deep breath, then another, bringing his free hand back around to squeeze the base of his cock hard, needing to back off a moment.

“I know, right?” Rory panted. “I feel like I could go off like a rocket, just from your fingers.”

“I’m gonna die,” Luke agreed. “It’s the best way I can think of to go.”

“No dying. Fountains of spunk? Yes. Death? No.”

The laughter eased him back again and made him tickled as fuck that Rory was the one that he actually got to try this with. Ridiculous man. Rory made him feel as if no matter what happened, they would have a ball.

He slid his fingers free, wiping them down on the towel Rory had brought over with the lube. “Okay, glove me, babe.”

“I’m on it.” Rory smoothed the condom down with hands that still shook the slightest bit.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

Adrenaline made a body do crazy things.

Luke helped, closing his hand over Rory's.

"I'm not scared. You know that." It wasn't really a question.

"I do." Luke smiled up into Rory's eyes. If anyone had a right to be nervous it was Rory, after everything he'd gone through. But he was the bravest soul Luke knew.

"Up and on me, babe."

"Yes, sir!" Rory grinned at him, then the expression dissolved into one of pure need as the tip of Luke's cock popped inside that tight ring of muscle.

He breathed deep again, using his damned underwater breathing skills to calm him enough to do this without embarrassing himself.

"Hurt?" Rory asked, hovering, not sliding down like Luke wanted him to.

"God no. It feels like paradise."

"Good. I need to move now, honey. Okay?"

"Please." Luke grabbed Rory's hips, helping him do just that. The slow, maddening glide into Rory's body made him shout. Rory rippled around him, hot and tight and—fuck. Fuck, this was real. Rory was looking down at him and watching him and wanting him, blue eyes burning bright.

They began to gain a rhythm, Rory sliding down, Luke pushing him back up.

His thighs wouldn't give him much, so Luke muscled through it with upper body strength, his arms straining.

Rory helped, hands on his chest and using him to drive back, riding him good and hard.

His eyes kept wanting to close, but he forced them open, needed to watch every second of Rory dancing on his diamond-hard dick.

Speaking of cocks, Rory's bounced in front of him, and Luke caught it against his palm, their skin slapping for a moment before Luke closed his fingers about it.

"Oh fuck!" The sound was perfect, wild and loud, and his immediate instinct was to shush Rory, but he didn't have to. He could make Rory scream and cry out.

They had all the time and all the space in the world right here. So Luke stroked, up and down, bracing himself with his other arm so Rory could do the hard work.

A litany of praise—way more profane than sacred—poured down over him, Rory never letting him doubt how good it felt for a second.

Luke watched sweat bead up on Rory's skin, and the cock in his hand swelled, wet at the tip and deep red.

"Pretty," he ground out. "So fine, man."

"All yours. Fuck, I feel you deep."

"Uh-huh. Tight. Hot." Even with the condom on, Rory was like frickin' heaven.

When he squeezed Luke with those inner muscles, he shouted again, his body trying hard to convulse.

“Yes. Yes. I’m close, honey.”

He fucking hoped so.

“Good. Oh good. Please.” Luke was babbling and he knew it, but his balls had pulled up tight to his body and he was ready to blow. Real ready.

Rory twisted, reached behind him and nudged his balls, the pressure there and around his cock perfect. Almost as perfect as the ropes of spunk that sprayed out over his belly.

Luke lost it, shooting hard inside Rory, his whole body shaking with it. He moaned, a long, low sound of pleasure, because he couldn’t create words right now. What would he say, anyway?

Rory slumped down on him a second, a heavy, heated, panting weight.

Wrapping his arms around Rory, Luke held him right there, unwilling to lose the amazing connection. Jesus, he could do just this the rest of his life and die a happy man.

“You...you totally rock my world, cowboy.”

“You’re not too shabby.” He laughed weakly, patting Rory’s back with one sticky hand.

“Good. Good.” Rory blinked up at him, obviously dazed. “Remind me to bring damp cloths to bed next time?”

“We have one side of a dry towel,” Luke said. That was better than nothing. He had no doubt Rory would set the stage for seduction next time. Next time. They were both talking on next time.

“That’ll work for now.” Rory sat up, blinking nice and slow. “Damn, that was good, honey. Thank you. I needed that. ”

“Me too.” He chuckled, feeling his heart settle back into a more regular beat. “You scared me, Rory.”

“You think I scared you? I was fixin’ to shit myself in terror.”

“Hey, you’re good at not showing it.” He stroked Rory’s hip. “Move, shoot, communicate, as we say in the SEALs. You got that down.”

“I do my best.” The words rang with truth, then disappeared as Rory sighed. “Let me clean us up, and then I can find us some food.”

“Hey.” He caught both of Rory’s hands. “Kiss me, babe.”

“I can do that.” Rory leaned forward, the motion a little shaky, but strong, and brought their lips together, the kiss not hesitant in the least.

Luke closed his eyes and sank into the kiss, the touch just what they both needed to get grounded again.

Then Rory pulled away, this time with a smile. “Oh. That’s nice. I need those.”

“Yeah. We got ahead of ourselves, but I ain’t bitching. And now that I know you like...what did you call it? Ass play? I am going to be insufferable.”

“I like it. I like it a lot.” Rory bit his bottom lip, playing with him. “And what’s this ‘going to be insufferable’ thing?”

“What? I don’t pinch or slap your butt in public yet. Just you wait.” Luke laughed and hugged Rory hard.

Maleficent let out an impressive yowl beyond the door.

“Oh, someone’s totally blaming you for this. Totally.”

“I know. I’ll have to bribe her.” They both wiped down and Luke rolled up to sitting.

Rory opened the door before going to grab clothes from the dresser, and Maleficent landed on him, pointed on all ends.

“Ow! Okay, lady, I love you, but you got to watch the claws.” He lifted her up against his chest, nuzzling her head .

Lord, those cats could talk.

A pair of soft sweats landed next to him.

“These work?”

“Perfect.” He grinned, handing off the cat, the Persians watching him now from the footboard. Right. Assume the body armor .

He had to admit, those beasts were serious about their human time.

The sweats were old and soft. Rory was such a hedonist. He got socks on, then reached for his chair, fingers missing by half an inch.

He damn near went ass over teakettle, but Rory was there, and he caught himself on that lean, fine body.

“Good catch. Let me move your chair over.”

“Thanks.” His cheeks heated. “Not so graceful post-orgasm.”

“Who is?” Rory helped make the transfer. “You’re weak from hunger. How does DiGiorno sound?”

“Like a plan if we load it with more meat.”

“I have sausage crumbles, pepperoni and Canadian bacon.”

Luke rubbed his hands together with glee. “Excellent. We can eat and I can entertain you with my plans for the new therapy place.”

“I love it.” Rory swooped down and stole a kiss. “Thank you for tonight, honey. I needed it, bad.”

“I know you did. I ain’t gonna complain.” Not one bit, even if he was going to have to find the Tylenol in a few.

“Let me feed you. You need help in the bathroom, or do you have it?”

“I got it.” He grinned, because Rory really thought Luke had his ducks in a row. He had squirrels, and they were moshing, but he could fake it .

He’d fake it until he made it, if it kept that satisfied little grin on Rory’s lips.

Luke thought that was well worth any amount of squirrel wrangling.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“ S o, what are you going to call it?” Rory glanced down at his hand, which held a piece of the three pizzas they’d cooked and were devouring. Not shaking. Yay.

“Whut?” Luke looked up, frowning as if he wasn’t following. Considering they’d been talking about rain, Rory guessed he got it.

“Your new venture, honey. What are you going to call it?” He thought things needed a name. It was important. A man couldn’t walk around saying, “I’m going to do this thing without a name,” after all. There was no power in that.

And Luke really needed to think of his thing as something besides ‘my therapy place at the old Lawson ranch’, didn’t he? Too wordy.

“Oh. Uh, well, it’s going to be a ranch. For wounded warriors, but that’s taken. Maybe a brand of some kind, huh? Matt’s is the Lazy L.”

“Really? Matt? That doesn’t seem to fit a bit.” Wounded warriors... “Just use the ‘w’, honey. The Leaning W. The Broken W—no, that’s creepy. ”

“The Bar W. Nah, sounds like a place to get drunk.” Luke brightened. “The Rocking W? That could work.”

“The Rocking W.” Rory grinned—he liked that. That worked. “It’s got a ring to it, you know? I think that’s a good one.”

“I do too.” Luke kinda bounced. How cute was that? “I never thought about names, but it gives it direction.” Luke’s face fell a little. “Not that I’m having any luck with financial aid, and I can’t afford to blow all my savings in case Matty needs a crutch for a few months here and there.”

Huh. “What all have you tried?”

“VA. A couple of charities. County and state. I have a commitment from two horse rescues, but that’s just animals and volunteers.” Luke spread his hands. “I mean, that’s amazing, but I need feed, improvements, all that.”

“Well, do you have the projections for an investor? It might be a decent tax deduction.”

“Projections.” Luke looked gobsmacked. “No. I’ll have to work them up.”

“I can help. Hell, I’m pretty sure I’m willing to invest, at least enough to help with start-up.”

“I—wow. Okay. I mean, I have the figures at home for initial costs. I would just need to, what, figure out return percentages?”

“Well, you’re not going for a profit, so it’s not returns, more how you intend to make costs. You’ll have to either be totally funded or charge folks for their stay or a mixture of the two.”

“Right. I looked into nonprofit status, but yeah, I would have to have the full start-up covered there I think, and then get grants and donations.”

“Well, we need to figure that out. I have a number of contacts, you know? And so does my dad, the orthopedist.” He grinned, because Pop would be all over this idea .

“I don’t even know what to say, babe.” Luke grabbed his hand. “Thank you for even giving a shit.”

“Of course I do. It’s a great idea, and if it makes a difference, then we have to try.”

That smile made everything worthwhile. Luke seemed so used to doing everything for himself.

“You’ll help me get the paperwork together?”

“Sure I will, honey.”

“Thanks.” Luke let him have his hand back, then grabbed another piece of pizza.

“Been an eventful day. I could text Matt to come get me.”

“Or you could stay the night.”

“I could. You wouldn’t mind?”

“I’ll even wash your clothes for tomorrow.” His cheeks were fixin’ to light on fire, but he refused to seem embarrassed. “It’s Saturday after all. We could...have a day.”

“We totally could.” Luke grinned, cheeks just as pink as his probably were. “Let me text Matty.”

“Rock on.” He beamed, just about as tickled as he could be.

A day. They were going to spend the night together then have a day.

Luke’s fingers flew over the phone’s face. He grimaced a little, then tapped a few more times. “He heard about your truck.”

“Yeah. I’ll have to call tomorrow, but they won’t do anything till Monday.”

“True enough.” Luke turned off the phone’s sound and tossed it aside.

“Oh, does that mean he’s pissed at you?”

“I think I was supposed to call him a while ago and let him know I was okay.” Luke grinned faintly.

“Ah. So...” He knew he shouldn’t ask, but he had to know. “Do y’all have, like, a connection? Did he know you were hurt?”

“He did. He was in the hospital for two days.” Luke looked a little guilty then. “When he broke his leg when we were eight, I lost my shit and threw up for two hours.”

“Wow. That sort of sucks, but it’s also cool. I have two sisters, you know? One is like Barbie, the other Wednesday Addams.”

“You have a wee goth kid sister? Awww.”

“I do. Rowenna. She’s going to destroy the world.”

“Wow.” Luke nibbled a bit of sausage. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

“You’re too old for her.” Besides that, Luke was taken.

“I mean for world domination. I come with wheels. I can grab you and run.”

The words hit him, balls deep, heating him like someone had set a can of Sterno under his ass. “It’s a deal.”

“Cool.” Luke touched him again, the man tactile as hell.

He could get used to that. In fact... He scooted closer and lifted his face for a pizza-flavored kiss.

Luke hummed, kissing him as if that was all they had to do and they had all the time in the world. Which, hey, maybe they did. A man had to have hope.

Lord knew he was good at that.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“S o, I got a question for you, Lulu.”

Luke hated that shit, when Matty had been gnawing on something for days and then, in the middle of a normal day, just sprang whatever it was on his ass. He knew this was no ‘why is the sky blue’ kind of question. Matt was studiously not meeting his eyes.

“Shoot, then,” Luke said. “I’ve probably got an answer.”

“Why’s McConnell buying in to the Rocking W?”

Rory had sat down with him and helped him—first with the paperwork for the bank to get a loan, then by getting Lori to start finding donors, starting with Rory himself, who funded them for the first year.

Luke raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean? He’s helping me out, and it’s a tax write-off for him.”

“It’s just a lot of helping, that’s all.” Matt’s head was down, eyes focused on hay. “A whole lot for someone not family.”

That hit a little bit below the belt, but Luke breathed through it. He’d talked to Matt a lot about the Rocking W, but not a bunch about Rory, so this was partly his fault .

“Well, I know it’s taking a big chance, bro, but Rory and me...we’re a thing, I think.

Like a real thing.”

That made Matt stare at him, and the look wasn’t near as surprised as he’d thought it would be. “Yeah? For him too?”

“I think so, yeah.” His cheeks heated, but Luke smiled like he always did when he thought too hard on Rory. “I mean, we have a damned good time, and he really likes me, and I think he hung the moon.” He glanced up at Matt. “Is that okay?”

“I want to talk to him, let him know that I’ll make him bleed if he hurts you.”

“Okay.” He could get that. Luke would do the same to anyone who took up with Matty.

“Okay, then.” Matt set back to work, the rhythm of ranch life eternal, unending. “You want turkey sammiches for lunch? I bought Doritos at the store.”

“Sounds great.” He chewed his lip, pondering asking Matt why he wasn’t trying to date anyone. He didn’t ask, though—he just got his ass back to work too.

He knew Matty better than anyone and, if Matt wanted to date—or fuck or whatever—Matt would. It was none of his.

Not that getting Matt on board the happy train wasn’t a good plan. It just had to be Matt’s deal, not something Luke pushed. Pushing just made Mr. Stubborn into Mr. Immovable Rock.

Luke grinned. Not that he knew anything about that. At all. No, sir.

“What are you smiling about, Lulu?”

“Stubbornness.” He handed Matt a shovel because it was too far away for Matt to reach. “We got that in the family.”

“You think? Hell, just think, not one of us is Mark. He’s fucking evil. It was watered down by us and then Johnny, well, he’s damn near easygoing.”

“He gets all his energy out during sex,” Luke drawled. “What are we gonna do about Mark, Matty? It can’t be healthy to run away from life.”

“Nope, but then that’s what Johnny thought about you.” Matt started pulling out more hay.

“He thought I was hiding?” His voice rose with genuine surprise. “How?”

“He don’t know you like I do.” Matt wiped his face, then leaned against the stall door.

“I mean, you cain’t judge, Lulu. Folks always say some shit.

They say Johnny’s a horndog ’cause he likes making babies.

They say you’re an adrenaline junkie ’cause you are a SEAL.

They say Mark’s an asshole ’cause he don’t come home or write.

They say I’m a worthless piece of shit that never will be no one because I stayed here to take care of things and be a rancher.

Folks always got things to bitch about.”

That might have been the most words Matty had ever said at one time. Luke blinked.

“Cowboy philosopher. I like it. So I guess I could try to call Mark instead of bitching, huh?”

“You ought. I talk to him about once a quarter. He’s gonna make it.”

“Do you know what happened to him?”

“Nope, and I ain’t fixin’ to ask. He wanted me to know, he’d’a told me.”

“Argh.” Luke was so much more ‘charge the beach’ than his twin. He wanted to know what happened and how he could help. He wanted to fix it.

Matt just waited for the broken to show up, then he made them fix themselves.

Luke snorted. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“I try, man. I do try.”

“You do okay.” Luke grunted, lifting a square bale into the aisle of the barn so Matt could break it up. Hard work made him feel useful .

“You want to go into town today? I have to run to the feed store. I can drop you off at McConnell’s.”

“Well, if you’re heading that way and you don’t mind.” He’d intended to stay at Matt’s, but if Matt was wanting some thinking time or something, Luke was willing to go get some nookie. “Maybe we could all go to the Mexican place.”

“Works for me. I’m not trying to get rid of you. I’m trying to be nice.”

“I like nice. Let me buy y’all supper.” He tugged out his phone to call Rory.

“Ello?” Rory was laughing and he’d bet Lori was in there, teasing him about God knew what.

“Hey, you. Matty has to run into the feed store. Want to go to Two Senoritas with us?”

“I totally do. When?”

Luke glanced at Matt. “Five-ish? Five-thirty?” He wanted to help Matt load up at the feed store first.

“Let’s say six.” His twin, the bastion of imminent practicality.

“Six?” He was about to have a moment of overjoy, having his brother and his new man out for supper. Together. That was just too cool, and he didn’t have to drive, so he could have a margarita. Score.

He would grab a go bag too, because he needed to leave things at Rory’s house. He could get a toothbrush and deodorant at the feed store, but his undies and socks, a pair of pants and a couple of T-shirts, and some pajamas, would be really nice to have.

The stuff for hard-core melted relaxation after sex. Really wonderful sex.

Maybe he ought to stop at the CVS instead of the feed store. Get lube.

“Luke? I said sure. Six. ”

“Sorry. I was, uh, thinking of hanging out after dinner. When Matt leaves. Is that okay?”

“Well, duh.” Rory’s voice dropped. “I changed the sheets and bought more lube.”

“Oh, then I can skip the CVS.” Cool. That made things easier on Matt for sure.

“You two stop that. Right now.”

“What?” He went for innocent, and Matt just stared him down. “Sorry.”

Rory laughed on the other end of the line. “Is he jealous?”

“Absolutely.”

That laughter redoubled. “Uh-huh. I’ll see you at six, honey.”

“You bet you will.” He hung up and grinned at Matt, “Seriously. Sorry. I get kinda silly.”

“Kinda? Lord have mercy, you’re a case.”

“I totally do.” Luke shrugged. “I feel good, bro. Like things are going better.”

“Good. You deserve some of that.”

“What about you, Matty?”

“Huh?”

He tossed another bale. “Don’t you deserve some good?”

“I got you here, Preacher’s recovering from his stroke, and none of the horses have hoof rot. I got what I want.”

Luke mulled that over. What had Matt said? Don’t bitch about someone else’s

choices. He had a point. So he just nodded. “Sounds good, bud.”

“Yessir. If you want to make your booze and booty call, you’d best pick it up, man. We got an hour of work to go, at least.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch.” Luke dutifully got back to work, though. Matt was right. The ranch came first. He’d best get used to that idea now.

Especially since he had an investor.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rory was on Cloud Nine. Dos Equis and tacos were upcoming, then nookie. There was nothing wrong with this plan. Not a goddamn thing.

He changed in the office, getting rid of his meeting suit and changing into jeans and a button-down.

Lori stuck her head in his door. "That email came through. I'm printing it now so you can sign it." She raised an eyebrow. "Hot date?"

"You know it. How do I look?" He did a damned passable pirouette, one foot and all.

"Like a giant Texas queen." She winked, her mascara almost giving up the ghost at the end of the day. "Have fun, boss."

"Uh-huh. I will beat you, woman."

"Promise? I've had a dry spell." She wagged her fingers. "Don't forget to stop on the way out and sign that printout."

"I won't." He grabbed his laptop, his briefcase and his hat.

"Here, gimme." Rory walked her back to the outer office.

He signed the contract they'd been waiting for, then headed out to his Mustang.

The truck was in the shop for who knew how long.

A little voice in the back of his head whispered about how bad he'd be fucked if they came after him in the Mustang, but he stomped on it.

Not like he had a choice unless he traded for Pop's truck, and he wasn't about to leave his folks sitting as targets. Or his sisters.

As it was, he'd take his chances.

Still, he checked the tires, the body, before he eased out of the driveway of his office.

All was well. No one had pissed on the hood, either.

He hopped in and drove to Two Senoritas, looking forward to chips and salsa and enchiladas, maybe.

Thought tacos still sounded good. So did nachos...

Maybe he and Luke could share two plates.

It was a quiet little drive to the restaurant, and he parked next to Matt LeBlanc's empty pickup. See how they were, starting without him? The bed was full of bags of feed and dog kibble, but the really interesting thing was the go bag tucked by the wheel well.

Hello.

He loved to see that.

His phone beeped.

Put my bag in your trunk b4 u get in

Will do.

He would also thump himself and think about Doug Harris in a Speedo to get the hard-on to go down. Luke revved his engine in a huge way. The picture Rory brought up in his mind did the trick, though, so he grabbed that bag and stuck it in his car, then he hurried in for his supper date.

Two adorable matching men met his gaze—dark hair, dark eyes, tan, straw cowboy hats. He knew which one was his, though. His was the blistering hot one in dark blue, a silver chain around his neck. Luke was turning into a cowboy right out of a movie, and Rory was a lucky man.

“Hey.” Matt stood politely. Like he was a girl. Rory had to smile.

“Hey, man.” He shook hands with Matt, then put a hand on Luke’s shoulder.

“Rory.”

“Studmuffin.”

“I will beat you down, McConnell.” Matt gave him the arched eyebrows.

“What? It’s true.” He relented, though. He might be out in public, and Luke was committed to coming along for the ride, but Matt was here because he loved his brother, period. “God, it smells good in here.”

He sat down with a plop, offering the guys a grin. “Good day, y’all?”

“Worked our butts off.” Luke pushed the basket of chips his way. “But, yeah, good

day.”

“Rock on. I lawyered my fingers to the bone. It’s like working, but it pays better.”
God, he was nervous.

Matt grinned, looking so much like Luke it was both weird and wonderful. “Good to know. I was never any good at anything school-like.”

“That’s what John told me.” He chuckled softly. “Actually, when we were freshmen he was devastated that he didn’t make it on the rodeo team.”

“He was.” Luke grinned at him. “He was so good at math and shit.”

“Still is. And, apparently, creating children.” He went wide-eyed, playing happily. “I swear I send a baby gift every other month.”

“At least every eighteen.” Matt rolled his eyes. “He and his lady make beautiful babies though. He ever send you pictures? ”

“Oh, we Skype. I see them in...well, not person, in virtual personhood?”

“Oh, he loves that stupid program.”

Luke laughed. “Matt hates sitting in front of a computer.”

“Yeah, well, I have a media room with a video camera and great streaming.”

Matt looked at Luke. “Was any of that English?”

“Yes. He has this really cool room with movie theater seats. We watch movies and shit.”

“That sounds cool. You got lots of movies, man?”

“Tons. You should come over one night.” One ‘not tonight’ night . “We can have pizza and beer and watch.”

“Matt likes westerns and shark movies.”

“Shark movies?” Rory munched a chip, then went on. “Like Jaws ?”

“ Jaws . Deep Blue Sea . Sharknado . Sharktopus . Shark Night . Mega Shark . I’m easy.”

“Apparently so.”

“Hey, now,” Luke put in. “ Sharktopus is a classic.”

“Y’all scare me.” The waitress was making her way over to take their order. “Anyone else having a beer?”

“I am. Mr. Lightweight here wants a margarita,” Matt said.

“He can have two. I’ll drive him home.”

“I figured. I’ll have a beer.” Matt folded up the menu. “The chicken chimichanga deluxe I think, yeah?”

“Oh... I was going to have nachos or tacos, but that sounds good.”

“I’d totally share nachos and a chimi with you,” Luke said. That was perfect, since that was a ton of food.

“Yeah? Works for me.”

“Get the big nachos so I can have a few.” Matt liked nachos. Good to know .

“Large nachos, chimichanga deluxe on two plates, a margarita on the rocks with extra salt and a Dos Equis, please.”

“And I’ll take the chimichanga deluxe and a Coors Light,” Matt added.

“Sure. Just a sec.” The waitress headed to the little bar to put their drink order in. The bartender glanced over at them, and he nodded. That kid seemed familiar.

Rory frowned, trying to remember where he’d seen the guy, but Luke touched his arm, making all his nerves light up.

“Did you hear anything about the truck today?”

“In the shop. Still. Eternally.” He rolled his eyes, sighed. “I swear, my poor baby truck was mangled.”

“You got someone real mad,” Matt said, watching him carefully. “I reckon you need to be more careful.”

Rory caught the warning plain in those words. He understood. Luke was special.

“I am. There’s method to my madness, Matt. It has to be done.”

“I reckon I can’t complain. I mean, Luke is the one who saved my ranch, but you’re doing a lot for him, so I’m grateful.”

He was amazed to hear Matt say it, and pleased as punch. “I won’t do him wrong,

you have my word.”

“That means a lot.”

“He’s right here,” Luke said.

“Here y’all go.” The waitress brought them their drinks, smiling and giving them all a little napkin to set it on.

“Thanks.” They all picked up their drinks. “Cheers!”

He took a sip and damn near gagged. “What the fuck?”

Matt stared. “What’s wrong?”

“Tastes like shit. Super bitter.”

Luke took away Rory’s water glass and handed over his. “Drink some water.” Then he grabbed a handful of napkins.

“Here, I’ll just get you another beer,” Matt said .

“No.” Luke’s tone was all military command. “Don’t make a deal out of it. Give it to me.”

“Sure, honey. Here. God, that’s some nasty shit.” He sucked down Luke’s water.

Luke took the bottle from him, wrapping it in the napkins gently. “I’ll be right back, y’all. I’m gonna go have a smoke.”

He blinked, but it was Matt who put one hand on his arm when he went to follow his

lover. “Sit. Stay.”

“Roll over? Play dead?”

“Just hang. My money’s on him. He says let him handle it, we let him do it.”

“Did he say that?”

“Yep. He said he was gonna go have a smoke.” Matt’s gyrating eyebrows clearly meant something.

“Is everything okay?” the waitress asked, dumping another scoop of chips in their basket.

“Yep. He just had to step outside to make a call,” Matt said, turning on enough charm to make Rory catch his breath and stare. “Didn’t want to be rude.”

“Okay. You want more water?”

“Uh. Please?” He guessed? He didn’t know.

“Just bring us a pitcher? That way you don’t have to run so much.”

Okay, he was starting to freak out a little. What the hell?

“No problem.” She wandered back to the little service station and started filling a pitcher.

Rory took a deep breath, forced himself to chill the fuck out. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just sit for now. I think the chips and salsa are fine. We had them before you got here.” Matt’s face had lost all expression.

“Are you suggesting?” He hadn’t done any—A series of memories hit him in a rush—low lights, throwing up, falling to a fancy-assed floor. “The bartender. He was working that party. I remember him.”

“Don’t look at him.” Matt scooped up some salsa with a chip. “They won’t chance the food since you and Luke are sharing. Try to be casual.”

“Right. Casual. You ever felt like you had a target on your back?”

“Nope. I bet Luke knows what it feels like. You ever thought you drew it on yourself?”

“No. I didn’t start this thing, Matt LeBlanc, but I damn sure intend to finish it.”

“Well, then, I reckon the LeBlancs will have to help.”

“Apparently I can use some assistance.”

“You are kinda...flashy, McConnell. You stand out.”

Luke came back in without the beer bottle, wheeling smoothly up to the table. “Did I miss anything important?” he asked with a smile.

“I think your brother and I just came to an agreement about something.” Maybe.

“Okay.” Luke glanced at Matt. “I just needed to get something done. Someone will be coming by. The water safe?”

Matt nodded once. “Clean as a whistle.”

“Good deal. The bottle is locked in the truck.” Luke had his back to the bar, so he asked, “Bartender run yet?”

“No sir, but he’s sure fixin’ to. You want me to stop him?”

Rory was so caught up in the amazing wonders of the LeBlanc brothers that he couldn’t hardly blink.

“Nah. The folks here will know his name and address.” Luke laughed. “The more he runs, the more guilty he looks.”

“Do you think...? Maybe I should go.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

“You stay, McConnell. If you’re gonna be part of our family you’d best know, you don’t run. Never ever run.” Matt never glanced away from his salsa .

Luke nodded easily. “Balls to the wall, Rory. Get comfortable with the uncomfortable.”

Rory laughed, because that was a Navy SEAL saying he actually knew from movies. Luke had a thousand of them.

“Right. Sorry, I forgot to be super macho for a second, but I’m on it now.”

Matt laughed now, the sound bright, almost merry. And Luke said Matt had the nerve to call him an adrenaline junkie.

“Here you go.” The waitress brought their food, handing out super-hot plates. She blinked at Rory. “You want another beer? Jim had to go home, but I’m old enough to serve.”

“Can you bring it with the cap still on, hon?” Matt asked. “He’s particular.”

Luke nodded. “He’s a fancy-assed lawyer.”

“That’s me. Fancy-assed, particular lawyer.” He didn’t roll his eyes. Much.

She giggled and left them, bringing back a new beer and more salsa. “Y’all holler if you need anything else.”

“Man, she’s gonna be sad when the sheriff’s office sends someone,” Luke murmured.
“Mmm. Nachos.”

He wasn’t sure he could eat, but he’d be damned if he pussied out with Luke and Matt watching him. Brazen it out. The story of his life.

Besides, the nachos were really good. The chimi came out in one piece, too, and they split it to two plates, so he felt relatively safe.

Before long they were chatting away like monkeys, then a long shadow crossed them.
“Can I join y’all?”

Jake Neeley stood there in his sheriff’s uniform, hat in hand.

“Sure, man,” Luke said. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks. Lord, I’m dead on my feet. That chimichanga looks good.”

“The beer is really bitter,” Rory warned .

“Yeah, so I’m told. I’m going to run it to Dallas, LeBlanc. You realize you’re talking a jailable offense.”

“Uh, hello! I’m the one getting screwed with here.”

“You’re the one poking the bear, McConnell. Can’t you just back off and leave us all in peace?”

“No.” No, he couldn’t. Doug Harris had hurt him—body, soul and reputation. He couldn’t just back off.

The bastard deserved everything he got, and Rory was too far into the process now.

Luke stared at Jake. “I imagine if the guys who previously had your job had done something back in the day, this would all be very different. Too bad they were friends with Harris.”

“Well, it’s a damned good thing I’m too young to be,” Jake said, then sighed. “Seriously, mind if I eat? I assume the bartender took off.”

“He did. I remember him from the gala. I was violently sick after.” Rory waved down the waitress. “Sheriff Jake here needs feeding.”

“Hola, Sheriff.” She smiled. “You want chicken suizas ?”

“Nah, I want that chimichanga with queso. ”

“It’s good today. Popular.”

“It looks amazing. Extra rice, please, and just iced tea. I’m off-duty but on-call.”

“Yessir.” She hurried off.

Rory passed Jake the chips.

“Thanks. So, I guess I owe you an apology for the whole truck thing. I let it go too damn quick.”

“Undoubtedly. I’ll forgo it for you keeping me alive.”

“Mmm. We need to do that, and I need to connect this shit to Doug Harris if you think he’s behind it.” Jake held up a hand when he would have opened his mouth. “I

don't doubt it, but I need a reason to run him in specifically."

"I was going to say I understand. I am a lawyer, you know? I want any charges to stick." He wanted to destroy the son of a bitch.

"I hear you. This is his second?—"

"Third," Luke cut in. "That same bartender tried to poison him at the cattlemen's gala."

"Right. Okay, we'll watch him, but we want him, right? You know how hard that's going to be?"

He stared Jake down. He knew. It was sort of his life's work.

"I dunno." Matt smiled a little. "He's getting pretty reckless."

Rory had to agree. "He called and threatened me a few days ago. Foamy. I wish I'd recorded it."

"That would be prudent." Jake rolled his eyes. "I seriously do not need this shit, man."

"Your life is too boring, Jake," Luke said. "You need excitement."

"Shut up and give me some of your nachos."

"We got the large so we could all share," Rory agreed, handing over a rolled silverware set.

"Foresight is the mother of invention or some shit."

“Indeed.” Rory had to laugh, because Jake was something else. Always had been. And he was one of the youngest sheriffs ever elected in their county, so he wasn’t half-stupid.

Only about a quarter.

He took a deep breath and dug a piece of chicken from his chimichanga, trying to chill the fuck out.

“Drink your beer, babe,” Luke murmured. “It’ll help.”

“You think?”

“I do. This one should just taste like beer.” Luke reached over to squeeze his leg under the table.

“Yeah. That was weird.” And that was the understatement of the fucking decade .

“At least you only had a tiny bit. You feeling sick at all?” Matt asked.

“I pretty much spit it back in the bottle.” Luckily, he wasn’t feeling gross.

“Good deal.” Luke grinned at him, and Rory swore he could read promises in the smile.

Evil promises.

Perfect ones.

Necessary even.

“Stop it.” Matt and Jake said it together, and Luke burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” Rory said for the hundredth time. Even if it was a ‘sorry, not sorry’. He deserved a reward for not jumping up and running in circles, hooting like an owl and slapping his head.

Hopefully, there was an incredibly fine Navy SEAL who intended to reward his happy ass tonight in a most definite sort of way.

He had a good feeling about that.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Luke hummed, running the curry comb over Petunia's rough-ass coat. He had a soft brush to finish her sensitive spots, like her face and her long ears, but she was shedding her summer coat, which made him laugh. Silly beast would grow huge hair for the winter.

She tossed her head, huge ears twitching as she leaned into the grooming. Lord, she was tame as a dog. She loved to make him a muscle with the grooming, too. She could stand there for hours.

"Are you brushing a donkey?" Rory asked from the other side of the stall door, making Luke jump.

"Someone has to keep my ass clean," he shot back.

"Indeed. I hear there's a few folks in line for that job." Rory was in his redneck tuxedo, wearing a chambray button-up and a beat-up straw. Luke liked it.

"I bet you fight them all off. Come meet Petunia. She showed up two weeks ago. Now we have two donkeys."

Rory frowned. "Showed up?"

"Bonus donkey. "

"Ah. I get that. I had someone drop off a dog the other day. I fed her, but she up and

disappeared.”

Luke nodded. Anytime you lived in the sticks, animals came and went. “I bet Mal ran it off just staring at it out the window.”

“Hell, she could possibly light it on fire.”

“She might just.” Luke shook his head. That cat was a force of nature. “What kind of dog was it so I can be on the lookout?”

“Pit mix. Pregnant. Liver-colored.”

“Oh, man.” That was a tough row to hoe. A stray momma dog. He’d have Matt ride out and watch for her.

“Yeah. I’m hoping she’s hiding out in your barn between us. You been out there at all?”

“I have, but I’m glad I didn’t put out the rat poison yet if we got dogs and stuff. I’ll get traps instead. Those box ones.”

“Yeah.” Rory grinned at him, tickled as hell. “So, what can I do?”

“Well, I need to check hooves on a couple of the ladies over there.” Luke pointed across the way.

“You want to take over? On her body you go in light circles. On her legs, down to just above her hocks, just brush like you would a dog. Then use the soft brush in the caddy there to do her hocks and ears and face and just around her tail.” Rory gave him an arch glare and his cheeks heated.

“Right. Sorry. You make it easy to forget; you’re so fine. ”

“Yeah. Y’all think I’m a dipshit and I know it. Go on.”

Luke rolled out of his way. “Hell, babe, I have no idea if you know donkeys. You got some fancy horses. Ropers.”

“Hee-haw! Have I never spoken to you of Rowenna’s beloved donkey, Ho-Tee?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Luke shook his head. “That’s awful.”

“She was ten. She thought it was brilliant. ”

“Lord have mercy.” Luke grabbed a hoof pick. Miss Jasmine would be fine, but the chair still made Pickle nervous. She would try to kick.

Rory whistled and chattered as they worked, the sound comforting and easy. Matt would kill him, no question, but Luke liked it.

When Rory finished with the donkey, Luke had him move on to washing down a mare who’d caught her side on something sharp and needed doctoring every day.

“Lord, honey, you have to watch this shit. You’re awful pretty to be tearing yourself up.”

The mare bobbed her head, snorting and blowing her lips.

“She loves it when you talk to her.”

“She’s a beauty. Seriously. Are any of these guys going to move to the Rocking W?”

“Petal is. These two here. Jasmine and Pickle. Pickle still needs a lot of work. She was badly beaten and is skittish.”

“Who does that?” Rory sounded utterly confused, genuinely.

“Assholes, I guess.” Luke pushed back, then put a hand on Jasmine’s flank to keep her in the loop. “Okay, lady, time to give me a hoof.”

Jasmine offered it up, no problem. Her hooves had been a mess when they’d picked her up at auction, but they were good now.

“That’s it, baby girl. You’ll be able to range with the others. Farrier comes next week to do your final check-up.”

“You know, it’s a cruel irony that furrier and farrier are only one letter apart, Luke.”

Luke blinked. Rory did think of the strangest things. Of course, he thought of a buddy who was into furies...

“Okay, what’s so funny?” Rory asked.

“You ever hear of a furry fetish?”

“Oh God, yes. I have the Internet and a sleep disorder. I Bing.” Rory chuckled, the sound evil, merry. “I just keep thinking about the sweat factor. It’s not so bad during, but what about when everything cools off? Isn’t there an odor issue?”

Obviously, Rory had never been bivouacked with a bunch of sailors.

“There’s always an odor in the military, babe. Now, picture a two-hundred-pound Marine who wants to be a raccoon.”

“A-Whoa. Whoa . That’s...juicy.”

“You got no idea.” Thankfully, neither did Luke, really, though there were a couple of pics on Dane’s phone that had burned his eyes. “I tell you, for someone who never got to do the sex thing, I got to hear about it. A lot.”

“That seems incredibly unfair. Someone needs to take up the slack. I seem to totally be the man for the job.”

“I think you’re the only one qualified.” And then some. Rory made him stupid.

“I’m sure there are others interested, but I don’t care.” Rory peered at him over the stall wall. “I’ve been hired.”

“You have. On a permanent basis.” He felt brave saying it, and it made his heart beat fast.

“All right then. I love the benefits.”

“Do you?” Luke finished up with Jasmine. “I think they’re stellar.” He wheeled out. “Now the kicker.”

“Be careful with you.” Rory watched him stretch and make his back pop. “Your momma still want to do the lunch thing? I’m taking a personal day Friday.”

“Oh she does. She’s been poking me, but with your truck and the poisoned beer and all, I’ve just been giving you breathing time.” Luke grabbed a towel from a stack at the end of the aisle, which would help pad him if Pickle decided to go apeshit.

“Well, see if Friday works for her and we’ll do arepas. ”

“I’ll call her this evening.” It was real decent of Rory to think of his momma. “You hear back from Jake yet?”

“Antifreeze. Not your standard bar fare.”

“How did he think he was gonna slide that past you?”

Rory snorted. “Jake tells me it’s only been standard to bitterize it here for about a year.”

“Well, shit. Thank God the asshole didn’t have some in his garage.”

“What I want to know is why he had it in a bar. At a Mexican place. Not a lot of call for it.”

“No. No, the only thing I can think is that it was in his car and he improvised for the boss.”

Rory nodded, the hat brim bobbing in the shadows. “I didn’t know the kid from Job, so it had to be.”

That thought was the scariest part of it all. Who knew how many frickin’ people Doug Harris had on the payroll who were gunning for Rory now.

Of course, Rory seemed to have taken the whole LeBlanc Family motto of ‘no running’ to heart. The man was out there, living his life. Hell, all the land in the county that was free to buy had been bought.

He had no idea what other business interests Doug Harris had that Rory might be fucking with, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

His not-so-private prayer was that Rory could let it go, could just breathe and work on fewer avenging-angel-type deals. Or that Doug Harris would do something to get his ass arrested. Then Rory would have what he wanted.

Luke wanted his man to be able to be really happy, and bitterness would eat a man up inside.

God knew he knew that. Christ.

He'd learned all bitterness could teach him.

Now he was working on sheer joy. "Hey, when we finish up here you want to go over to the Rocking W and hear me wax poetic about my plans? I need to take a load of boards over and you can drive."

"I'm at your disposal, honey. Point me and shoot me."

"Rock on." Luke slid into Pickle's personal space, watching her closely. "Hey, sweet lady. I need to clean your hooves."

She gave him the side-eye, judging whether she was going to kick the shit out of him or not.

"Now, don't get all mad, girl." He stroked her, making her skin shiver. "We can be friends. I know we can. Poor baby. Everyone's not an asshole. Everyone's not bad and you can learn this."

He felt her relax, breathe, her chest bellowing.

"That's it, lady. That's it. I just need your foot." Now was danger time. She lifted her foot after a couple of stomps, yielding to his gentle pressure. "Good girl. Good girl.

This won't hurt a bit."

Luke rubbed the hoof pick over her hoof before digging in, letting her feel it. Then he chipped away at the crusty stuff in there, knowing she would eventually be free of it. Tim the farrier said she was doing great.

He noticed as he finished that Rory had gone quiet, and didn't that feel good? That his lover got it, understood that this was a bit of a trial.

Once he was out of the stall he held up his hand for a high five. "That was the best she's ever been. Woo."

"Rock on, honey! I'm proud. You're damn good with them."

"I'm learning every day." He shook his head. "It's never been in my life to be gentle and patient, you know. I was a human weapon."

"It is weird that I find that hot—the patience, I mean."

"Nope. Just like I find your unaccountably freaky sense of humor and weird death wish sexy as hell. "

"Fuck you, honey." Rory cracked up, then came to sit on his lap, just like he belonged there.

"Hey." Luke wrapped both arms around Rory, tickled pink that his legs were getting strong enough that they didn't ache when Rory did that.

"Hey. I like riding you, you know? A lot."

"I like it too. Are you trying to distract me, babe? Matt will beat us if we get busy in

his barn.”

“As tempting as that is, you’ve just tipped my kink scale. I’m not a sharer.”

Luke paused to digest that. “Ew. You are nuts, you know that?”

“You brought it up, cowboy.”

“Not that way.” Luke made sure Rory’s feet were up before starting out of the barn. Rory would get up soon but this was a game they played. How far before the weight made Luke’s arms give out.

“You’ve got the body of a Greek god.” Rory said the most wicked things.

“If you mean one of those damaged statues…”

“Nah, they have teeny tiny weenies.”

He hooted. “That, at least, was undamaged.” Though he did have a few tiny shrapnel scars. Those fascinated Rory’s tongue and Luke loved it.

Hell, there wasn’t much he didn’t love about Rory.

“I thank God for that every day, Mr. LeBlanc.”

“Horndog.” He stopped and took a kiss. “Your turn to push me. I just pooped out.”

“Good deal. You made it damn near to the drive this time.”

“Did I?” He glanced around. Damn, he had.

“Yeah. With me on the chair.”

“That’s pretty cool.” Luke played it down as much as he could, but he was proud .

“You’re a stud.” Rory pushed him toward the house.

“I am. Thanks for hanging out with me, babe.”

“I like you. It’s the easiest thing ever.”

“It so is.” Luke laughed for sheer joy. “I just really dig you.”

“Excellent. Let’s tell Matt where we’re off to and go explore your land.”

“Good deal.” He was ready to show Rory all his ideas, and not just on paper.

Best of all, Rory wanted to play too.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lunch.

He'd make sure he had enough Pan masa, had bought carnitas from Mrs. Gonzales, and pickled red onions all by himself.

Now all he had to do was check to see if the ramp he had built onto the front of the house was dried off again and that his front room didn't smell like cat.

He brushed some lint off his pants. God. He was having lunch with his lover and his lover's mom. How fucking amazingly weird was that?

Rory grinned. His cowboy lover. Luke was this amazing mix of brave and vulnerable, strangely innocent about things and world-weary. Rory adored him.

The rain was relentless today, proving that fall was well upon them, with north Texas winter coming soon.

He waited near the door for Luke to text. He had umbrellas ready if they needed him to run out with them.

A truck headed down his driveway, one he didn't recognize, but that was no big. He didn't know what Mrs. LeBlanc drove. Rory watched, waiting for his phone to ding. Luke was supposed to warn him.

When he saw the two big guys in the front seat of the cab, he made sure his shotgun

was at hand, right there inside the front door. That was so not Luke and Mrs. LeBlanc. Rory also got his phone in his hand, ready to hit the emergency button if he needed to.

He set his expression to 'friendly but not stupid' and waited for Frick and Frack to get out of the truck.

The muscle trundled out into the rain and slogged up on his porch. How nice of them to ring the doorbell. Which was wired to a security camera that was recording the whole front yard.

He pulled his shotgun off the rack and opened the main door a bit, knowing the screen door was locked. "Can I help you, boys?"

One of the men had the good sense to back off a step. The other scowled, opening his coat to show a handgun. "McConnell?"

Ah. A hired Yankee. Interesting .

He lifted his shotgun and cocked it. "Who's asking, boys?"

"A concerned citizen."

The other man snorted. "What he means is Mr. Harris asked us to stop by and make sure you understood the dangers of buying the Sumner acreage."

Now, this was a local boy. He looked of an age with Luke and Matt's eldest brother.

"Ah, what a sweet little cocksucker. The deal's already in the bank, sweetheart."

"You're pushing your luck, McConnell," Goon Number One growled. "Sooner or

later you'll push too far."

"Or what?" Come on, assholes. Keep talking. I will put your asses under the county jail .

"Just shut up, Leo." The local boy poked the other one on the arm.

"What did you boys think you were gonna do?" Rory asked. "Waltz in here and pull me out of my house and beat me up? You think I don't protect my home?"

They glanced at each other, and he had to chuckle. So yes. That was exactly what they'd planned. Morons.

"I may be a giant flaming fag, guys, but I'm still a Texan. I know my rights. Now, I suggest you get off my land before I shoot you for breaking and entering."

Another truck turned into the drive, his phone beeping. Fuck-a-doodle-doo.

He didn't let it distract him, the shotgun never wavering.

Texas doofus turned to see who it was, eyes widening. "Shit, Leo."

"I told you not to say my name!"

He prayed that Luke was watching, was paying attention and could see something through the rain.

"That's Preacher LeBlanc's truck. Come on!"

The beefy one with the Jersey accent wasn't bright enough to comply. "I'm not scared of some minister."

“No?” He had to make the decision whether to expose himself and protect Luke and his mom or pussy out.

Christ on a crutch. Like he’d told Harris’ men, he might be a giant flaming fag, but he was still a Texan.

He opened the screen door, stepped out on the porch and put a bead on the one that had proved he was packing.

“Maybe you ought to worry about being scared of me.”

“Come on!” The Texas boy started down the steps just as the truck accelerated sharply, then skidded to a stop with the passenger side facing them. Very stunt driver maneuver.

There was nothing stunt double-y about Luke sitting in the open truck window, pointing a rifle at the goons. “What the hell is this?” Luke snarled.

“The Doug Harris welcome wagon. Watch out, honey. Mr. Tall, Dumb and Yankee here is packing.” Be careful, Luke .

“Oh, I imagine Jakob there is, too. He never did have a brain in his head.” Mrs. LeBlanc had hopped out of the driver’s seat and was leveling a large revolver over the hood of the truck while keeping herself mostly out of sight.

Please, Jesus. Let me be part of this family. I’m totally in love at first sight with Mom and the vision of Luke with a gun is giving me an inappropriate woody.

“Now, Mrs. LeBlanc.”

“Castor Jakob Hise, don’t you talk back to me.

That's my baby boy Luke with that rifle and he was a sharpshooter for the Navy.

He will skin you alive one bullet at a time.

Now you take your ugly friend there and get out of here.

I also suggest you get a better job. One that doesn't involve you waking up of a morning and being an asshole! Don't think I won't call your momma."

"Jesus." Jakob grabbed the Leo guy by the arm. "We're going. Now."

"Good idea. It's damp out here and I have lunch plans." Not to mention that the shotgun was getting heavy. The big guy was going to be a problem, he could tell, but for now he muttered and took off with little Jakob.

No one moved a muscle until the big truck cleared his gate and gunned off down the ranch road.

"Well, now. I hope you have a towel warmer," Mrs. LeBlanc said.

"Yes, ma'am. I bought one last year. Come on in and I'll help Luke in and then I'll set you up." He shot her a smile. "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleasure to meet you, too." She tucked the revolver into her shoulder bag before walking over to take the elbow he offered her.

"Be right back, Luke."

"No worries. I can hang." Tension thrummed in Luke's voice.

"I won't let anything happen to him, ma'am. You have my word." He wasn't sure

that was a comfort, but it was true.

“I hope so, Rory. I have to say it wasn’t reassuring to drive up to a standoff.”

“It wasn’t reassuring to answer the door to a little lynch mob, so I totally understand.”

“What did they want?”

“To tell me to stop buying things.” He tossed towels in the dryer, which was off the kitchen and closer than the towel warmer. Then he pulled her out a chair. “I’ll be right back to get you dried out and warm, ma’am. Two shakes.”

Then he headed back out to Luke. “Hey. Let me grab your chair.”

“Thanks. I didn’t bring my crutches since it was wet. I didn’t want to slip and bust my ass in front of Momma.”

“No, and that ramp is slick as snot.”

“That wooden rail you put in helps, though.” Luke had concern face when he got to the passenger door with the chair. “Are you okay, babe?”

“I’ll be better when we get inside. Believe it or not, that was the first time I’ve drawn down on someone.”

“No shit? It was kinda hot.” Luke laughed, some of the strain falling away.

They got Luke out of the truck and into the chair, and Luke held him when he would have straightened, kissing him on the mouth short and hard. Oh, hello.

“Yeah. I almost sprung wood with you and the rifle. I approve.”

“We’re going in there to have lunch with my mom. We have to behave.”

“Right. I’ll volunteer to take you home after, though, so I can have my wicked way with you. ”

“That sounds so good I might embarrass myself. Good thing it’s cold.” Luke nodded.
“Up we go.”

“I’ll push. If I fall, please don’t roll back and crush me. I’m trying to impress your mother.”

“I can hold the rail.” Luke was breathless with laughter, though.

“Uh-huh. Let’s go before she freezes.”

“If you have a fuzzy robe she’ll want it. And socks. Her dress can go right in the dryer.”

“I’m on it. She’s a stud.”

“She so is.”

“Is what?” Mrs. LeBlanc asked. Her teeth were chattering.

Shit.

“Did you want a hot shower, ma’am? I can offer a fuzzy robe and some clean sweats and socks.”

He hurried to the dryer even before she answered, grabbing towels and wrapping her up in them.

“Oh.” She huddled into the towels. “That would be a kindness.”

“Let’s get you set up, then, shall we? Then I’ll make coffee with hot chocolate in it.”

“That sounds lovely.” She gave Rory a smile like the sun coming up.

“Good deal.” He found her soft sweats, a robe and fuzzy socks and towels, waiting for her dress so he could toss it in the dryer.

The dress popped out of the bathroom and he caught it, laughing. He grabbed more towels and the pair of sweats and hoodie Luke had left in his dresser.

“So, this isn’t exactly how I’d intended this afternoon to go, you know.”

“No?” Luke stripped off his snap-front shirt. He toweled off, his nipples hard with the cold.

“Mmm.” He flicked one nipple. “Not exactly.”

“Ouch!” Luke swatted at him. “Cold!”

“Uh-huh. Gimme. I’ll pop it in the dryer.”

“Help me get out of my jeans, too. That way you can take both.”

“I can do that.” In fact, he was exceptional at it.

“I know.” Luke’s dark eyes heated, holding his gaze.

They had tested that ability in and out of the wheelchair. In bed, too. It was more fun than advertised. He wrestled Luke out of the jeans, dried his lover off, then helped

Luke back into some sweats. “You want socks, love?”

“Please. My everything got wet. Though the top was where I got the most.” Luke dried his hair with a towel. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I saw them coming, honey. I was watching the drive for you. I met them at the door with the shotgun.”

“Ah. That’s my man.” Luke handed him the towel and took the socks that had been in the clean laundry waiting to be folded.

“No, the part that’s your man is where I tell you that all the conversation was recorded with video.”

“Now, that’s fucking impressive. Who were they?”

“Doug Harris’ flunkies.”

“Jesus. Help me into a kitchen chair? I need to wipe down the wheels.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

“Sure. Grab on.” They had this move down, too. He lifted and Luke pushed and Rory was pleased to note that moving Luke was getting easier every day as Luke got stronger.

Hell, lots of times Luke used his crutches here at the house. He didn’t seem to mind Rory seeing him stumble. In fact, he often showed off new physical skills to Rory first.

Rory loved that, deep down and big. Huge.

He tossed Luke a dishrag, then put everything in the dryer, turned on the coffeemaker and pulled out cups.

Luke was soon back in his chair and moving around the kitchen, pulling stuff out of the fridge to help Rory start lunch.

Then Mrs. LeBlanc came in and he started pouring coffee, trying not to flutter.

“This is a very comfy robe,” she said, then sank down at his table. “Cream and sugar, please.”

“Yes, ma’am. Would you like cocoa in it?” How can I apologize?

“I love that idea.” She laughed and clapped her hands, her wet hair all wrapped up in a towel. This had to be the weirdest ‘parent of your lover’ lunch ever. “Excellent. I have to tell you, I don’t usually start lunches with a nascent gunfight. I prefer guacamole.”

“Well, with arepas I usually start with albondigas. They’re in the Crock-Pot, honey. There’s avocado sauce, which is why I thought of it.” He smiled at her. “I’m so sorry, ma’am.”

“Call me Bonnie.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He fixed her coffee and handed it over, then did the same with Luke’s.

“Thanks,” Luke said. He wheeled over to the Crock-Pot and filled a bowl with meatballs, then grabbed all the condiments for them, looking right at home.

Miss Bonnie watched her boy like a hawk, then Rory swore he could see her relax.

He hoped that was good. He really did. They jostled each other to get the arepa maker set up, and he had to fling a tiny blob of cornmeal at Luke, hitting him in the nose.

“I’m going to beat you, babe. I swear to God.” Luke scowled.

Miss Bonnie started cackling, just busting out with it.

“Yeah, yeah, promises.” He winked at Luke’s mom. “He’s so tough.”

“He’s a stud.”

Rory knew that. “He is. I’m damn fond. ”

“Good. Good.” She sighed. “Now, if I could just find a nice boy for Matthew.”

“Leave Matty alone, Momma. He’s fine.”

Rory knew better than to get into that. Matt LeBlanc had threatened to castrate him when he suggested setting Matt up with one of his friends in Austin. The man had some issues, and it wasn't up to him to solve them.

All he could do was set a good example with Luke, right?

Soon the kitchen smelled like cornmeal cakes and pork roast and they were all nipping up meatballs.

“You have a lovely house, Rory. It's so homey and warm.”

“It's a little goofy, but I love it.”

“I like it.” Bonnie shot Luke a fond smile. “Luke seems to like it, too.”

“Pushing,” Luke murmured while pulling arepas out of the machine.

“Moi ?” Bonnie popped another meatball in her mouth. She'd already asked for the recipe, so that was excellent progress.

Rory split arepas and Luke filled them. They served them with the pickled onions and cilantro rice and Miss Bonnie laughed her happy trill of a laugh again.

“Look at that!” she said. “So pretty. Luke on KP duty. I love it.”

“Momma, be nice or I'll not let Rory invite you over again.”

“Now, honey. She did show up in a bad situation. I think we have to make amends.”

“Don't give her an inch—she'll take a mile.” The fond look Luke shot his momma spoke volumes about the fact that he was joking.

His mom would adore Bonnie.

Was he thinking of introducing his mom to Luke's? Holy shit .

Luke grabbed his hand. "You okay?"

"Glorious." He'd just keep that to himself now, wouldn't he?

"Cool." Luke dug into his food, humming.

The arepas were good, spicy and the pickled onions? Hell yeah. Given that Luke's momma was in a robe and Luke was in sweats, he thought it was a fab way to have lunch.

They all got to giggling over Luke when he lost an onion and had to dig it out of his shirt. The coffee helped warm everyone, and the dryer thumped away, providing background noise.

"I'm full unto death," Miz Bonnie said finally, patting her belly. "Someone refill my coffee and give me the tour. Also, I need to meet that cat."

"Which one?" he teased. "I locked them in the office. I wasn't sure how you felt about kitties."

"The one who's yowling like he's dying."

"She, Momma. She's amazing." Luke had taken to his cats like a house afire.

"That would be Miss Maleficent. She hates missing out. Come on and I'll introduce you. She thinks Luke was invented just for her." He led her through the front room and opened the door to the game-slash-media room for her to see. "We spend a lot of

time in here.”

“Do you? It’s amazing!”

“We’ll have to watch something. It’s very comfortable.” They did the rest of the house—up to and including the bathroom of joy with its rain bath and the sauna. Then he opened the door to the office, the cats right there in a row.

“Goodness, look at them!”

The Persians all sat staring, offended. Maleficent stalked over to sniff Miz Bonnie’s sock, then leaped into Luke’s lap to yowl at him accusingly.

“I know, baby girl. He’s a bastard, locking you in. ”

Rory hooted. “She sure thinks so. Who wants a treat?”

He found the little bag of kitty treats and passed them out to Luke and Bonnie. Merida decided that Bonnie was going to be her best friend, Ariel and Esme hid behind him while Maleficent told Luke, in no uncertain terms, that he was in trouble.

God, he was happy.

Bonnie winked at him, and he thought he’d also made a friend. He liked her a lot, not least because he could see where Luke’s resilience and humor came from.

“Y’all want to watch a movie? We have a sh-lot of choices.”

“How long has it been since I just got to sit and watch a movie?” Miss Bonnie asked.

“Yes, please. Let me text your daddy, Luke, and tell him I’m having so much fun I’ll stay a while.”

“Sounds good. I’ll pick a movie and Rory can refill coffees?”

He nodded. That plan worked. Luke would know what his Momma liked to watch and the cats were keeping Miss Bonnie busy.

That way he could toss the dishes in the dishwasher, too, keep things neat. Was that too much? Worrying about the dishes?

‘Clean as you go’ , his mom would tell him. He would do the dishes.

Then he would take coffees in and watch a movie with Luke and Bonnie and the cats. Right on.

Not weird. Not weird at all.

Especially when you thought about how the day had started...

Chapter Twenty-Seven

L uke sat in the Mustang, trying to decide. Arm crutches or chair? They'd brought both, and the crutches made him look less handicapped, but the chair made him way more steady.

He didn't want to bust his ass in front of Rory's folks and teenaged sister.

"Dad is an orthopedist, Luke. He's seen it all. Bring both."

"Oh, right." He'd completely forgotten. "Sorry, I'm stupidly nervous."

"I get it. Do you want me to have someone pull a gun so it's more like when we lunched with your mother? Harris is lying low, but I'm sure someone will. Rowenna maybe?"

He snorted, reaching over to pinch Rory's nipple. "Be good."

"You know I'd do anything for you, but they're all standing at the kitchen window, pretending not to stare."

"And I just gave you a titty twister." Luke sighed. "I'll start on the arm crutches and use the chair to take a break. Can you bring it in with us? "

"Of course." Rory's smile faded. "They're good people, Luke. I swear to you. They're good."

“Well, of course they are. They made you.” Luke gave Rory a real smile. “I just never have met anyone’s parents like this. Not ever.”

“I’ve never brought a lover home either, so we’re even.”

“Then this will be as new for them as it is for me.” Luke took a deep breath and popped open the door. “Let’s do it.”

He worked himself up on his crutches and Rory grabbed the wheelchair, moving alongside him. He was a good guy, and his family sounded like a hoot, so Luke relaxed as much as a guy could on crutches and clumped up the improvised ramp they’d put out for him.

“Hey, brother. She’s cooking everything in the Food Network magazine. Scary. You must be the boyfriend. I’m Ro.” The little gal was cute as hell—hair dyed black, black eyeliner, black clothes, the whole goth thing.

“Luke. Nice to meet you.” He smiled and she blinked.

“Wow. He’s totally hot, Rory. How did you do that?”

“I know his brother.”

“Oh. Well, come on.” She led the little parade back inside, and Luke couldn’t help chuckling.

“I like your Chucks, Ro.”

“Thanks. Rory got them for me.”

“He’s a good brother, huh?” Luke wanted to see how other people saw Rory.

“He’s not bad. He gets me.”

“Yeah. My older brother doesn’t get any of us, I don’t think.”

“No? Rory says you have a twin though, so that’s cool.”

“I do. A real cowboy. His name is Matt.” They walked into the kitchen, where a man sat at the table, and a lady maybe eight, ten years younger than his mom stood at the counter. “Hi, Luke LeBlanc. ”

“Luke, we’re so pleased to meet you!” Mrs. McConnell stood and held out her hand. “I’m Helen and this is James.”

“Dr. McConnell.”

“Sir.”

Luke nodded. “I’ll shake hands if you like but it takes some maneuvering.” He hoped the man wasn’t ready to hate him.

“Have a seat, Luke. Seriously. We’re not real formal here.” Rory’s dad had a warm smile and Matt could see Rory in Jim’s face, clear as day.

“Hey, Mom. I brought whipped cream and coleslaw like you asked.”

“Thanks, honey. Would you like some iced tea or coffee, Luke?”

“Iced tea would be great.” He plopped down into a chair, grunting when he landed. Whoops.

“Rory, get your man some iced tea.”

“Sure, Mom. Can I make myself a glass too, or do I get to drink out of the dog bowl like Ro?”

“Cheeky!” She laughed and popped Rory with a towel.

Rory winked at him before going to the fridge. A few moments later, glasses of iced tea appeared on the table.

“Something smells really good,” Luke said.

“I made a brisket and potato salad and there’s brownies for dessert. I asked about allergies and preferences. Rory said you ate red meat.”

Rory wagged his eyebrows at Luke over his mom’s shoulder.

Luke stared for a moment. “I do. I love brisket.”

“Is he making faces over my shoulder?”

Jim rolled his eyes. “This is normal. They play. Ignore them.”

“Right.” He could totally ignore Rory if the man was going to be evil .

Rory grinned and brought the glasses over, then grabbed his mother and squeezed her tight. She was a classy-looking woman, professional and put-together. Nothing like his mom.

She laughed and hugged Rory back. “Where did you put that coleslaw? I need to jazz it up.”

Rory handed her a bag and she laughed when she pulled out burnt orange mums, too.

“So pretty. Thank you, son.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Suck up.” Was there any sarcasm like a teenager’s sarcasm?

“You have no idea.” Rory wagged his eyebrows.

“Oh, ew. Pop! Make him be good!”

“That is an impossibility, my dear child.” Rory’s father winked at him. “Now, I want to hear about the improvements y’all have made to the Rocking W.”

“Oh, has Rory told you about that? We’ve done a lot with the barns right now, working to make stalls accommodate wheelchairs and such.”

“I have a vested interest. He keeps your investors well-informed.”

“Oh.” He blinked, his cheeks heating. “Wow. I mean, thank you. I was hoping to pick your brain about what kind of staff might be helpful. My physio is willing to donate time, but I know we’ll need help.”

“Of course. That will depend, of course, on what kind of client-injuries you’re going to have to deal with.”

“Right. I intend to have guys who range from PTSD with no real physical problems to guys like me, or people with traumatic brain injuries.”

“You’ll need a physician on-call, for sure. The VA should be able to help with the details, I’d think.”

“That would be great.” His shoulders loosened up even more. “Can I help with anything, ma’am? ”

“Everything is basically done. It’s just assembling plates at this point.”

“Tell me what sorts of house facilities you’ll have.” Jim kept him busy describing chair rails and roll-in showers and wheelchair-height counters until the food was all laid out.

Then they were all talking—even Ro had good ideas, good questions. He could totally tell that this family encouraged discussion.

Luke liked it. They’d all had Sunday dinners together at his house when they were kids, and it had always been lively like this.

The food. Oh, Lord, it was good.

He tucked in, and as soon as he wanted something, Rory’s mom had it. Even the bag of Wonder bread made him happy, and he was being a pig, but he had to have seconds.

“I like him, son.” He heard Helen say and Rory answered with a chuckle.

“I do too.”

“That’s good. It would be weird if it was just sex.”

Luke swallowed a bit of tea the wrong way and began coughing.

Rory clapped him on the back. “Drink tea. Breathe air.”

“Got it. No drowning.” He pinched Rory’s leg. No drowning. No discussing sex with the mother.

Rory laughed. “We embarrassed him, Mom.”

“He’ll get to know us,” Miz Helen murmured. “Y’all want to wait on dessert and go sit in the front room for a bit?”

“Please. I’m stuffed. Luke?”

“You got it. I think I’ll switch to the chair, though. I might not be able to carry all this extra weight.”

Rory grabbed his wheelchair and moved it over close enough for him to move himself into it. He hoisted up and over, grateful they had doorways and paths around furniture big enough to get around .

“Mom’s totally going to try to get you to play Scattergories or Monopoly or Clue or something, just FYI.” Rory grinned and winked, looking pleased as punch. “Parents are predictable as hell.”

“I was meaning to ask if you played cards. My folks will want you to play spades at some point.”

“I do. Pop was an addict in med school.”

“Well, there you go. Though I’d want Ro to be included so a board game is good.”

Rory shot him a pleased smile. “You’re a good guy.”

“I try, babe. I have some shit to make up for, I’m sure.”

“Eh. You’re mine. That’s the good part. Let’s go entertain the folks.”

“You got it. Steer me?” He didn’t want to bounce off things his first time in someone’s house.

“As long as you need me to.”

Luke thought that sounded damned fine, and he loved how Rory bent to kiss the back of his neck.

“You two come on and sit. We were thinking Clue.”

“So lame.” Still Rowenna sat there with them. “So I heard at school that you got folks arrested because you were having a shootout at your house. I miss everything.”

“You didn’t want to be there,” Luke said. “Who all got arrested?”

“Jakob Hise and Leo Gianelli,” Rory said. “Harris didn’t get arrested, but he was brought in for questioning. In handcuffs. It was glorious.”

“You’re obsessed,” Ro said. “It’s so weird.”

Luke snorted. “I would say Harris was the one with the problem.”

Helen and Jim looked at each other, and there was worry there, a genuine concern for their son. He could see it.

“Anyway, if he got run in, that’s the beginning of the end,” Luke finished, trying to let it drop.

“Yes. I’m ready.” Rory’s words were serious, sure, and God, it felt good.

He wanted Rory to move on, to have a happy life. There was no good coming from a feud that went on and on.

As it stood, Rory had investments, land, a lover, a life.

Not to mention Luke was gonna need his help on the Rocking W.

Right now, though, he was going to crush them all at Clue. Rory's family might as well learn that a LeBlanc played a game like he stormed a beach.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“O kay, Luke. Five more reps on the abs.”

Luke panted, arms crossed over his chest as he pulled in his ab muscles and sat up.

“Are you sure you’re not a military DI, man?”

“The military isn’t as tough as me, Luke. Come on, give it up for me.” Avery grinned at him, all-American with his surfer hair and his too-blue-not-to-be-contacts eyes.

“What the hell are you doing in this little town again?”

“Taking the path of least resistance and cheap rent, cowboy. Cities have tons of competition. Besides, you cowboy types tear yourselves up a lot.”

“Right.” He huffed, pushing up again, his muscles screaming.

“Come on, stud. You can do it. You give me these and I’ll rub you down.”

“Promise?” He hit three, then four. One more.

“I swear. Your guy just pulled up too. He’s always early, huh?”

“He’s eager.” Luke grinned and pushed out his final rep. “He wants to make sure the rubdown stays impersonal.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a stud and all, but not my type. I like them less bitchy.” Avery

grinned at him and he swatted at the bastard half-heartedly. “See what I mean?”

“Are you abusing my man, Avery?” Rory looked good—all cowboy lawyer, from hat to jacket to dark Wranglers. “It’s chilly out there, I swear to God. Hey, honey. Looking good.”

“Hey, babe. Do you know how awkward it is to know you two had a fling?” Luke had to say it. It was a ritual by now.

“Rory was a horndog, man. You reformed him.”

“I have had the best now. I got nowhere else to explore.”

Luke burned with pleasure at that. He did adore when Rory got all possessive.

“Up on the table, sailor. I’ll rub you down while your man watches and drools. I should charge extra for this shit, y’all.”

“You’re a sick man, Avery.” Rory flopped down into a chair. “Damn, what a day wheeling and dealing.”

“Have you made a fortune?”

“Actually, today was a good day on the money front. I can afford to buy us steaks at the Walmart.”

“Oooh.” Luke grunted when Avery dug both thumbs into the sole of his left foot.

“Steaks. Baked potatoes?”

“I’m all over that. Dessert?”

“We have that Boston cream pie mix,” Luke said. “I’ll toss it together.”

“Y’all are domestic as fuck,” Avery teased as those strong hands started working his shoulders. “It’s adorable.”

“I know.” Rory’s voice sounded tickled, not wry. “What the hell is up with that?”

“He’s in desperate need of someone to take care of him.

” Luke could tease, because they were doing a great job of taking care of each other.

They had a little bit of a routine going—Wednesday and Friday nights he spent at Rory’s and Rory brought him home Saturday and worked the horses with him, then did the same Sunday.

Hell, Rory was invited to Sunday lunch at the folks—standing offer.

The most telling fact was that Matty let Rory care for his expensive fillies. There was trust there now—between Rory and the horses.

“I totally am. He takes care of me, of horses. It’s stunning.”

“I love the mutual admiration.” Avery gave him deep pressure on his lower back.

He grunted. Fuck, that was good. Ab work always caused an atrocious ache right above his hips. “Rory, did you bring my chair?” He’d come in with his crutches, but there was no way he was leaving on them.

“I did. You need it?”

“Please? The cold will make it worse.”

“Give me two shakes and I’ll have it in.” Rory headed out, whistling merrily while Avery started in on his thighs.

“He looks so happy,” Avery murmured. “Looks like you two are getting serious.”

Luke frowned a little at Avery’s careful tone. “Is that bad?”

“He...he’s just had some bad shit happen to him. Real bad, and it’s like public. That leaves scars.”

Luke rolled over. “What are you saying, Avery? Spit it out.”

“You need to talk to him, Luke. Let him tell you.”

“It sounds like you’re warning me off.” Luke had been about to ask Avery if he would be interested in investing time in the idea him and Matt had, but now he hesitated.

“Not in the least. You’re happy, he’s happy, and I can tell he loves you. I just want him to show you his skeletons instead of somebody else.”

“Okay.” He left it at that. If Rory was gonna tell him about shit he was. If not, well, they both had their hard luck stories .

“Good deal.” And that seemed like was that. No dire looks, no bullshit.

He shook his head, feeling a little ambushed. Avery was his friend, though, so Luke chose to take it as concern for both him and Rory.

“Your chariot, sir,” Rory chirped, wheeling his chair into the room.

“How are you feeling, man?” Avery met his eyes, unashamed, so yeah, that was what it had to be. Concern.

“Better. I think I’ll take a hot shower at home and be good as new.” He glanced at Rory when he said it, and Rory beamed. Rory did love a shower.

“Let’s go. I’ll run into the store and grab steaks for us.”

“Works for me.” Luke grabbed the sweatpants and hoodie Avery handed him. “Same time next week, Ave?”

“I’ll see you Wednesday, Luke. Y’all have a great weekend! Stay warm!”

Rory wheeled him out, giving his arms a break. “Y’all looked serious when I got back.”

“Did we?”

“Yep.”

Luke handed Rory his crutches, which lay across his lap, once they got to the truck. “He says you have issues.”

“He’s a good guy.”

Okay. That was totally not the response Luke had expected. Not at all. Luke squinted at Rory when he came to assist in the chair-to-truck transfer. “That’s what I decided too. He’s as worried about you as he is me.”

“I don’t blame him.” Rory got him eased into the truck, which was easier every fucking time, then put his chair away.

When his lover climbed into the pickup, Rory closed the door and looked over at him.

“I’ll tell you what you want to know, but not in the truck.

That’s just wrong. We can talk at the house.

You’ve been in combat, honey. I got nothing to tell you that’s worse than what you’ve seen.”

“I bet it will be worse to hear.” Luke reached over to touch Rory’s hand. “You tell me what you want when you want. I’m not pushing, but I know this has to be more than a grudge for someone seeing you drunk and silly, which is the rumor.”

“Whoever told you that was being good to me. I hope it was your momma.”

“It was. I don’t go asking around for people to talk trash about my lover, Rory.”

“No. There’s a lot to say. At home, huh?” Rory looked serious but not pissed.

“Okay.” He could totally understand that, and he let himself smile a little. “Steaks.”

“And potatoes. I got it.” Rory squeezed his hand. “I got you.”

“I know you do, babe.” That much he got. Did he worry about Rory when people were showing up at his house with guns? Shit, yeah. But he knew Rory had his back.

“Then we’ll figure it out.”

They would. They had to. Luke was teetering on the verge of getting his shit together.

He wasn’t gonna quit now.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rory bought steaks and potatoes, a bag of fancy salad and some Hawaiian rolls, along with a cherry pie. Luke had said he'd bake, but after Rory said his piece, who knew.

Christ, he had a headache. Maybe he should have asked Avery for a massage, too. Asshole owed him.

Luke was quiet on the drive back from the store, but he didn't seem mad. More like he was trying to respect Rory's space.

It was maddening.

He got Luke back in his chair, grabbed his laptop and the groceries and Luke's crutches and got them all inside. Then he did the normal stuff—started the potatoes, fed the cats, plugged in his phone and his computer. "I'm going to change out of my work clothes."

"You want to come have a shower with me?"

The fact that Luke asked eased something inside him, even if he thought it might be odd now.

"I do." He stopped and met Luke's gaze. "Thank you."

"Hey." Luke held out a hand, little blisters across the top of the palm from walking

the bars with Avery. “I’m in for the long haul, even though we haven’t talked about it. The telling is important, I think, but it’s not gonna make me run.”

He took Luke’s hand. “It damn near broke me, and I swear to God, I will break Doug Harris until there is nothing left.”

Luke nodded slowly. “I just want you to be safe while you’re dismantling his empire. Come on. I stink.”

Rory knew Luke was more than a little in love with his bathroom. He had a huge walk-in shower with seats, with a rain shower and detachable shower heads. It fit them both in a number of delicious ways and he loved washing Luke, touching Luke all over.

This was what he needed. He stripped down after he got the water going, and it took mere moments to have steam filling the shower stall.

“Come on, honey,” Rory said. “Let’s get you in.”

Rory stripped down, put towels in the warmer and turned the lights low, leaving them in a private, quiet space. Rory easily helped Luke up and in, then down onto a bench. Luke was already so much stronger.

He sat close, closed his eyes and tried to breathe, but his chest felt so tight.

It was one thing to live day in and day out with his plan to take down Doug Harris. It was another to talk about the past. To Luke. He wanted Luke to be proud of being his lover, to admire him.

Of course, everyone had already heard about it. Everyone in town knew.

“I was... I was nineteen, between college and law school and Harris invited me over to meet some of the local guys. I wanted to be able to have contacts. Dad doesn’t work here, you know? He’s not into the good old boy network and I th ought... I was nineteen and trying hard, you have to understand.”

When he opened his eyes, Luke was watching him, brown eyes dark and serious. “I get that.”

“There were five of us. Hank Lloyd, Chris Baker, Fred Miller and Harris. We had supper and had a drink. One drink. I don’t know what was in it, but I know we had supper at seven p.m. and I woke up at midnight with them all naked.

Harris was slapping me with his dick and screaming names at me.

There were pictures—lots of my face, none of theirs. ”

“Jesus.” Luke caught his hand again, holding on. “Why?”

“I was out of the closet. I was the golden son of someone that didn’t play their game.

I think Harris wanted to blackmail me into working for him.

It didn’t work. He couldn’t touch my folks.

I brazened it out.” He’d gone to law school, refused to hide his face, then used the inheritance his pappy had left him to put his plan into motion.

“I was nineteen. I didn’t know that they would hurt me. ”

“God.” Luke squeezed his hand. “They didn’t...did they hurt you?”

“I don’t have any diseases from it. They used condoms, you could tell from the photos. I don’t remember it.” He didn’t remember, and he’d moved on. Mostly. For the most part.

“So it was a fucking power play. They got off on it. You think Harris is a closet-case?” Luke’s voice had gone cold. Hard.

Rory had a feeling if Luke ever saw Harris again he might try to kill the man.

“I think he wanted to ruin something and I was there. Now I’m going to ruin him.” Rory sucked in one deep breath after another, because he wasn’t ashamed, but...this was Luke, for fuck’s sake. He needed Luke to want him, see him.

“I love you.” He didn’t expect to hear it, and for a moment Rory thought it was just sympathy, just Luke feeling bad for him, which would be worse than fucking pathetic.

Then he looked into Luke’s eyes again and he knew it was the dead truth. Solid and sure and real.

“I love you too, Luke. I’m sorry there’s a story to tell.”

“Me too, but I can’t even blame you for the vendetta. I mean, I would take his ass down.”

“Everyone thinks I was drunk, I came onto them, I embarrassed myself. I didn’t. I had one glass of wine.”

“I’m so sorry, babe. You had to be so nervous, so excited to make contacts.” Luke shook his head, droplets of water flying. “Nothing is ever what everyone thinks, is it?”

“No.” He didn’t have anything else but that. Maybe ‘don’t hate me’, but they’d already gone over that with the ‘I love yous’, and besides, it was a little teenager of him.

“We all have our shit to deal with, babe.” Luke laughed, the sound a tiny bit harsh.

“More than thirty missions, and you know what takes me out? A frickin’ IED on the side of the road when I’m on my way to a three day in the Qatar country club.

Every time someone thanks me for my service I feel like this huge fake.”

He winced, reached for Luke’s leg. “That’s no fucking fair.”

“No. My first R&R in nearly a year and a half.” Luke sighed.

“Broke both femurs. Shattered a kneecap and an ankle. Mangled my left hip. I mean shit, babe, I know I’m lucky.

Two guys in the same transport lost limbs and one had a traumatic brain injury.

” Luke pulled him closer, fingers around his wrist. “It took Matt and the new ranch and you to make me feel lucky, though.”

“I’m glad I could. I wanted you when I first saw you, and I know I seem like a slut, but—After all the shit that happened, I just... I wanted to take control of coming on to someone. Is that reasonable? ”

“Absolutely. Fuck sitting around feeling like it’s your fault.” Luke nodded as if that was that, then grabbed the soap to start washing them both.

The touches felt sure, normal, and he thanked God for them. He didn’t want to be

broken. This was too important to lose over something like that asshole Harris.

Rory was no idiot. He knew Luke was worried about him, about potential violence. They had shit to work through. But this—this was good.

“I’m glad you’re here, Luke.” Simple and true. No more secrets. No more shame.

“Me too.” That smile was open, honest and so Luke it made Rory grin back. “I’m glad you have a huge hot water heater.”

“What can I say, honey? I’m a hedonist.”

“Mmmhmm.” Luke scooted a little on the bench to reach Rory’s hair.

He leaned and begged the touches—he needed this. Needed Luke.

Luke lathered up his hair then dug in lightly, just enough to be a good head massage. His headache eased right away as his muscles relaxed.

“Oh, God. God, thank you.”

“I got you, I told you that.” Thumbs rubbing deep, Luke moved down his neck.

“You did.” And Luke knew what had happened and it was okay. Well, not okay that it happened, but things were fine with Luke.

Luke kissed the back of his neck after rinsing his hair, sliding both arms around him. That hug took away the rest of his tension.

“Mmm. Did I tell you I bought a cherry pie in case you wanted to cheat for dessert?”

“Oh, yum. I can so go there. ”

“I thought it was a decent idea.”

“Thanks, babe. I’m pretty wore out.” Luke looked great, though, his muscles standing out from hard work.

“You worked your ass off, but it’s Friday. I can pamper you all night.”

“Oh, now.” Luke stroked his back, fingers finding the bumps of his spine and rubbing to ease the muscles. “I like the sound of that.”

“Do you?” He shifted around and offered Luke his lips. “Kiss me?”

Luke slid one hand behind his head to tug him close. Those lips met his, hot and damp and eager. He sobbed once, so fucking grateful that Luke wasn’t pulling away, wasn’t put off.

He had no idea how he would react to his history if he didn’t know it. Then again, Luke really expected to be rejected for not being the hero everyone thought he was.

Luke was a hero. His.

He touched one mangled leg, loving on it, thanking God that Luke had been strong enough to survive. Luke never even stiffened, used to his touch now. Trusting him.

He’d explored every inch, after all, with his tongue. Rory knew he’d proven he wasn’t disgusted or freaked out.

“I’m getting pruney. Wanna go, uh, have a rest before supper?”

“The potatoes will sit happily and the steaks are fine until we cook them.”

“And the pie just needs cream, so...” Luke beamed, and he knew he was in for some good loving.

“So we can go share amazing orgasms and a nap.”

Luke’s cheeks flushed even darker, and Rory knew it had nothing to do with the hot water. “Yep. Boom.”

“I want to suck you, honey. It’s been days.”

“Please. Oh, God.” Luke turned off the water.

Rory grabbed the towels, because they would need Luke mostly dry before he got back in the chair, and crutching in the damp tile was just wrong.

By the time they were in bed, they were laughing, having danced like a pair of drunk bears to get it all handled.

“It’s going to be okay,” he told himself.

It had to be. This was the life he’d always dreamed of. He couldn’t give it up now.

Chapter Thirty

“O kay, I have to run to the drugstore,” Matt said. “Are you sure you want me to just leave you here?”

Luke sat in his wheelchair outside the sheriff’s office, looking at the long, three-part ramp he could do in his sleep. “Yep. It’s all good.”

“Okay, well, I’ll swing back by and pick you up after I get done.” Matt rolled his shoulders. “All you have to do is call if you need me.”

Worry wart.

“I’ll holler.” Like Jake Neeley was going to be ugly to him. Luke had made an appointment, for heaven’s sake.

He needed to find out where they were on the whole thing with his Rory. He wanted this over.

Luke rolled into the sheriff’s department a minute or so later, wheeling right up the desk. “Hey, I have an appointment with Sheriff Neeley.”

“Hey, Luke. Give him two shakes, huh? He’s on the phone.”

“Not a problem.” He peered at the desk sergeant. “Lord have mercy, Danny. When did you become a cop?”

“I went to the Academy after I got out of the Army. It’s a good job.”

“Good deal. You look like civilian life agrees with you.”

“I’m happy. You look like you’re doing well. I saw you on your crutches the other day, too. You’re moving like a pro.”

“Thanks.” He and Danny had graduated together and had gone off to basic at the same time. Danny had been Army all the way, though.

Jake came out of his office. “Luke. Hey. Sorry, man. I was on the phone with my mom. She’s...a mom.”

“Of course she is.” He rolled up to shake Jake’s hand. “Thanks for seeing me.”

“Any time. Come on in.”

Luke followed Jake into his office, where the chairs had been moved for him to settle in front of the desk on his own.

“So, what’s up, Luke?”

“I want to know where we are on Doug Harris. He’s trying to kill my guy, Jake. It needs to stop.” No sense pussyfooting.

“Yeah, the two shooters flipped on Harris. There are going to be charges filed.”

“What about the bartender?”

“Not yet.”

“Damn.” They should never have let him leave the restaurant. Two Senioritas had given them the guy’s name and address, but he’d skipped town. “Well, at least he won’t be here to poison Rory a third time.”

“No shit. I’m sorry about the whole thing with the truck. I just thought he was overreacting.”

“I get it. I thought he was just really fucked up the first time with the beer. That was some kind of date rape drug, I bet. The second time I guess the guy was improvising.”

“Well, you hadn’t made reservations, right?”

“No. Not at all.” Could you even make reservations at Two Senioritas?

“I was joking, man. Sarcasm, only one of the services we offer.”

“Oh.” Luke shook his head. “I didn’t know cops were allowed to have a sense of humor.”

“I’m an aberration, what can I say?”

“In many ways,” Luke agreed. “So what kind of proof do I need to get Harris arrested, Jake? This needs to be over.”

“I think the county district attorney is going to have him arrested, but they have to build a case.”

“Okay. What does he need?”

Jake scowled at him. “For guys like you and Rory not to get killed trying to force his

hand. The old guy is a nutbag. He'll fuck up."

"He's a fuck up. Seriously, I want this over. I have plans that don't include dealing with that asshole anymore." Big plans. Some sexual plans.

"Stop it. Just stop looking like that." Jake pointed a finger at him. "Harris sees y'all being gay as a weakness, so he'll come after you if you're not careful."

"Oh, I'd pay for that privilege." Was he baring his teeth?

"I know you would, but damn it, just stop pushing."

"Yeah, yeah." His phone beeped and so did Jake's.

Jake sighed, but pulled it out. "Let me check this."

"Sure." He grabbed his phone, opening the email notification. What showed up was a video—something shaky and blurry that cleared into a naked man laid out on the floor. A young guy who looked hella familiar.

Luke frowned, watching as the camera shook a little, then cleared again.

"This is our little initiate. He thinks he can run with the big boys. "

A foot shot out and the man was kicked, flipped over, and the birthmark on the back of the lean shoulder proved who it was.

"Rory."

Rory stared at the video as it played out on his phone, then grabbed his keys. He had to get out of here.

That was the only thing he could think to do. He headed out the door, thanking God Lori was getting her nails done for her lunch break.

He didn't know where he was going, but he knew his Mustang would take him there. It had to.

That video had gone to his parents, his sisters, the sheriff, Lori, all the LeBlancs.

Maybe he could go to the lake. His mom's family had a place at Lake Travis. The key was at the real estate management office.

In seconds, he was on I-30, barreling west, the road seeming to swim. Rory blinked, trying to clear up his vision. He couldn't do this. Not again.

No thinking. None. Just drive. Turn the radio up and drive.

Turn the radio up and fucking drive.

Chapter Thirty-One

L uke called Rory and it went straight to voicemail.

Jake had watched the video they'd both been sent, then sprung into motion.

He sent the email to his tech guys to try to figure out where the anonymous email had come from, then sent a deputy to collect Doug Harris.

The video showed incontrovertible truth that Harris had abused Rory. In a criminal way.

For a long minute or two, Luke had fought the urge to puke. Then he'd fought the urge to go kill Harris.

When he finally figured out Rory had gotten the email too, he started calling.

"Come on, babe. Answer your phone."

"Rory, we can deal with this, answer the phone."

"Call me, you asshole. I need to see you."

Then he called Matt. He needed a ride. He swore to God, he was going to try driving. He'd avoided it long enough.

His one leg was strong enough, and if it didn't work he'd trick out his old truck with

an assistive kit.

“Luke? Luke, what the hell is going on?”

“Jesus. You got it too?” He hadn’t seen past Rory .

“Yes. Mom too. What the fuck was that?”

“That was Rory being drunk and inappropriate. Those fuckers tried to ruin him, Matty.”

“Looks like they still are, Lu. Why would they send this around? They got careless and showed faces. This had to be Harris’ personal jack-off reel and he’s not savvy enough to take it to digital.”

“I don’t know. I don’t fucking know. Come get me. I can’t find him.”

“You still at Jake’s?”

“Yessir. Hurry.”

“I’m on my way, Lu.”

He sat there on his ass and called Rory again. “Call me, Rory. Please.” Luke hated to beg, but what if Rory was doing something really stupid? “I’m going to head to your place, look for you.”

He hoped Rory would be waiting for him. They needed to talk, needed to connect.

He wanted to see his lover, tell Rory this shit would never happen again. Harris was going down for this.

Once and for all.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was the best he could do.

Rory couldn't even look at his phone. He knew Luke had been calling, but the thought of talking to Luke made him want to vomit. It was one thing to tell someone what had happened. It was one thing to have seen a few graphic photo stills.

The video was like it had just happened all over again. Shit he didn't remember or even know about...

He made sure the curtains were pulled, the lights down, and he toed off his boots and curled onto the bed. He knew that he couldn't run forever, but he could hide for right now.

His phone rang again—Pop this time, and he just turned his phone off.

Then he turned on the TV for noise before going to the shower. He opened both complimentary bars of soap, the one from the sink and the one from the tub. He was going to scrub all his skin away .

He didn't know if it would help, if he was ever going to get clean, but he had to try.

The nice thing about a hotel was pretty much endless hot water and no one to interrupt you. He had so many apologies to make, so many hurts to soothe, but all he wanted to do right now was forget what he hadn't remembered.

He closed his eyes once he stepped into the spray, tilting his head up so water washed over his face. That way, if tears joined the spray, who would know?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Luke arrived at Rory's folks' place at about seven a.m. They'd talked the night before, both of them trying desperately to get a hold of Rory, who had left without even telling Lori where he'd gone.

Dread had lodged in Luke's belly all night, and even Matt wasn't laughing and teasing him. What if Harris had gotten to Rory and he was dead in a ditch somewhere? Luke was going to kill something himself if that was the case.

He was shocked as fuck to see his momma's truck parked in the drive.

"Have you heard from him?" Helen was right there at the door, Momma behind her.

"Momma?"

"I brought muffins and coffee."

"She's been a huge help," Helen said, tired lines etched around her mouth and eyes.

"I was hoping y'all had heard." Luke grabbed his arm crutches.

Matt unloaded his chair and brought it into the house before kissing Momma's cheek. "I got to get back. I have a load of hay coming in today. Holler at me when you know something." He took two muffins.

"You're not staying?" Momma said.

“No, ma’am. I’ll hold down the fort, Luke will find him and help.” That was the way they worked.

Helen nodded. “Be safe,” she told Matt. “If Harris is on the warpath, who knows who he’ll come after.”

Matt nodded, his face set in stone. “I’ve got the shotgun. That bastard comes after anyone and I’ll give him what for.”

That was also how they worked. No one fucked with their family.

And Rory was his motherfucking family. Full stop.

“No news at all?” Luke asked after Matt left them.

“No. He won’t answer either one of us.” Helen pursed her lips. “That bastard sent it to the newspaper. Lori fielded calls all afternoon yesterday.”

“Why would he do that, Helen?” Momma asked. “That makes no sense. You can see him...violating Rory.”

“Yeah.” Luke nodded, that rage building up in him again. “That had to be one for his vaults. So who had a vested interest in sending it to all of us?” He had turned on the military part of his brain because he had to.

“Rory. Rory’s the only one that gains from this, Luke.” Rory’s dad looked like hammered shit, the big man brought low.

“No way. I mean, if he had this video all this time, why wouldn’t he take it to the police? So who else wants Harris out of the way?” He was being ruthlessly logical, but Luke had already eliminated Rory as the sender. Not his style at all.

Besides, Rory said he couldn't remember any of it and he'd stared into his lover's eyes. Rory had believed it.

His momma and Rory's mom stared, both of them looking at each other with dawning horror. "What? What have you figured out?"

"Jeanette. Jeanette Harris is getting dragged through the dirt," Helen said, and Momma nodded.

"Word is she's been to a divorce lawyer in Greenville."

"This would take care of a lot of her troubles, Jim, if he got arrested for rape."

Jim stood up. "We're, what? A month off ten years? That's the statute of limitations in Texas. She's given us enough to have the son of a bitch sent to the pen."

Momma shook her head. "Makes divorce easier for sure."

Luke was going to lose his ever-loving shit. "Is she capable of digitizing this stuff?"

Jim snorted. "Hell, no. Her son, though, is an IT guy in Dallas."

"Fuck!" He slammed his hands on his thighs. "I need to find Rory!"

"He won't answer. I called Aislin down in Austin, but she hasn't heard from him."

"Where would he go?" Luke racked his brain. "He doesn't have any other properties he stays at, does he? I know he owns a place in Greenville that Harris was going to subdivide."

"Oh, honey, that place has to be stripped to the studs. It's full of cat pee and mice."

Helen shook her head. “Not my Rory.”

“Momma! Momma, he’s in Round Rock. He’s real drunk, but he says he’s in a hotel and safe.” Rowenna ran into the kitchen wearing SpongeBob jammies, tears on her cheeks. “I talked to him. He’s so sad!”

“Oh, thank God,” Helen said. “Luke?”

“My old truck is not gonna make it. I can drive it if I can get a vehicle.”

Momma shot him a worried glance. “Are you sure? Preacher can call someone from church.”

“I swear. He’s...he’s my lover, Momma. Mine. And he’s hurting and I need to be there to help. ”

“Take my car, Luke. It’s a comfortable ride and Aislin can drive it home when she comes home in a few weeks for Thanksgiving.” Helen grabbed her keys and pulled off a set. “Surely you can find that damned Mustang in a fancy-assed hotel parking lot.”

“There’s only one little pod of hotels in Round Rock proper, all off at the Rudy’s exit. If he’s not there, we have a house on Lake Travis. I’ll give you the address.” Jim scribbled that down. “I guarantee you he’ll go there eventually. He loves it down there.”

“Okay. Do you have it with an agency or something?”

Jim nodded.

“Can you call in a few hours and see if he’s picked up the keys? That way I know

where to get off 35.”

Helen handed him the keys to her car. “It’s got a full tank. Do you need to go back to your place to pack?”

“No. I put a go bag in Matt’s truck. It’s with my wheelchair by the door. Jim, can you help me get all that shit in the car?”

“Son...” Momma’s face was a thundercloud. “I worry about you driving so far on your own.”

“I’ll stop if I get too tired. I swear.” He couldn’t wait for anyone else, and Preacher didn’t need to be volunteering to drive either. “I can do this.”

“Stubborn boy. Promise me you’ll text. When the car is stopped.”

“I promise.” He would have to check in, anyway, see if there was any change in the news. “Love you, Momma. Call Matty for me?”

“Coward.” She shook her head, but smiled. “I’ll tell him, son, even though he’ll know somehow. I love you.”

He nodded, then clumped outside, Jim following him with the chair and bag. “It pulls a tiny bit to the right after sixty or so. If you need anything at all, you call us. ”

“Yes, sir.” It meant a lot that Rory’s people trusted him.

“Tell him that we... Shit...” Jim’s face turned a deep, harsh red. “You tell him we have his back and we will fucking take that son of a bitch down. All of them. They’ll burn.”

“I’ll tell him.” He shook Jim’s hand. “I’ll also tell him to call his momma.”

Jim laughed roughly, then helped him get his crutches into the car. “Be safe, son.”

“I will. Thank you for this.” Okay, it was time to hit the road. Luke had Tylenol, and he would stop for a Sprite.

He could do this.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Rory had been at the lake house for fifteen minutes before the knock to the door came, the sound so loud that it liked to split his head wide. Goddamn it.

He stumbled to the front door and wrenched it open, intending to lay some hurt on whatever asshole had dared to bother him, when he found a perky little gal in a Sigma Chi T-shirt and Longhorn yoga pants.

“Aislin. What are you doing here?”

“Missed you too, Rory. You look like shit. Let me in before the neighbors call the cops.”

“Why would they do that? It’s our house.” He stepped back to let her in, though. Lord, she was getting so pretty.

She rolled her eyes. “There may have been a party a few months ago. Mom doesn’t know, okay?”

“I’m not telling. Not my problem.”

“Yeah, yeah. I guess you got enough of those, huh?” She rolled her eyes. “You’re such a drama llama, bro.”

“Fuck you, Lynn.” He didn’t need this shit.

“Yeah, I love you too.” She came to him and hugged him hard. “Seriously. We’re going to kill them, Rory. We’re McConnells. We will eat their faces and make them bleed.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a goofy sorority girl?”

“Have you not seen *Scream Queens* ? We’re fierce.” She flipped her hair at him. “Besides, you’re not the only one going into law.”

“Lord. Isn’t that a movie?” he popped back. “Legally blind?”

“Blonde,” she snapped. She held up a tote bag printed with the H-E-B logo. “I am making you sober up food.”

“You cook now too?”

“I’m a woman of many talents.” She kissed his cheek. “Seriously. You’re going to have to call Mom eventually. She’s shitting a pink Twinkie.”

“I know. I can’t.” Not right now. He couldn’t face her.

“Well, no one would tell me exactly what happened, but I gather it must suck.” She marched past him and he trailed after her, kinda fascinated to see what she would do next.

“I’ll make migas . I hear your new boyfriend likes them.”

“Do you?” Luke did. “I don’t know that we’re going to still be...after this, you know. I don’t know that I’d want to be with me right now after seeing that.”

“Hmm. Well, I won’t watch it, whatever it is, bro.” She pulled out eggs, tortillas and

peppers. “Your guy, though, is on his way.”

He shook his head. “I’m not ready to see him.”

“So tell him.”

“He’s a Navy SEAL. You can’t tell him anything.” He sure as shit wasn’t ready for both LeBlanc brothers.

“Oh. Ro says he’s super-hot.” She hunted down a big bowl and a skillet.

“He is.”

“Cool. I’m dating this guy, but he’s not all that. He’s just someone my girlfriends like. ”

“Is that cool?”

“Probably not. I like him okay. I’m not leading him on. We haven’t ‘I love you’d or anything. Have you?”

“Yeah.”

“And do you?”

“Yeah. He does too. Love me.”

“Good.” She started cracking eggs, her movements kinda vicious and efficient. “So, he should see you then, since he’s, like, driving. I guess that’s a big deal?”

“He can’t drive all the way here, kiddo.”

She blinked. “Oh. I thought sure Pop said he was bringing down Mom’s Cadillac. I have to drive it back up at Thanksgiving.”

“I—” He had nothing. “My head hurts, Lynn.”

“Of course it does, dork. You probably have alcohol poisoning.” She sat him down at the table, then produced a cup of coffee and two Excedrin seemingly out of nowhere, a la Mary Poppins. She was as magical as Mom.

“You’re pretty cool.”

“I totally rock. Totally. Ro will too. She just has to get over herself and admit she’s an artist. It’s a thing. I learned about it in my psych class.”

“She is stuck in a family of doctors and lawyers,” Rory agreed. He took the water she offered so he could swallow the pills. No chewing them like the guy in *The Shining* .

“Go lie down on the couch. Breathe. I will bring delicious food.”

“It had better be the best ever.” He gave her a faint smile before climbing to his feet and staggering to the couch. Maybe he would close his eyes for a few minutes.

“It is. It’s all going to be okay. Trust me.”

God, she sounded just like Mom. That was as weird as it was comforting. He stretched out on the couch, all that sleep he didn’t get the night before rushing up to meet him. Sort of like a shovel to the head.

Chapter Thirty-Five

L uke sat in the driveway, shaking a little.

He'd done it. He'd made it to Austin. The Mustang was there, along with a wee Mazda. Rory was in there.

Too bad he wasn't sure his legs would get him out of the car.

A pretty little blonde bebopped out of the house, the vision of perfect co-ed, and came right up to the window.

"You are Luke. I'm Aislin, the middle child, which I hear you totally get.

He's sleeping on the couch. He napped, puked, ate, then crashed.

I was staying to make sure he didn't throw up and drown.

Apparently that's a thing. You need a hand? "

"I do. I'm kinda sore, so the arm crutches are totally out. My chair is in the trunk." He popped the trunk, glad he had a fancy, lightweight new wheelchair.

"I'm on it. You do okay on the drive?" Aislin proved herself to be a stud, hauling the wheelchair out without a bit of trouble.

"I did. Had to stop in Waco, which is always scary for a gay guy." We chuckled.

“West is too weird on and off. We’ll have to stop on the way back up and get a pecan roll.”

“Uhn. The cherry ones are my favorite.” She got the chair opened and set the brakes.
“Okay, what now?”

“Now you just stand by to make sure I don’t keel over.” He was getting pretty good at the hoisting thing. His upper body was on point.

“I am totally here for you.” She grinned at him, eyes just like Rory’s, blue as the Texas sky.

“Thanks. How did y’all end up with Rowenna as a sister?” he teased. “She’s like the inkblot of the McConnells.”

“She hasn’t figured out that she doesn’t have to compete with us yet, that’s all. Once she does? She’s going to be famous. No one gets her, that’s all.”

Okay, so he hadn’t expected this well-spoken, sharp, totally self-aware woman. Not at all. The McConnells raised some great children.

Luke breathed deep before grabbing the car door and the side panel. He heaved himself to his feet, teetering for a moment, and Aislin grabbed his arm.

“You turn toward the door and I’ll scoot the chair in behind you.”

“Great idea.”

“I’m a brilliant broad, just ask my brother.”

“I will. If he’s anything like my brothers he’ll say you’re a giant dork.” He eased into

the chair. Yay. “Okay, if you can grab my arm crutches?”

“I’m on it.” She grabbed them and his go bag. “You want your Coke?”

“It’s empty. If you want I can put it in the chair and take it in.”

“I’ll toss it. I can’t stay. I have a class.”

“Well, thank you for coming to sit with him.” He liked her a lot already. “We’ll holler about the car? ”

“Totally. Heck, I might leave it parked here until I come up. Safer than trying to get parking anywhere near campus. I’ll park it in the garage.”

“Works for me.”

Aislin helped him into the house, which was a two-story, goodie. Rory was sound asleep on the sofa, his face haggard, dark circles under his eyes.

Luke’s heart clenched, because the last few days had to have been a nightmare.

“Aw.” Aislin squeezed his shoulder. “I love the way you look at him. Okay. I have to go. Good luck, SEAL.”

“Thank you, honey. I appreciate you.”

“Thanks. See y’all at Thanksgiving!” She bounced out, phone already in her hand and active.

Luke rolled over to Rory and poked him right in the ribs. His lover sat straight up, pure panic in his eyes.

“Shh. It’s okay, babe. Get up and show me where the bathroom is, and we can go back to bed for a bit.” They would talk. A lot. Right now they were both wore out.

“You came.” Rory was on pure auto-pilot, moving him through the house to a first-floor master with an en suite, stumbling around like a zombie.

“Well, yeah, once I found you, you monumental asshole.”

Rory helped him from chair to pot, then back again so he could wash his hands.

“I just need to text the mommas and let them know I got here and you’re okay.”

Rory looked at him, nodded and headed into the bedroom to pull the curtains closed and the covers down.

Luke shot off a group text to his momma, Helen and Matt, letting them all know everyone was safe.

Will call tonight

, he added.

You’d better

Helen shot back.

Tell him we love him.

Will do

He would, too. Maybe not right away.

The bed was a monster, but the comforter looked like a cloud, and Rory was standing by, ready to help him up if he needed it.

“I like your sister,” Luke said, turning off the sound on the phone.

Rory nodded, refusing to meet his eyes. “Me, too.”

“Help me up, babe.” That way Rory had to touch him.

Rory nodded and reached for him, face crumpling when he grabbed his lover and tugged him down.

“And don’t think for one second that I don’t want you in this bed with me. That video changed nothing about how I feel about you, you understand?”

Rory slumped against him, hard sounds coming from him, his whole body shaking.

Luke held on, tears in his eyes, because, Jesus, his lover was hurting so bad. So bad.

Still, the only way to deal with shit was to deal with it. So he let Rory storm, then he finagled them both into bed. “I love you, Rory.”

“I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I know, but you are not to blame.” The motherfuckers who’d hurt an innocent kid were. “What they did to you was criminal, babe. He’s going down for this.” Luke didn’t even want that man’s name in the same room with Rory .

Once he made sure his lover slept and ate and slept a little more, then they’d make a plan, together. Right now, it was more important that Rory stood up as if some of the weight was off him, then helped Luke into bed.

He got rid of his boots so he could shimmy out of his jeans. When Rory cautiously slid between the covers with him, Luke reached out to pull his lover close.

Rory came to him, face hot and wet, buried against his throat.

“I got you, babe.” Luke stroked that silky golden hair. “I love you.”

“I’m sorry. I never wanted... Never.”

“Right. I mean, I can tell you were waiting to spring that on me. Hush, you. Unless you need to babble, and then go for it.”

“My head hurts. My...my fucking soul hurts, Luke. Everyone’s seen it. Lori, my people, your people, the news.”

“Lori fielded all that like a pro.” Luke paused, pondering. “I knew why you wanted to go after Harris. Like in an academic sort of way. I swear, if I hadn’t been with Jake when the video came in, I would have gone and killed him. Now I’ve seen it, I’m surprised you didn’t.”

“I was nineteen and scared. Now, I’m fully grown and I’m not scared anymore. I’m pissed off.”

“Jake has a warrant for the old fuck. I don’t know if they got him yet.”

“A warrant? Does the DA think they can make anything stick?”

“Yeah. I mean, the tape can only do so much. If they prosecute, they’ll want you to be there.”

“I’ll be in court every single fucking day.”

“Good deal.” He just kept touching, needing to feel Rory, there with him, alive and safe. Nothing sexual. Just comfort.

“You drove all this way. Your legs must be unhappy. ”

“I took some Tylenol. I can’t promise not to kick you if I cramp up.” His muscles were jumping in places, tiny electric shocks going through his legs.

“You need me to rub them?”

“If you have an urge, I am not gonna say no. That lotion Avery gave me is in my go bag.”

“You bothered to drive down here. It’s the least I can do.”

“Hey.” Luke caught Rory when he started to move away. “I would follow you anywhere, okay?”

“Even still?” Sometimes Rory was so young.

“Hell, yes. You’re the bravest man I know.”

Rory snorted. “I’m just... I can’t believe I trusted them. I was so stupid.”

“You were young and desperate to join the old boy network.” He propped his head up with his hands, watching Rory get up to grab his lotion. “I like to think it made you the take charge, balls to the wall guy you are, and I like him.”

“Yeah? Good, because I don’t know how to be anyone else.”

“Good.”

Rory returned to him, lotion in hand. “Oh, honey, your legs are just jumping like frog legs in a hot pan.”

“I needed to get to you, no matter what.”

“Thank you.” Rory looked up, rubbing lotion between his hands to warm it. “I just ran. I should have come to you, but I shorted out.”

“I get it. That sort of attack, you have to get somewhere safe.” Besides, Luke could only imagine how fucking mortified Rory was.

“They sent it to my mom,” Rory said. “My goddamned mother.”

“Not the brightest move. Moms are vicious.” He thought about his mom being right there at the McConnell place today, bringing muffins and cheering him on. “Your mom was totally like, take my car, go get my boy.”

“Dude, she gave you the Caddy? Impressive. She loves that car.”

“She insisted. My momma freaked.” Luke moaned when Rory began to rub at his calves. His thighs might kill him.

“I have you.” Rory was careful, knowing where to touch, how to make it better, make it right.

“Sore.” He panted through a wave of cramp that finally relaxed, leaving him a little limp.

“I’m sorry.” Rory leaned down and kissed his thigh, the touch gentle, careful as anything.

“Well, you can make it up to me later when we both feel better.” Luke raised his head to grin. “Rub.”

“Taskmaster.” Rory didn’t manage to smile, but the touch of his lover’s hands was gentle as hell.

“Yep.” He tensed when those hands found his left thigh. His right was stronger, and even with all the driving he was less sore there. That left leg was gonna be a bear the rest of his life. He hated it, but it could be way worse and Luke knew it. Even with the drama, these days he felt lucky.

“Tensing isn’t going to do you any good, honey.” Rory’s hands were like feathers, just skating over his skin again and again until the muscles relaxed.

“It’s totally not voluntary. Thank God for cruise control, at least between Waco and Austin. Man, it’s not a lot of country out there anymore. Everything is growing up.”

“The world is changing. That’s one of the reasons I bought the land, to keep our home, to keep our bit of Texas.”

“I like that. I mean, I really do.” He thought he actually got it now, and Luke was happy to do his part. Besides, the Rocking W was becoming a real thing, kind of. The barns were up, he had the one house almost livable.

The work blistered his hands and made him sleep hard at night, but it made Luke proud. “Did I tell you the VA finally called back? They’re wanting to work with us.”

“I told you they’d like the idea. It’s great PR.”

“Yeah. I mean, they’re super-enthusiastic. They assigned me a caseworker.”

“Excellent. When did you find this out?”

“Right before I went to see Jake, so I guess we haven’t talked.” Luke sighed, the knot in his left leg giving way. Goosebumps rose on his skin, “Oh, good. Babe. Good.”

“There we go. I knew it would happen.”

Luke wasn’t sure if Rory was talking about the VA or his leg, but it didn’t matter. Rory was talking, was there with him and breathing. They both needed this.

“You need me to return the favor and rub your neck?” Rory got a terrible headache if he drank more than three beers. Lord knew, Luke could tell he’d had way more than that.

Rory looked over to him, bloodshot eyes just miserable. “My head is going to bust like a ripe watermelon.”

Luke slid up to lean against the headboard. “Get up here.”

“You sure?”

“Rory, don’t be any dumber than you have to be, man.”

Rory chuffed out a tiny laugh and slid up between his spread legs, which Luke could do now that his muscles had relaxed some.

He reached up to press against the sore spots, because Rory always held his tension in the same spots. Oh, his poor lover. His poor man. “I want to kill him, Rory.”

“Me too. I’m so embarrassed. I’m never going to be able to go home.”

“Yes you are. You held your head high for years when everyone thought you were the one who got drunk and stupid. Now we know better.”

“Everyone knows better.” Rory’s head fell forward, giving in to his hands .

“How is that bad? They need to know that bastard deserves to be in jail. Now you can be a hero for buying all that land instead of just an obsessive weirdo.”

“I need this to be over. I’m so tired.”

“Rest, babe. What you need is sleep. That always brings perspective.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Listen to you.” Rory helped him scoot down and they both settled into one another, spooning. “Go to sleep.”

“Mmmhmm. Be here when I wake up,” Luke demanded.

“I can do that.” Rory nodded and pulled the blankets up over them.

Luke knew it was true. Rory wouldn’t run from him again, and if he did, well, Luke would just hunt him down again.

Really though, together they would figure it out. They had to.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Rory kept waking with a headache and going back to sleep, over and over.

Finally, blessedly, he woke up with a mouth that felt like a desert, but with a head that was clear enough to believe that he might not die. Luke was sitting in the wheelchair across the room, pulled up to a little table and tapping away on a laptop. “Hey, babe. How you feeling?”

“Hey. I need to brush my teeth. I feel like an army goose stepped over my tongue.”

“Ew. I set up all the stuff in the bathroom. You kinda packed willy-nilly.” Those dark eyes watched him carefully, assessing his condition, he thought.

“I more stopped at the Walgreens than packed.”

“Ah. Well, at least you got a toothbrush.”

“Yeah.” He rose, a little unsteady, then walked to the bathroom, his head blessedly calm. Once he’d brushed his teeth, he stuck his head back out of the door. “There’s a teak shower seat. Want to?”

“I do. Will you join me? ”

“Yeah. If you want me.” He didn’t want the world to have changed.

“Shit yes.” Luke rolled his eyes. “Maybe you were too hungover when I told you

yesterday. I'll always want you."

"Shut up. You know what I mean, asshole."

"I do." Luke rolled back, then turned on a dime, that fancy new chair super neat.

"Look at you, stud. I like it. You're swift."

"I know, right? The newest in fashionable wheels. Light but strong." Luke slid past him into the bathroom. "Man, I am sore. Help me?"

"Any time." He got Luke stripped down, then shucked his clothes. "We have a tankless, so the water heats up fast."

"Schmancy," Luke said. "I like it. I looked into the tankless for the main house at Rocking W, and I think we can just swing it."

Luke reached up, so Rory leaned down and helped Luke out of the chair, slipping him right into the shower and down on the bench. He would have to stand behind Luke, or in front of him, but that was okay. He was feeling better already.

"Where do you want me, honey?"

"Anywhere I can get you." Luke chuckled for him. "How about you wash me and I'll wash you?"

The immediate thing that came to mind was, I live for this shit , but what came out was, "Sounds like a plan."

"Cool." Luke held his hands up to the spray. "I like your shower better, though."

“Where we can sit together, you mean?”

“Mmmhmm. So easy to ride that way.”

His face went hot and he told himself to stop it. He was going to be shy now? Seriously? He was the king of innuendo, of flirting, and Luke had seen every inch of him, for God’s sake.

“You okay, babe? I’m sorry. Too soon, right?” Luke did understand PTSD. That could come in handy.

“I’m fine. Just being a dipshit.” Just hurting, like the attack had happened yesterday, which it hadn’t. It was long over. Years.

He would give anything at all not to have opened that video file.

“Hand me the soap,” Luke said. “I can help.”

He hoped so. Rory hoped Luke’s touch would wash away what he hadn’t been able to. Maybe Luke could get his head back on right. God knew Rory loved the man.

“You’re all scratched up.”

“I was dirty.”

Luke nodded. “I know it felt that way. After the explosion, when I was all bloody and not all of it was mine... I obsessed about getting clean to the point where the nurses avoided me, not wanting to have to scrub.”

“Yeah? I just... I didn’t remember. It was better.”

“I bet. A terrible thing was done to you. Sometimes ignorance is bliss. For real.” Luke soaped up both hands and started at his chest, washing him with easy, circular motions.

“No shit. I never want to see it again.” He knew he’d have to, to put those bastards in jail, but that didn’t mean he wanted to.

“I’m with you the whole way, Rory. You’re not alone. Not one bit.” Luke scrubbed his belly and hips, then his cock, just a washing, nothing else. “Turn around.”

He turned, laughing softly when Luke kissed the small of his back. “No tramp stamp.”

“Nope. Just this surprisingly delicate skin.” Luke reached around to wash the fronts of his legs, cheek against his spine.

“I love you. I feel like...” He took a deep breath. “Well, to be honest, I don’t know what I feel like. I always know what to do next. Always. ”

“This was a huge shake-up.” Luke paused for a long moment. “It might be psychobabble, but I bet this took you back to being nineteen for a while. To that freaked-out kid.”

“For a while? Sometimes I swear I’m twelve years old, standing in front of the high school and wishing God would just rescue me.”

Luke washed his back, scrubbing in long strokes. “Was it really scary? It had to be. I know when I went to basic I was sick for a week.”

“I always knew I was weird. This just drilled it in. It wasn’t until law school that it stopped.

There, no one cared. I was just another thing to chew up and spit out.

Walking into that high school, knowing my balls hadn't even dropped yet, and I'd have to take gym class with seniors? That was hell on earth."

"Jesus." Luke moved down to his butt, and he thought maybe those fingers lingered a little. "I never even thought of that."

"Yeah. Johnny was there after that first gym class. He glared at that little pod of fuckers in the showers, picked the biggest one and kicked him right in the nuts." Rory grinned, then started chuckling.

"He told me that his daddy said that was the secret to a good and peaceful life. Pick the biggest asshole, beat the fuck out of him, and move on."

Luke laughed out loud, squeezing Rory's butt cheeks playfully. "That sounds like Preacher. Seems like you took it to heart, too. Still doing it now."

"It's worked well. Never let it be said I can't learn a lesson."

"Well, learn this, Rory McConnell. I love you."

He turned so he could meet Luke's eyes. "I know. I didn't run from you. I ran from me."

"I can handle that. But we're in this together. I support you just like you do me. "

"Yeah. I hope you don't end up regretting it. Me."

"Hey, I hope every day that I don't end up embarrassing you." Luke turned him back around and handed him the soap. "My turn."

“Yes, please.” He grinned and lathered his hands. “I live for this shit.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

L uke liked the lake house a lot. It was a little fancy, but the view was amazing and the barbecue pit was a dream come true.

The third morning, though, Matt was calling him. “You ever coming home, Lulu?”

“Yep. We’ll leave midday today.” He knew he needed to get back to work, and Jake had texted about some legal shit.

“Good. How’s he doing? He lost his mind?”

“He’s hurting, but better every day.” Rory was bruised but not broken.

“Good on him. Tell him I said we got his back.”

“I will.” His family never ceased to amaze him. “Everything okay on your end?”

“Same old same old. Life. I think we got a bonus horse dropped off at your place and there’s a dog wandering around. She’s had puppies, but I can’t catch shit.”

“Rory said he’d seen a pregnant dog. I’ll get on it when I get back.” Life was never dull in the country. “It’ll be good to get home. I imagine I’ll stay at Rory’s tonight, come back in the morning. ”

“Sure, man. Hell, he needs you there, you stay. You can come back for feeding and shit.”

“You rock, Matty. Thanks for understanding.”

“No prob. Just keep in mind his family is losing their collective shits. They’ll want to see him.”

“I hear that. He’s called home. Helen was pissed.”

“I bet. Can you imagine Momma if we disappeared like that?”

“She called this morning,” Luke said.

“Right. Did you get a lecture?” Matty sounded damn near gleeful. “She’s been crawling up my ass for days.”

“She blistered my ears.” Luke shook his head ruefully. “She wants lunch this week to make up for Sunday.”

“Oh man. Take her to Red Lobster in Greenville.”

“Shit, man. I’m getting home and I’m not driving farther than the Rocking W for a month. I’m still sore.”

“So offer to buy for Preacher, too. He loves their biscuits.”

“Yeah. I bet Rory would drive too.” Actually, he’d put money down on Rory coming to lunch at Momma’s. Those two got along like a house afire.

“I bet he would. He’s the fishy type.”

Rory was actually a brisket-loving Texan, but he liked his shrimp, too. “You want anything from West?” Luke asked.

“Pecan rolls. Raisin bread. Jalapeno kolaches—six of ’em. No, get me a dozen.”

“Damn. You eating for two?”

“Well, I been doing twice the work.”

Oh, jerk face . “I’ll get you a bunch of shit.”

“Good deal. I figure I’ll share with you when you’re working.” Matty was laughing at him. “Come home, Lulu. Please. We’re busy.”

“We just have to grab a bite and close up the house.” He was ready, and he hoped Rory was, too. Austin was...busy.

“Drive safe. ”

He didn’t have to worry about that. Rory loved that Mustang. He had no doubt the Caddy would make it back safe too. Miss Aislin was a force of nature.

All of the McConnells were, he guessed—top to bottom.

“See you in the morning. I’ll text when we get back.”

They said their goodbyes about the time Rory came into the room. “Mom’s car is safe in the garage. I shudder to think how many miles are on it when Aislin brings it home.”

“I know. It’s been safe while we were here, but I bet she takes it on a tour.”

“She loves to go to Fredericksburg to shop.” Rory bounced on his toes. “You all set?”

“I packed us both and checked all the rooms.”

“The cleaners will catch anything we missed.” Rory gave him a crooked smile. “Let’s go.”

“You ready to go home?”

“Nope, but that’s never stopped me.”

Luke wheeled over to tug Rory down for a hug. He’d found the chair much easier than the arm crutches in this house. Plenty of room to move.

Rory nuzzled his jaw, the move damn near catlike.

Speaking of. “Man, the cats are going to be pissed at you.”

“I’ll tell them it’s your fault.”

“Me?” No way was he gonna let Mal take it out on him.

“Totally. I’m totally going to lie.”

“Bitch.” Luke pinched Rory’s butt. “Matty wants like fifty bucks worth of shit from West.”

“Are you starving him? How did he take care of himself before you showed up?”

“No idea. Momma, probably. She makes casseroles.” King Ranch, broccoli chicken, chicken spaghetti...

“Moms are magical things. Seriously. Mine’s never going to cook for me again.”

“Bullshit. She’s making bacon right now.” He wheeled toward the bedroom with Rory on his lap. The new chair wasn’t quite as responsive with two of them. “Did I tell you Momma brought her muffins and coffee the day I left?”

“You did. Bonnie is amazing. I adore her.”

“I know. I do love that about you.” He dumped Rory in the bedroom. “Bags.”

“Yes, boss. Get your ass to the car.”

“Going. I’ll grab my arm crutches.”

“Already in the backseat, honey. Just you and the chair.”

“Just you and me and the chair.” It was an important distinction.

Rory gave him a long look, then nodded. “Of course, you doof.”

“I just want to make sure we’re together.”

“We so are.” Rory hauled bags out, then came to help him over the doorjamb.

“Thanks. Easier not to have to stand up and do it.”

“I know. You’re missing your fun with Avery.”

“I am! Damn.” Luke grinned. “Shit. I need to text him.”

“Like he doesn’t know. Everyone knows.”

“I guess so.” Luke would still send him a note. His session was late in the afternoon

so he was still in the realm of politeness.

“Sorry. I’m harping on it. It’s one of my shitty qualities, I know.”

Luke raised an eyebrow. “Harping? Babe, you’ve had a shitty week. You’re allowed to dwell.”

“Yeah? Because I’m nervous. I’m going and I’m going to bluster through, but I’m fucking scared. What if he comes to the office? Seriously, what will I do?”

“Kill him?” Luke laughed when Rory glared at him. “Kick him right in the nuts and call Jake.”

“I bet Lori does both of those.”

“No shit on that.” Jesus, that woman was scary. Word was that she had dealt with reporters and Jake, with looky-loos asking questions and the entire North Baptist Ladies’ Auxiliary.

She was also a wiz at filing permits and browbeating contractors. She was doing two hours of work a week in exchange for free horse boarding. Lori could get more damned work done in two hours than most people could in forty.

They got everything, and both of them, into the car, after locking up behind them. Time to get a move on. Luke grabbed Rory’s hand when they’d settled. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“No it’s not, but I’m going to deal.” Rory shot him a glance. “You and me? We’re gonna be fucking amazing.”

“We are.” What could he say? He believed that with his whole heart. “My PT in the

hospital used to tell me I had to get used to the new normal. You make that easy.”

“The new normal. You. Me. Cats. The Rocking W.”

“Uh, what’s your position on dogs?”

“I approve, if there’s someone home often enough to let them out. Why?”

“Well, Matty has spotted that momma dog. We’ve got us some puppies.” Luke liked the idea.

“Huh. Ranches need dogs.”

“They totally do.” He thought about what Mal and the girls would make of puppies and chortled.

“You’re thinking evil thoughts. You have to share.” The Mustang roared to life.

“I was thinking of Mal versus puppies.” Luke knew who would win. Just like her dad, Mal would rule.

“Oh, man... That would be something else.”

“You know it. Dogs would be great at the ranch house, though, especially if we can train them as comfort dogs or helpers.” He loved the possibilities he was discovering .

Rory glanced at him as they pulled through the circular drive. “I love that, you know? How excited you are.”

“Talk to me after we’ve been open a year.” The words warmed him, though, and Luke smiled.

“I intend to.”

Well, okay. “Like at night when we get home?” There. He’d tossed his cards in as well.

“Every single one. And on weekends when I come to help out, except for the one Sunday a month that’s just ours.”

Luke blinked. “You are the man with the plan, babe. Whatever will we do on these Sundays?” This was the best game ever.

“Love on the cats. Cook weird and decadent food. A metric fuckton of sex. Possibly a movie or two.”

“I like movies,” he teased. “The cats are okay. Ow! No titty twisters when you’re driving.”

“The impressive part is that I found it on the first try.”

“Well, you do know my nipples pretty well.” Rory seemed to be a fan of them, in fact.

“I may be the world’s foremost expert in them,” Rory agreed.

“Probably.” He couldn’t think of anyone else who had ever noticed them, come to that. “I like your dick, personally.”

“Yeah? I think it deserves a fan.”

“I could start a website, but that might be awkward.” Luke was laughing now, unable to help himself. Rory never took too long to bounce back. Resilient bastard.

“I think we’ll just spend some quality time with it, you and me and our penises.”
Rory grinned, eye lines just barely showing. “That could be a song.”

“Don’t sing.”

“No, seriously.” Rory began to yodel. “You and me! And quality time. With. Our. Peniseseses!”

Oh, Jesus .

“Well, it’s never gonna be a breakout pop hit.”

“Maybe a gay anthem.”

“Oh, God. You’ll be the Lee Greenwood of queers.”

“I’m totally cuter than Lee Greenwood. Let me be the queer Robert Redford or Jon Bon Jovi or Keith Urban or something.”

“Does Robert Redford sing?” Luke liked that the choices were all mostly blond, though.

They hit the highway and Rory cranked up the music, letting them both bellow like bull moose.

They were heading home to face whatever shitstorm was coming and take that motherfucker down. It was time for them to have their lives back.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Looking Momma in the eye was tough, but it was nothing—nothing—to going to the office and seeing Lori, who walked right up to him and decked him, hard.

“Hey, honey.” Okay, that hurt. He rubbed his jaw, wiggled it.

“Fuck you! You bastard! You scared the piss out of me!”

“I’m sorry.” He was. He’d just shorted out, hopped in the car and run. “I lost my mind for a few days.”

“I was so scared.” She came to him and hugged him, and he held on. She’d been his friend forever, his right hand, his Lori.

“I-I didn’t know what to do.”

“I can only imagine. I dealt with things on this end. You owe me a raise.”

“Assuming we ever get another client, you’re on.”

“You have two new briefs to read.” She smoothed her hair into place. “You also have a mountain of paperwork to sign, two charity events to attend in Dallas next week and a sheriff who wants to talk to you very badly.”

“Right.” He looked down and Lori stamped her chunky high heel on the floor.

“No.”

“No?”

“No. You will not be ashamed. That motherfucker did this to you. You did nothing to be ashamed of. You are my fucking hero. I’ll go with you, if you need someone to take notes, but you’re going to go with your head held high, do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He had to smile for her, because she was fierce and in his corner, and he loved her. “Have they brought him in? Last I heard they issued a warrant.”

“They found him in Rockwall this morning. Jake called. They’re bringing him in.”

“Okay. They don’t need me for that.”

“No. There’s a tape. There’s faces.” She got this grin that was pure-D evil. “And there’s Chris Baker, who flipped. He was holding the camera. Harris is going to burn.”

“Good. So what do they need me for?”

“Well, it will go faster if you press charges, and Jake needs everything you can remember, regardless. He’s worried about you, hon.”

“Right. I’ll call today. Any media stuff?”

“Who cares about a gay lawyer in the sticks, honey? I told the ones that called that they had to talk to the sheriff.”

“Oh, good deal.” Relief made him sag a little. “I mean, I’m not above going out there and pretending to be a scandal survivor, but if I don’t have to, yay.”

“Just go sit at your desk and know it’s over, Rory. You did it. You brought the king to his knobby little knees.”

He didn’t know if he remembered how not to plan vengeance. He guessed he’d have to learn. He had Luke and the Rocking W, and with two new dossiers to look at, he wasn’t hurting for work .

Besides that, he owned half the county. Land was always good, investment-wise. For the taxes, if nothing else. Some of his tenants were living rent-free. Mrs. Leeman did bees, though, and he had honey out his wazoo, and he got a side of beef butchered twice a year from old man Clawson.

Look at him, the small-town real estate mogul.

He reached for his phone and called his lover.

“Hello?” Luke sounded a little out of breath, which meant heavy lifting.

“I don’t need anything. Just to hear your voice. I’ll let you go.”

“Hey, no, I could use a breather.” Luke perked up a lot in just a few seconds. “I was moving a bale.”

“I just got in the office. They arrested Harris.”

“This morning? Because Matt didn’t hear anything on the scanner last night.”

“Yeah, they found him in Rockwall.” He felt a little lightheaded.

“Holy shit. You think the wife put in an anonymous tip?” Luke sounded about as stunned as he felt. His lover was right there with him.

“Who the fuck knows. I don’t care. I mean, I do, but I don’t, you know?”

“I get you. You need me to come into town, babe? I can.”

“Look at you, being all mobile.” He smiled, feeling his chest let go a little. “No. No, I have a shit ton of work. I’ll probably have Lori grab me lunch from the diner and bring it back. I just needed to talk to you a second.”

He imagined it would happen more than once today.

“You know I’m here. Anything you need.” Luke was a freaking tower of strength, which was amazing, considering how torn up he’d been when he first came home.

“You. I need you. You want me to pick up pizza on the way home?”

“I do. I could eat three.” Luke chuckled, the sound warm. “Got a double load of shit to do before I can quit.” That didn’t sound like a complaint.

“Well, get to it. I’ll call later. Love you.”

“Love you too. Holler if you need me.” Luke hung up, the line going flat.

“I will.” He totally would. Rory laughed at himself and opened up his laptop.

Time to get to work.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

L uke scrawled his signature on the form the inspector handed him. The main ranch house was the last thing to get approval, as he'd had to improve the older bathrooms with ADA-approved materials and layouts.

That was it, though. They were done. Fifteen fucking months and they were done. "Thanks for coming out," he told the inspector, Lane, who was very used to his face now.

"Congratulations, buddy." Lane clapped him on the shoulder, careful not to tip him over. He was on his crutches a lot lately. He had too much shit to do to get up and down all the time.

The chair was mostly reserved for nights at home when he was Rory, who didn't give a shit if he was too tired to do more than sit on his ass for an hour or two.

"Thanks." He beamed, because the place looked like a cross between a vacation lodge and a really swank rehab facility. "I'm pleased as punch. We have two clients coming in next week."

"Already? Good on you! I bet you do a shit load of good. How many horses you running? "

"I've got two riding horses and four rescues who need a lot of love. A donkey. A llama." The momma dog he and Rory had finally found in a hay barn wandered up, her teats swinging. "This lady. We named her Mother Goose."

“Oh, that’s great. How many pups?”

“Twelve. You need a shepherd pit mix pup? They’ll be ready in about six more weeks.”

“I totally do. I need a new ratter, a male. Miss Bisby is getting on in age.”

“You got it. There’s a real energetic boy who looks like his daddy, I reckon. More pit than shepherd like this girl.”

“Mark him for me, then. I’ve got to get on, but I’ll come by with the missus and check him out in a few weeks.”

“Will do.” They shook hands one more time before Lane left. Luke pulled out his phone and tapped out a note. Number 3 pup for Lane . Then he called Rory.

“Hey, honey, I’m going to be home in twenty. How’s it going?”

“We got approved.” He fist-pumped even if Rory couldn’t see him, making Mother dance. “Sorry, girl. C’mere.”

“All right! I told you it would happen this time. I’ll grab a bottle of champagne and head to the ranch. Call Matt.”

“I will. Love you.” He hung up just to call Matt’s number.

“Yo.”

“We got approved. Rory’s bringing bubbly. Come over?”

“Be there in ten.” He knew Matt was grinning—he could hear it. “I knew it five

minutes ago, Lulu.”

“I know, but I had to call.” He wanted to tell the whole damned world.

“Call Preacher. He’ll want to know. See you soon.” Click.

Asshole.

He dialed Preacher next, then John, who had done a website for him and walked him through setting up secure Wi-Fi and shit .

By the time that was done, he was fucking exhausted and his lover’s pickup was rolling down the gravel drive.

Luke headed back in to find his chair. His legs were shaking, the adrenaline getting to him. Damn, this was really going to happen. His fucking dream.

Rory came in with a bag of tacos, some limes, a six-pack of Coronas and a bottle of champagne. Impressive. A tower of efficiency, his Rory.

“Hey, babe.” He wheeled out to the big porch and waited, grinning like a newborn fool.

“Hello, Mr. Rancher Man. I come bearing Rocking W-warming gifts.” Rory was all grins. The weekends at the ranch were making his lover bronzed, buff in a way no gym ever could, and even with a hat, that hair was going white-blond.

“Hey, lover. Get over here and congratulate me before Matt comes.”

“Ooh.” Rory’s eyes lit up. “Are you talking hugs and frenching congratulations, blow job congratulations or riding you like a prize pony congratulations?”

“Butthead.” Luke held his arms wide open. “Kiss me and we’ll hold off on the rest until Matt’s gone.”

“Mmm. I like the idea of christening the place.”

Rory kissed him hard, and it made Luke’s voice hoarse when he said, “Like we haven’t made love in here.”

“Not in here after it passed inspection!”

“True.” They definitely needed to remedy that.

The scratch of tires on gravel had them laughing, Matt breaking up the moment. That was okay. Matty had as much to do with this as they did.

Rory settled on his lap, making huge, foul sex noises as Matty walked up the steps.

“I will kill you, man.” Matty’s grin was wide, though, and he held his twin’s gaze. They’d done it. It was going to be real.

“We did it,” Luke said aloud, mainly for Rory’s benefit. “The VA guy starts Monday, and our first clients arrive Wednesday.”

“Well, I guess we have some busy days ahead of us.” Matt sniffed. “Do I smell tacos?”

“How does he do that?” Rory asked.

“We LeBlancs have excellent sniffers.” Luke wrinkled up his nose.

“Good to know.” Rory kissed his jaw, his lips moving over his skin.

“You two stop it,” Matty growled. “Where’s the grub?”

“Champagne first.” Rory hopped up, headed for the kitchen. He looked over his shoulder first, with an evil grin. “Don’t worry, Matt. I’ll serve it in a red Solo cup, that way you’ll know what to do with it.”

“Yep. I will shove it up your smart ass, McConnell. How the hell did I end up stuck with you as a future in-law?”

“You were a very, very good little boy?”

Luke hooted. “I’m the bad twin, which is how I got you.”

“Exactly! You know how long I looked for my own personal demon?” Rory disappeared, laughing as he went, and Matty shook his head.

“Lord have mercy, that man is something else. I bet he keeps you busy for a long damn time.”

“That’s the plan, Matty. I swear, it’s never a dull moment.” He grabbed Matt’s hand before he could walk into the house. “Hey. Thank you. For everything. I never could have imagined this life, but I could never ask for better.”

“I love you, Lulu.” Matt squeezed his hand, then headed in.

Simple as that. He grinned, shook his head. “I love you too, asshole.”

Then he rolled himself in so they could all celebrate.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:32 am

M att rolled his shoulders and tossed down a bale of hay. Fuck, it was cold. Bitter.

January was hell.

“Mr. Matt?”

“Yeah, Rick?” He went to lean over the edge of the trailer, looking down at the kid in the wheelchair. Both legs were gone above the knee, along with damn near half the guy’s face.

“I’m here to help. Luke said I could. That there was stuff I could do.”

“Sure. Go get you a horse blanket from the tack room, then grab that hay bale and toss it by the barn door. We’ll stack after.” He’d learned from Luke to act as if these guys could do anything they set their minds to. They would let him know if it was too much.

“Yessir.” Rick beamed, those scars pulling all up.

“Holler when you get back so I don’t hit you with a bale, ’kay?”

“You got it.” Rick was mobile with that chair, and Matt had to say that Luke had planned all the walkways well.

Luke was watching out the office window, headphones on as he made some calls. Soon, they were going to have to split more time with Miss Lori, sure as shit.

He waved to his brother, who waved back, giving him the 'one more minute' finger.

Yeah. Right. One more minute his ass.

The red tape with this place was endless, between insurance and the VA and the rescue groups and the nonprofit donations...

Matt took a deep breath. Between this and his breeding operation, they were so far in the black he didn't think they'd ever need anyone to help out again. Money-wise, anyway.

He imagined Luke would need Rory forever and that suited him to the bone. McConnell was a hard worker, a good man and a surprisingly great brother-in-law.

Matt smiled, a little sad for maybe the two seconds he could spare to self-pity. So, Luke had what he probably never would. So what?

The thing that mattered here was his brother was back in the land of the living, loving his life and his man. Matt really just wanted his twin happy.

Well, that and his horses.

It was damn hard to cowboy up without a horse.