



Wrangled and Tangled (Raven Peak Ranch #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Spencer Tritt

I've always loved three things more than anything: Raven Peak Ranch, my daughter, and my garage.

I've never gone lookin' outside my own hometown for bigger and better things.

So when the rodeo comes into town, and my sister drags me along with her, I'm not expecting to be thrown into the orbit of Buckin' Bronco Champion, Heath Macabe.

His golden brown eyes draw me in, and I can't help but fall.

Too bad, after an incredible night, I find out he's engaged...

And he's still naked, in my bed.

Heath Macabe

The rodeo has always been my home.

As the Buckin' Bronco Champion I've always had plenty of attention from fans, and I've never been too picky about my partners.

Men, women, it doesn't matter to me as long as it's consensual, but the moment I meet Spencer Tritt, that all changes.

Because for the first time in my adult life... I find myself imagining a future with someone.

Too bad my PR manager decided to set up a fake engagement without askin' me first...

And he kicks me to the curb.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

There's somethin' about a man in dark wash jeans and leather chaps that fucks with the chemistry of my brain. Which means I most certainly shouldn't be at the rodeo. Not with all these cowboys looking fine as hell and my libido pounding at the door.

Lucy cheers along with the lively crowd as she grabs my hand, pulling me up the metal stairs to find seats. She's my sister, my best friend, and the only reason I'm here. Her boyfriend, Levi, is one of the social media managers for the arena.

Lucy usually sits with the gaggle of girls waiting for the riders to notice them. They'll sit there and look pretty, waiting for one of them to offer up a fun night. She waves as we make our way past them, and they return the wave with more enthusiasm.

She begged me to come tonight—bribed me with cotton candy and free beer, more accurately. She's been lonely without Levi since he's been traveling with the rodeo, though she won't come out and say it.

Women sit up straighter when we pass, pressing their chests out and smiling at me. Nodding my hat their way, I smile and continue behind Lucy.

“One day, Spencer,” she leans over to whisper in my ear once we're seated. “You're gonna find someone, and all these poor ladies will be very disappointed.”

“That day doesn't have to be today,” I smirk, looking at her speckled cheeks. Her deep green eyes squint, perfectly manicured brows dipping in toward each other. She slaps my thigh and shakes her head before looking down at the arena. “You promised me beer.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” she says, still looking at the metal fence in a ring serving as a barrier between bull and spectator. When she spots her boyfriend, she whistles loud enough to turn the crowds roar to a whisper, and heads swing our way.

Tucking my neck so the brim of my hat covers my face, she hollers, “Do your thing, baby!”

Peeking out from under my hat, I can see Levi’s bright, wide smile and wave to Lucy as she melts beside me and conversations gradually start up again.

“Tell me why I came out with you again?” I sigh, rubbing my fingers over my wiry mustache and beard. My daughter would have jumped at the chance to come to the rodeo with her aunt. Briar lives to see Lucy out in the wild.

“Because you love spendin’ time with your sister,” she quips, “and because I can get you free beer.”

Snapping my fingers and holding my empty hands out, we look at each other, and she laughs, slapping her hands in mine. “Okay, I’m going, I’m going.”

Jumping up from her seat, she walks down the bleachers to where Levi is waiting at the bottom for her to wrap herself around him.

They’re cute together, and lord knows she deserves some good in her life.

With both of our parents passing right before her graduation, she’s been looking for someone who feels like home.

I, on the other hand, have no intentions to date anyone.

I don’t have the time anyway. Between my daughter, the garage, the ranch...

I can't ask anyone to get jumbled in that mess.

I've got a routine down, balancing all of my responsibilities and lending a helping hand at the ranch.

Even without all of those things, the dating pool here in Goldspur Ridge is pretty slim at my age.

I know thirty-four isn't old, but a small town like this doesn't have an abundance of available people running around, especially for a dad with a teenage daughter.

Though Lucy says I'm picky, and Briar says I'm too stuck in my ways.

Either way, starting a relationship while running a business isn't for everyone.

It doesn't help any that the garage was almost in financial ruins when Granddad died the year prior.

Lucy hasn't ever wanted anything to do with Goldspur Gears—she's not opposed to running a garage, the ranch takes up most of her time, and it's where her heart is, along with the rest of our family.

The two of us have things pretty much under control now, I help out on the ranch when I can, and she doesn't mind doing all the tax stuff for the garage in return.

It took us nearly all year to get the garage back on track, repairs to the equipment, and a full office renovation.

Now, you'd never know it was almost just another shell of memories for some big corporation to come in and tear it down for a strip mall.

“Fresh from the ice bucket,” Lucy’s cheery voice pulls me from my thoughts. She has two beers in her right hand, cotton candy dangling from her fingers, and in her left hand she’s got a cherry soda and a tray of nachos on her palm.

“Damn, we just ate,” I remark, eyeing her nachos with loads of cheese, jalapenos, and meat.

“It’s the rodeo, plus, beer makes you hungry, and I hate to break your little heart but, cotton candy ain’t gonna cut it,” she nods with a hmph and sits down, pulling one of the nachos from the pile and shoving it in her mouth.

“Easy, killer,” I laugh, “I thought those were for me.”

She rolls her eyes and shoots me daggers, “So it’s okay for you to eat again, but not me?”

Fuck me, she’s in a particularly sassy mood tonight.

“I relent,” throwing my hands up in mock surrender, she purses her lips and nods as the announcer comes over the speakers to start off the show.

Taking a long chug from my first beer, I let the taste linger before shoving a piece of blue cotton candy into my mouth and letting it dissolve on my tongue.

The first performance of the night pops off, complete with fireworks, and the crowd shoots to their feet. The ambiance is infectious. It’s hard not to join in with their stomping and hollering as competitions begin.

Most people come to see the bull riders and their eight seconds of fame. I’m not saying what they do is easy. I know I don’t have the guts to do it myself. There’s something about watching a person being bucked on a Bronco that captivates my

attention.

The horse in itself is a master of muscle.

Watching them buck and writhe while their rider does their damndest to hang on, it's a sight.

Women are up first, and I think they might give the men a run for their money tonight.

Their thighs squeeze the belly of the horse, and their grip is tight on the riggin'.

The buzzer sounds, and another rider emerges from the chute, horse jumping and kicking. Dirt and dust fly from the arena as the rider stays on for a full eight seconds, and the crowd goes nuts.

The smell of beer and earth invades my nostrils, and I holler along with the rest of 'em. The woman hops off the horse, arms thrown up in the air in victory. Her vest is patched with too many to count, which means she's most likely sponsored by many corporations within the rodeo circuit.

I've downed both beers and eaten all the cotton candy Lucy bought. The nachos are long gone, and with the lull in action, she disappears to get more.

The crowd roars again, and women jump up and down as Lucy returns.

Standing so she can slide by—and so I can peek at the arena to see what all the hubbub is about—a man dressed in dark jeans, brown chaps, a light blue button-down shirt, and a dark brown hat waves his arms in the air as the crowd's volume grows to almost deafening.

His nearly black hair is tied into a low knot at the back of his head, and his smile is so bright against his golden skin. He's handsome, that's for sure, but I don't follow the circuit any longer to really know who he might be.

Women scream, stomping their feet as he passes them by, winking in their general direction.

"That's Heath Macabe," Lucy says with an eye roll. "He's the current Buckin' Bronco champ."

"Ah," I say with a nod and raised brow.

"He's also a slut," she crosses her arms and sits down, chugging her own beer. I can sense there's a story there, but I'm not gonna ask.

"Slut shamin', little sis?" I joke, sitting down with her and bumping her shoulder.

"Wouldn't be so bad if he weren't so damn arrogant," she grumbles, looking up at me with fierce eyes.

"What'd he do to you?" I don't care if he's the president of the damn rodeo. If he did something to my Lucy Loo, I'll kill him.

She shakes her head, sighs, and drops her shoulders. "Not me, Levi."

"Okay..." I wait on her to tell me whatever it is she's got circling her brain. When she doesn't elaborate, I twist back around to where the men riding broncos have started. After a few entries and one injury, she leans over and whispers in my ear.

"Heath told Levi's boss some bullshit lie about him stealin' rodeo funds to feed a habit he doesn't even have."

Whipping my head her way, searching her face. I shake my head. “What kinda habit , Lucy Loo?”

“Nothin’ true,” she says, waving me off.

“Lucy,” I warn, trying to be as gentle as possible.

“Spence, it’s nothin’, swear.”

She avoids the conversation by talking to the people beside us, striking up conversation so she can evade my concern. If Levi ropes my sister into something dangerous, I’ll fucking kill him.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

The crowd's loud tonight, and hot damn, if my ego gets any bigger, my hats won't fit. I live for this shit. The bright lights of an arena, the rush of the rides, and the underlying smell of manure and hay bring me to the highest of highs.

Or another body beneath mine, one that I've pursued and captured.

I've been coined the 'Playboy of Rodeo', and while it's not entirely wrong, I don't understand why my publicist flipped her shit over the latest article that's circulating the internet right now.

So I slept with a married man. I didn't know he was married, and I'm not in the habit of interrogating my dates before jumping into bed with them.

"You ready, Muffin?" My flankman, Eddie, hollers as I finish waving in the arena.

"Hell yeah," pumping my arms in the air, Eddie claps my hand and brings me in for a one-armed hug.

"You've got this," he says, releasing me so I can climb the chute where Fiona, the buckin' bronco, is riled and ready.

"Let's give 'em a show, old gal!" I whisper in her ear. She responds by buckin' and hittin' the side of the metal chute.

Nodding to Eddie, taking in a deep breath, the chute flies open, and away we go. Fiona's kicking, hopping, and jumping around the arena, doing her damndest to buck me off her back. My grip's strong in the riggin' though, and I'm holding on for the

win.

The noise of the crowd swells in my chest, and when the buzzer sounds, I'm on my feet. Hitting the sand with excitement and relief. That was probably my best ride this season. If I can keep this up, I'll be on my way to another championship.

The crowd's on their feet, screaming my name and chanting. This is what dreams are made of. All the work in and out of the stables, it's all worth it. Children hang on to the metal bars, high up on the top, with their parents below, making sure they're safe.

Running over to a row of kids, they squeal and hold things out for me to sign.

Quickly swiping the sharpie one of their parents hands me, I sign hats, vests, whatever they hand me before waving and heading out of the ring so the next contestant can ride.

Buckle bunnies mill around the back, waiting on a moment they can capture a rider's attention.

One of them's wearing a low-cut top with a signature scrawled out on one perky tit, and with her come get me eyes, I can imagine she wants my signature for the other.

Never one to disappoint, I mosey on over, and as she offers the pen, she gives me a smile that spells trouble. "Lookin' good tonight, Heath."

Her little laugh attached to my name does nothing for me, so I smile and sign her exposed flesh. "Thank you, darlin'," and with a wink, I'm gone, disappearing to the back of the arena where Eddie's waiting in the wings.

"That was amazin'!" Eddie screams, along with the rest of our crew. The rest of the night is full of gals hanging around with sweet as syrup smiles, fuck me eyes, and lots

of cold beer.

I wish I could say the women and men falling into my lap part made me just as happy as the arena, but it's gotten stale.

Sure, I still like to fuck, but the flavors lost it's sugar.

I want somethin' that makes my feet wanna run toward them every time they hit the ground, not someone who wants to fuck me for a story.

Someone soft to land on after a particularly hard day. I just haven't found that person yet.

Boy, have I tried.

My publicist, Staci, told me if she has to hitch me to someone for my own good , she will. I've got no doubts about it, she's a scary woman, most people run when they see her coming.

I think that's why I hired her, she's got zero time for bullshit, and she doesn't give a damn who you are. If you're being a fucking idiot, she's gonna tell you. She's told me personally time and time again in the past, but I tend to block that out.

"You were on fire tonight, Heath!" One of the buckle bunnies that hangs around after the rodeo's over says with a flirty little wave and smile.

Flashing her my pearly whites, I wink and salute her with two fingers, tipping my hat. The girls around her all flutter with laughter as Eddie wraps his arm around my neck. It isn't lost on me the looks men are throwing my way, either. I love a good chase, whether my prey is male or female.

“Hot fuckin’ damn, Macabe! You keep ridin’ like that, and you’ll have sponsors eatin’ right outta your hand.” He releases me as we move, walking backward so he can still talk to me. “I can’t believe it man, my best friend, the champion.”

Laughing, I scratch my beard. “I hope they have deep pockets.”

“Ahh, that’s what I’m talking ‘bout! Talk it up, manifest that shit or whatever,” he stops, eyes glancing over my shoulder. His smile turns to a sneer, and I pause mid-stride so I can turn to look at whatever it is he’s seeing.

Levi Walker, the son-of-a-bitch who drugged one of the women at the bar we went to after winning the rodeo last month in Texas. He weaseled his way outta any charges, and the fucking team won’t fire him. Even after I threatened to leave, I can’t get out of my contracts—so here we are.

Eddie and I have been keeping an eye on him since then.

Women already get the shitty end of a lot, why add predators to the list?

A gorgeous woman with long honey-blond hair jumps into Levi’s arms, throwing her legs up with a squeal.

Her hat falls from her head and hits the dirt when arguably the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen steps from behind Levi to pick it up.

He’s smiling at the woman as Levi lets her down on her own booted feet and sets her hat back on top of her head.

With the breath knocked from my lungs, I can’t help but stare. He’s... so fucking handsome it almost hurts to look at him. His light beard stands out against the kind of tanned skin you get from working hard days in the sun. With tan lines that overlap

and rosy cheeks.

His arms are the size of pythons, and the belt buckle under his round belly is too shiny, as if he had to dust it off.

His jeans are stained, the kind that never washes out, and his boots look worn.

This man works hard. If I had to guess, I'd say blue-collar work.

It's purely out of curiosity that my feet start toward the newcomers, especially since I've never seen them on the road before.

"Howdy, y'all," I hear myself over the blood rushing through my ears. I can ride a bucking bronco without a blink, but approaching this man... Nerves ignite my whole body and I'm anxious.

"Hi... Oh," the woman says with a sour face, and I tilt my head, wondering what that's about when Levi wraps his arm around her shoulder and gives me a shit-eating grin.

"I'm Heath," extending my hand to her, she looks at it for a second before placing hers in mine. "It's nice to meet you..."

"Lucy," she replies sharply.

"It's my pleasure," nodding my hat and letting her hand go, I turn toward the man I really came over here to see and his gaze stops my heart.

I swear I've never seen a more gorgeous man.

His green eyes are bright against his golden-kissed skin, and freckles dot the bridge

of his nose, and cheeks, disappearing under his beard.

Offering my hand, he places his calloused one in mine, and a shiver runs down my spine.

“Spencer,” he smiles, and good Lord above, it makes me want to lean in closer. I won’t though, I’ve got to feel him out before I turn on the charm.

“We’re headin’ to The Rowdy Raven later, y’all gonna be there?” I ask, catching Levi’s whisper in Lucy’s ear. She giggles, while Spencer and I look at each other.

His eyebrows rise, “You know The Raven?”

“Of course, this is actually my favorite stop on the tour. This place feels like a little slice of home,” I chuckle, realizing I’m still holding his hand. Letting go of his hand feels wrong, cold, detached, and I immediately want to feel his warmth again.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

It's the stunning man in chaps from the arena, and he's looking at me like I could be his evening meal. Or my brain's playing tricks on my ass, and I'm reading too much into a look.

"We're headin' to The Rowdy Raven later, y'all gonna be there?" He asks, with his hand still in mine.

Surprise washes over me as Levi says something to Lucy.

The Rowdy Raven is my uncle's bar, a townie favorite, named after the family ranch.

Usually, rodeo folk head to the Goldspur Saloon, which is exactly how out-of-towners view our little country town.

Cheesy memorabilia is tacked to the walls, and all of the tables and chairs are made from wine barrels and wheel spokes.

"You know The Raven?" I ask, skeptical of his knowledge.

"Of course, this is actually my favorite stop on the tour. This place feels like a little slice of home," his eyes drop to our hands, where he's still holding on to mine, and he drops his with a small smile.

His cheeks tinge pink, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling too hard.

He's so cute.

“You might see us there,” I say noncommittally since Levi and Lucy seem to have opinions.

Then it clicks, Heath, the guy Lucy said lied about Levi’s habits.

The one he may or may not have. It’s a shame, really.

I could see us having a good time later.

He’s handsome, and I could use a bit of fun.

Disappointment and curiosity swirl in my stomach.

Biting my lip, I hold back on immediately jumping on his offer.

“I’ll look for ya,” Heath promises, and with a wink, he turns around, walking back to the guy that’s been hanging around while he introduced himself.

When he turns back around to catch me staring, he waves two fingers and smiles before disappearing down the tunnel that leads outside.

“You didn’t mention he was hot,” I scold, running my tongue over my teeth.

“I said he was a slut,” Lucy shrugs, “same thing.”

Laughing, I have to hold my stomach. “Touché.”

“The Raven sounds like fun,” Levi says, looking down at Lucy with a smile.

I don’t know Heath well enough to know if what he told their boss is true, but something about Lucy’s adamant push that it’s not true sets my hackles to rising.

Especially since she wouldn't tell me what exactly this 'habit' is, and the way Levi's searching the space makes me wonder who exactly he's looking for.

"I need to ask Uncle Scott somethin' anyway," she lifts her shoulder and looks back up at Levi.

"It's settled," Levi says, clapping his hands together and following the same path Heath walked a few minutes ago.

The two of them walk hand-in-hand, arms swinging in the middle of the path as if no one else will need to walk down the tunnel. Rolling my eyes, I follow, pulling the truck keys from my pocket and fisting them in my hand.

"Meet you there!" Lucy hollers as we emerge outside of the arena. The sun's long gone, and the stars are bright.

"Yeah, maybe," I grumble back. The full moon shines down on the parking lot, still brimming with cars. Gravel crunches under my boots, and the crickets are out and singing.

My truck is off to the side, in the grass overflow parking, since we got here late.

The old red beauty sits on balding tires that I need to replace, her body's got a few rusty places, but I rebuilt the engine myself, and I'm damn proud of it.

It's taken me years to find the original parts to replace some things, and I plan on restoring her to when my Granddad first bought her.

Slipping the key into the ignition and firing her up, I let her warm up before taking off.

She's a temperamental ol' bitty, and if you push too hard, she likes to lock up on you.

The bench seat needs to be repaired, along with the dash, but the garage has been busy this year, and I haven't had the time to work on her like I'd planned.

Driving to The Raven is easy enough. It's only a few miles down the road from the arena, tucked away down a long dirt road. There really isn't an official parking lot, just a flat stretch of dirt serving as a place to loiter and perhaps park your vehicle if you're going inside for a drink.

Though, I'm not sure I'm gonna go. Passing the turn for The Raven, I head home, especially since Briar's home pouting about not being able to go to the rodeo with us.

Mawmaw's probably called her at least four times since we've been out, and I can admit I texted every hour.

Of course, it was met with, "Dad, I'm not a baby," every time. Still she's my whole world and I'd never forgive myself if something happened to her.

Parking and pulling the break, I head inside where Briar's got music playing loud enough I can hear it from the bottom of the porch steps. Unlocking the door, I brace myself for what awaits inside.

Our house isn't large, two bedrooms, two baths.

The living room and kitchen are open to one another, and our bedroom doors sit closed across from the front door.

Thelma, Briar's raccoon, is snoozing on the arm of the couch, arms splayed out, hanging over the edge of the couch.

That damn raccoon will be the death of me one day.

Briar's got the television on, music pouring from it, dancing around the room like she's auditioning for a recital. Her long caramel hair is tangled in her face and arms, and she startles when she sees me standing in the doorway. "Dad? What are you doing here?"

"This is my house. You know, where I sleep, eat, and wash my ass?" Poking fun at her surprise, I smile.

"You came home early, didn't you?" Untangling the hair from her face, she plants her hands on her hips and purses her lips. "You're so old you don't even remember how to have fun!"

"Not true," I argue, knowing better than to fall into this same ridiculous argument.

"Okay, so you're gonna turn around and go see Uncle Scott and Aunt LuAnna. Have a beer, maybe dance to a few songs. Act a little more like when you were happy?"

"I'm happy—"

"Bullshit." She crosses her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes.

"Language," I warn, though I've been slack since she's getting older. "I'm still your dad."

She waves her hand in front of her face and walks over to where I'm still standing at the door. "I love you, Dad, but you can't come home until you have one beer and dance to at least two songs. Bye!"

Shoving me out of the door, she throws my keys at me and locks the door behind her.

“Briar Jo! Open this door,” I demand, she can’t kick me out of my own damn house.

“I’m gonna go to Mawmaw’s! She made ice cream and cobbler,” she hollers through the door, “Just in case you find anyone worth bringin’ home! Love you!”

If I find anyone worth—wait, what the hell just happened? My cell phone’s on the table by the door, so I can’t call Mawmaw to find out if Briar’s telling me the truth.

“The fuck,” I whisper under my breath, turning and looking at the porch swing her mother and I used to sit in every night with Briar.

Listening to the crickets and the frogs sing their songs.

Sometimes, the pain of her passing hits me square in the chest, and I have to remember to breathe.

It’s been ten years since she had an aneurysm while out on a ride.

The doctor in town said she didn’t feel a thing.

Still, the hole she left in our family feels like a black, endless pit that’ll never be filled.

Thirty or so minutes later the telltale sound of a four wheeler coming up my drive signals Mawmaw’s arrival.

“You aren’t waitin’ around like a lost puppy, are ya?” She asks, and I chuckle at the bossy nature of her tone. “Go on, I’ve got my granddaughter, you go have a good night.”

Her wink and Briar’s snicker from behind me make me wonder if these two weren’t

planning this all along. “You two together are trouble.”

Briar shrugs, lifts up on her tippy toes, and I bend so she can plant a kiss on my cheek, “Have fun, Dad, you deserve some, alright?”

I shouldn’t.

I should turn around and go to bed, and maybe dream about a hot, dark haired bronco rider who just so happened to blush from holding my hand. My feet stall on the porch steps, and I turn around, walking back into my house and shutting myself in my room.

Stripping down to my boxers, I snuggle down in my bed. Thelma scratches at the door, and I ignore her. She can sleep on Briar’s bed.

Scrolling through TV channels, I finally give up on watching anything and just click on something. Letting it play in the otherwise silent house.

I can’t get comfortable, thoughts of the dark-haired cowboy invade my mind, and I find myself wondering if he’s waiting for me or if he’s taking someone else home.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

I t's been a few days since Heath invited me to join him at The Raven, and I've kicked myself a few times for not going. Now I'm back at the rodeo, attempting to catch another glimpse of him. Wearing one of my Goldspur Gears t-shirt's, jeans, and boots. Comfort and free advertising at its best.

Everything's the same, yet the air is different. There's an undercurrent of anxiety that I can't connect. The regular girls Lucy normally sits with are front and center, waving and smiling.

Tipping my hat, I walk up the stands a few rows and take a seat. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I scroll through my texts with Lucy just to make sure I didn't miss anything about Briar.

Lucy's gotta work at the diner tonight, and I know Briar's supposed to start a few shifts there, so I'm hoping since she had to stay with her that she's learning something. When the announcers start, I tuck my phone away and wait for the event I'm here to see.

Spotting Heath waiting in the wings, I lick my lips and wonder what the hell I'm doing here. This man probably wants nothing to do with me after not showing up. Hell, I still don't know if I want anything to happen.

Heath loads into the chute, and with a nod, it swings open.

He's being shaken like a rag doll, the horse jumps and kicks.

Still, he holds on as if his ass is glued to the saddle.

After the buzzer sounds, he's hopping off the horse and throwing up his hands.

People stand and crowd the metal fence, screaming and hollering his name.

His smile is so wide as if he lives for this, and he probably does. I can imagine the fame of it all must be nice. His eyes look through the crowd, and he scans over me. I'm not sure what I thought would happen, but I didn't expect to feel... disappointed.

"Hey!" I hear someone shout. It's loud but not out of the ordinary, so I pay it no mind. Bending down to pick up my trash, I stand to leave and see people looking at me almost as if they're trying to get my attention.

I look around, seeing people pointing down to the arena and my spine straightens.

Heath's looking at me, waving his arm in the air.

He winks and nods toward the tunnel, and I take in a deep breath.

Does he want me to meet him there? Nerves bloom in my stomach, and I debate on whether or not to meet him.

I don't know what to do with these feelings, I'm not usually indecisive, but it's been a long time since I've been with anyone.

What could a conversation hurt?

I take my time getting to the tunnel. With acts still happening, I figure he's probably got other things going on. To my surprise he's leaning against the same wall he was the last time I saw him.

His smile grows as he sees me—just like in the arena—and my own lifts in return.

“You’re here,” he says, almost breathless, and I remind myself he just did a major event, so he’s probably winded. “I’m taking that as a good thing?”

I chuckle. His almost nervous waver is adorable.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I say honestly.

“I guess that’s fair,” he laughs. “Would you wanna come to The Raven tonight, then?”

Shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans, I clear my throat and shake my head. “I don’t know.”

Heath looks around and then says, “Wanna come hang out outside?”

I nod, “Sure.”

He turns, cheeks turning pink, and walks out of the tunnel into the balmy night air. I follow as my spine tingles, and my mind erupts with visions of his cheeks turning pink for other reasons.

He takes a seat on one of the benches outside of the arena, crossing his ankle over his knee.

As I sit down beside him, I struggle to get comfortable.

He’s a stunning man, and not that I’m judging myself, I just don’t see the two of us getting along for long.

Sure, the attraction is there. I can feel it bubbling to the surface, but chemistry doesn’t keep anyone around—though I’m not looking for that anyway.

“You didn’t come the other night,” he says, eyeing me from the side.

“Yeah,” I nod, looking out into the parking lot as people mill about. Smoke from people smoking cigarettes puffs into the night air.

“Why not?” He asks, turning his body my way. “I thought... Well, I guess I thought we had somethin’, like a spark.”

His voice lifts at the end as if he’s asking me if I felt the same way, and I did.

I do.

But I’ve been out of the dating game for so long, I’m not sure I know how to conduct myself for a hookup.

“I’m sure you could have the pick of the litter if you wanted, Cowboy,” I laugh with a scoff mixed in.

“And I picked you,” he smiles, teeth so bright against the dark sky. He scoots closer, his hand brushes mine, and he leans in. I’m frozen in time, disbelief at his words and his actions. My heart leaps in my chest as he presses closer, and I turn to face him.

His lips skim mine, and in a flash, I’m lacing my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer so I can kiss him the way I want.

He matches my pace, and goosebumps erupt on my skin.

I’ve not felt a tug like this in a long time.

It’s as if we’re connected, but I have no idea how.

A cough nearby jolts me back into my senses.

Standing from the bench, I make excuses about having to leave. I can't even hear myself or think straight, so God only knows what I said. I couldn't look at him as I made my escape. Back in my truck, I lean my head against the steering wheel and blow out a few breaths.

“What the hell am I doin’.”

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I've ridden like shit the last few days.

Thoughts of Spencer circle through my mind, and I still can't figure out why he would basically run away from me after that kiss. I know he wanted it just as much as I did. It felt electric like his lips zapped something awake in me I didn't know was dormant.

I want him, and I have a feeling having him once would never be enough. Normally the thought would scare me if it were anyone else. But with him and his incredible green eyes, I want to feel it again... and again, and I have no idea why

"I heard the Play Boy of rodeo's been strikin' out!" Levi's voice worms its way to my ears, and my blood immediately boils.

"Yeah? Maybe that's cuz I give my partners a choice," I seethe. "What do you give them? Drugs, oblivion? You know, you're lucky you haven't fuckin' killed anyone!"

My voice carries, and the rodeo hands around us all stop to stare. Levi's shoulders puff up, and his neck and face turn red. He steps close to me, the tip of his boots touching mine.

"You keep your fuckin' mouth shut. You think you're untouchable, but you ain't. I could drug your little crush for you, you know. Make it easier for you to get what you want."

Shoving him by the shoulders, I watch as he stumbles to right himself, and I point my finger at his chest. "If you make threats like those again, I'll fuckin' end you. Do you

hear me?”

Eddie rushes over out of the corner of my eye and steps between us. “I think it’s time for you to leave for the night, Levi.”

Levi laughs, looking around, throwing his arms wide. “You can’t touch me, Macabe.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“Alright, that’s enough, Heath,” Eddie says. “Are you tryin’ to get arrested, man? Death threats? Shit.”

“Fuck him,” I growl, and Eddie turns my way, pushing me toward the exit. “I hate that motherfucker.”

“Me too, but you can’t be shoutin’ things like that,” Eddie says, following behind me. “That’s askin’ for trouble.”

“You know what he’s done!” I shout the second we get outside. I don’t care who hears. Levi Walker’s a fucking skeeze, and he needs to be stopped.

Eddie nods, and runs his hand down his chaps. Chalk from the riggin’ coats his pants, “Yeah, but I’m not threatenin’ to kill him, Heath!”

“He threatened to do it to Spencer! Said he could make it easier for me ,” I argue.

“You need to calm down,” he reasons, pointing toward my trailer. I don’t want to sit there and think about his threat. I want to punch something, anything.

“We only have a few days left here. What if he makes good on that promise?”

Eddie laughs, and it grinds my gears, “You’ve been waitin’ on him for days. Do you really think Levi, of all people, could get him to come out?”

By that logic, he’s not wrong, still... The dread I feel in my stomach sets my vision to red.

“I’ll head to The Raven tonight, too. If Levi shows up, I’ll call,” stomping away from Eddie, I head for my trailer.

Inside a smell hits me, and I scrunch my nose.

Searching my fridge for spoiled food, I don’t find anything, mainly because it’s close to empty.

Taking out the trash still doesn’t curb the smell, and even after a shower, I can still smell a hint of it.

Dressing in a fresh pair of jeans and a button-down, I throw on my hat and head for my truck. It’s not quite dark yet, but it will be by the time I get to The Raven.

Music pours out of the bar as hoots and hollers sound while people dance. The crash of pool balls plays in the background as the bar starts to fill up. Neon lights cascade around the space, casting red, green, and blue glows on skin and tables.

“What can I getcha?” The woman with long, graying black hair asks from behind the bar.

“I’ll have whatever you’ve got on draft,” smiling at her, she nods, taps her pen on the wood top, and turns to pour my drink. Before long, she’s setting my drink down in front of me. A light layer of foam sits on top, and the golden liquid’s cool through the glass.

Taking a stool at the bar, I sip the beer, just like I've done every night since I asked Spencer to join me.

A woman dressed in heels and a nice dress saddles up beside me, and I know before I turn, it'll be my publicist, Staci.

"You look lonely, Show Pony." Her tone isn't teasing because the woman has a cold heart and wouldn't know how.

"What do you want, Staci?" I'm not in the mood for her shitty attitude, nor do I have it in me to fight about this arranged marriage bullshit she's hinting at.

She laughs, and it sounds hollow. "You really do know how to make a woman feel special, don't you?"

"Staci," I warn.

"I've set up an interview with three options—"

"No, Staci, I've already told you, I'm not fakin' an engagement with anyone to look more relatable," I cut her off.

She glares daggers at me, grabs her drink, and slinks off to torture someone else with her company, I'm sure.

Once she's gone, my thoughts drift back to Spencer.

I wish I knew why I wanted to get to know him so bad.

I know my body's reason, but my brain just won't let it go.

I want to know who he is. Maybe my gut knows he's a good one, a diamond among pebbles.

If he doesn't show up tonight, I'll make damn sure to do everything I can to get him to have a drink with me the next time I see him.

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Why am I back here?

Because I'm a sucker for my daughter, and she roped everyone in, even Uncle Scott and Aunt LuAnna. We've got a whole row blocked off, courtesy of Levi, and Lucy looks over the moon about it.

Watching Heath ride again is stupid. I should have made an excuse to go to the bathroom or something. My resolve is slipping, especially after that kiss. My knees were weak the moment I sat in the truck, and I couldn't even crank ol' reliable until I sat for a few minutes.

After the show's over, Briar asks to meet the riders, animals, you name it. Lucy's already off with Levi, and Uncle Scott, LuAnna, and Mawmaw look ready to head out.

"Please, Dad." Briar begs, holding her hands together in front of her face.

"Mawmaw's ready to go, Flower. It's late," I warn, giving her my best 'stern dad face.'

"But," she starts, and Aunt LuAnna jumps in.

"How about you listen to your dad, and before we open tomorrow, I'll let you come in and dance on the freshly waxed floors?"

Her eyes widen, and she smiles. "Will you let me pick the songs?"

Her great-aunt laughs and nods, throwing me a wink and shuffling Briar out of the stands.

My neck heats instantly, and I know someone's eyes are trained on me.

Slowly looking around, I spot him. He's doing an interview, but his eyes are on me.

Barely looking at the reporter, he keeps his golden gaze locked on me, even while I move.

The exit is past him, which means I'll have no excuse not to speak to him. With the crowd moving toward the exit, I get separated from the group. Hanging back a bit, hopeful his interview will end soon, I wait, allowing others to pass by me first.

The reporter must have a million questions because he's still talking. If I stand here too long, I'm bound to garner attention. Dropping my head, I walk past him, grumbling about how reckless I'm being. As I make my way out, I hear him tell the reporter he's done.

"Spencer!" He yells, and I don't stop, hopeful that maybe he'll give up. "Hey!"

Taking a deep breath, I stop and turn, watching him catch up to me through what's left of the crowd.

"One drink," he says, with a smile still plastered across his face. "Please."

Shaking my head, I start to speak, and he starts too.

"Please, I've been patient, and I know I'm not crazy. We have something here," he says, motioning his hands between us. "One drink, that's all."

“Alright,” I resign, knowing he won’t be in town much longer, and if I can get him out of my system, maybe I’ll be good for the next ten years.

“Really?” He asks, taken aback almost as if he was prepared to beg.

I hate that my body really wants to hear it.

“I’ll be there,” I confirm, turning around and walking out.

God, what the fuck am I doing? He’s got to be in his twenties, with nothing to lose, and I’m a father to a teenager with a small house and modest living. He won’t be interested in me after one drink, so why am I so worried?

I can have a fun time and not feel guilty. God knows it’s been a while since I’ve been intimate.

I’ve got to go home and take care of a few things. Let him wait—if he’s serious about getting a drink, he will.

Even if my sister has opinions about him, he’s easy on the eyes, and I’ve waited and frustrated both of us for long enough.

Turning into a spot between two other trucks, I put the ol’ gal in neutral, engage the parking brake and turn her off. Pulling the key from the ignition and pocketing it, I step out, adjust my belt and shirt, put my hat on the dash, replace it with my baseball cap, turn it backward, and walk in.

My boots are covered in dust by the time I’m walking through the door.

A little stomp and swipe has most of the red dust falling off before stepping into the bar.

The glossy wood planks under my feet creak, and the smell of beer and sweat are a comfort.

I grew up in this town, this bar, and the ranch behind it.

The Rowdy Raven has seen many of this town's breakups, makeups, and everything in-between. Along with my uncle, who's been running this place far longer than he'll admit, he likes to think he's still in his twenties. His wife keeps him in check, though, and keeps him down to reality.

"Looky who decided to come down from his perch tonight!" My uncle hollers from behind the bar when his eyes land on mine. It's been a minute since I've been in here, that's true, but the old bastard didn't have to shout it to the whole damn bar.

My cheeks flush, and I roll my eyes. Everyone who stopped to look returns to whatever it was they were doing, and I join my sister, Levi, and my Aunt LuAnna at the main bar. LuAnna grips my forearm in quiet apology for her husband's outburst, and I smile down at her.

"He's on another level tonight, honey," she says with a head shake, yet her smile remains. She loves Uncle Scott. It's always been clear, even when he acts like a total idiot.

"Yeah, he is," Levi shouts, holding up his empty glass. "Pouring liquor with a heavy hand tonight."

He gyrates his hips into my sister, and she smiles but pushes him off. He doesn't stop though. He hangs all over her as if she's his prize and he's showing her off.

Lucy avoids my look and ushers him away to a table tucked in the corner of the bar. I worry, but knowing Lucy, she'd rather chew off her arm than talk to me about

whatever this problem with Heath and Levi is.

The dance floor is packed, spotlights roam over dancers as they dance the line, changing colors like a kaleidoscope. Music pours out of the speakers stationed around the old, worn-down floor, and a DJ stands on the opposite side with headphones sitting half on his head.

With my elbows propped on the bar behind me, LuAnna and I watch as Uncle Scott jumps in and starts grooving, too. We laugh, unable to hold it in any longer. He's one of the most uncoordinated people I've ever known.

"Bless him," LuAnna says, standing and ducking under the bar to serve some customers. She smiles at them, all while mixing and twirling bottles to make their drinks. I have to crane my neck back to see her move.

Scott meanders through the crowd, most likely asking if everything's alright. He never wants anyone to leave feeling like they didn't have a good time.

Unless they came to pick a fight. Now that he won't tolerate, and he's one scary-ass dude. Standing about four inches taller than me, he may be a bean pole, but I've seen him throw men out on their asses faster than the strike-a-lightning can crack and sparkle in the sky.

LuAnna taps me on the shoulder, and I turn my back to the dance floor. She's got a big ol' smile on her face as she slides a beer my way, one brow raises, and she nods to a part of the bar I can't see.

"It's on him," is all she says before she's serving someone else.

Walking the way she indicated, I look for whoever it is that bought me a drink. Even though LuAnna most likely won't charge him, it's polite to acknowledge it. There's a

surge in the crowd as the music changes to another song, and those who were on the dance floor take a break.

Scott and LuAnna handle it without worry, and soon, everyone's been refueled and ready to dance some more.

Though I still haven't found whoever it was that LuAnna nodded to.

I'll feel bad if I don't at least say thank you, and I'm sure my mama will have some way of getting back at me from the grave if I don't use the manners she taught me.

"Kept me lookin' long enough," a heavily accented voice says from behind me. My stomach bunches, and I swallow down a bundle of nerves before turning around.

Heath Macabe stands there, one hand wrapped around a cool glass of beer, the other in his pocket. His golden brown eyes are locked on me, and his grin threatens to send me to my knees.

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Spencer turns, his eyes widen slightly, and I start to wonder if the beer was too bold a move. If I misread the few interactions we've had.

"My apologies," he says as a smile blooms on his face, "I didn't realize I was on a timer."

Chuckling, I shake my head, "Naw, no timer, but I was startin' to wonder if you were gonna show up."

He licks his lips after taking a sip of the beer I bought, and something about watching his throat work as he swallows has my dick twitching in my jeans.

His lips are full and the perfect shade of pink.

His wiry mustache and beard are a golden color I wanna touch again.

Feeling the coarse hair and tangling my fingers in it while we kiss.

I'm not sure what it is about him. Maybe it's the easy way in which he holds himself or the quiet nature of him. Either way, I want to chase.

"I guess I was testin' to see if you were actually lookin'," he replies with an arched brow and a small grin.

Fuck .

Is he flirting with me?

“I’m a man of my word, Spencer, and I’d never lie about lookin’ for a handsome face like yours,” leaning in to whisper the last part of my sentence closer to him, I catch a whiff of his cologne.

Subtle spicy notes and the undercurrent of sweat have me lickin’ my lips.

If my words aren’t clear enough for him, I don’t think anything will be.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re hittin’ on me, Mr. Macabe,” he says, sounding breathier than before. Less sure, more surprised, or turned the fuck on.

“And if I was?” I ask, praying to God that he’s just as excited about the possibility as I am.

He shrugs with a wolfish grin, which sends sparks straight to my cock, then backs away, downs the last of his beer, and says, “How about we see if you can dance first?”

Spencer’s strides onto the dance floor are easy yet confident. His feet jump into the rhythm of the dance without a hiccup. It’s almost as if he created the damn dance itself. His boots glide across the floor with sure, steady movements, and his smile, good God, it’s infectious.

People flock to the dance floor, rockin’ and moving their legs and hips, shufflin’ across the dance floor. He replaced his cowboy hat with a baseball cap. It’s sitting backward on his head, and fuck, if it’s not the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

Swallowing down the nerves swirling in my stomach, the heel of my boot clicks on the floor, and I’m immediately swept into the movements of the dance. One look at Spencer, and he winks, not a hitch in his step.

I, on the other hand, miss the step and bump right into the woman in front of me. My cheeks heat, and Spencer laughs. With his head thrown back and his neck exposed, I'm having a real hard time keeping my dick in check.

I've never found anyone this alluring, this all-encompassing. So fucking hot.

He knows it, too. He has to know, with the looks thrown his way by the majority of the people in this bar, I'd wager he gets propositioned often.

"You're not very good at dancing, are ya?" He's still chuckling as he pulls us from the dance floor. His hand's warm in mine, a bit slick, but I don't care. He's holding on to me like a teenager would. There's something carefree and eager about it that makes me smile.

My cheeks are gonna go numb. I can't remember the last time I've smiled this much.

"I'm not used to chasin'," I admit, stopping our rush off the dance floor and pulling him into my body. My eyes meet his nose, so I have no choice but to look up into his beautiful green eyes.

"I heard somethin' about that," he's slow to smile, a grin that pulls his cheeks up and makes his eyes squint.

"Oh, you did, huh?" I whisper, "So how do you feel about gettin' outta here with me?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he says, leaning down into my space. So close, he's practically kissing me already. His breath breezes over my lips, and I have to stop myself from closing the minuscule gap between us to kiss him properly.

Too soon, he's stepping back and with a wave to the woman behind the bar, he guides

us to the door. Our boots scraping over the dirt is the only sound other than the crickets and the frogs singing their nightly songs.

The sky's lit with stars, bright white lights among a deep navy sky. Spencer's pulling me toward a red truck that looks like a classic, minus the shiny exterior. Our arms outstretched, linked in the middle with warm, calloused fingers.

The smile he throws over his shoulder makes me lose all sense, and while he's searching in his pocket for what I assume are his keys, I crowd his back against the metal of the door and plant my lips on his.

His lips tip up before he's kissing me back.

His lips are soft, and he tastes like beer and temptation.

My tongue flicks his, and he groans, wrapping his hand around the side of my neck as he adjusts me the way he wants, fingers tangling in my beard.

His hands, rough and calloused, squeeze my neck.

In a blink, he's spinning us, slamming my back into the truck, and ravishing my mouth like it's his personal mission to turn my knees to goo.

My stomach flips, and my whole body feels like it's been zapped by lightning. There's a zing between us, much more than a simple spark, and I can't wait to see where it leads.

"While I'm enjoyin' this, I'd much rather have my way with you in my bed," he rumbles against my lips.

Nodding through the delirium of this kiss, I grind my hips into his so he knows

exactly how excited I am, too. How fucking hard I've been watching him dance and smile on the dance floor.

"Eager, Cowboy," his voice is still gravely, low, and playful.

Opening the door, he gestures for me to slide in, which I do without question. This man could murder me, and at this point, I think I'd say thank you as long as he fucks me first.

In a blink, the old truck's moving, and we're flying down a dirt road past The Raven. I can't bother looking out the windows, not with Spencer driving with one hand on the wheel and the other on my leg. His fingers trail up and down my thigh while I groan, leaning my head back on the glass.

"I might die in here," I mumble. My cock is stiffer than it's ever been, and I'm fucking dying for this man to wreck me.

He chuckles, "I think you'll be just fine."

Pulling up to a little house set back into a pasture, he puts the truck in neutral and twists in his seat to look at me. His eyes are curious, as if he wants to ask me something, only he leans in, hand rising and twisting the lock of my hair that's fallen forward.

"You sure you wanna go inside?" He asks, and my brows pull down.

"Second thoughts?" I question, trying to hide the water he doused on my fiery nerves.

He shakes his head and leans back against the seat, running his hand over his beard. With a sigh, he whispers, "It's been a while, and I've only ever jumped into bed with one other person without knowin' more than their name. I just need to know you want

this.”

Biting my bottom lip to suppress my smile, I scoot closer, “I want this. What else do you want to know?”

His head lolls to my side, and he blinks slowly before smiling. “Would you like to come inside?”

Nodding my head, he squeezes my hand and opens his door. Once he’s stepping out, I follow him to the porch steps. The house is small, modest. Deep walnut stains the stairs and railing, up to a porch that has the most incredible view.

It’s dark, but I can imagine the sun rising over the pasture below. I’ll bet they have beautiful mornings here. There’s a swing to my left, and a few rocking chairs dot the rest of the space, as if Spencer’s front porch is where people come to visit.

Twisting the knob on the door to his house, he pushes it open and throws a smile over his shoulder.

There’s a light on in the kitchen, giving the rest of the house a yellow glow, a coat rack to the right, and beyond that the living room sits with brown leather couches that look well loved.

The inside looks like a cabin, all wood and warmth.

The fireplace across from the couches is empty and clean, given the warm summer night.

The kitchen boasts dark wooden cabinets, a small island with items scattered about, and two stools slid under the overhang of the countertop. There’s three doors on the back wall, one with photos pinned to it, and the other two left blank.

“Make yourself comfortable, wanna beer?” Spencer’s voice pulls my attention away from the house. His thumb’s hooked over his shoulder toward the fridge.

“Sure,” I want more than that, but he seems nervous all of a sudden, and I want him back to the confident man he was back at the bar. “You said it’s been a while since you jumped into bed with someone.”

Handing me the offered beer, he joins me on the couch where I have indeed made myself comfortable.

“I’ve been with others since then. It’s only...” he sighs, pulling his cap off his head and running his hands through his golden hair. He laughs and shakes his head, “I don’t do one-night stands, usually.”

Taking a swig of beer, I turn, perching my leg up on his couch so I can pull my boots off. “Well, seein’ as I’ve got time, ask me whatever you want.” Placing my boots beside the couch, we lock eyes, and he turns away with a smug smile. Scooting closer, I don’t touch him, even though I’m dying to.

He huffs out a breath, “What do I even ask that’s not gonna sound judgemental, or rude?”

“What if I ask the first question?” I offer, and his head lifts, eyes sliding toward mine. He nods and takes a long drink. “How long have you lived here?”

“My whole life,” he chuckles, “that can’t be what you wanted to know.”

“Why not?” I scoff.

“Because you came home with me to get laid, not to learn anything about me.” Placing his beer on the floor beside his boots, he lifts back up, looking me over.

“Why can’t both of those statements be true?” Raising my brow and cocking my head to the side, I study him.

“Because you’re Heath Macabe, bronco rider extraordinaire, and I’m a mechanic from podunk nowhere,” he leans back into the couch, eyes trained on the ceiling.

“I’m also from a small town where nothing happens, other than that one couple who always has some sort of drama to throw into town gossip.

I’ve known I was bisexual since I was twelve and kissed my best friend, who became my flankman, Eddie.

And I think there’s more to you than just being a mechanic.

There’s a story in you, and I fully intend on pullin’ it out of you.

” Leaning into his space as I finish, planting my lips on his neck where his pulse jumps behind his tan skin.

“Most importantly, I’m very interested in seeing you naked. ”

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He's kissing my neck, and my lungs have somehow forgotten how to work. His lips graze my pulse, prickling my beard. "I'm..." I swallow, attempting to clear my throat and get my thoughts together.

Instead, I twist my body, capturing his mouth with mine. He rumbles something I don't understand and I pull his thigh over mine and make him straddle me. He's on my lap, knees on either side of my hips, hands roaming over my shoulders as our mouths move and our tongues fight for dominance.

"Do you still need me to ask questions?" He whispers into my mouth, lips spreading into a smile.

"I think I'm good," nipping at his bottom lip, I capture his lips once more, working his shirt out of his pants and unbuttoning the buttons along the front. He shifts and grinds into me, muscled thighs caging mine in, and I groan when I remember I almost didn't go out tonight.

My cock swells painfully behind my jeans, and as his hands explore, he finds it pushing against the denim.

With a low rumble, he moans, tugging on my shirt and pulling it over my head.

Smiling down at me, he presses gentle kisses to my neck, my shoulders, and chest. The lower he moves, the more nerves build in my chest. Having a gorgeous man like Heath on his knees before me will be burned into my memory forever.

"May I?" He asks, eyes blinking up at mine when his hands land on my belt.

Nodding my head, he pulls, releasing the buckle and pulling the leather through. His hands make swift work of my jeans, and before I realize it, he's shimmying them down my legs.

His breath is hot on my groin as he kisses my round stomach, fingers digging into the waistband of my boxers.

"I'm..." I start.

"Pierced?" He groans, sitting back on his knees, eyes staring at my cock where it's sprung forward and slapped my soft belly. Bringing his bottom lip into his mouth, he slowly lets it out, eyes flicking up to mine.

My boxers are tight around my balls as he looks at the two pieces of metal through the underside of my cock.

"Changed your mind?" I ask with a raised brow. When he doesn't immediately respond, I reach to reposition my boxers. He swats my hand away, eyes focused back on my cock. Shock rockets through me at the gesture, and I swear my cock gets harder.

"Surprised? Yes. Changed my mind? No fuckin' way," he lifts up, wrapping his hand around the base and stroking me to the tip. His thumb swipes the head, precum sticks to it and he lifts it to his mouth. Sucking his thumb into his mouth he tastes me.

Groaning, I throw my head back into the couch, "Fuck."

With a chuckle, his hand is back around my cock, working it over with his dark eyes on me. One glance down, and his grin threatens to send me over the edge, I can not finish now.

With one hand, I stop his movements. His eyes lock on mine, and I wrap my other hand around his neck, squeezing just a bit to get a feel for his consent.

When he smiles and moans, leaning into the touch, I stand, bringing him up with me.

Slamming my lips to his, we kiss and stumble through the house toward my bedroom.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Cowboy?” I murmur into the kiss. His knees buckle, and I have to hold him up.

“Fuck me,” he says on a gasp of air.

“I plan to,” I chuckle, twisting the knob on my door and pushing it open. “But first, let me get you ready.”

He nods against my hand, stealing another kiss and unbuckling his jeans. Shrugging off his button-up and throwing his undershirt behind us, we leave a trail of clothes to the bed. Shoving his jeans off, we’re both left in boxers, and I’m dying to see his dick.

“Take ‘em off, Cowboy,” I instruct, and he listens beautifully. His body’s like something out of a movie.

Rippling stomach muscles, biceps, and thighs that I want to bite and leave marks on.

He’s got a trail of dark hair below his belly button, trailing down to where his cock bounces out of his boxers.

Biting my knuckle, I close my eyes for a moment to center myself. I really don’t want to fuck this up.

“You like what you see, Daddy?” He growls.

My eyes snap up to his, and I cross the space in one stride, “What’d you call me?”

He smirks, eyes like liquid fire, “Daddy.”

“Are you gonna listen to Daddy?” I mutter against the skin of his neck, sinking down to my knees.

“God, yes,” he shivers as I lick a path up the underside of his cock, encasing his hardness in my fingers.

“Good Cowboy,” I praise him, as his head falls back and I take him into my mouth.

The smooth skin of his cock on my tongue makes my eyes roll, and I moan.

Sucking him down to the base, I hollow out my cheeks and bob my head.

His hands delve into my hair, and he grips the strands, murmuring encouragement.

Popping off his dick, sticking a finger in my mouth, I get it nice and wet before sliding it between his cheeks. His groan is all the encouragement I need as I find his hole and probe it with my finger.

“Keep suckin’, Daddy, please,” he whimpers, bucking his hips toward my face.

As he requests, I lick and suck his cock, worshiping it. His subtle cry as my finger breaks through his entrance makes my cock drip in response. He’s relaxed enough that moving that finger in and out is easier and easier.

“You’re an eager little slut, aren’t you, Cowboy?” I remark while licking his sack. He

shutters, legs quivering as I suck him down my throat. “Are you gonna cum in my mouth like a good boy?”

He nods, tightening his grip on my hair as he fucks my face while my finger pumps in and out of his ass.

“That’s... fuck, it’s amazin’,” he whimpers as I swirl my tongue around his head. Pulling his hips away, we lock lust-filled eyes. “I need to cum while you fuck me, please.”

Standing, I crush his mouth to mine, letting him taste himself, and he groans into my mouth. “Please,” he begs, and I’ve never heard a sweeter sound.

“Lay down, Cowboy,” I command, and he listens beautifully. Stomach pressed into the mattress, his ass is in the air, perfect and round. Reachin’ for my nightstand, I pull out the bottle of lube I keep there for myself and drip it onto his crack.

Watchin’ the clear liquid run down between his cheeks is erotic in a way I can’t explain. Slathering my hand in lube, running it all over my cock, paying close attention to the head, I use my other hand to lube up two fingers, and work one into his ass, “You’re takin’ my fingers so well.”

His moan echoes through the dim room, and I work the other finger in. Spreading him open so I won’t hurt him when I finally get to fuck him.

“Please,” he presses, pushing back against my fingers. “I’m ready, I need to feel you.”

Swatting his ass with my opposite hand, I scold him. “You’ll wait until I’m ready, Cowboy. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Daddy,” he whimpers. Reaching between the mattress, he grips himself, pumping his hand over his dripping cock.

The crack of my hand on his ass has his body shivering. The muscles of his back constrict and shift. Goddamn, he’s beautiful. “You don’t get to touch what’s mine without permission.”

His mewl is low and long as if just my words drive him wild.

“Are you ready for my cock, Cowboy?” I ask, ripping open a condom from my nightstand and rolling it onto my cock. Squeezing a bit more lube onto the tip of my erection, just in case.

He nods vigorously, head turning to the side so he can see me.

“Do you need another swat, or have you lost your voice?” I ask, rubbing my hand over the pink imprint I’ve made.

“I think I need another, sir,” he moans, “please.”

Cracking my hand over his round cheek, squeezing his ass, I guide my cock to his hole and slowly push inside. He whimpers, “More, please.”

“Shhhh,” rubbing his back, I push further in once the ring of muscle gives, and I can slide in and out. I haven’t given him the piercing yet. Waiting to work up to it, the two barbells under my cock feel amazing, but I don’t want to push too much too fast.

“You’re takin’ me so well, Cowboy,” the flattery falls from my lips with ease.

“You feel so good,” he blurts as I move inside of him. Slowly, working until each barbell has entered his hole, I pick up my pace, reaching around his hip to grip his

cock, I tug hard and his chest lifts off the mattress.

“Yes,” he breathes, “faster.”

As he requests, picking up my movements, I pull almost completely out of him and plunge back in. Over and over, I watch as my cock slides in and out of him. The sight alone makes me want to finish, but he’s got to cum for me before I can let that happen.

“I wish you could see yourself right now. My cock buried in your ass, makin’ you shiver.”

His groan is low, and he pushes himself back into my hips. With a laugh, I pull out and flip him over. His surprise is short-lived as I slam back into him. With a shout, he moans and smiles up at me while I place his legs around my hips to aim my dick right at his prostate, making him squeal.

“You’re such a good boy,” I praise.

The slapping sound of our skin hitting, breaths coming in short gasps, it’s sensory overload, and I grasp his cock, moving my hand up and down along with the movements of my hips. Pressing his head into the mattress, he groans, “I’m.. oh FUCK, I’m gonna...”

He doesn’t finish his sentence—his words become a mess of moans as hot cum sprays onto my hand, and his stomach and chest. Seeing him erupt for me sends me over the edge, and I follow, sparks flash behind my eyes as I cum, filling the condom with everything I’ve got.

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“F uuuuck,” Spencer’s deep rumble as he cums nearly threatens to make my dick go stiff again. Watching the tendons in his neck flex as he spills himself inside of me. Unreal.

Slowly, he pulls out, his hands falling on either side of my hips as he pants and collapses half on top of me. His breath brushes against my lower abdominals, and I take the moment to stroke his head.

“That was amazin’,” I tell him, panting into the air before looking back down where he’s sprawled out. He smiles, licks his lips, and nips my hip.

Once his breathing has evened out, he lifts, pulling off the condom I didn’t realize he’d put on, but I’m glad he did.

We didn’t have that talk, and even though I’ve been tested, I’m not sure about him.

He said it had been a while, so I imagine he’s probably clean, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

He disappears behind a door, which I assume to be the bathroom, and emerges with a towel and a damp cloth.

“Turn over. Let me clean you up,” he says, looking away from where I’m still sprawled out on his bed. “I got a little carried away with the lube.”

With a chuckle, I sit up and accept the towel, pointing toward the door he just came through, “The bathroom, right?”

He looks back, “Oh, yeah, yeah, of course.”

“Relax,” patting his chest as I walk by. I smile, and his hesitant grin has me stealing a kiss before going to the bathroom.

Staring at myself in the mirror after Spencer wiped me clean, the goofy smile I’ve got plastered across my face feels foreign but not unwelcome.

Spencer’s sweet and a fucking rockstar in bed.

I don’t know where it came from, but the second I called him Daddy , I felt the air shift, as if he threw away the careful persona he’s crafted over the years, or if he just felt like he could be himself. Either way, I’m so fucking happy I did.

Washing my hands, walking out of the bathroom, we lock eyes. He’s standing there in his jeans with his shirt in his hand, eyeing me as if I’ll bolt.

“Are you okay?” I ask tentatively.

He scoffs and runs a hand through his beard, “Am I...,” his teeth dig into his bottom lip, and when he blinks his eyes back open, he says, “Are you okay?”

A laugh escapes me, “I’m more than okay, Spencer.”

“I didn’t hurt you?” He sighs, eyes vulnerable and open.

“No,” I hope my words are enough, but just in case they aren’t, I step around his bed, walk toward him so our bodies are millimeters away, and kiss him. It’s slow and languid as our tongues tumble together. “I promise.”

He nods, resting his forehead against mine. We stand there together, sharing breath

and space.

After a few minutes, he leans back, “That was pretty incredible.”

“The Daddy kink was a fun surprise,” I crack with a chuckle. “I wasn’t expecting you to be so... excited about it.”

His cheeks dimple, and he pulls his shirt over his head. “Yeah, well. I didn’t know I liked it either.”

Placing my hand over my heart, I gasp, “You mean we unlocked a new level for you?”

“Funny,” he narrows his eyes.

“I’m serious,” my brows furrow.

“I typically prefer, Sir. Now get dressed, Cowboy.” He smirks, eyeing me up and down.

“Yes, Sir.” With puckered lips and a nod, I retrace our steps, gathering up my clothes and putting them on.

Spencer brushes by me with a hand on my back, heading out the door of the bedroom.

Once I’m tugging my undershirt over my head, I find him in the kitchen at the stove with chips, cheese, and canned chicken.

“Nachos?” I ask, rubbing my hands together and salivating at the thought.

He nods, laying out the chips on a tray and covering them with shredded cheese after

he's put the chicken on. Popping them in the oven, he turns, leaning his back against the cabinets.

"Figured you might wanna stick around since it's late," he shrugs one shoulder and searches my face.

Walking around the island in his kitchen, so he's standing in front of me. Placing his hands on my hips, he looks down and swipes a kiss against my lips.

"I think I'd like that very much."

"I'm torn between wanting to rip your clothes off again or learn everything I can about you," he admits with a grin.

"I like both options," I tease, running my mouth across his jaw to plant kisses on his neck.

"Maybe we take it slow, hmmm?" He says, pausing my kisses and placing me at arm's length.

"Slow," tumbling the word over my tongue, I nod. "Okay, slow it is."

He turns once the beeper goes off, pulling the nachos out of the oven and placing them on the top of the cooktop. "Beer?" He asks, pointing to the fridge.

"Yeah, why not?" I laugh, watching him grab two more beers from the fridge and popping the tops. He hands me one and guzzles the other. Pulling two paper plates from a cabinet above the counter, he piles on the nachos, making sure to grab all the cheesy topping.

"I could eat the whole pan," I'm only half joking.

He snorts but nods. “So, why broncos?”

His question throws me off, only for a minute, though, while I swallow down the nachos I shoved in my mouth. “I tried bull ridin’, but it wasn’t for me. Bronco’s just fit. I respect the hell outta Fiona.”

“Fiona’s, your horse?” His surprise makes me smile.

Nodding, I sip some beer before answering. “Yeah, she’s a special horse. When my parents bought her for me, they thought she’d be easy to break.”

“She never did, huh?”

Shaking my head with a chuckle, “Naw, she didn’t, but she did teach me a few valuable lessons. It doesn’t hurt that we’ve won a few trophies.”

He inhaled his nachos and downed the last of his beer. Walking to the trash can, he throws the plate away and puts the bottle on the counter. “A few trophies?”

“And some buckles,” winking at him, he shakes his head and chuckles.

“Modest, huh?” He murmurs.

“You asked me!”

“I did, only because a little birdie told me you were the current champion,” his eyes slide my way as he puts the empty tray into the sink.

Flipping on the tap and adding soap, he washes down the pan, making sure to get the harder bits of cheese that are baked on.

Watching him do something so simple shouldn't be hot, yet here I am, ogling his ass in those jeans.

I'm only sad I didn't get to appreciate it earlier.

"Is that little birdie , Levi?" I question with a sour taste in my mouth. His name licks a path of flame up my back. I just hope that pretty blonde he was with isn't in trouble tonight.

Putting the tray into the strainer beside the sink, he turns, wiping his hands on a towel that looks like it needs replacing.

"What's goin' on between the two of you?" He looks almost concerned, and now I'm not sure if I've backed myself into a corner or not.

Choosing to be honest, I tell him about the woman we watched him drug. How out of it she was and how we found them before he did any permanent damage. Spencer's eyes get rounder as the story goes on, and I notice his energy shift as he starts patting his pockets.

"Is everything okay?" I ask once I've told him everything.

"My sister," he sucks in a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I need to call her. There's no way she knows any of that. Which means he lied to her, and if it's true... If he does that to her..."

"The blonde in the tunnel? That's your sister?" I want to make certain I understand him before I call Eddie.

"Lucy, yeah," he says, searching the floor for his phone. It must have fallen out of his pocket in our haste to remove all our clothes. "Found it!"

Swiping it from in front of the couch, he dials her number, but it's late, well past midnight by now, and I'm not sure she'll answer.

"Hello?" A groggy voice comes in over the cell phone speaker, and my brows raise. I really didn't think she'd answer.

"Lucy, where are you?" Spencer's panicked voice must perk her up because she answers right away.

"I'm home. Is everything okay?" She asks, "Briar didn't come home and bust you, did she?"

"No, no, she's not here," he turns around and takes the phone off speaker. Speaking softly into the phone, I can tell they're arguing, but I respect his privacy enough to head to his bedroom and wait.

If she's with Levi, she has to know about the other women. Right? Or is he that skilled of a liar?

After a few minutes, Spencer trudges into the bedroom with a heavy sigh and flops onto the bed. "She's adamant that Levi didn't do that, but..." he pauses and turns his head to face me. "I can't imagine you have any reason to lie about it."

"I liked Levi. Before that, he was fun to keep around. After... not so much." I have literally no reason to lie about something like that, but Levi?

Well, if he'd stoop low enough to drug a woman, then lying sure ain't outta the question.

I hope he chooses to believe me and not his sister's naivety, but there's nothing I can do about it either way.

“I believe you,” he says, “for whatever that’s worth.”

A sigh escapes my lips. I’m not sure why, but those words settle in my gut and grip my heart.

He believes me.

“Would you want to watch a movie?” He asks, looking around the room as if another option will reveal itself.

“Only if I get to pick,” I smirk.

He laughs and lifts up, picking the remote up off his nightstand and tossing it to me. “Deal. Go shower, and I’ll set it up.”

“Only if you’ll join me.”

“Insatiable,” he tisks.

“It was worth a shot,” I shrug.

“I didn’t say no,” he rumbles, pulling the button on his jeans open and wiping his shirt off with one hand.

“Fuck yes,” pumping my hand in the air, I follow him into the bathroom where his lips meet mine, and we kiss as if it’s the only way we’ll get air in our lungs.

He breaks away to turn the knobs so the spray starts pelting the tiles. Pulling towels from under the sink, he places them on the counter as I shed the rest of my clothes for the second time tonight.

At this point, I want to stay naked.

“You’re fuckin’ gorgeous,” Spencer says. His eyes go dark, and he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth.

“I think you’re pretty fuckin’ hot, too, Daddy.”

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After one of the hottest showers of my life, we both passed out in the bed, spent and naked.

Morning sun assaults my eyes, and I wish my internal alarm would turn the fuck off.

Especially when with one look beside me, memories tug at the god-tier-level-sexy man still in my bed.

Today's my rare day off, and I just want to relax.

Instead my body riots, and I figure I might as well make the most of it. With a quick bathroom break before padding into the kitchen, I start the coffee machine, hoping he likes cheap coffee. The way I see it, as long as it gives me the boost I need, I don't give a shit what it tastes like.

Pulling eggs, milk, and butter from the fridge, I set them on the counter before I grab a bowl and whisk.

Cracking the eggs and whisking them until there are no more whole yolks, I add milk.

The fluffier the better, and once my pan is piping hot, I add the butter.

The sizzle always makes me think of Mama and her kitchen, always buzzing with people.

Pouring the eggs in, I let them sit while flipping on the TV and putting the volume on low. The news is depressing at best, and there's nothing on in the morning most of

the time. I debate turning it off when my phone chimes from the bedroom.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath, hoping it didn’t wake Heath. He looked so peaceful this morning, and it makes me wonder how many nights he doesn’t get to sleep in a real bed. Traveling rodeo ain’t for the weak, I’ll give him that.

Pulling my phone from the charger I don’t remember plugging it into, I race back to the eggs and stir them with a wooden spatula. It’s the only way to make fluffy eggs, and I’ll die on that hill.

My phone dings again, and I fumble with it, trying to flip the switch to vibrate on the side. Lucy’s picture lights up my phone, and instead of hitting decline, it accepts and her voice careens through the speakers.

“Did you see?!” She shouts, “Tell me he’s not the person you brought home, Spence. Please.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” I ask, still a little groggy without my coffee.

“He’s engaged!” She screeches. “Did you see the article?”

“Who’s engaged?”

“Heath!” She shrieks.

“Heath Macabe?” I question because he’s still naked in my bed right now after we had sex not once but twice. “What article?”

“It’s on the rodeo network, social media is havin’ a field day, and his fiancé—who’s stunnin’ by the way—announced it on her feed.” Her words are like a slam to the stomach. I knew I should have driven him back to The Raven. I should have listened

to my gut.

How could he be engaged and not tell me?

“Spencer!” Lucy shouts, reminding me I’m on the line with her.

“Lucy Loo, I’ll call you back,” I don’t give her the space to argue, hitting the button to end the call and pull up the internet. The Wi-Fi’s spotty and really only works in certain parts of the house. Moving to the couch, I sit, preparing myself for whatever I’m about to read.

Typing in his name brings up the word fiancé, and my stomach sinks to the fucking floor.

THE PLAYBOY OF RODEO, ENGAGED!

Footsteps sound outside of my bedroom, but I don’t bother looking.

“Get out,” I breathe. Just two words—but fuck, they hurt. I don’t know why I thought I could do this whole one-night stand thing. I’m a relationship guy, and I wasn’t looking for one of those in the first place.

So why does this feel like he’s punched a hole right through my body?

“I can explain,” he starts, and I look at the ceiling with a humorless chuckle.

“Isn’t that a cliché if I ever heard one,” I lash. “ ‘You can explain’ . I’m sure you can, but I don’t want to hear it.” He walks closer, and I stand, turning so I can face him. “Get your stuff and start walkin’, Cowboy.”

“Spen—”

“No. I have no desire to end up wrangled and tangled in your mess,” I holler. “Especially when you’re engaged . I should have listened to Lucy when she told me you were bad news. But silly me, I thought, ‘damn, this fine ass cowboy thinks I’m worth his time.’”

“Please—” he says, stepping closer and reaching his hands toward me.

“Get. Out.” I rumble, as fury radiates from my body.

His dark eyes are lined in silver as he steps up to the front door, and I have to shake my head to keep from getting teary-eyed myself. Last night made me feel like a piece of me clicked into place like I could enjoy myself and connect with someone for the first time since Briar's mom died.

“For the record, you are worth my time, more than, actually,” he says, opening the door and then pulling it shut behind him.

The smell of burning eggs makes me gag. Rushing to the stove, dumping the whole damn pan in the sink, and running cool water over it, I hang my head.

I wish I wasn’t the man I am. I should let him walk all the way back to the rodeo grounds.

He deserves nothing more from me. Instead, I grab my phone and text Scott to pick him up from The Raven and give him a ride back.

I’ll have to face Lucy at some point, not to mention, Briar. I’ve got to get this off my mind before Briar shows, or she’ll sniff it out of me like a bloodhound. Dressing quickly in sweats and a tee, grabbing my keys, I hop on the side-by-side and cut through the pasture to Lucy’s to hash this out.

I'm only going to relive it once, and then I'm moving on.

So help me God, I will.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

“What the fuck, Staci?” I’m bellowing into the phone before I hit the bottom step of Spencer’s house. He threw me out, and hell, I would too if I were on the other side of this damn mess.

“I told you, this player shit ain’t gonna work anymore,” she says, calm as a cucumber while I might very well have a coronary. Spencer’s someone I could have seen myself pursuing, and now? Fuck, he probably hates me.

How do I tell him that Macy’s a woman my publicist set me up with? And because I hoe’d around for a little too long to boot.

Throwing my head back and groaning, I look at the blue and orange morning sky. It’s as beautiful as I thought it’d be. The grassy hills of the pasture glisten with morning dew, and the sky mixes with blue, pink, and orange.

An easy morning, that’s what it should have been. Now here I am, walking down Spencer’s long ass driveway to the bar down the way so Eddie can come pick me up. Kicking the dirt and listening to Staci tell me about how good this is going to be for my image, I roll my eyes.

“You didn’t think to run it by me first?” I scoff, “You didn’t think, ‘maybe he’s with someone?’”

She laughs, and if I had a guess, she’s not at all amused, “You’re always with someone, Heath, that’s why Macy and I made this arrangement.”

“Goddammit! I like this guy, Staci!” I shout, hearing my voice travel across the

fields.

“Of course you do, Heath. He gave you his undivided attention,” she coos. “What happens when you leave for the next city, hmm? Are you expecting him to follow you?”

“No,” I hmpf.

“Exactly, and there will always be another guy or girl that you really like ,” I can almost hear her eye-roll from over the phone. “Get back to your trailer, get ready for tonight, and you’ll be on your way to your next stop, okay?”

She ends the call with a click, and I stop, standing there like an idiot in the middle of the dirt road leading to his house. I should go back, explain, even if he doesn’t want to hear it. Maybe if he knows that it’s a farce, he’ll understand. Or, at the very least, not hate me.

The rumble of an engine catches my attention, and a truck appears down the hill, coming my way. It’s a black Ford with a Raven Peak Ranch plate on the front. Whoever it is comes to a stop beside me and rolls down the window.

It’s the older man from The Raven.

“You Heath?” He asks with little enthusiasm, and I suck my teeth and nod. “Get in.”

“I think I’ll walk,” I start, taking a few steps past the passenger door. And he honks the horn, stopping my feet from moving.

“Get in the truck, Heath, I ain’t gonna hurt you,” he sighs.

Looking down the road, I decide to get in. If he’s gonna kill me, I guess I had a great

last night.

“Spence said you might need a ride,” he says, putting the truck in reverse and backing into the grass where the fence is open. Pulling it in drive, he presses the gas, and we fly down the road, kicking up dirt behind us.

I can only imagine what Spencer told him, an engaged asshole whom he fucked last night. The words sound crude in my own head. I can’t imagine that’s how he said it.

“He didn’t tell me what happened, if you’re worried,” the older man says, and I’m grateful for that. I doubt he’d be hospitable if he knew Spencer’s view on the situation.

“Mhmm,” I offer him. I don’t really have anything else to say. My phone’s blowing up, and I have half a mind to turn it off. I don’t know what’s being said, and Lord, I don’t think I wanna know.

The entirety of the drive back to the arena is quiet, and my thoughts circle.

Eddie’s standing at the gate, arms crossed and legs standing apart like a disappointed father catching his son doing something bad.

“Don’t,” I sigh, stepping out of the truck and turning back to speak to the man who saved me a whole lotta steps. “Thank you, and if you see Spencer, would you tell him it’s not—” I let out a long breath. “Just tell him I’m sorry.”

“You bet,” he nods but doesn’t look very hopeful.

I can’t hope for much after this morning. He doesn’t seem like the type to give second chances.

“How are you feelin’?” Eddie asks, clapping my back as I reach him.

“Like I might have just fucked up somethin’ good for me, and I wasn’t even the culprit,” I admit with a sad chuckle and shake of my head. “You know Staci’s so fired, right?”

Eddie laughs, shaking his head as he walks me to my trailer and opens the door.

“Rest up, Muffin,” he hollers. “You’ve got a qualifier tonight.”

The door shuts, and the quiet settles. There’s a bottle of water and a few pain pills on the small counter where the sink is. I didn’t even drink that much last night, Spencer was amazing, and so fucking hot that I didn’t need any liquid courage to be with him.

I’ll have to find him, make him understand that this engagement isn’t real.

Tomorrow, once this rodeo is over, I’ll talk to Macy.

Buy her out of whatever contract Staci made her sign.

There’s something between Spencer and me, and I’m not about to let that sliver of hope go, not when I have all the charm in the world at my disposal.

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Pounding on the screen door with very little patience, I finally hear one of the kitchen chairs scrape the linoleum and hear Mawmaw's drawl before I see her. "Hold your damn horses, boy! I'm old."

If I weren't about to puke my coffee up, I'd laugh.

My gut feels sour now that I know Heath's engaged.

Maxine Tritt is one of the oldest women in town, but you wouldn't know it looking at her.

Sure, she's got smile lines by her seafoam eyes and thin lips from being one of the happiest people I know, but that's the only hint you'd get.

Her gray hair's still in pink foam rollers covered by a net that tames flyaways.

"It's Saturday. Your baby is still asleep, and Lucy's already out in the barn," Mawmaw grumbles. "And that runt boyfriend of hers upstairs is still asleep. I thought he was a workin' man?"

She tisks and shakes her head, sloshing her coffee over the rim of her mug.

"Thanks, Mawmaw," kissing her cheek, I turn and head to the barn so I can talk to Lucy. The horses are out, still covered in blankets and fly masks. Their tails whip and swish in the early morning dew-covered grass.

Lucy's form comes into view once I've stepped into the barn. Her jeans are snug on

her thighs as she lifts a bale of hay from the loft and throws it down.

“Mornin’,” she huffs, swiping her blonde bangs away from her forehead. “So, how’d your night go, homewrecker?”

“Got a minute?” I grumble, nodding my head to the bale of hay turned on its side.

“Of course, for your illicit affair?” She waggles her brows before climbing down the ladder.

With a skip in her step, she plants her ass on the hay right next to me. Once she catches a glimpse of my face though, hers falls and she grabs my hand.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t judge. What’s goin’ on?” Her voice is soft, and it’s that small thing that makes me feel foolish.

“He was still in my bed when you called,” I blurt, shaking my head and leaning down. Elbows on my knees, I rub my face. “We slept together twice last night.”

Her gasp would be funny if it weren’t laced with loathing. “You dirty dog! Seriously, it’s about damn time you got laid, even if it did end in disappointment.”

Burying my face in my hands, peeking at her through my fingers, I laugh.

“Wait,” she stands, popping a hip out and crossing her arms, “You called me last night askin’ if I was alright.”

I nod, letting her put the puzzle together in her mind.

“What did Heath tell you?” Her eyes are flinty, and I know no matter how I spin it, she’s going to be pissed.

“Everythin’,” releasing a heavy breath, I stand too. Putting my hand on her shoulder. “I think we need to have a conversation about that too, Lucy Loo.”

She backs away, hands held out in front of her. “We don’t, Levi and I have talked about it at length, and I trust him enough to know that he would never cheat on me, much less drug some other woman to do it.”

“C’mon Lucy, two eyewitnesses? What did Levi say happened then?

How did a roofied woman end up in his hotel room, half-naked in his bed?

You can’t be that blind.” I don’t know how to be any gentler, especially since I’m a little hurt that she didn’t talk to me about it.

We share everything, and I know for a fact that if she would have told me, they wouldn’t be together now.

Maybe that’s exactly the reason she didn’t.

“You spend one night with the playboy of Rodeo—who by the way, was happy to spend the night warming your bed while he’s engaged –and suddenly his word is gospel? Newsflash. He. Lied. To. You.” She spits, eyeing me up and down. As if she’s looking at me differently.

“He didn’t lie to me, I didn’t ask—I assumed—and that’s on me. I should have known better, especially given his reputation, but Lucy, I don’t think he’d lie about somethin’ like that. You shoulda seen him. He was visibly irate when he was tellin’ me what he saw in Levi’s hotel room that night.”

“Stop, Spencer. Whatever you think you know, you don’t. I’m not havin’ this conversation with you anymore.”

Turning on her booted heel, she rushes from the barn. I won't go after her, she's upset, and there isn't a damn thing I could say to make her feel better. Especially since I'm damn sure Levi isn't the angel she thinks he is, and I don't know how to make her believe it.

Heath may have omitted the little fact that he's engaged, but I sure as hell believe what he said about Levi.

Goldspur Gears is my family's garage. It's on the edge of our little town, perfectly positioned for people on the highway who need repairs, a place to rest, or just to stop in and visit.

Briar called not long after my interaction with Lucy to tell me she and Mawmaw were going out.

Apparently, there's a sale on clothes at her favorite store, and Mawmaw agreed to take her to get some new summer stuff.

Since I couldn't get my mind to stop spinning over Heath, I figured going into work is the best thing to do. Colt was happy to see me since the car he's been working on for the better part of three days is whooping his ass.

"I just can't get this part to work the way it's supposed to, Boss," he says, swiping grease over his brow. It's gonna be a hot one today, and he's already sweating up a storm.

"I'll take a look at it," I promise, grabbing the rolling creeper seat, laying on my back, and rolling under the car. "Alright, you pull, and I'll push. Let's get it outta there and make sure it's the right thing."

"You got it, Boss Man," he says, wrenching his fingers into the groves of the power

steering pump.

“One. Two.” It pops free in his hands, steering fluid pours from the pump, and I dodge the fall of liquid that rains from the new part. “Damn it, Colt!”

“Sorry, Boss, forgot I filled it already.” He offers me a rag and a sheepish smile once I’ve rolled the creeper out from under the car, and I dab at the mess that’s staining my coveralls.

“It’s alright,” I assure him. He’s a goof, but he shows up every day, hasn’t ever stolen a dime, and he’s great with the customers. Explaining things to them with a smile and listening patiently when they complain. He’s a heck of a young man, plus his mama makes us cookies every now and again.

“Let me see the pump.” The two of us walk over to the workbench, where he set it before coming to my rescue with a rag. It’s covered in liquid, making it harder to hold on to. With a quick wipe-down, it’s clear that he pulled the wrong pump from the stockroom.

“It’s the wrong pump for this car. Did you pull the filter for the truck in bay two at the same time?”

He thinks for a minute. Clear as day you can see it on his face the second he realizes his mistake. “I pulled both for the truck...”

With a laugh, I clap his shoulder and head to the stockroom to pull the correct pump and return to find him still staring at the part as if it personally offended him.

“It’s alright, Colt. Maybe only pull for one bay at a time next time, okay?” I’m not mad. We can still use the other pump if the need arises—plus, it’s a learning experience. He’s still in school, just a few years older than my Briar. I don’t expect

miracles out of him.

The phone rings, and Colt looks over at the office. I guess he expected to find Brett there answering the phone. He's my head mechanic. If he can't fix it, no one can. His wife just had a baby the weekend the Rodeo pulled into town, so I let him have the next month off.

"Go on," I nod, wiping my fingers off with the rag Colt gave me.

He does, slipping into the office and taking down a note. By the time he comes back out of the office, I've got the pump positioned where I want it and have started bolting it down. The chime above the lobby door goes off, and Colt's head whips in that direction.

"Uh, Boss?" His tone changes, and I wonder who the hell left the lobby door unlocked.

"Did you unlock the lobby this mornin'?"

He shakes his head and looks at me, eyes wide and body-taught.

"Why are you—"

"Hi, I'm lookin' for Spencer?"

That voice.

Why the fuck is Heath here?

"Tell him I'm not here," whispering to Colt.

Colt just stands there in shock or awe, neither one is great for me at the moment. I know he can't see me. The hood of the car does a pretty good job of hiding my frame, but if Colt doesn't say anything, I have a feeling Heath will walk over, and if he does, well then I won't be hidden for long.

I knock over a wrench to try and break him out of this stupor.

He shakes his head, blinks a few times and squeaks when he tries to talk.

Heath laughs, and fuck him for sounding so charming when he asks, "Are you alright?"

"I'm—I, fine. I'm fine, you're Heath Macabe," he stutters, and I hang my head.

"I am. Nice to meet you," he steps closer, and I can hear the knock of his boot on the garage floor. "And you are?"

Colt slaps his hand over his chest, fingers splayed wide. "I'm Zachariah, but everyone 'round here calls me Colt."

Heath chuckles, and the deep tone of it has my hair rising on my arms.

I like it, and I wish I didn't.

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“So, Spencer. Is he here by chance?” I ask. Nerves threatening to make me turn around and forget I even had the audacity to show up here and plead my case.

“Oh, Spencer. Boss Man, yeah,” Zachariah looks up and to the left. My eyes follow his in case Spencer learned to fly and is currently hiding up in the rafters of the building. “He’s... off today, I think.”

My eyes travel slowly back to him, and I pop my brow, “You think?”

He nods, crosses his arms across his chest, and holds his thumb up under his elbow. There’s a car with the hood popped up in the bay beside me, exactly where Zachariah’s thumb’s up is facing.

Taking a step further into the bay, I watch as his arms drop and his eyes grow. “Uh, now I remember—” but it’s no use. I can see Spencer’s tattooed arm sitting against the front of the car.

“Colt,” Spencer’s deep baritone rumbles in my damn chest, and I know he’s worth whatever I can salvage from this situationship. “Go home, I’ll lock up.”

“I’m sorry, Boss.” Zachariah hangs his head and disappears into the office.

“What do you need, Heath?” His tone isn’t nearly as warm as it was when we talked last night, but I should have expected it.

“I came to explain,” I know it’s going to sound ridiculous, but I hope, at least on some level, that he can understand.

He stands taller, his face coming into view over the opened hood of the car, and I smile. His green eyes are hard and flinty as he looks at me without a smile to be seen.

“I’m under no illusion that I reformed you last night, Cowboy,” he says, throwing whatever tool he had in his hand to a nearby toolbox with a clang. “So there’s no need for you to be here to explain anythin’.”

“There is, and I don’t need reformin’,” I scoff, rolling my eyes at the absurd statement.

He growls and closes the hood of the car he was hiding behind. The slam resounds through the metal space, and my shoulders draw up for a second.

“Look, I know whatever you’ve read, seen, or heard is makin’ it look like I cheated on my fiancé with you last night, but that’s not at all what’s going on.”

“I’m too old for this, Heath. Your actions are your own. If I’d have known—”

“You’re not that old,” I remark, cutting him off. “You’re like, what, thirty?”

He chuckles, but it doesn’t sound humorous, “Thirty-four.”

“Still in your prime,” I smile.

“This doesn’t seem like an explanation to me,” he barks, moving to the office where I assume Zachariah left.

“So you’ll hear me out?” I ask with a tiny ember of hope in my chest.

He sighs, turning around and placing his hands on his hips, “Are you going to leave me alone if I don’t?”

“Nope,” I smirk. He’s got to know that I had an incredible time with him last night and that this PR stunt was not approved by me.

“You’ve got two minutes. Make ‘em count.”

“My publicist, Staci, arranged this whole farce. Apparently, fans don’t like to root for someone who sleeps around, especially with a married man.”

His eyes close, and his chest inflates, I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that. Instead, I keep going, like word vomit that just won’t stop. “I didn’t know he was married. Anyway, Staci set this all up—without my approval. Macy and I have never had any intention of getting married.”

“Okay,” he grumbles, still looking at me with a bored look on his face.

“It’s fake. A plan to boost my image with fans and make them believe I’ve changed.

It’s wrong, and I hate it.” I add because his expression makes me want to shrivel into a corner.

“Staci just went ahead and did it, even though I told her not to. I found out at the same time you did, and I had already dialed her number, ready to cuss her out for a month of Sundays.”

He drops his head to his chest and though he releases a breath, I get the feeling that my explanation still isn’t enough.

“Okay,” he says, eyes back on mine, shrugging his shoulders and nodding toward the door.

“Okay?” I ask, looking that way and then back at him. “That’s it?”

“You said what you had to say,” uncrossing his arms as he walks around me to the front door where I came in. Opening the door, he holds it and waits.

Taking a few steps that way, I stop shy of the door and look him in the eyes, “And you’re not at all interested in seein’ me again?”

I don’t usually put myself out there like this. Vulnerable and wanting. I’m usually more of the one letting other people spill their inner guts.

“What about this whole conversation makes you think I’d want to see you again?” He snaps, “I’ve already told you I have zero interest in reforming a player. I’ve sowed my oats. I’m happy alone. Sure, last night, hell, this past week was fun, but that’s all it was.”

Well, that doesn’t feel great. His words, while not completely unfair, still drive a knife in my gut. I swear I felt a little something there, something tangible and real. Hearing him say it was fun plows through my stomach with a sour taste.

“I’m not a player. I enjoy sex, and that’s all it usually is. I make sure to let anyone I’m with know that prior to jumpin’ into bed.”

“So what, this is the part where you tell me I’m special and you want to ‘get to know me’?” He laughs, emphasizing his point with the use of air quotes, and shakes his head.

“I do want to get to know you, Spencer. Why do you think I tracked your shop down and came out here to explain the situation?” I scoff, kicking my boot on the floor.

We stand there in silence, neither of us giving an inch. He smells like grease, and the undercurrent of his cologne makes it damn near impossible to move. After a beat, I walk past him, out the door, and into the parking lot where my truck’s sitting.

“And yeah, I do think you’re special. I think you’re worth jumpin’ through hoops for.”

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I think you're worth jumpin' through hoops for.

Watching him walk to his truck after saying those words has me torn between wanting to pull him into the garage and have my way with him again or letting him walk away without another word.

His explanation makes sense. I didn't bother to ask if he was seeing anyone at the bar before I brought him home—not that he would've said anything if he truly didn't know what his publicist had planned.

Still, I feel like the devil's advocate here.

Two sides at war with the other, excuses and solutions tunnel through my head.

The sound of his engine rumbling to life has those thoughts stilling and my head hurting. Reversing out of the spot he parked in, he leaves. The windows are too dark to see through, but I can feel his eyes on me.

I've got to get myself together before Briar gets home. Checking my phone for the time, there's a text from my girl telling me Mawmaw's dropping her off in an hour. Perfect, enough time for me to get home and shower.

I plan on taking her to Maxine's, the diner my mawmaw owns. One day, Lucy will own it, and I have no doubts she'll make it just as incredible as it is now.

Locking up the shop, I double-check the front door to make sure it's locked before heading out the back to my own truck.

Driving home, I focus on Briar. Her last week of school was two weeks ago, and now that she's older, she's got friends that drive.

Uncle Scott and I were talking the other day about who we'd allow her to get into a car with.

She's fifteen going on sixteen this summer, and by God, the teen years aren't for the weak. She's a good kid, keeps up good grades, seems to make friends easily, and she's always ready to help when asked.

Aunt LuAnna and I decided that she needs a job this summer. Something that will keep her accountable and line her pockets with a little running money.

My house feels empty when Briar's not here, though I can never get away from her fucking raccoon. That little nuisance gets into everything, and for what? A crumb of fucking dinner. We've learned to keep our bedroom doors shut to curb her bad habits.

Taking a shower reminds me of last night, and I hate that it stirs my cock. Choosing to ignore my misbehaving dick, I go through my normal routine, and by the time I'm dressed, I hear my girl burst through the front door.

"Dad! We're here!" She shouts, looking around the small space. Spotting me in my doorway, she squeals and runs into my arms. No matter how old or how tall she gets, she always leaps and attaches to me like a fly on a horse.

"Hiya, Flower," I chuckle, stroking my hand behind her head. Using the nickname her mother used to call her.

She lets go and rubs Thelma under her chin. The black and white furball darts out, zooming around the living room, bouncing off couches, hopping against the walls, and I have to remind myself the zoomies only happen rarely.

Briar laughs and takes her shopping bags to her room, allowing Mawmaw and me to talk.

“She’s excited about the diner,” she says, looking at me with a sneaky smile.

Briar comes out of her room, freshly changed into one of her new dresses, I’m sure.

“Bye, Mawmaw, we’ll see you soon!” Her shoulder shimmy has my eyebrows raising, and Mawmaw gives me a wink.

Throwing her arms around her great-grandmother, she squeezes tight before kissing her cheek and telling her she loves her.

“I love you too. Be good for your Dad!” She says with a stern look before turning and heading down the stairs.

Briar stays until Mawmaw’s in her truck and comes back inside, scooping Thelma up in her arms and smiles wide at me. “How was your night? Care to tell me over dinner at Loo’s?”

A chuckle escapes me. This girl’s nosey as all hell. “No, but we’ll go for dinner. It’ll be early though cuz your aunt’s goin’ to the rodeo again tonight.”

Briar’s eyes go wide, and I internally kick myself.

“Let’s go with her!” She shouts, starting toward her bedroom. “Just let me change and put on my boots!”

“Now, Flower, hold on,” I sigh.

“Please, Dad? I’ve only been once this season!” Her bottom lip threatens to pop out,

and I swear God gave her a superpower just to keep me from telling her no, even as a teen.

“Aunt Loo’s not happy with me at the moment,” I admit, hoping that will deter her from wanting to go.

“What did you do?” Her head tilts to the side, and Thelma jumps down from her arms, scurrying off to do God knows what.

“We had an argument,” shaking my head, I let out a breath. “If Aunt Loo wants to take you, I won’t say no, but if she can’t, I don’t wanna hear any whinin’, you hear me?”

Whipping her hair around, she’s heading for her room with a little skip in her step. She’s gone all of twenty seconds before she’s back again, this time in jeans, boots, and a t-shirt she must have taken from her aunt’s closet. It’s got a metal band on it that I don’t think she’s ever heard of.

“I’m ready,” she declares with her hat in her hand and a ponytail holder on her wrist. Her brown boots are worn, the ones she wears to work on the ranch.

“You aren’t gonna wear your new boots?” I question.

“They’re too pretty for the rodeo, plus I ain’t tryin’ to replace ‘em. Mawmaw said if I ruin those, she’ll never buy me a new workin’ pair.”

The fact that she thinks her Mawmaw would deprive her of anything is ridiculous. I don’t think Mawmaw knows how that word works when it comes to Briar.

“Okay, load up then.”

Briar yells a goodbye to Thelma and kicks her feet up all the way to the truck, singing a song under her breath. I don't drive the old red Ford when Briar's with me since it doesn't have airbags, so instead, we take the silver Chevy I use when ol' red doesn't wanna crank.

The drive's like muscle memory, downtown where there are a few businesses, a grocery store, and a place for the teens to hang out without being disruptive or getting into trouble.

"How was your last week of school?" I question, reaching across the center console and tapping her hat.

She laughs and turns her head my way, "It was borin', I coulda skipped and been fine."

"We're not arguin' about that again," I warn.

Pulling into the diner, Briar kicks her feet, knocking her boots into the dash. She mumbles an apology, and the second the truck's in park, she's bolting out, heading toward the door. After I park, I follow her in, she's already wrapped in Lucy's arms, and Mawmaw's waiting beside her.

Lucy won't even look at me, and Mawmaw's fawning all over Briar. Taking a seat at the booth behind the window, I wait for them to come to me. Other than Lucy, she'll most likely avoid me until she has no choice but to talk to me.

The bell above the diner door chimes, and on instinct, I look up.

Heath strolls in, wearing well-worn denim that clings to his thighs like it was tailor-made, pulling his hat from his head. His eyes find mine like a tick finds a dog's neck, and he smiles.

Fucking hell.

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Seeing him here feels like fate, though, I'm sure it's because there are only two places to eat here in Goldspur Ridge, and I had a fifty-fifty chance of running into him.

His lips turn down into a thin line, and I smile, vaguely wondering if something's wrong with me.

This gorgeous man, that I thoroughly enjoyed fucking, still wants me, and he hates it. I can see it every time he looks at me.

That I can work with.

The diner's got a fun vibe. Black and white checkered floors, turquoise booths around the perimeter of the space, tables, and chairs with mixed-matched furniture in the center, and a bar along the back wall with a long window that shows the kitchen.

A choked shriek interrupts my gazing. Turning my head to see what's going on, I find a young girl who looks like a damn replica of Spencer, staring at me.

Her long blonde hair is darker than his, but her eyes, they're the same.

Those same green eyes are wide as saucers while she continues to gawk at me and Eddie.

"Heath Macabe is in my Mawmaw's diner." She mutters as if to herself.

Chuckling, I nod, "You betcha, Maxine's lucky to have such a beautiful

granddaughter.”

“Well great-granddaughter,” she waves her hand in front of her face and walks over to us, “nevermind, holy shit. You’re here!”

“I do need to eat,” I crack, “and I’ve heard Maxine’s chicken pie is the best in the state.”

“Oh, it is,” she replies with a sly smile, all uncertainty gone. “You should join us!”

I can hear his groan from here as she turns to look at Spencer. I was right. She is his daughter. She’s gotta be at least fourteen...

“We’d love to join you, but I think your dad might not be open to that idea,” Eddie says, pulling me from my thoughts.

She looks over at him, and I can tell whatever his daughter asks, he will agree. The admiration in his eyes when he looks at her threatens to weaken my knees.

“Oh, he’s grumpy in general—that’s just his face sometimes.” Holding her hand up so her mouth is hidden from Spencer, she says, “We’re workin’ on his RBF.”

Laughter bursts from Eddie, and I can’t help but join. Especially since she’s busting her dad’s balls.

“So, join us?” Her shoulder lifts up to her ear, and her lips twist to one side.

Looking at Eddie with a smile, he knows what I’m gonna say and rolls his eyes with a smile forming on his lips.

“It would be rude to turn down that offer,” nodding toward where Spencer’s sitting, I

allow her to walk us over and introduce us.

To his credit, Eddie doesn't say a word when she introduces her father, even though I told him everything about him already.

"I'm Heath, and this is Eddie. He's my best friend and flankman," that gets a quick flash of Spencer's eyes. I guess he didn't forget everything I said that night.

"Briar," one of his eyebrows pops up when she twirls to meet his stare. "I think they might be tired of people asking them to do things. Let 'em go enjoy their dinner on their own."

"Dad, don't be silly, Heath said he didn't mind." Her smile is so big that even I'd be disappointed if we didn't sit down.

"Really, it's not any trouble," Eddie says, sliding into the booth so he's across from Spencer.

"Plus, it would help to have a full table so people don't invite themselves," I admit, though I don't think people around here would do it. But it's happened before.

"By all means then," Spencer says. His fake smile makes me want to laugh, but if he wants to pretend we don't know each other for his daughter's benefit, that's fine. I like to role play.

"It's nice to meet you, Spencer," Eddie says, reaching across the table to offer his hand. "You've got a very persuasive daughter."

Spencer looks over at her and smiles, a genuine smile that fractures my heart a little. He loves her, and by the look she's giving him, she loves him too.

“Dad says I could sell ice to an igloo,” she boasts, and I can see that. She’s also stunning, like her dad. Her freckled skin is dusted with a hint of makeup, and her eyes—the same green as Spencer’s—are so bright against her dark lashes.

Makes me wonder what her mama looks like. I’ll bet she’s stunning. Spencer having a daughter surprises the hell outta me, though—his house only has two other doors, and it doesn’t seem large enough to hold all of Briar’s personality. She’s spunky, someone I could see running the circuit one day.

“How long have you been a rider?” Briar asks, trampling over my thoughts.

“I was raised on a ranch, so I’ve been riding my whole life,” sliding my eyes over to Spencer. I can tell he’s listening, though his head’s turned away. “My Dad sat me on a horse the second I started to walk.”

Briar laughs and elbows her dad under the table, “I guess ranch dads have that in common.”

Spencer huffs, “I didn’t put you on a horse that soon.”

“I can saddle a horse blindfolded,” she argues, “I think it’s safe to say it was that early.”

“It was not, and it was a pony that Lucy had the reins to the whole time,” Spencer lobs back. The two of them argue, and I sit back, enjoying watching these two. They talk to each other with so much passion, and I find it refreshing that he talks to her as an equal.

The voluptuous woman from the arena saunters over, “Y’all gonna eat or gab all night?”

Briar turns her megawatt smile on her and laughs, “Sorry Aunt Loo, I’ve invited Heath and Eddie to eat dinner with me and Dad.”

“Mhmm,” she mutters, spearing Eddie and me a hard look. She doesn’t even acknowledge Spencer. “So what’ll it be, boys?”

Briar orders first, then Spencer and Eddie—then finally, it’s my turn. She turns her cold blue eyes my way and I smile, hoping she’ll melt a little. When she doesn’t, I order the chicken pie with potatoes and gravy. She writes it all down before walking away.

“So, how long are y’all in town?” Briar asks, sipping on the tea her aunt brought her.

“Only as long as the rodeo’s here,” Eddie answers, kicking my boot under the table while Spencer looks away.

“Not long then, huh?” She leans back into the booth and sighs. “God, wait until I tell my friends I had dinner with Heath Macabe.”

That gets a chuckle outta Spencer, and just as he starts to settle into the conversation—

A scream erupts from somewhere in the back. Spencer’s out of his seat, hopping over his daughter. “Stay here.” He instructs Briar and darts off to the chrome door that swings back and forth.

“The hell?” Eddie nods, I shrug and step out from the booth. If someone’s in trouble, surely he could use the extra hands. “Heath,” he warns.

“If I can help, I’ve got to,” I argue, heading to the door Spencer disappeared through.

I only catch the last few words Lucy sobs through while I take in the scene. The discarded, and cracked cell phone on the floor in front of me.

“He’s dead!” Lucy screams and collapses into Spencer’s arms. “Levi’s dead.”

Her cries are painful. I can feel it in my chest as dread sours my stomach. Levi’s dead, and if the fire in her eyes means anything, it wasn’t an accident, and she thinks I had something to do with it.

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Lucy's wailing at Heath who's standing at the door like a deer caught in headlights.

"You fuckin' killed him!" She shouts and writhes in my arms. His eyes bounce to mine, and I'm just as shocked as he is. I have no idea what she's talking about. All I know is Levi's dead, and whoever called Lucy told her it wasn't an accident.

"You bastard!" She launches herself outta my arms toward him. Slapping his chest and hollering more things we can't understand.

Mawmaw hushes her, while Heath gently but firmly holds her wrists. He hasn't said a word, and honestly, I'm not sure what he could say. Lucy's shouts have reduced to giant hiccuping sobs, and her face is pressed into Heath's chest.

I'm not sure she knows which way's up at the moment, what I do know is his eyes are pinned on me with a pleading sincerity that threatens to crack my resolve.

"Lucy," I try, keeping my voice low so I don't add to the already stressful situation. "You're not makin' any sense."

"Levi's dead. They found him in a dumpster outside of the arena," as she talks, her hiccups break up her words. When she looks up and realizes she's been cuddling into Heath's chest, she pushes off of him with a growl that I don't think I've ever heard from her.

Eddie sticks his head through the door, paler than before, "Uhm, Spencer, your daughter's askin' a lot of questions, and I'm not sure what to do."

If I weren't in the middle of coddling my sister, I'd laugh. "Don't let her come through the door," I offer instead.

Mawmaw heads out that way, and a breath of relief escapes my lips as I fold Lucy into my arms.

"Who called you?" I murmur in her ear after she sinks to the floor. The weight of grief and surprise clearly took her knees out from under her.

"The police, they spoke to someone at the rodeo who told them I'm his emergency contact," her breaths come in long drawls as she works to settle herself. I know she's self-regulating. I've seen her do it more times than I can count growing up. "They said I need to identify his body."

Her tears flow once again, this time with less frustration and more agony.

"So they didn't say he was murdered?" I ask.

She pauses for a moment, hangs her head, and shakes it.

Heath pulls his phone from his pocket, and his face pales. With a look tossed my way, he turns on his boot and walks out the swinging door. I can't focus on him, not with my sister torn up in my arms.

"I'll go with you. Mawmaw can keep Briar," running my hands up and down her arms. She shivers, and I internally steel myself for what we're about to do. She nods, and I stand, gently easing her back against one of the storage shelves. "I'll be right back."

Mawmaw's got Briar wrapped in one of her shawls back at the booth we previously occupied.

Stares and whispers hit my ears as people wonder aloud what the hell's going on.

Briar looks up as I get closer to the table.

Her eyes are wide and worried, and I immediately swap places with Mawmaw to hold my girl.

She's not used to anyone losing their shit like Lucy did, so I can only imagine how she's feeling right now.

Rubbing her back, looking at Mawmaw, I nod back toward the kitchen and then back to Briar in silent question.

Mawmaw nods and gets back to work, reassuring the people in the diner that everything's alright.

For the most part, everyone seems alright.

"What happened?" Briar whispers, barely catching my attention.

"It's..." I want so badly to say complicated, but knowing Briar, that won't be enough, and she'll call out the bullshit without thinking of where we are. "She's in shock and a lot of emotional distress, and I imagine it will remain that way for a while."

"I heard her screaming about Levi. What happened to him?" She blinks her green eyes up at me. It's hard to remember that even though she's mature, there are some things a Dad has to protect his child from.

Knocking her chin with my knuckles, I give her the only truth I can, "I'm not sure, Flower."

She nods, looking down at the fingers she's twisted into a knot. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"It's not great," I admit. "I need to do a few things with your aunt before bringing her home."

She sits up straighter and wipes under her eyes, "I'll help Mawmaw here, but when I get home, I want to know what's going on."

"I promise when I get home, I'll explain more," with a wink, she smiles, and I know she'll be alright. My little girl doesn't like to see anyone she loves hurting.

Sliding out of the booth, she follows and walks with me to the back where Lucy's staring at her phone. She doesn't move as Briar bends down and places a kiss on her cheek, nor does she budge when I place my hand on her shoulder to let her know it's time to go.

Briar looks at Mawmaw as I pull my sister up and into my arms. "Take her to your house or mine after you close up here, I'll send Colt up to walk you to the truck."

"I don't need a bodyguard," Mawmaw scoffs, waving her hand toward the door. "Especially not that clumsy boy."

"Humor me, alright, Mawmaw?" I swear the woman thinks she's invincible.

If Levi was murdered, I don't want to take any chances. Goldspur Ridge has never had a gruesome act like murder stain its soil, and I'll be damned if I let anything happen to the women in my life.

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Staci's been blowing up my phone since I stepped into the back room at the diner. Her texts are constant, and if I weren't fucking terrified, I'd laugh. Levi's dead, and the way Lucy looked at me, she's damn sure it's my fault.

"Where the fuck are you?" Staci's voice booms through my speaker once the call connects—loud enough I'm sure the whole diner heard her—as Eddie and I walked out. "You better get your ass to your trailer right the fuck now. Rodeo's cancelled until further notice."

"What's goin' on?" I try to ask, but the second it's out of my mouth, she clicks, and the line goes dead.

"Dude," Eddie says, handing me his phone. There's a picture of the arena and my picture in a circle up in the corner of the article on the screen.

'Heath Macabe, Murderer?' scrolls under my face. Blood drains from my head, and I think I might pass out.

Pressing the button to turn it off, I let out a breath. What the actual fuck, I'm a suspect in Levi's supposed murder? I didn't like the guy, sure, but murder?

"The police think I did this?" Asking no one in particular as the two of us sit in the truck staring out the window. "I didn't kill him, Eddie."

"I never thought you did," he says, slapping a hand on my back. "Let's get back to the trailers before there's a riot lookin' for you."

Cranking the engine, I peel out of the parking lot and head for the trailer I call home for months out of the year. If the police are there, I'm not sure what I can do, legally, anyway. I'm an open book, and if they want to search my trailer, they're more than welcome to.

Lights are flashing, and there's already a police cruiser here as we roll in. The two deputies close in around the truck as I pull in front of my trailer, gesturing for us to exit the vehicle.

"What the hell?" Eddie says, eyes wide and searching the lot.

Staci's call rings through the speakers of my truck, and I pause, looking at Eddie with wide eyes before pressing the green accept button.

"When you get out of the truck, they're going to ask you to go with them to answer some questions, and I swear to God, if you say a word before I get a lawyer there, I will personally skin you alive and make you into a nice new pair of boots. Understand?"

Swallowing down that awful image and clearing my throat, I nod, "Clear."

"Not. A. Word." She says once more before hanging up.

Eddie's mouth is hanging open, and his eyes are practically bugging outta his head. "You're just... cool with this?"

A humorless laugh escapes me, "What about this makes you think I'm cool with it? People think I murdered a co-worker, and I'm sure stories are spinnin' as we speak. There ain't nothin' okay with how I feel."

A knock sounds on my window, and I know I've got to face the cops on the other

side. I've never so much as gotten a ticket, and now this?

"Mr. Macabe, I need you to step out of the vehicle." His thick accent and deep voice don't make me feel any more calm about the situation. My blood's pumping, ears ringing, and my palms won't stop sweating. I feel like I can't get a swallow down, much less make my limbs work.

"Okay, Heath," Eddie starts, "You already know what's gonna happen, and Staci's on her way here, I'll follow you down to the station and wait for as long as I need to, okay?"

Nodding my head, I take a deep breath and unlock the doors. The deputy gives me a half-smile and gestures to the cruiser. Without complaint, I head over and watch as the other deputy talks with Eddie.

"I'd like for you to come down to the station and answer some questions, if you don't mind," the shiny gold bar on his breast says Follie, and his hair's clipped close to his scalp.

Staci's words ring in my ears and I have no doubt she'll make good on her promise to fix whatever this is, so I nod to the officer and look back at Eddie, who's looking at me.

"I'll follow you to the police station," he says, nodding toward the deputy as he opens the door for me.

The deputies don't say anything the whole drive, and part of me's thankful for it. It would be awkward to sit here and not respond. Pulling into the sheriff's station and scanning the parking lot, my eyes land on Spencer's.

Shock filters through my system, he's not my biggest fan at the moment, but he's

here. The officer opens the door, allows me space to step out, and walks me in—past Spencer, who looks like he wants to say something but turns away instead.

So much for thinking he was here for me.

Lucy's at the desk inside, talking to another officer, sniffing and nodding. "Thank you, Brent."

"No problem, Miss Lucy," he gives her a smile that makes me wonder if he's into her. "We'll get whoever did this," Brent says before looking over her shoulder at me.

Her gaze travels across the room, following his, landing on me. "I'm sure you will." Head held high, she walks through the door to where Spencer's waiting outside, and my heart sinks a little.

I should have known.

"Come on," the officer who drove me in pulls me toward a hallway with a few doors. Their sheriff's station isn't that big, so I'm assuming wherever he's bringing me is an interview room.

Taking the key ring from his belt, he unlocks the door. Inside are plain cream-colored walls, a metal table that looks like it's only been used once before, and a single chair on each side.

Setting me down in one of the chairs, he tells me someone will be in shortly and walks out without a word. The table's dusty enough I can draw little shapes in it. I'm not sure how long they plan on keeping me here, and I doubt they'd tell me anyway.

A wave of fatigue washes over me, and I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open. As soon as my eyes close, the lock in the door snicks and in walks a man I've

only seen a time or two—but I’m assuming he’s the lawyer—and Staci.

She’s a spitfire on her best days but tonight she’s a fucking dragon. A dragon on a warpath, it seems. She’s throwing around words that my brain seems to be unwilling to understand or hear.

Warrant...

Under arrest...

Free to go...

I feel like I’m watching everything from underwater, barely able to see, only getting muffled sounds, and damn sure unable to breathe.

“Heath, let’s go,” her words register, as the man that walked in with her places his hand under my armpit and hauls me to my feet.

“What about L—” I start, only to be met with Staci’s evil eye. Zipping my lips, I follow the lawyer out to the front desk where the officer who was talking to Lucy earlier, eyes me with clear disdain.

With papers signed and Staci’s instructions, we walk out to the waiting SUV, where Staci’s assistant, Kenzie, sits at the wheel.

“Get ready, hotshot, you’re about to get your ass reamed.”

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The second I saw Heath in the back of that cruiser, I knew in my gut something wasn't right. He's made some mistakes, sure, but murder? I don't think he's capable.

"I can't believe he's gone. What am I gonna do? Call his parents—that I've only met a handful of times—and tell them their son's dead?"

Letting her rant while I drive us home seems like the only option I've got. She's going on and on. Everything on her mind pours out as waves of tears break up her monologuing.

"Lucy Loo, take a breath," reaching across the seat, I grip her hand. "You don't have to make any decisions tonight, okay?"

Her heavy sigh is punctuated by a hiccup, and her head hits the window. Passing The Raven, I veer off to the left, where Mawmaw's house sits with only a few interior lights and the front porch light on.

"You've been through a lot tonight," I begin, parking the truck and turning it off so I can look at her.

Her face is puffy, her eyes are red when she turns my way, and I know that my words won't be the coddle she wants.

"Brent shouldn't have given you all those details.

Identifying him and having to see that his throat was slashed, I can't imagine what's goin' on in your head right about now. "

Her lips turn down, the bottom one quivers, and I know this is gonna hurt like hell tonight.

“You’re gonna be okay,” I promise before dropping the question that’s been burning my brain since we found out his body was found face down in the dumpster.

“There are a lot of people that want to hurt Levi, and a lot of those people are rodeo folk. Did Levi say anythin’ before he left this mornin’? ”

Her tears spill over as she looks at me, “We,” she hiccups and lets out a burst of noise that I can’t name. Something’s welling inside of her, and I’m not sure I’m equipped to handle it. “We fought this mornin’,” she sobs, “and he left.”

Wrapping my arm around her, I pull her as close as the console will allow and kiss the top of her head. “I’m sorry, Loo.”

Staring out at the dark sky, we sit like that for a bit.

My eyes scan what I can see of the pasture and house.

It needs a fresh coat of paint, and it could probably use new windows, but Mawmaw would rather pour her earnings back into Maxine’s Place, the diner in town.

I can’t say I blame her. Any extra funds I have go toward the garage, as long as Briar doesn’t get to them first.

Lucy sighs and brushes off my arm before reaching for the handle. She pauses, her hand hovering above the metal, she twists in her seat. “Do you think Heath did it?”

Shaking my head, I worried she would circle around to this question eventually. “I’d like to think no, and my gut tells me he didn’t...”

Nodding her head, she pops the door open and gets out, slumped shoulders curved in as she rubs her arms. The heat tapers off when the sun goes down, and it's a little balmy tonight. Fireflies spark and dim, spark and dim, out in the fields. It's peaceful here. I can't imagine living anywhere else.

The two-story house Mawmaw and Lucy call home is a safe haven for family and friends. It's housed many tears, smiles, and memories to last a few lifetimes. Mawmaw's sitting in her rocker with one of her glasses of sweet tea and a pitcher with two empty glasses waiting for us.

Reaching behind her chair, she produces a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass. "I figured it might be a heavier hitter type a night?"

Lucy crumbles into the chair beside her, and I look through the screen door into the house, searching for my daughter.

"She's in your sister's bed," Mawmaw supplies when I start to open the door.

Lucy's reaching for the bottle without the glass.

Mawmaw and I make eye contact, but neither of us says a word as she takes a long pull of the amber liquid.

Her face screws up into a tight scrunch, and she shakes her head.

Passing the bottle back to Mawmaw, she tilts it toward me, but I decline.

I've got Briar to think about, plus I'd like to know what's happening with Heath.

"Did the sheriff say anythin'?" Mawmaw asks, putting the bottle of whisky down and looking between Lucy and me.

Lucy doesn't comment, only stands and wordlessly heads into the house. As if in a daze, she walks up the stairs and out of view from the front door.

"She identified his body," I offer. "After that, I don't know everythin' they told her, but she saw his throat slashed."

Mawmaw nods, takes a swig of her tea, and leans forward. "I don't think that cowboy coulda murdered Levi like that."

"Heath?"

She nods slowly, eyes connected with mine. "You don't either, by the look on your face."

"I don't, but how well do I actually know him after a week and one night together?" I say with a heavy sigh. "After all Maw, he did lie to me. He's engaged, and I didn't know. We—It doesn't matter. I don't have the time or capacity for anythin' remotely close to love."

"Love doesn't work on a clock, baby. It's got its own timeline, and it's up to you whether or not you wanna jump on the horse or let it pass you by."

"Leaning back into her chair, we sit in companionable silence."

Mawmaw sips her tea until it's gone, and the crickets and the frogs are singing louder than my thoughts.

"I'll grab Briar in the mornin'," standing, my knees crack and my back constricts.

I swear getting old is for the fucking birds.

Stretching out my back with my arms above my head, I allow my body to do what it needs before breathing in the night air.

Bending down, I place a kiss on Mawmaw's cheek, and before I straighten, she puts her hand to mine, and I pause.

"I'm tellin' you, son, a life without love isn't a life worth livin'," she squeezes my jaw and continues, "And I'm not talkin' about the love you have for your own blood either."

She winks, lets go of my face, and stands. Before she makes it inside, my phone rings in my pocket.

"You better answer that, might be that horse runnin' by."

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Kenzie wasn't joking. Staci chewed me up and spit me out. I swear her face went ten shades of red during her rant. I tried following everything she said, but some things got lost. Like the fact the police have taped my trailer off, and I'm not allowed to go anywhere near it.

Where the hell am I supposed to sleep? Eddie comes running out of his trailer, having gotten here before me, and I'm relieved beyond measure.

"Thank God!" He shouts, wrapping his arms around me, squeezing like I've been gone for weeks. "I told the other guys that I'd bunk down with them, and you can sleep in my trailer."

Shaking my head, I decline.

"Oh no, he's going to call that mechanic he's so obsessed with and stay with him," Staci reports while clicking on her phone, without even a glance my way.

"I'm not callin' a man, who hates my guts—because of you, by the way—and asking him for a favor." I'm shocked she would even think Spencer would agree to let me stay after the conversation we had this morning.

"Oh, but you are because you, my friend, need an alibi from now on. An airtight one, too. So," she looks up long enough to step up to my chest and look me directly in the eye, "you're going to call him.

Beg, plead, coerce, I don't care. Just do whatever you have to, to get your ass in his house where he can vouch for your whereabouts from now on. "

“He’ll never go for it,” I sigh, throwing my hands up, pulling my phone out of my pocket, and burst into laughter. “You’re pretty damn smart, Staci, but you didn’t think about the most important thing.” I wave my phone around to signify my victory, “I don’t have his num—”

She winks, a smug smile twists her face as she flips her phone around and shows me the screen. Right there in black and white is a phone number, and above it, Spencer Tritt .

“How did you...”

With a laugh, she nods to my phone, “I have my ways. Go ahead, work your magic.”

Eddie doubles over in laughter, and Kenzie hides her smile behind her hand. Her eyes are squinted, and she’s trying her damndest to look away.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, willing my heart to stop pounding behind my ribs. I only feel like this when I’m in the arena, never when I call anyone. But Spencer isn’t anyone , and I’m starting to wonder if maybe there’s something wrong with me.

Should I feel this way after knowing him for one week? I mean, we only really talked last night, but I don’t know him. For all I know he could be the reason Levi’s dead body is sitting in the morgue.

“This could go wrong in a lot of ways, Staci,” I warn after punching in the numbers, hovering over the call button.

“Do you think he killed Levi?” She asks, point blank with zero emotion, looking back down at her phone.

My gut says no, that Spencer knew nothing about Levi's habits until I told him last night. But Levi is—was, dating his sister. That could be motive enough to want to get rid of him, but even the thought feels like a reach, one that makes me look like a fool.

No. Spencer didn't kill Levi, he wouldn't hurt his sister like that. That much I know for certain.

Pressing the button on the screen to call him, we wait. Just when I think the call is going to go to voicemail, his deep voice resonates through the speakers. "Hello?"

Internal panic has me stuttering over my words, "He-Hey, Spencer. It's Heath."

"How did you get this number, Heath?" He sounds not at all surprised that I'm calling as if he expected it. Turning away from the group, I smile and walk closer to the edge of the fence surrounding the rodeo, now cordoned off with police tape.

"My publicist is very good at her job," I chuckle. "Listen, I know you kind of hate me right now, but I have a huge ask, and I'd be really grateful if you'd hear me out."

He makes a sound that may or may not mean to go ahead and ask, so taking the opportunity, I blabber on.

"The police have my trailer taped off, so I obviously can't stay there.

The rodeo is cancelled, and not allowed to move on from Goldspur Ridge, and my publicist is insistent on the fact that I need a place to stay where I can have a witness to my whereabouts, and of course, her first thought—"

"Was me." His interruption makes my cheeks heat, and my fingers tingle. "You wanna stay with me?"

“I—well, I. Yes. Yes, I’m askin’ if I can stay with you... again. I’ll sleep on the couch, I promise I won’t try anythin’, and I won’t talk to you about what happened this mornin’.”

His heavy sigh is punctuated with a click as if he were telling a horse to move. “One night, and we’re not sleepin’ together.”

Shock threatens to knock me on my ass, he’s agreeing to let me stay.

In his house.

He really didn’t seem like the amenable type, but I guess I made an impression.

“One night,” I agree, even though I don’t know for certain if the police will be done with my trailer by then.

It’s late, well past midnight, by the time I roll my truck up next to Spencer’s ol’ red beauty. He’s sitting on the swing I eyed the last time I was here. I want to join him so badly, but I know right now’s not the time.

I don’t want him changing his mind and turning me away again. Though, I can’t help the tug in my heart that keeps pulling me into his orbit. Pulling my bag from the front seat and hopping out of the cab, I prepare myself for his walled-off demeanor.

As I press the button on the keys to lock the truck, I walk up to the steps feeling his eyes on me the whole time. “Thank you again for this,” I begin, tucking my lips into my mouth and letting them roll out. “I know you and I don’t know each oth—”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about this whole thing,” he says, cutting me off—again—and dropping his hands between his open knees.

“You were with me until the early mornin’, and Levi was with Lucy until mid-mornin’.

Then you came by the garage around what, lunch?

How could you have time to murder Levi, stage his body, and get to the diner around the same time I did? ”

“I swear on my life, I didn’t,” taking a step toward him, I drop my bag by the door and take the rocker next to the swing. I’m not about to push my luck with him by sitting beside him.

“Never thought you did, Cowboy.”

Looking up, he meets my stare, and I see it there, the honesty which I’ve come to realize—in the short moments we’ve been together—is his pride. He’s not the type to lie for someone’s benefit. At least, that’s the impression I’ve gotten.

Especially since he kicked me out so fast once he heard I was engaged. I’m not upset about it, though. After seeing him with his daughter, I can understand his trepidation.

My daddy’s an actual daddy .

“Listen, I know you have your girl...so if this is oversteppin’...” I go quiet, hoping he’ll tell me to shut up.

“She’s at her Mawmaw’s, and this is only for one night, Cowboy. Don’t go gettin’ any ideas, got it?”

I nod.

“Words, Heath, Remember?” He growls.

“Yup. Got it. No ideas.” I can’t hold back the twinkle in my eye, though, and I’m pretty sure he sees it.

“Why do I feel like your thoughts aren’t on the fact that Levi’s dead and you’ve been questioned for his murder?” His deep timbre pulls me back into the moment.

“It’s really hard to get good sex off the brain when it’s been less than twenty-four hours,” I admit with a shrug.

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This man has no shame.

His fucking smile, though, it's charming and inviting. I know why he is the way he is, at least the playboy part. How could he not? He's beautiful, travels all over, and I know people likely fawn all over him.

"I sure hope you get tested." My tone comes out harsher than intended, so I look away, out into the rolling darkness. I used a condom, but they aren't the end-all-be-all, and my mind won't stop spiraling.

His chuckle vibrates in my chest, or maybe that's my heart beating at an unreasonable rate.

I hate that I want to kiss him right now.

Hate how I want to sit here and listen to everything he's willing to tell me about himself.

I barely know this man, but he's already under my skin, and I need him out.

"I get tested regularly, I ain't playin' around with my health.

It's all I got," his wink has magical powers.

I'm positive because my dick, which hasn't been this active in years, is rioting against my jeans.

I need to get as far away from him as possible if I stand any chance of keeping my dignity in check.

I don't care if the engagement is fake. I don't want to end up in a tabloid and have my daughter thrown into this mess.

"Good. I'm clean too, I got tested a few months ago and haven't been with anyone since, thought you should know." Clearing my throat I continue, "You can sleep in my room," I offer, standing from the porch swing and blowing out the citronella candle I'd lit earlier. "I'll stay in Briar's."

"I can sleep on the couch," he says, following my lead. Grabbing his bag from where he placed it, we head inside, and I march straight to my door. Ain't no way I'm letting him sleep on the couch and risk Briar, Lucy, or Mawmaw barging in and asking questions I haven't had the time to answer.

"You'll stay in my room. It's not up for discussion." My tone brokers no argument, and he smirks. "Don't arg—"

"Yes, Sir," he extends the last of the word, his voice raised in playfulness, and my traitorous cock twitches.

It's been a long time since I've enjoyed anything in the bedroom that wasn't my imagination and calloused hand. So, hearing him taunt me ignites something deep in my gut.

"Go to bed, Heath," throwing his bag onto my bed and passing him in the doorframe. Our shoulders knock, but I don't stop to think about it. I know if I do, the two of us will fall right into the vortex of lust we share.

Stomping across the few feet that separate my door and Briar's, I throw open her door

and immediately think the couch might be the better option. She's so messy. Her clothes are strewn about, makeup on the vanity, and open bottles of what I hope are only water pepper the space.

Picking one up and taking a sniff, my chest loosens. I was a teen once, and Lord knows I did a lot of things I'm not proud of, but I don't want Briar falling into the same pattern.

Her book bag's half unpacked, with books and notebooks threatening to spill out.

Carrying it to the chair in the corner of her room, I plop it down and throw the clothes left from her shop-splosion on top of the chair.

She can clean this up tomorrow. For now, I'll squeeze my body onto her bed and pray to God I can sleep with Heath next door.

My body's relaxed, and my eyes are heavy not long after I've laid down with a blanket over me. Footsteps sound in the house, and in my almost asleep state, I remind myself that it's just Briar, and she likes to get water in the middle of the night.

But her steps aren't that heavy, and her voice most certainly doesn't sound like hers when I hear a whispered "Good night," against the door.

An impatient hand lands on my shoulder and shakes the daylights out of me. My daughter's voice is pitched higher than normal, "Why is Heath Macabe in our kitchen cooking bacon?"

My brain's not awake yet, and I groan. "What are you goin' on about?"

"Heath! You know, bronc ridin' champion?" She's waving her hand around while the other's on her hip. "Hot cowboy? Apparently has eyes for my dad—"

The smoke detector sounds, and I jump out of bed, pulling Briar with me. “Fuck!”

Dashing from her room into the kitchen, I grab a potholder from the drawer and fan the smoke detector as Heath stands there, pajama pants slung low over his hips, and not a stitch of a t-shirt to be found.

“Put a shirt on, would ya?” I holler over my shoulder as Briar tries to hide her laugh.

He’s standing there with a pair of tongs in his hand and a smile on his face. The alarm stops blaring, the only sound now is bacon frying on the stove. Rubbing my eyes, I huff out a breath, “Shirt. Now.”

Heath laughs, puts the tongs down, and walks to my bedroom. The sight puts thoughts into my head that shouldn’t be there. Seeing him so comfortable in my home should be criminal.

One night. That’s all I gave him. Now, he can pack up and go back to the rodeo.

“When did you come home?” I ask, wiping sleep from my eyes.

“Daaaad,” Briar sign-songs, holding her hands in front of her like she’s got some secret she can’t help holding in. “What is he doing here?”

Choosing to ignore my question, she eyes me then my closed bedroom door.

“His trailer is under investigation. He needed a place to stay,” I’m debating telling her why he called me, but think better of that conversation with my teenage daughter. Don’t ask, don’t tell, is my friend right now.

As if she can read my thoughts, she asks, “How did you know he needed a place to stay?”

Walking over to the stove and pulling the sizzling bacon off the burner, I think through my answers. What can I tell her? I've never lied to my daughter, and I don't plan on starting now.

"I ran into him at the police station with Lucy," which is true. I didn't speak to him, but I did see him.

"And you offered up your bed for him?" She asks, with a raised brow and hand on her hip.

"Briar, he needed a place to stay, and I have a place," turning my back to her, I fish the bacon out of the pan and place it all on the towel Heath already has some pieces laying on. "I don't know what else you need to know."

"I called him," Heath interrupts, "last night. I knew your dad would know where I could stay for the time bein'."

Turning her full inquisitive teenage brain on Heath, she asks, "And how did you get my dad's number?"

"Briar crosses her arms, her eyes bouncing between the two of us.

"He's a pretty private person, and I'm not convinced he would have given you his number after just meeting you at dinner last night.

Especially considerin' what happened after. "

God love her. Why does she have to be so intuitive?

Heath laughs and nods, "Yeah, your dad's a hard one to crack, that's for sure, but my publicist is a woman of many talents."

“Your publicist. The one who arranged your phony engagement?”

Heath and I both whip our heads in her direction, mouths agape and floored. She stands there, hip popped out, arms crossed as if she’s got some sorta leg up on us.

“How—wait, hold on. How do you know that?” Heath chuckles, as if it’s no big deal that my fifteen-year-old daughter can see through a bullshit engagement and not bat an eye.

“Oh, come on,” she says, throwing one arm up, “you wouldn’t settle for a woman like Macy Myers .”

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Briar really doesn't pull any punches.

"Well, you're right, I'm not actually engaged to her," I chuckle, looking at her father. Spencer doesn't spare me a glance. Instead, he plates the bacon on three separate plates, pulls a bowl of eggs from the counter along with an empty one, and starts cracking.

Scrambling up a few of them, he pours them into the hot pan of butter waiting on the stove.

They sizzle when they hit the hot butter and simmer once he stirs.

I could watch him cook any day of the week.

His tattooed arms working the spatula, the muscles that shift in his back.

Gray sweatpants—which, thank fucking God, exist—stretched tight across his thighs.

"She's too, what's that word you like to call rich people, Dad? Ritzy! That's right, she's too ritzy for someone like you. You need someone who isn't afraid to get dirty." Briar quips.

I couldn't agree more, and the man for the job is standing at the stove. Whether he wants to admit it or not, we have a connection. Something I've never bothered to try and find in any hookup over the years.

A raccoon zips through the room, and I immediately go into capture mode. The black

and white creature zooms across the living room, clattering and scratching its paws across the floor for traction.

“Thelma!” Briar shouts, and damn it, if the animal doesn’t stop and look at her. She’s got something dangling from her mouth, and from her side of the room, it looks almost transparent.

Realization dawns, and my cheeks heat.

Spencer’s bedroom door is open, and I’d bet my bottom dollar the raccoon has the condom we used the other night hanging out of its mouth.

“What d’ya have now, Thelma?” She asks, walking toward the animal.

“Uh, Spencer,” I’m frozen in place, unable to move or even think about anything other than the fact that I don’t want this girl touching the condom her father and I used. “Spencer!”

He finally turns, and all the color in his face drains. “Briar! Don’t–”

I guess he doesn’t know how to finish his sentence either because he’s darting across the space just as his daughter bends down to her knee and gasps.

“Oh gross, really, Thelma?” She says around a gag that turns into a giggle at her father’s distress.

Spencer pulls Thelma’s mouth open as she chitters in rebuttal.

Unhooking the latex from her teeth, he crumbles the condom up and shoves it into his sweatpants pocket.

Briar scoops Thelma up and walks over to the table. Plopping down in the seat, she strokes the raccoon's fur and says, "You know you aren't allowed in Dads room. I hope you've learned your lesson because I never want to see that again."

Spencer looks down at the floor with a shake of his head.

"That raccoon's your pet?" I ask, still embarrassed that it had our fucking condom in its mouth.

Briar looks up, "She's a cutie, right?"

"She's somethin'," Spencer grumbles, standing and making his way back to the kitchen where he washes his hands before noticing his eggs are sticking to the pan. "Briar, go wash up."

Laughter pours out of me the second she's shut the door behind her. "Was that—"

"Keep your voice down," Spencer spins, pointing the spatula at me. "It was exactly what you thought it was, so would you shut my damn door before Thelma digs anythin' else outta the trash?"

He's scooping eggs out of the pan onto everyone's plates, so I do as he asks. Returning to the kitchen, he offers up a floppy piece of bread. "Uhm, sure?" I mumble, staring at the offered carbohydrate in his hand.

"I'll toast it, but I wanted to be sure you eat carbs before I made too many," he rolls his eyes and lets out a breath.

"Yeah, toast would be great," I nod as if I totally understand his floppy bread offer to make toast. "And for the record, I eat everythin'," I say with a waggle of my eyebrows, and he huffs and turns back to the toaster.

Briar opens the door to the bathroom and steps out. Walking to the fridge, she smirks as she passes me and grabs the orange juice pitcher. Taking it to the table, she returns to a cabinet closest to the fridge and removes three glasses.

The toaster pops, and two pieces of perfect toast sit ready to be buttered.

“Jam, butter, both?”

“Both, please!” Briar says from the table, answering her dad. She mutters something under her breath, and Spencer whips his head her way. She smiles and tilts her head as if she didn’t say anything.

“Butter, please,” I reply.

It feels like a normal Sunday morning, something I could see us doing every day. The thought gives me goosebumps.

It sounds crazy, even in my mind. I’ve known Spencer for just over a week and Briar even less. But I can’t help being drawn in by everything about them. I want to know more about their regular life.

I want to know how Spencer feels about what his sister is going through with Levi’s death, how he takes his coffee in the morning, and if he has any allergies.

I want to know how Briar is enjoying summer vacation.

I want to know all the things a partner would know about his family, and I want it with them.

I feel like my life’s a puzzle, and these two are the pieces that I’ve been missing for a long time now.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

After breakfast and a smart-ass remark from Briar about safe sex, I send Heath back to his publicist. After Thelma outed me for having sex while Briar was with her Mawmaw, the rest of breakfast was...weirdly normal. It was as if we'd known Heath all our lives, he just fit.

It's scary, and I'm afraid if Briar gets to know Heath anymore, she'll get attached and want him to stay.

He can't stay though. He's a rodeo cowboy, not a 'settle down on a ranch cowboy', and I'm not delusional enough to believe that I could be anyone's first choice.

Other than Briar, though, her aunt might fight me for that spot.

"I need to get some things done at Raven Peak," I start. Briar pumps her arm in the air, throwing water and bubbles from the dishes all over the floor.

"I'll come help, I've been dyin' to see Jinx," rushing through the dishes, her words are jumbled, but I get the gist.

"Work before play," I remind her. She can't saddle up her horse and take off before chores are taken care of.

Walking into my room, I'm hit with the scent of him. He's everywhere, and I hate to admit that I like it. Pushing myself to get dressed, I try to ignore the sight of my messy bed. Thoughts of him sleeping here, in my bed, are making me hope it happens again.

It was only for one night so now he can clear his name, and head out to the next town for the rodeo.

Pulling my boots on and walking out of the room, careful to make sure the door shuts behind me, I wait for Briar. My cell phone's dead, so plugging it into the charger on the counter, I leave it to charge while we take care of the ranch.

I don't open the garage on Sundays. It's an unwritten rule around here. Nothing's open on Sundays except the church, and I haven't been there in a hot minute. Nothing personal, but the ranch takes up my whole Sunday, and with Lucy being down, I'll have a lot more on my plate.

"Alright," Briar says, boots clicking on the wood floor as she makes her way to the door. "Let's go!"

Grabbing the keys to the side-by-side, she cackles and settles into the driver's seat.

Lord, help me.

Hauling my ass into the passenger seat, she floors the gas, headed straight for the fence. Correcting herself she looks at me with a smirk before shooting us clear across the pasture to the barn on our family ranch.

"And you think I'm willin' to put you on the road, drivin' like that?" Nudging her arm, she lifts her shoulders and hops out.

"Mawmaw already signed the papers."

Hell.

The sun's high in the sky, and sweat drips down my chest under my shirt as I finish

up tilling the dirt for Mawmaw's garden.

She loves fresh veggies and herbs and uses them down at the diner, too.

So every year, I till the fields, and she tends to them as much as she can.

She gets winded easily, and this summer heat ain't no joke.

"Lookin' good, kid!" Mawmaw hollers from the barn.

We made the garden close to the barn so she wouldn't have to walk too far for tools.

It worked out better than we thought since Lucy's flowers don't play well with other plants.

Lucy's the unofficial town florist, her flowers win prizes every year at the county fair.

"You ready to sow those seeds?" I yell back. "I'll have Briar help."

She shakes her head and motions for me to come to the barn. Worry pierces my gut, and I turn the tractor off. I'm done with the ol' girl anyway, pulling her into the lean-to covering we added on last year.

Hopping down, I pull the keys and hang them on the hook inside the barn. We needed more space when Briar bought Jinx. He's a good old gelding, perfect for Briar's first horse. With his snow-white coat and faded black hooves, he's a looker, and he knows it. Reminds me of Heath's bucking mare, Fiona.

The second we brought Jinx into the barn, he preened and pranced around the mares. Now, since the mares made it clear one too many times they aren't interested, he saves his preening for Briar.

She's pulling the saddle off him, hanging the saddle pads and blankets off to dry. Brushing him down, she doesn't have to hook him to the stall. He stands and appreciates all the affection she gives him.

Mawmaw's rubbing her mare's chestnut snout by the time I've cleaned my hands in a bucket of hose water. "I see Thistle's gettin' all her nose rubs in."

"Yeah, poor thing doesn't get to see me too much these days," she sighs wistfully, eyes stuck on the horse my Pawpaw surprised Mawmaw with for the last wedding anniversary he was alive for.

Laying my hand on her shoulder, I squeeze, and she places her other hand on top of mine. "Your sister's refusing to get outta bed," she whispers, eyeing Briar's proximity.

"She just lost Levi," I argue, watching my own volume. "Give her some grace, alright?"

Shaking her head, she stops rubbing Thistle and looks at me head on, "I think it's a little more than that."

Cocking my head to the side, I have to let her words sink in. What does Mawmaw know that I don't? "Okay."

"Her phones been ringin' off the hook, hell I had to unplug the house phone," she grumbles and pats my chest. "I think she needs some big brotherin'."

"I don't have the right words for her," I argue, "Lucy's cryin' over a man I'm not sure she really knew."

Her stare tells me all I need to know. Mawmaw knew about Levi's proclivities, how,

I'm not sure, and maybe not the drugging, but she knew he was a bad seed.

"You knew," I say without looking away from her.

"A mother always knows, child. I may not be your mama, but I am your mawmaw, and I saw somethin' dark in that boy." There's a sheen in her eyes that gives away her emotion, but I don't comment.

"I'll talk to her," I promise with a sigh as Briar leads Jinx to his stall and refreshes his feed.

"Y'all musta had a mighty breakfast. It's past noon," Mawmaw bellows, emotion gone. "Come on now and wash up. We've got a family dinner to cook."

Briar claps with a little skip in her step as she tosses the keys to the side-by-side my way. "He's driving," she winks.

"Because you might give your poor old Mawmaw a heart attack," I rib.

She sticks her tongue out, and Mawmaw swats my shoulder. "Be careful who you're callin' old," she warns with a mischievous smirk.

I drive down the path I'm sure we could have walked and park beside Lucy's truck. We each pile out and do exactly as Mawmaw asked, turning toward the house to wash up, but I stop in my tracks when I see who's waiting.

Heath's standing on the porch, his hat by his side, hand running through his hair.

"Guess that horse you coulda missed came back," Mawmaw leans up and whispers in my ear. I'd forgotten what she told me about love being a horse you can either ride or let pass you by, and I still don't know what I'm gonna pick.

“I guess so.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Briar greets me with a smile, and I try my damndest to return it without looking like I need to throw up all of the contents of my stomach. She tilts her head but doesn't have time to comment as her great-grandmother scoots her inside the house.

Spencer's boots hit the stairs, and I have to hold back the urge to walk closer to him. To be near him, basking in his presence. It's soothing, something I'm in short supply of.

"You're back," he rumbles out. Is that a hint of hope I hear?

Or is my mind reading into his words because I've been in an interrogation room again—this time for hours—and want to rage cry into the shoulder of the big grumpy mechanic I'm slowly starting to realize may not want me, regardless of my fake engagement?

"I couldn't find you at your house, but Maxine sure found me," chuckling at the way she persuaded me to come with her to her house and promised me a good old-fashioned meal to fill my belly and heart.

"She did, huh?" Crossing his arms, he leans against the post at the top of the small set of stairs.

"I know this isn't at all how you want to spend the next...

Well who knows how long, but the police have shut down the rodeo, and since I've got no trailer for the foreseeable future, and I can't leave the county, I need to make arrangements...

” I trail off but continue, “That’s not what I came here for, though,” I chuckle, my nerves getting the best of me. “I came back to say thank you.”

“Okay, you’re welcome,” his eyes trail down my body and back up. “What did the sheriff say?”

With a heavy sigh, I shake my head and look up at the slatted porch ceiling, “They asked me a lot of questions about the report I filed after the incident I witnessed with Levi a while back. Apparently, more women in towns we’ve visited have had kits done...

” Even just the thought of what he did to them makes my blood fucking boil, and a small part of me wishes I had killed that rat bastard.

“You mean,” he lowers his voice and looks into the house through the screen door. “You mean they had rape kits done?”

Nodding, I suck my teeth and clear my throat, “They’re all being processed as we speak. When they come back with a match for Levi’s DNA, the police will have no choice but to start lookin’ outside of the rodeo for their killer.”

“So, as of right now, they still think you did it?” He asks, dropping his arms.

A humorless laugh escapes me, “They’re comin’ at me with everythin’ they can.”

“Why?” He tilts his head and bites the bottom plush part of his lips and I smile. It’s a thing he does—I’ve noticed in our short time together—when he’s processing.

“Because I turned him in, and nothin’ came of it?” I shrug, “I’ve been pretty vocal to my team about the kind of man I knew he was and what he deserved.”

“So you painted a target on your own back,” he concludes.

“I guess so,” I hadn’t thought about it that way. But it’s true, I’ve made it no secret how I feel— felt , about Levi and his demons.

Spencer closes his eyes and when he opens them, the green of his eyes is vivid against the bright blue sky.

“You can stay with me.” He states matter of factly, and it’s one of the furthest things I would’ve thought was on his mind. “I’ll have Briar stay with Mawmaw.”

“I can’t ask you to do that, I didn’t come back for that.”

“I guess it’s a good thing he offered then,” Maxine says, slinging a towel over her shoulder.

“I’m fine bunking down with the rest of the crew.”

“I’ll have none of that. He offered, and you’re gonna say thank you and accept. Now get in here before your youngin’ gets a cramp in her neck from eavesdroppin’.”

“Mawmaw!” Briar shouts, her cheeks are red and she turns away as soon as we walk in. “Not cool,” she murmurs under her breath at the stove, where she’s stirring something that smells mighty delicious.

“Wash them hands,” Maxine says, swatting at Spencer. He disappears down the hall, and I’m not sure what I should do. “Have a seat, honey,” nodding at the old circular wooden table with chairs that might have once matched, but no longer do.

Spencer emerges from the hall, and the three of them move through the kitchen as if they’re sharing a brain. Each of them does something that helps with the final meal,

and I'm impressed.

Maxine whispers something to Spencer, and he nods, heading up the stairs without a word. Briar watches him with glassy eyes, and I know her teenage heart is breaking for someone she loves.

"She'll either come or she won't," Maxine says, squeezing Briar's arm and laying the last bowl of food on the table. Everything's steaming, smelling like a Sunday dinner back home, if my family were still around.

I think losing my dad at such a young age is what pushed me into rodeo. It's like building your own family, except you don't have to worry about checking in. Staci does enough of that as it is.

Spencer comes down the stairs with a little pep and I'm confused, until Lucy's footsteps fall behind his. When she looks up, it's clear she had no idea I'd be here. A range of emotions flicker across her face before a mask of stone falls.

"I'll pass on dinner, Mawmaw," her voice sounds automated as if she's fully retreated into herself and refuses to come out.

"Naw, now Loo, you come on down. Heath here ain't a threat to you, or the rest of us," she defends. It's softer than her earlier words yet still brokers no room for argument.

"He mighta murdered Levi, Maw." She whimpers his name, and my heart sinks. She loved him, and despite my own convictions about Levi, I can't fault her for feeling a little betrayed.

Maxine looks at me, dead in the eyes and asks, "You haven't been charged with Levi's murder, have ya?"

“Mawmaw,” Spencer’s deep, authoritative tone sends shivers down my spine.

“Don’t you take that tone with me, boy,” she warns, and looks back at Lucy. “Heath didn’t hurt that man, Lucy Tritt, but I’ll bet if you let him, he could help you figure out who did.”

Everyone’s head twists in her direction as a smile stretches across her face.

Her gray hair is pulled back into a low ponytail, showing off the green eyes Spencer and his sister inherited.

Her skin’s weathered, the kind that comes with hard days at work out in the sun, and the deep lines by her eyes and mouth tell me she had a lot of fun doing it.

“Alright now, everyone take a seat,” she picks up a bowl of green beans, perfectly vibrant and home grown. Serving up herself and Briar, she passes the bowl my way, nudging me to do the same.

Spencer descends the remainder of the stairs with a look back up to his sister.

Reaching out his hand, she looks at it, and back at me before letting a lone tear fall.

Accepting her brother’s hand, she takes the seat beside Briar and wraps her arm around her.

Spencer takes the seat next to me, accepting the bowl I pass to him.

No one speaks as we dish up our plates full of green and pinto beans, quartered potatoes, and brisket so tender it melts off the bone onto the serving fork. Once everyone’s plate is full, Spencer says grace, and we dig in.

It's a bit awkward since the only noise is chewing or cutlery hitting the plates. Until Lucy puts her fork down and looks up.

"Did you murder Levi, Heath?" Her eyes are flinty, as if she's been working the courage up to ask me.

"No, ma'am, I did not," I answer truthfully, and once the time of death comes back confirmed, I'll be cleared. I feel it in my bones.

She nods, no hem-hawing, follow-up questions, or tears. She looks exhausted and confused by why this is happening, but somehow, it looks like she believes me.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry for your pain," if I had my hat on, I'd lay it across my chest, offering her sympathy the only way a cowboy knows.

Wiping her nose on her napkin, she nods, and conversation starts up again. They go back and forth, each of them excited to talk about whatever it is they're talking about, and eventually, Lucy joins in, too, sipping her tea and offering small smiles to the rest of the family.

I want to smile, too, to feel included.

To be part of this family.

Only I'm worried it will have an expiration date, and I'm not sure what will happen to me when that day comes.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Mawmaw's got Heath on dish duty while Briar laughs and corrects his washing abilities. He blows suds at her, and Mawmaw yells at them both not to ruin her kitchen floor that I just finished sweeping a few minutes ago.

The two of them laugh, and Heath gets back to his mediocre washing while Briar walks over, rubbing her belly.

"I haven't felt this fat and sassy in a while," she groans.

"Might-a been that second scoop of ice cream," I chuckle, poking her arm.

"Mawmaw's ice cream is irresistible, I don't know how you do it!" Her words reach across the kitchen because Heath whips around, dropping water and suds galore on the floor.

"I done told y'all not to mess up my floors," she hollers, throwing her hands up in the air and grabbing dish towels.

"I'm sorry, Maxine, and yeah! How could you not have any?" The way he asks sounds like he's personally offended.

Laughing even harder, Lucy helps me out from the front porch, shouting, "When you grow up eatin' so much of something, sometimes it just makes you queasy."

Nodding my head toward the screen door where she's been listening, I smirk. "It doesn't hurt that Loo and I used to sneak spoonfuls at a time without her knowin'."

“Pfft, you two still think I never knew?” Mawmaw slaps the towel from her shoulder to her knee. “A mother always knows.”

She taps the tip of her nose, and pulls the towel through the loop near her stove. That’s where her towel always sits. If it’s ever missing from her kitchen, I know something’s wrong.

“On that note, I’m gonna take my full belly to bed,” she winks and walks off, stopping under the stairs. “And Briar honey, you’re gonna be stayin’ in your daddy’s old room for a while, alright?”

I was going to tell Briar once I had her alone about Heath staying with me until this is all figured out, but Mawmaw beat me to it.

“Why?” Briar asks, looking around the room. “I want to stay at home. It’s not like Dad’s never had a friend...”

She stops mid sentence and I can see it the moment everything clicks for her. Her mouth drops open, and she points at me, then Heath.

“You’re... You two...? Oh... OH!” Her eyes widen, and I worry she might explode.

“That’s enough of that,” wrapping her up in my arms, I walk her out to the porch where Lucy’s snickering behind her glass of whatever she’s drinking instead of dessert. “Not helpful...” I grumble at my sister, though I’m happy to see her in a good mood.

When I’ve safely gotten her out of earshot, Briar whirls with one of the biggest smiles on her face I think I’ve ever seen. “You and Heath Macabe?” Her squeals echo into the night and I hang my head.

“I’m not answering that.” Chastising her does nothing to dim her wide lips. “He needs someone the sheriff trusts to keep an eye on him. That’s. All.”

Popping her hip out she plants her hand there and says, “So the condom Thelma just happened to pull out of your trash was from... what?”

“Briar,” I start because I do not want to have this conversation with her. “Boundaries.”

“So you hooked up with him but you’re not interested in more.”

Rubbing my hand across the back of my neck, I massage the tense muscles there and nod.

“Why not?”

“Because, he’s a rodeo champion, he’s engaged—”

“Fake engaged!” She snaps with more enthusiasm than a fifteen-year-old should have about her father’s possible dating life.

Choosing to ignore her protests about the fake engagement, I continue, “And he’s a murder suspect, I think he’s got enough on his plate right now, and I certainly don’t want him around you. At least... Not until he is cleared by the police.”

“But you like him?” She sing-songs, wagging her brows.

I do. Despite all the reasons I’ve told myself not to. My eyes travel to the screen door where Heath’s leaning against it, arms crossed, looking at Lucy.

“You so like him,” Briar smarts and runs back to the porch.

And I don't know what it is she says to him, but the smile he throws my way makes me wish I did.

Briar's passed out on the swing not long after I joined Lucy and Heath on the porch. Her soft puffs of breath move her hair every time she exhales.

"I'm sorry," Lucy says, waving a hand in front of her chest. "I'm having a hard time with all of this information."

Heath's eyes are soft as he looks at my sister. Telling her what he told me was hard for her to hear, I'm sure, and Heath doesn't look like it was a cakewalk for him either.

"I believe you," she clarifies, "it's only—God, that asshole. How could he be such a monster and smile at me like I was the sun to his moon?"

"I can't imagine all of the thoughts and scenarios you've put yourself through," Heath says. "Sometimes people like Levi fool us all."

She huffs with a sarcastic chuckle, "I'll need to add that one to the list."

"You're not a fool, Loo," I interject, "You were in love. Sometimes we choose to ignore things in hopes they go away."

Shaking her head, she stands, lifting the empty whiskey bottle and scowling.

"I guess that's my cue for bedtime," she grumbles as she walks past Heath. "Goodnight, love birds."

Closing my eyes and smashing my lips together, I force myself to pretend she didn't call us that.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

S pending time with Spencer's family feels like fates aligned or some of that cosmic shit I've heard people talk about. Like we're destined to be on this journey, and I'm just hoping it ends well. I'd rather not spend my life in jail for something I didn't do.

"I'm gonna take Briar upstairs," looking up the stairs with a tired sigh, he walks to where she's sleeping on the porch swing and lifts her into his arms.

She whines but doesn't wake. Instead, her arms circle her father's neck, and she snuggles into his chest.

I hold open the screen door so he can maneuver more easily, and his eyes soften a touch, making me smile—a big, cheesy smile—because his walls just cracked. It may have been a smidge, but they fucking cracked.

Carrying her into the house, careful to avoid hitting her head on the door frame, he walks up the stairs and disappears from view. Returning a few minutes later, he's huffing and puffing trying to catch his breath.

"She's not so little anymore," he laughs on another puff of air. "And I'm too old to be doing that."

"I mean, what else are those big ol' arms good for?" It slips out before I can think better of it.

His eyes widen a fraction before he's shaking his head and walking to the ATV parked beside a Jeep in the driveway. Cranking it up, he drapes his arm over the open door and looks my way. "You need a ride? Or are you walkin', Cowboy?"

Oh, I definitely want a ride, but it's not on his ATV.

His belly pops out over his belt, and my body remembers the way my hardness met with his softness.

The memory alone makes my body ignite, but at this point, I'd settle for some cuddles.

The comfort and security I felt last time feels needed after the past two days.

Jumping in, he takes off, mindful not to make too much noise. I love this compound they have, such close proximity to family must be helpful for running the ranch and raising a kid.

"I'll sleep in Briar's room again," he states, opening the door and walking in.

Thelma darts out from some unknown place, and I jump. "Holy hell."

Spencer's deep chuckle has butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

"I'm gonna need you to stop being so fucking hot if you're not willin' to give me a chance," I blurt, "because it's really hard not to like you."

He squints and tilts his head, "You've known me for what? A week?"

"I know enough to know I'd like to ask you on a proper date. Hell, I'd settle for coffee, anythin' to get you to notice me."

He scoffs, crosses his arms, and takes a deep breath. "Since the rodeo that first night, all I've done is notice you."

Taking a few steps closer to where I'm standing, he gets close enough that the smell of him, all cedar and smoke, envelopes my senses.

"My body tenses when you're near. I can sense your eyes on me, like the sun meetin' the sky. You're all I ever notice when you're around, and I hate it."

His words send a shock wave to my nervous system. Wait... "Why do you hate it?"

Licking his perfectly cherry lips, he says, "Because I know how this goes, and I've got a daughter to think about.

Her feelings matter, and despite her insistence that I ' get back out there', she gets attached too easily.

We've already lost too much for me to take a chance on you.

You're a fuckin' rodeo cowboy. You leave , it's your job.

How can I entertain the idea of us and still look my daughter in the eye when you decide we're not lively enough for you? "

I'm taken aback by his words. It never occurred to me that Briar would get attached... to me. Fuck, now I feel like an asshole. Of course, he's worried about who his kid gets attached to, and if roles were reversed, I'd hope I would feel the same.

"I can't promise that it wouldn't be challengin'," I argue.

"Challengin' ain't what I'm after, Cowboy," he whispers as he leans in closer. He blinks, eyes looking down at my lips before he passes me by and closes himself in Briar's room.

“Goodnight then,” I shake my head, frustrated at his bullheadedness.

Turning off the lights in the kitchen after getting a glass of water, I trudge to Spencer’s room and climb into bed. Leaving my clothes on the floor, I snuggle into his sheets and inhale a deep breath. He smells like home, and I’ll cling to it as long as I can.

The next morning, the door creeps open as I’m blinking sleep away. Spencer walks in, careful not to make too much noise. Seeing him tiptoe around is like watching a bull in a china shop. My chuckle startles him, and his head whips my way.

“How long have you been awake?” He grumbles.

“Not long,” stretching my arms above my head, I catch a glimpse of him eyeing my body exposed by the sheets pooled at my waist. “Drink your fill, Daddy. I don’t mind.”

His face hardens as he lumbers to his closet, ignoring my comment. “Get dressed,” he rumbles from behind the closet door.

“Yes, sir,” I tease, hoping to get a rise outta him.

He doesn’t fall for the bait. However, I can’t see him while he’s in there, so to satisfy my poor heart, I’m imagining that he’s scowling and biting his lip. The thought makes my cock stand to attention, and I debate stroking myself in hopes the sight will entice him into a quickie.

Deciding against that, I do as he asked, slipping into the bathroom and getting myself ready for the day. I’m not sure what we’re doing, and I don’t really care as long as I have the opportunity to break down his walls until they crumble to dust.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

The sheriff called this morning, asking questions about Heath and verifying the times we were together.

“Do you have any other leads?” I asked, hopeful he did.

“We’re working on other possibilities,” he mentioned, “whoever did this, they didn’t leave much in the way of evidence, and we combed through everything in that dumpster.

It’s possible something slipped through the cracks, but we’re doing everything we can.

The lab is still working on Heath’s trailer. ”

“Why are you so sure it was him?” I asked, knowing that he most likely wouldn’t divulge much. This town’s never seen a murder, especially not one so public. The media has been having a field day with the story, coming up with wild theories, and asking for any tips.

He sighs, and I can tell the case is weighing on him. Sheriff Follie and I went to school together and grew up here in Goldspur Ridge, where the most exciting things to happen are shoplifters and tourists being stupid. He’s never had to investigate a murder, and I don’t envy him one bit.

“I’m not,” he admits, “Spence, I’m in over my head.”

“Follie, you’re doing everything you can, right?” I know he is, he was never one to

do anything half-assed.

“I’m calling in the detectives from the county. We need help.”

“Okay,” I’m not sure what they’re going to find that he can’t, but I’m not about to ask. I know there are things he can’t tell me. “Well, you know where to find me if you need me.”

“Thanks, man.”

Walking into my room with Heath looking all comfy and adorable in my bed, my body goes haywire. God, I wish it wasn’t such a welcome sight, and I sure as hell wish I didn’t want to join him there.

Choosing instead to continue quietly gathering some clothes, I hear him chuckle, and I spin around, “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long,” he stretches like a lazy cat, sheets dropping around his naked hips, and my eyes follow the lines of his body. “Drink your fill, Daddy. I don’t mind.”

Sometimes, I regret speaking to him, especially when he calls me Daddy in that tone. Telling him to get dressed, I return to what I was originally doing and make sure he knows we’re leaving for the garage soon.

Pulling up to Goldspur Gears, my phone rings, pulling me out of my thoughts. The screen on the dash says Flower, and I accept the call.

“Hello, daughter of mine,” I say, catching Heath’s cheek dimple.

“I’m startin’ my chores now,” she says without greeting. “Could I go to Clara’s and hang out by the pool later, please?”

Sometimes, I think Briar underestimates the amount of things I know about her and her friends. Clara's a good girl, but she's not always been the best of friends to Briar.

"Loo said she'd drop me off before she heads to the diner," she adds with more enthusiasm.

"Who all is gonna be there?" I ask, wary of the answer.

"Dad," she whines.

"You know the deal, Flower. If boys'll be there, Clara's parents need to be there too," I know that's what she's not telling me. I was a teenager once, it's how I ended up a father at nineteen. I wouldn't change a thing, but that doesn't mean I'm not careful with Briar.

"But," she starts, "Colt will be there!"

"Colt isn't your babysitter, and he sure as hell ain't an adult," I laugh. Of course she would try using him as a reason to go. Sure, he'd look out for her, but he's also trying to enjoy his summer before senior year. I'm not asking him to keep an eye on her while he's hanging out with his friends.

"I'll be the only one not there," she whines, "it's not fair."

"Life ain't fair, Flower."

It's something Mawmaw's always said, and it's gotten me through a lot of hard times.

Heath scoffs in the seat beside me, and I dip my brows.

"Ugh, you're no fun. I'm already stuck here instead of at home, this is like..."

compensation, or whatever.” I know she’s pouting. I can hear it in her voice.

“Let me think about it,” I want to know what Heath’s scoff was all about, and I’ll be calling Clara’s mother to find out if she’s going to be there.

Her squeak over the speaker makes me smile. I hate telling her no, but at the same time, it’s my job to protect her.

“Thanks, old man!” She hollers into the phone before hanging up.

Shaking my head, I pull the keys from the ignition and step out. Heath does the same, slamming the door behind him and following me in without a word.

He’s moody all of a sudden.

Colt never works Mondays, so he gets a full weekend. Even through the summer, I don’t ask him to work more than he does during the school year.

Opening the garage office and waking up the computer, I check the messages and look over my lists of things to do in silence.

Heath flops down into the seat at the desk usually reserved for Briar. She’s my unofficial secretary and occasional helping hand.

“She’s a teenager, Spence. Let her make some dumb mistakes,” Heath cracks as I head into the bays.

Stopping just short of walking into the first bay, I turn, looking at him with lowered brows. “Excuse me?”

He chuckles nervously, then licks his lips and says, “You heard me. She’s a teenager

wantin' to hang out with her friends for the summer."

"She's fifteen, Clara has been cold and hot with her since they were in kindergarten. Forgive me for wantin' to protect my daughter," turning away from him, anger brewing in my gut, I open the big door to the first two bays and secure it.

The heat's going to be on another level today, so the sooner I can get a breeze going, the less stuffy it'll be in here.

"Briar seems pretty capable of protectin' her own peace," Heath's voice echoes out of the garage, and I growl.

"You've known her all of what? A minute, and all of the sudden, you're an expert on my daughter?"

He shakes his head, "I'm not sayin' I'm an expert. What I'm sayin' is, let her live."

Stepping around the car I've got to finish up today, I advance on him and force him to walk backward to the wall where tools hang. "You're a stranger in my house, you don't get a say on how I parent my daughter."

His gold-flecked eyes dip for a second, nearly tripping as I crowd him against the wall before he looks up at me. Our breaths mingle, and my chest rises and falls in conflicting emotions. He doesn't know us well enough to get an opinion on how I parent.

"I wasn't—" He stutters.

"You don't know us, so shut your mouth before I throw you out on your fine ass," I growl, completely in his space now.

My stomach's pressed to his hard torso, and the proximity threatens to scramble my brain. Knowing exactly how he looks under that t-shirt and the way his muscles contract when he comes.

"Then go on a date with me, and we'll get to know each other," he whispers, mouth closing in on mine. "You can get to know my fine ass while we're there."

Stepping back, I grunt and turn away to head for the car I've been working on finishing for Mrs. Sink. I called her on Saturday and told her it would be ready today. I don't like to break my promises.

"One date," he says, following me to the car.

Ignoring him, I lift the hood and check to make sure everything's in working order. I replaced the fuel pump and drained and replaced her fluids. All that's left is a test drive to double check everything works properly.

"I'm livin' in your house, don't you think we oughta' get to know each other?"

"Livin' is a strong word," I scoff, "you're only stayin' until your trailer's released."

"And did the sheriff tell you when that would be?" He smirks, and I wonder if he knows I spoke to him this morning.

"I've got to test drive this one, try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone," shutting the hood and grabbing the handle to the driver's side, I slide into the car and carefully back it out of the bay.

"You're going to leave me here?" He asks, looking around as if he's worried something's gonna pop around a corner and scare him.

“I’m not lettin’ you into a client’s car.”

He nods, leaning down arms on the window seal, “I’m gonna wear you down, Daddy. You’ll see.”

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Spencer came back not long after leaving and made a phone call. I have to admit, I enjoy watching him work. His coveralls are permanently stained in places, and when he gets hot, he unzips the top and ties it around his waist, leaving him in just the white t-shirt underneath.

The rest of the week goes pretty much the same.

We wake up, I make coffee, and we go to the garage. We've had a few more dinners at Mawmaw's with Lucy and Briar, but I get the feeling Spencer doesn't want me around his girl too much, and I don't fault him for it.

Like usual, because of the weather, Spencer tied his coveralls around his waist, letting his belly hang over the knot, and my mouth waters. Watching him work is hot as hell. He's so handsome and wholesome it hurts.

I remember having his tattooed arms surrounding me while we gave into each other, and I watch the veins pop while he works, and sweat beads on his brow as I get lost in my daydreams.

There's a fan in the corner of the garage, so I flip the switch, and his head pops up at the flow of air.

"Thanks," he mumbles and continues working.

The ringtone I have specifically for Staci plays loudly, echoing off the bay walls, and Spencer eyes me from where he's working on the other car in the garage.

“Hello.”

“Tell me you’re with the mechanic,” she squawks.

“I am,” I say, slowly drawing out the last word.

“Thank God,” she says, “I’m going to call the sheriff back.”

“Wait—” I start, but the audible click of the line going dead sounds before I can get anything else out.

“I hate when she does that,” I grumble.

Spencer’s phone rings as he’s wiping his hands, and he eyes me, “Hello?” He answers, placing the phone on speaker and laying it on the ground beside his rolling chair.

“The sheriff called,” Lucy starts, “The police found another body.”

He stops moving, body going taut. Rolling over to where he placed his phone, he picks it up, takes it off speaker, and walks off outside of the bay where I can’t hear. Levi wasn’t the only body. How could that be possible?

Eddie’s name flashes on my screen, and I answer immediately, “Heath—”

“I know, there’s another body,” I cut him off.

“It was under your trailer,” he blurts, “and the guy was pretty fucked up.”

“It was where?”

“Under your trailer. When the police moved it, it was layin’ there, hardly more than a bloody pulp, seriously smelly. Must’ve been there a week or more,” his words make me want to vomit.

Under my trailer... The smell... I couldn’t figure out where it was coming from. I think I may be sick.

“I’m—”

“Hang up,” Spencer’s voice resonates through the garage as he lumbers back in. I freeze, so he repeats, “Hang up the fuckin’ phone, Heath.”

Pressing the end call button, I stare at him, mouth agape and running dry. “I didn’t—”

He looks in my direction with flinty eyes, effectively shutting me up. “Get in the truck, and don’t argue.”

Following his instructions, he comes out a few moments later, cell phone pressed to his ear. “—comin’ to you,” is the only bit I catch before he’s throwing his phone onto the dash and gripping the wheel with more aggression than I’ve ever seen from him.

“We’re goin’ to the sheriff. I don’t care what your publicist says,” he starts, cranking the truck and peeling out of the lot. “You couldn’t have done this, you’ve been with me for a week now, and I’m going to go on record for that.”

Swallowing down the little bit of saliva I’ve got in my mouth, I nod, looking out the windshield. I want to enjoy the fact that Spencer’s visibly upset on my behalf, that he’s so hellbent on making a statement that I couldn’t have murdered anyone.

“Thank you,” I murmur once we’re at the police station. Looking down at my hands, I’m picking at the skin around my nails. The only sign of my growing anxiety about

being here.

Again.

Staci texts, the alert blinks on my phone screen and Spencer picks it up.

FlameThrower: You let your mechanic speak his peace, but you don't say a fucking word.

FlameThrower: Do you understand?

The second pings faster than the first, and I cringe.

“Your mechanic, huh?” He says, the column of his neck moves with his tone. Twisting in his seat, he looks at me head-on and hands me my phone. “She's right, don't say anything, I'll do all of the talkin'.”

“Why are you here? Why do this for me?” I ask, “You've made it clear that you'll never be able to move past the fake engagement before this whole mess started. I told you I didn't have anything to do with it, but it hasn't seemed to matter. So, why?”

He pauses, eyes searching my face before saying gently, “I'd hate to see someone go down for something they didn't do.”

Unlocking the truck, he steps out but I don't budge. If he doesn't want me to speak, I don't want to go in. Realizing that I'm acting childish, I step out, place my hat on my head, and walk into the sheriff's office without so much as a fidget.

“I'm here to see Sheriff Follie,” Spencer says to the officer working the front desk.

Her hair's slicked back into the bun at the base of her neck without a stitch of makeup

to be found.

She looks young as if she's right out of high school.

But that can't be right, don't they have to go through training first?

Her eyes find mine behind Spencer, and she scowls. "Have a seat, I'll call him."

I guess she's not a fan.

We sit on the hard plastic chairs against the wall, neither of us saying a word. The same officer who brought me to the station for questioning a week ago, walks out of the hallway to our right with a grim smile.

"Spencer," he says. He looks around Spencer's age, only with more lines on his face and dark circles under his eyes. He seems more than tired as if he's lost years of his life to his job.

"Sheriff," Spencer stands, offering his hand. They clap hands and shake before Spencer follows the sheriff down the same hall he came from, leaving me alone up front.

FlameThrower: Lawyer will be there in 10.

Staci's text brings me no comfort. For all I know, Spencer will be done by then, and we'll be leaving.

The female officer at the desk eyes me every now and then as if I'm going to lose my shit at any moment. To be fair, I might. Only not in a 'psycho murdering way,' more like in an 'oh my God, I'm being framed for murder' way.

The clock on the wall ticks loudly as minutes go by before the door opens, revealing my lawyer and Kenzie, Staci's assistant.

"I imagine your boss has questions for my client," my lawyer says to the young blonde officer, stepping up to the desk.

"Actually," a man dressed in slacks and a button-down appears from the left hall where the interrogation room is. His shiny shoes make me believe he's not from around here, not with those expensive dress shoes. The officers around here wear boots covered in dust.

He's got a badge hanging around his neck, which he allows us to see as he settles into the seat across from me. "I don't have any questions for Mr. Macabe at the moment, unless he has something he would like on the record?"

Fuck no, I don't.

"My client does not," my lawyer says. I need to find out what his name is, and how much I'm paying him because he doesn't bat an eye. The mother fucker looks almost bored .

"Well then, if you think of anything else, I'm Detective Royce from homicide. You all have a good day," the well dressed man, Detective Royce, says as he hands my lawyer his card. Kenzie wraps her thin fingers around my arm, and lifts me out of the seat.

I don't want to leave Spencer in there, but I won't dare say a word when Kenzie's scowling like she is.

Once we're out of the building, nearing Spencer's truck, she drops my arm and says, "Why would you think it's a good idea to walk into a police station while you're a

person of interest in a murder investigation? ”

“Because Spencer’s here—” I start, and her look makes me pause.

“You’re all over the news. Didn’t you notice the reporters across the road?” She points their way with her middle finger and turns her wrist once they notice her, so she’s flipping them off.

“I don’t watch the news,” I smirk.

“Ugh,” she slaps her forehead and closes her eyes. Once she’s gathered herself, she looks at me, “Your fiancé wants to know why, every time you go out, you’re photographed with the same man. She’s demanding to know who he is, Heath, and she said she ‘doesn’t appreciate being made a fool of’.”

“Yeah, well, if she’d stop avoidin’ my phone calls, she’d know. Tell Staci to shut that whole shitshow down, I mean it,” I seethe.

She doesn’t respond, only lifts her phone to her ear and turns away. I can’t help watching the front doors, waiting for Spencer to come out. I know he’s okay, but still, I worry.

“Staci told me you get to keep your balls today,” she says, turning back around and looking at the lawyer. “He won’t be going back in, Burg.”

The lawyer man walks off toward the SUV Kenzie picked me up in yesterday and hops in.

“His name is Burg?” I blurt.

She laughs, “His name is Burgess, but we tend to spend a lot of time together.”

“Define a lot?” I squint.

“Too damn much for my liking,” she snaps. “I’ll be in touch.”

Not long after Kenzie pulls out of the lot, Spencer’s form comes into view through the glass. He’s smiling at the sheriff, and shaking hands with the homicide detective who introduced himself to Burg as Royce.

His eyes find mine across the parking lot, and I swear my heart jolts.

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Follie did call in the county deputies and a homicide detective, it seems. He's standing in front of me, asking a lot of questions, and I try to answer them as fully as I can.

Ultimately I think they've ruled Heath out since this other body was in a state of decomp, which puts the time of death at the same time we were having that first dinner at Mawmaw's.

He was with my whole damn family, so there's no way he could have attacked that person and hidden them under his trailer. Not to mention that would be the most absurd place to hide a body if he'd actually done it.

Heath's standing outside of my truck, leaning against the passenger door, worrying his bottom lip.

"Looks like a storm's comin' in," Follie says, looking up at the darkening blue sky. "I don't think your cowboy likes it too much."

My gaze travels to Heath, his head's tilted toward the sky, lips in a thin line. He's not my cowboy, but when he looks like that, all unsure and sweet, I really wish things were different.

"Guess I'd better get, then," shaking his hand one more time, I walk over to Heath just as rolling thunder reverberates through the town.

I love the way it sounds. It reminds me of long summer nights spent under a warm Tennessee sky as a teenager, my whole life spread wide before me.

Things have changed since then, but I think the two of us could use a little teenage stupidity.

“Come on,” I smirk, opening the door behind him. “I’ve got something to show you.”

He looks skeptical, and I admit I’ve given him every reason to be wary of my intentions. But I’m betting he’s never seen a heat-lightning storm like this before. It’s one of the most beautiful moments out here in Goldspur Ridge.

“I hope whatever it is, it’s inside,” he swallows and hops in. I have to hold in my laughter until the doors shut, and I’m rounding the hood of the truck, jumping in.

“You’ll see, Cowboy,” I wink, starting the engine and heading back home. Thankfully I already locked up the garage, so I don’t have to go back.

The sky’s darkening, turning a midnight blue faster than usual with the cloud coverage. The air’s thick with humidity. As I roll down my window, Heath’s eyes grow larger.

Turning into the driveway we share with The Raven, passing by the house, I chuckle at Heath’s wide-eyed expression.

“Spencer,” he says, low and concerned.

“Trust me,” I say, patting his leg and giving it a squeeze.

He doesn’t respond, only swallows and sits up, looking out of the window. Lightning flashes, and he sits back so fast I can’t help but let out a chuckle. Thunder rumbles in the distance and I’ve not heard a sweeter sound in a long time.

Driving carefully out into the wide pasture, I park the truck and hop out. Opening the

back door and hauling blankets out.

“Come on, Cowboy,” I laugh, nodding toward the bed of the truck before slamming the door shut and unlatching the tailgate.

Throwing the heavy quilt out onto the bed of the truck, Heath slowly steps out, warily looking at the sky.

“Are you crazy?” He asks, eyeing the quilts I’ve laid out in a pallet on the hard metal bed.

“There’s nothin’ better than a heat lightin’ storm,” I tell him, cupping his chin and tilting my head. “You wanted a date, here it is.”

“This is not my idea of a date,” he mutters looking up into my face. “I was thinkin’ somethin’ a little more... inside.”

“Scared of nature now?” I tease, resting my head against his. His intake of breath at the proximity makes me smile. “I know I’ve been pushin’ you away, and I’ve got my reasons but dammit, it’s exhausting.”

“So you’re what? Willin’ to give us a shot?” He asks, moving closer to my lips.

“If you still want that, and against my better judgement, yes.” I offer, “but you have to promise to be patient with me. It’s been a long time for me, and I have Briar to think about—”

His lips brush just beside mine, cutting off my words. A hint of a kiss. It’s a small token of affection, something that tells me without words that he understands.

Stepping back, I watch him climb into the truck, his ass is up in the air, and with a

look over his shoulder, his eyebrow pops up, and he smirks.

“Go on, before I swat your ass and this turns into somethin’ else,” I rumble.

He gets settled as I climb up and rest my arms behind my head, kicking off my boots and crossing my ankles. He scoots closer, almost but not quite touching.

“Is now the time to ask all my burnin’ questions?” He asks before a great boom echoes across the ridge, and his shoulders scrunch.

“Ask away,” I breathe into the dark sky.

“Where’s Briar’s mother?” His first question’s a biggie.

When we found out Pearl was pregnant, I proposed immediately.

I knew it wasn’t what either of us had planned on, but after losing my dad I was damn well gonna do right by my kid.

I’ve never wished anything was different either, I loved Pearl till the day I lost her.

I’ll always love her.

“She was out riding one afternoon after I got back from the ranch,” I start, hating to relive the moment in my head.

“It’s okay, you know, if it’s too personal, you don’t need to tell me.” His cheeks tinge pink, and it’s cute.

“It’s not a memory I love relivin’,” I answer honestly, “but it’s important if you’re tryin’ to get to know me, I guess.”

Pearl's death changed our lives. Briar was only five, so she didn't understand. She still has questions I don't know how to answer.

"Pearl had a brain aneurysm, and it burst while she was out riding," I have to force the words out, even after ten years, it stings.

Rolling my head to look at him, I continue, "The doctors say she likely never even knew it was there, and it happened so quick she never felt a thing. But she was alone, and I'll never forgive myself for it. "

He scoots closer so his arm brushes mine, "It doesn't sound like somethin' you could have stopped."

Shaking my head, blinking away the tears that threaten to fall, I look back up into the sky. Stars peek out behind the thinner clouds, as lightning races across the sky.

"That's what they say," I whisper, "I only wish I'd agreed to go out there with her, but Briar was runnin' a fever that day, and Mawmaw wasn't gonna be back for hours. I knew Pearl could use some alone time, so I encouraged her to go on her own."

I take a deep breath in and let the rest out, the part that makes me hate myself. "I only called the police after her mare showed back up at the ranch. I was too busy with Briar to notice how long it'd been. She was out there for hours. Alone."

"I can't imagine how that felt," he says, leaning up on one elbow to look down at me. "But you have to know there wasn't anything you could've done, and hey," he elbows me in the ribs to get my attention, "Your daughter's kind of wonderful despite losin' her mama so young."

That gets a smile out of me, Briar is a fantastic kid. Even when she's being a pain in my ass.

“I’m lucky enough to have an amazin’ family that stepped up when we needed it most,” I can’t take all the credit. Lucy, Mawmaw, Uncle Scott, and LuAnna all helped me raise Briar in the wake of losing Pearl.

“My mama died when I was Briar’s age, and not long after that, my Dad died too,” Heath’s voice is soft. Low, and his eyes drop to my mouth and back up. “He died of a broken heart, though that’s not what the official report says.”

“I’m sorry.” My heart squeezes in my chest as he lowers back down beside me.

“It’s part’a life, right?” He says, lifting his shoulders and throwing up his hands. “It sucks, but we keep on livin’. It’s how I found the rodeo, Eddie’s parents took me in after Dad died. They took me to my first rodeo and I guess the rest is history.”

A bolt of lightning strikes in the sky, sparkling in jagged arcs.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Talking about my parents isn't something I normally do, especially not with hot men who I'm currently interested in dating.

Yet Spencer pulls it out of me, and I find myself wanting to tell him everything about me.

It's not the way his slow drawl makes the hair on my arms stand up, it's the way his eyes light up with every crack of lightning as he looks at me from under the stormy sky.

I want him to know me well enough to complete my sentences, to buy me little trinkets just because he thinks I'll like them.

Shit people do when they're in love.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he says as if it's still fresh, and I grunt out a thank you as a lone tear escapes. It's not sadness, it's acceptance of what happened and what I'm sure is coming. I know the questions will stop, and whatever hate is spewing on the internet will be over soon enough.

I just hope whatever this is between us never ends.

My phone rings, Macy's name flashes across the screen, and I watch Spencer's body go rigid.

"I haven't had a chance to speak to her," I tell him, willing him to look at me. Instead, he looks up and watches the lightning flash. It sparks in his green eyes, reflecting

back to me, and it's almost more enchanting than just watching it light up the sky.

"Hey Macy," answering her call, the line's fuzzy when she speaks, and I have to move around to catch her voice. Finding it on the edge of the tailgate, I turn my back to him and listen.

"-fake still, I expected... Staci... more discretion...promised," she yaps, and I only catch tidbits.

"I don't know what Staci promised you, but this fake engagement is off," I tell her, keeping my back to where Spencer's laying down. "It never should've happened."

She squawks on the other line, yelling something about how this was for both of us , but I can't understand her. Every other word is filled with static, and honestly, I'm fed up trying.

"I'm a little busy right now, but when I get back to better service, I expect to see a breakup posted," clicking the button to end the call, I let out a relieved sigh just as the sky lets out a crack of thunder louder than I've heard all night.

Jumping back, warm arms circle my waist and cushion my head. Spencer's looking down at me, chest heaving, muscles flexing, and I pray to any God that will listen that he'll kiss me again.

His long blonde lashes fan against his cheek as he looks down at my lips and then back up.

His tongue pokes out, wetting his bottom lip.

Suddenly, I don't care that we're laying on a metal truck bed in the middle of a pasture during a lightning storm.

Spencer's soft stomach brushes against my side, and I shiver.

"We should get back," he whispers, mouth only an inch from mine. "Briar's gotta be lookin' for us."

I nod, clearing my throat and wishing the lump there would go away. He hasn't moved, though, and my heart constricts, hoping he'll close the distance to my mouth.

When he doesn't, my eyes drop along with my hopes. Scooting out of his arms, I move to the edge of the truck bed and hop off, Spencer following suit. The lightning's been quiet for a few minutes, leaving us with a star-studded clear sky.

It's beautiful out here. I can see the two of us getting lost in each other, blanketed in nothing but the starry night. Spencer reaches back to grab the quilts and then closes the tailgate. When I look up, Spencer's looking at me with something akin to want in his eyes.

He smiles and guides me to the truck, placing his hand on my lower back.

The contact makes my body heat, and I wish he would fucking kiss me already.

At the door, he pulls it open and allows me space to get in.

Leaning into the cab, he creates the most minimal amount of space, and my breath catches.

The click of the seatbelt across my chest and lap breaks my observation, and my eyes flick down and back up to where he's smiling and shaking his head. With a small chuckle and wink, he backs out of the cab and shuts the door.

Back at the house, Spencer parks the truck beside a blue one I recognize from

Maxine's house. The lights are on, and the doors unlocked. Spencer laughs when he opens the door, and I understand once I peek my head around the corner.

Briar's roped Lucy into what looks to be a spa day, but they're both crying, wrapped in each other's arms on the couch. Their faces are covered in white masks, lips covered in a similar fashion as tears drip down the surface of their mask.

Lucy sniffles and laughs once she sees Spencer's expression. His eyebrows are raised, arms crossed over his chest. "Should I be concerned?"

Briar startles as if she hadn't heard us come in and stands. Hip popped out, one hand sitting on top, she removes the lip mask from her face with a sour look, "You never called me back."

Uh-oh, Daddy's in trouble.

"Shit," he says, closing his eyes and rubbing them with his fingers. "I got busy and forgot."

"Yeah, I figured, so now I get to scroll the internet seein' all my friends havin' a fun summer by the pool," she's tapping her foot along with her words as if to punctuate how upset she is.

"I'm sorry, Flower," he says, looking around the room.

"But it doesn't look like you're lackin' in the fun department.

I thought you were meant to just be grabbin' stuff and headin' back to Mawmaw's?

"I am, but don't skate around the point.

It's not the same, and you know it! Aunt Loo!

?" She shouts, looking at her aunt for backup. Lucy throws her hands up and stands.

"I'm not your parent, Bee," she says with puckered lips, "but I understand where you're both comin' from.

Give your dad a break, okay? He's only one man, he can only do so much.

" Then she turns to her brother and scowls, which looks ridiculous with the mask still covering her face, and says, "And, you should have called, we were worried."

Her eyes scan over me, but she doesn't hurl any insults or look at me like I murdered her boyfriend, so I'll take that as a win.

"I know, I'm—"

"Sorry. We know," Briar blurts with an eye roll.

"It was my fault," I speak up, and all of their eyes swing my way. "Really Briar, don't blame your dad. I don't like storms, so we had to pull over and wait it out."

Her face softens, and she gives me a little pity smile. Lucy doesn't say anything, only picks up her things, and plops down onto the couch beside Briar.

Spencer's got a scowly look on his face, and I wonder what I said that I shouldn't have.

"I understand," Briar huffs, "still, it's a crappy feelin'."

Spencer rounds the couch and bundles her up in his arms. She lets out a laugh and

bats playfully at his arms.

“Other than Mr. Forgetful over there, how has your day been?” He asks, seamlessly turning the conversation to a livelier topic.

Briar goes on about the pictures she’s seen, how many people were there, and why she feels left out. Having once been a teenager, I get it, especially coming from a small town where friends were slim and things to do were even slimmer.

“Oh, and if I have to see one more picture of Clara and Sam kissin’ all over social media, I might barf,” she laughs and asks, “What about you two? Do anythin’ fun today?”

I can’t help the chuckle that escapes when I look at Spencer.

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With Heath's earlier somewhat lie to Briar, I don't really want him answering any of Briar's questions.

Do I think she needs to know I took him out on a date?

Yes.

Was I planning on lying to her about it?

No.

Now, here I am, stuck between Heath's sort-of lie and telling my daughter that I fucked up.

I forgot to call her after I spoke with Clara's mom. She wasn't going because her parents weren't going to be there, still I should have told her that like I'd promised.

"It's late," I say, punctuated with a yawn.

Heath and Lucy both chuckle and Briar whines. "It's summer, Dad. Bedtimes don't exist."

"They do when you still have chores to get done every mornin'," I chuckle, attempting to give her the dad look .

"Ugh," she groans, "the chores would get done with more enthusiasm if I could hang out with my friends after, you know."

Her tone's playful, but the undercurrent of hope fills me with dread.

"Clara's parents weren't going to be there," I start, and her face falls, mouth opening, ready to defend her position on going. "How about you wait until next weekend to go to the pool, and I'll call Pen's mom for a week-long sleepover?"

Penelope Saul is Briar's "ultimate best friend", whatever that means in teen girl language. She's my niece, Briar's cousin, and before her mom got her dream job, they lived here in Goldspur Ridge.

I don't blame Ravena for getting out, especially after Pearl's death.

Her squeal is higher pitched than I think I've ever heard, and she jumps up and down, pumping her hands in the air. "Pen's comin' to stay with us!"

"That way, the two of you can travel together," I warn, eyeing her with a stern brow. "Look out for one another."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" She says, wrapping her arms around my waist and squeezing. Looking up at me, she smiles wide, "Thank you, Dad!"

"We'll go pick her up after I get away from the garage tomorrow," I promise, placing a kiss on the top of Briar's head. "Now, bedtime, please."

She mocks a salute and skidaddles on to her room, where she's already picking up the phone while she repacks her bag. I have no doubt Pen will be doing the same in point two seconds.

"You bring that up with Maw?" Lucy asks quietly, and I give her a halfhearted shrug to indicate I have not, in fact, informed Mawmaw. She lets out a sigh and says she'll make that call for me.

“Thanks, Loo, you’re the best.”

“Yeah, I know.”

As Lucy and I start cleaning up their mess from what I hope wasn’t entirely their dinner, my phone rings. I placed it on the counter before coming to pick up their mess.

Heath looks at it and hollers, “Say’s Ravena.”

“Tell Bee I’ll be waiting outside to walk back to Mawmaw’s with her,” and she slips outside with her phone pressed to her ear.

“Press the speaker, please,” I tell Heath, making my way over to the trash.

“I guess you told Briar the good news, huh?” Ravena, Pen’s mother, laughs. “I’m glad they still have each other, even after all these years.”

“Me too, though you and Clive could move back, ya know,” I tease. I know with Ravena’s new position at the hospital, she’ll never move. Being the top surgeon in the state affords you that luxury.

“Speakin’ of, you wanna babysit him too?” She jokes, and I can hear the faint rebuttal from her husband.

“Hey, don’t go outtin’ me to Briar. She thinks this is a reward,” I laugh, only half-kidding.

Heath stands leaning against the counter with a smile splitting his face.

“Pen’s excited to spend time with Uncle Spence, don’t let the teen attitude fool you,”

she says, and I can practically see the mom look she's throwing at someone. "Clive will be here with Pen when you come to pick her up. I've got a surgery that I'm not sure will be done before you get here."

"That's alright," I can't say I'm not disappointed, ever since Pearl's death, it's been hard for Ravena and I to be around each other. Especially since they were twins. Seeing Ravena brings back memories of Pearl that I'd rather keep as memories. "I'm sure Clive misses me more anyway."

She laughs, and though I know it's genuine, it's still got a tinge of sadness to it.

"She would have loved seein' them together, Ravena," I whisper, sniffing back the tears that make my throat hot and thick.

"She would," Ravena agrees with a snuffle of her own. "It's good to hear from you, Spence."

"You too, Ravena," I say with a heavy breath.

She disconnects the call, and I lean against the kitchen island, hanging my head. Flexing my arms to feel something other than the pain in my chest, I stand there. Pen looks almost identical to her mother, so I have to prepare myself to go pick her up.

I didn't know if I should've told Ravena about the murders happening in Goldspur Ridge, they seem pretty isolated to the rodeo... I decided against telling her at the last second. No sense in raising an alarm yet.

Lucy's boots clack on the porch, and she leans into the house, "What's takin' so long, Bee?"

"Flower?" I ask, looking at Heath in question when he chuckles at my bedroom door.

Lifting his finger to his lips, he carefully walks back over to where we're standing. "She's out."

"What?" I ask, heading to look for myself. Briar had to be tired to fall asleep packing her bag. Her phone's still by her ear, but the screen's black, and she's breathing deeply as if she's more comfortable than she's been in a while.

"She's asleep," I confirm, nodding at Lucy.

She steps into the house and closes the door behind her. "So what do you want me to do? I can go pick up the truck?"

"Nah, just pick her up in the mornin'," I know it's probably too soon, but she's fast asleep, and I'd hate to move her now.

"I'll come by before chores," Lucy laughs, "hope she's ready!"

"Thank you, Loo," I tell her as she walks out.

Leaning against the door, I let out a breath. Talking to Ravena took a lot of my emotional bandwidth, and I feel like I need to explain because Heath's standing against the kitchen island with a look of confusion on his face.

"I loved Pearl," I whisper into the stale air between Heath and me. "She and I... We weren't conventional, but God, I loved her."

Heath walks around the island, standing close enough that I can smell his spicy, sweet scent. "I'd love to hear more about her."

Turning my head, our eyes connect, and I blink away the tears that threaten to flood my cheeks. Nodding my head, I stand, walking past him to the fridge. Grabbing two

beers, I pop the tops and offer one to him.

He accepts with a smile, following me to the living room, where we settle on opposite ends of the couch. Neither of us speaks until my bottle's almost empty, and I have to refill.

"Want another?" I ask, tipping the glass bottle his way from the fridge.

His grin is answer enough, still he says, "Only if you're drinkin' with me."

Taking him the glass, his fingers brush mine and electricity zaps my skin. I can't deny the chemistry we share, and I'm done trying. We have some things to figure out, but I'm willing to give this a try. I still need to lay ground rules, especially because of Briar.

"Do you want to talk about her?" He asks, tipping the bottle back and finishing the last of the first bottle. The scruff on his neck is dark against his skin as he swallows.

"I'd rather you tell me more about you," I smirk, leaning close to the coffee table to put my beer down. Turning his way, I bring my leg up onto the couch and rest my arm across the back.

"What do you wanna know?"

"You said your parents passed. Were you close?" I want to know how his family was. Were they close like mine? Or were they strained?

He looks down at his lap, and his shoulders roll as he looks back up. "My mama and I were close. My dad and I—we butted heads, but I loved him. I'll always love both of them, but I've made peace with their deaths. It's funny, really, the rodeo helped me heal."

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Talking about my parents, even though I've found healing, feels right with Spencer. He's looking at me like he's actually listening, absorbing everything I have to say. His eyes are inviting and soft. It makes me want to open up and tell him everything.

"Dad wanted things for me that I didn't want, and we fought about it. But he loved me, and I loved him."

A lone tear escapes my eyes, and Spencer leans over. My breath catches in my throat, thinking he might kiss me. The rough pad of his thumb catches the tear and wipes it away, and that simple act of kindness threatens to send me to my knees.

I've never felt the rush of blood through my body like this, the way my stomach flips, and how the hair on my body stands. It's unlike anything I've experienced, a high greater than the rodeo, and all I want right now is to feel it again.

He leans back against the couch, eyes still on mine.

"What about your parents?" I ask, noticing how he calls Maxine Mawmaw .

He sighs, looks toward Briar's room then back to me. "They died a few years ago in a car accident, right before Lucy graduated from college with her master's degree in food science. They were drivin' down to surprise her. It was a freak accident on the highway."

My heart pinches in my chest. I shouldn't have asked. His eyes are glassy, but he doesn't cry.

“I’m sorry,” I start, “that had to have been hard.”

“It was hard, especially explainin’ it to Briar,” he admits, and I can almost see the memories replaying in his head. “But our family’s been through a lot, and we’ve gotten through a lot. I can’t tell you how important they are to me.”

“I think anyone can see it,” I agree. Watching them all interact with each other, it’s clear how much love they share.

He smiles, rubbing his chest with his tattooed arm. Moving to speak, he looks up and says, “It’s late, and we’ve got a lot of drivin’ to do tomorrow.”

Shaking off the abrupt change in his tone, I nod.

“I’ll stay on the couch,” Spencer says, standing and heading to a closet I’d not noticed before. Pulling a few blankets out, along with a pillow, he tosses them to the couch, and I blink up at him.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I begin, standing up to look him in the eye. “I thought—”

He’s shaking his head with a small smile, “It’s a lot, I’ll admit, but you didn’t ask anything I wasn’t willin’ to tell you.”

“Then why do I get the feelin’ you’re pullin’ back?” I whisper. Apprehension and worry travel through my system.

“Go easy on me, Cowboy,” his shoulders roll in, and his gaze hits the floor. “I really want to try, but it’s going to be slow.”

Crouching down so I can catch his gaze, I grip his hands in mine. “Slow and easy, Daddy.”

His smile spreads wider, and he chuckles, “Go to bed.”

I don’t want to argue with him or push him any further, so I do as he asks and head to his bedroom.

Stripping down to my boxer briefs and slipping into his bed, I stare at the ceiling, attempting to close my eyes.

I lay there for what feels like ages, and I can’t get settled.

Continuing to toss and turn, snuggling into his sheets, which are starting to lose his smell, I huff.

The clock on his nightstand says it’s only been thirty or so minutes, but I still can’t sleep. My eyes won’t stay shut, and all I can think about is the way Spencer held me in the bed of his truck.

Giving up on sleep, I sit up on the edge of the bed, throwing my legs over the side. Looking back at the empty bed, my mind won’t turn off with thoughts and wants of being embraced in Spencer’s arms.

A floorboard outside of the door creaks, and I stand, crossing the space and throwing the door open.

Spencer’s there, eyes trained on mine with his hands buried in his hair.

“Fuck it,” he mutters under his breath as his hands land on my cheeks, cupping my jaw like I’m something breakable as his lips land on mine.

They’re smooth and sure, leading the kiss in bold moves. His fingers tighten, and he rumbles deep in his chest. A groan that matches my own fervor. His tongue slips

through my lips, and I surrender to him, letting him take the kiss as far as he wants.

By the time I'm breathless and floating on cloud nine, he pulls away, resting his forehead on mine.

"What are you doin' to me?" He whispers against my lips, nipping at the bottom one and pulling away. I'm dizzy, absolutely incoherent with want. His beard's wiry, scratching against mine as his lips move over mine. He swipes his tongue across my lips and chuckles.

"Stay," I whisper against his lips, "tell me that wasn't the last time."

Waking up engulfed in Spencer's warm, soft body, I smile ear to ear. He's snoring, breath puffing against the top of my head. Our half-naked bodies are smashed together, sheets tangled between our legs.

I don't want to move and risk waking him. His heart beats in my ear, and I nestle back in, closing my eyes and basking in the lazy comfort I've been craving since all of this Levi stuff started.

Movement outside the door reaches my ears, and I worry Briar might open it.

I know Spencer said he wants to take things slow, and Briar's thoughts and feelings were a big part of that, so I doubt he'd appreciate his daughter finding us tangled in his bed together before he has the chance to tell her about us.

Reaching down, I try pulling the covers up, but they're stuck between our legs. The movement makes Spencer stretch and pull me in closer. My chest burst with elation, and I want to scream from the rooftops that he's mine .

His eyes pop open, and he looks around, settling on me snuggled against his chest.

“Good morning,” I smile, and he jerks a bit, arms loosening around me.

After a few breaths, he settles back into the mattress and rubs his eyes. Noise in the kitchen captures his attention, and he sighs. “What am I going to tell Briar?”

With a laugh, I kiss his cheek and roll out of the bed. I know he needs to get to the garage, and I also know Briar's probably coming out of her skin with excitement to see her cousin.

“We’ve got to tell her at some point,” I chuckle, getting dressed.

He groans and sits up, looking over me with a sleepy smile. “We do.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

After falling asleep while talking with Heath last night, I'm finding it hard to keep him at a distance.

I know I said I wanted to take it slow, and I'm still being cautious—mainly because it's not just me in this family, and something shady is going on in this town—but I slept better last night than I have in years, and I find myself trying to remember why I can't have him in my bed every night.

When I'm done with my shower, I get dressed and head out, unsure what I'm expecting. But seeing Heath and Briar sitting on the couch with bowls of cereal watching some reality show, wasn't it.

She laughs at something on the television and makes a comment to Heath that I don't quite hear. He says something back and she whips her head his way with a look that can only be described as scandalous.

"You're a Staley fan?" Her gasp is dramatic and when she sees me, she says, "Daddy, can we keep him."

Laughing so hard, my belly shakes. I grab my own bowl and pour the wheat cereal in along with the milk left in the fridge.

"So, are you two dating?" She asks as soon as my ass hits the leather.

Looking at Heath, he looks at me and I swallow down the bite I'd had in my mouth. "We're taking things slow."

Her squeal pierces my ears, and she jumps off the couch, milk sloshing out of her bowl and hitting the floor. Thelma skitters out from under the coffee table to lick at it, and Briar crosses the room, throwing her arms around me.

“You deserve to be happy, Dad,” she whispers in my ear, “I think he’s the one for you. I feel it here.”

When she stands, she points to her stomach and skips back over to her spot on the couch, and looks between us.

“Are you movin’ in?” She asks, eyebrows wiggling up and down.

Heath laughs and shakes his head, “I’ll be here for a while since the police towed my trailer, but no, I’m not movin’ in.”

A smile tugs at my lips, his answer was perfect.

“Wait, why do I have to stay with Mawmaw if y’all are snugglin’ anyways?” Briar asks. I don’t have an answer other than my initial reaction of wanting to keep her away from someone I didn’t really know, who I thought may have been involved in something heinous.

But I no longer believe he could’ve done it, so why can’t my daughter come home?

“You can come back home once Pen leaves, alright, Flower?”

“Promise?”

“Pinky.”

We finish up and leave Heath at the house to head to the garage. I’ve got some work

to catch up on before traveling to get Pen. He didn't want me to leave him alone, so I called Mawmaw to keep him company. I can only imagine the trouble those two will get into.

Briar's singing in the office, scrolling through her phone while I finish up the last service on today's list. Closing the bay door, Briar pops up at the desk. "Is it time to go?"

With a laugh, I nod and toss her the keys to get the truck running. The summer heat's only gotten worse, and it gets hot as hell here. On our way, I let Briar pick the music, and she sings along with almost every word.

After about an hour and a half, we're pulling into their driveway, and Pen rushes out. She's got a huge smile on her face, her dark hair's cut to her shoulders, and Briar hops out to meet her before I've even put the truck into park.

"Briar!" I holler, but it falls on deaf ears. She's already caught her cousin in the air, Pen's legs wrap around Briar's hips, and their arms circle each other's shoulders. They untangle themselves as I step out and Clive hits the top of the steps.

"Spencer," Clive calls, his hands already out, waiting for me to shake. Grabbing his hand he moves in and slaps my back. "It's good to see you, man."

He smacks my stomach and then his and says, "I see you're rockin' the dad bod too these days."

With a nod, I chuckle, "I like to think I make it work."

"That you do!" He says, looking over at the girls. They're talking a mile a minute, holding hands, and seeing them like this makes me happy.

“Thank you for callin’,” Clive says, still looking at our daughters, “Pen’s been missin’ home.”

“It’s nothin’ really,” I tell him, “Briar’s missed her, and Mawmaw’s texted about four times already.”

“Ol’ Maxine,” he snickers.

The two girls run into the house and grab Pen’s bag. Briar tosses it into the back of the truck, and Pen comes over to hug her dad.

“Bye, Dad! Love you!” She says, kissing his cheek and walking to the truck.

Clive looks at me, and I shake my head, “I’m in for one hell-of-a-week.”

His hand lands on my shoulder, and he nods, “I don’t envy you.”

“Thanks,” I laugh, “tell Ravena I’ll take care of your girl.”

“We know you will, Spence,” he says, looking me in the eye and shaking my hand again.

“You got all your things?” He asks Pen through the window, leaning his arms on the sill.

“Yes Dad,” she leans out and shakes her head.

“I love you,” he tells her, looking behind her at Briar, “you too, Briar.”

The two of them return his love, and since I left the truck running, the air blows their hair around.

They sit in the back so they can talk the whole ride there, and I get my music back.

It's funny how these two are so connected, and how in sync with one another they are despite the distance between them.

Heath calls, and it connects to the truck, I debate not answering, but decide it might be an emergency.

"Hello," I answer.

"Your mawmaw has coerced me into bringin' Fiona into the barn," he laughs, and I can hear Mawmaw in the back yelling something. "But if you think it's a bad idea to keep her here, I can have Eddie take her home."

Hearing him call somewhere else home hits me like a rock crushing my chest. It takes me a minute to understand what he's asking.

"No, it's fine, I shoulda thought about it," I tell him, looking at the clock on the dash. "We'll be home in about fifteen."

"Oh, I know. Maxine's watchin'," he chuckles. I guess that app she claims to hate so much is coming in handy. "See you in a few."

"Yeah," I click the button on the steering wheel to end the call, and my thoughts circle back to Heath calling somewhere else home and how it made me feel. He's spent a week at my house now, and I don't think I want that to end.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

It's been a quick week. Briar and Pen have been so entertaining to be around every time we went to have dinner at Mawmaw's.

Spencer and I fall asleep together every night talking, and learning more about each other.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to let him go now.

The more I learn about him, the deeper I fall into this family and their ranch.

It's Friday, a day I'd usually be getting ready to perform in the rodeo, and all I've done today is harvest flowers from Lucy's garden. Sweat's caked to my body, along with my shirt and jeans, but it's the happiest I think I've been in a long time.

Spencer smiles at me from atop his mare—she's a beauty.

Solid black with a mane like liquid night that waves with her movements.

She's huge, a Dutch Draft, if I had to guess, but he'd have to have a big horse to ride.

He's a thick man, and God, he's so sexy, it doesn't matter what he's doing.

I'm always looking at him, and I don't mind getting caught.

“Wanna ride?” He asks. The sun's shining bright behind him, so I have to hold my hand up to see him.

“Depends,” I shrug.

He tips his head back laughing, “Be good, Cowboy.”

“Briar and Pen are at Clara’s pool for the day,” he says, “figured I’d take you through the ranch.”

Lucy hollers across the garden, “Go on, Heath! I’ll finish up here, then I gotta head to the diner anyway.”

Turning around with a smile, looking back up at him, “I guess I could go for a ride.”

He laughs and takes the bucket of flowers Lucy’s planning on selling at the farmers market tomorrow morning and heads for the barn. The walk’s not long, and by the time I get there, Spencer’s already got another horse saddled for me.

“Heath, meet Rittz,” he says, introducing me to the bay roan Appaloosa I’ve been eyeing since he brought me to the barn.

Offering my hand, palm out, fingers down, he gives me a sniff and huffs in acceptance. Running my hand down his tan snout, he preens and shakes his head.

“Rittz is a retired champion,” Spencer laughs, “and he makes sure everyone knows.”

He stomps his front hoof as if to solidify Spencer’s words, and I howl in laughter.

“Ready for a ride, Rittz?” I ask, taking the reins from Spencer’s hands and loading my foot into the stirrup. With an extra hop to clear his height, I throw my leg over and get situated. The stirrups are positioned perfectly. Spencer gives me a wink and climbs onto his horse.

“Storm and Rittz get along well,” he says, patting Storm’s neck, “but she likes to nip at him if he decides to nuzzle her.”

Laughing, I quip, “Kinda reminds me of her owner.”

“Har-Har,” he says with a playful eyeroll.

We take off at a nice walk, learning Rittz’s gait and adjusting accordingly. We make our way over the farmland I’ve only seen glimpses of. Its bright green meadows with overgrown wildflowers stretch for what feels like miles as we continue our walk.

There’s a stream nearby, I can hear the creek bubble before it comes into view. Spencer turns in his saddle, “We’ll go on foot from here.”

Dismounting Rittz, following Spencer, we lead the horses to the water, and they drink. He offers his hand once it’s empty, and I slide mine into his.

“There’s somethin’ I’d like to show you,” he says with a small smile as he leads us up and over to the other side of the creek. There’s a big willow tree among the field, its weeping green stems are in full bloom, and the sight makes my stomach tighten.

The tree’s beautiful but out of place, which makes me wonder if this isn’t the place where the family has chosen to remember Pearl. The mother, sister, wife, and friend they lost.

“Pearl planted this willow here when Briar was born,” he says, splitting the stems and walking under the canopy.

Inside, there’s a bouquet of flowers bundled in twine and butcher paper, blooms in white, purple, and yellow peek out of the top.

“She was by the creek when we found her, so I imagine she was visiting the tree she’d grown for her baby girl. ”

Squeezing his hand, I turn so I can face him. “You don’t have to explain—”

His hands move up my arms, and he grips my neck gently, “I do, I’m not sure when it happened or how the hell to process it, but I’ve found something with you that I never thought I’d ever find again. Something most people only ever dream of finding in this.”

In us.

“You’ve been in my life for less than a month, and I already want things I thought I’d never want again. You’ve given me a gift, and I want to make sure I give you everything I can in return.”

His words threaten to choke me up, and I bite my lip to keep the emotions at bay, “I don’t know what it is about you and Briar, but you both feel like home to me. Like two people I didn’t know I needed to make my life mean something more than just the rodeo.”

We stand there, his hands on my neck and mine holding tight to his wrists, just looking at each other.

No more words are needed because the feelings are there whether we’re ready to voice them or not.

What we’re building is heading in that direction, and I’ll wait as long as I have to to hear those three words fall from his lips.

Spencer and I cleaned up the barn, got everything Lucy couldn’t, and loaded her truck

down with flowers. Covering them with the soft tarp she had laying on the porch waiting for us, she's ready to go in the morning.

We both have to clean up after that and despite the chemistry in the air, we manage to keep our hands to ourselves. I'm a smidge disappointed, but he wants slow, and I'm willing to wait.

Briar and Pen are still at Clara's by the time we're both dressed and ready for dinner. So Spencer calls Briar to warn her that we're on the way, and to be ready by the time we get there.

She grumbles a little, but Pen's excited to eat at Maxine's Diner.

Pulling up to the infamous Clara's house, Spencer honks the horn, and after a few minutes, the girls come out dressed in shorts and t-shirts. Their hair's wet and pulled back. Briar throws their bag into the truck bed and hops in.

"I still can't get over knowin' you're datin' The Heath Macabe , Uncle Spence," Pen says, eyeing me from the back seat.

He chuckles but doesn't say anything. To Spencer, I'm only Heath, and that makes everything so much sweeter with him.

"How was the pool?" I ask, turning around to look at the two. They aren't talking, which is strange for them. All they've done this week is talk.

Pen eyes Briar but doesn't say anything, so Briar mumbles, "Fine."

Spencer looks at his daughter from the rearview but doesn't comment on her lack of enthusiasm about the pool.

The diner is within view as the truck's silence grows thicker. Whatever happened at the pool has the girls in weird moods.

"Who's ready to eat?" Spencer asks, and neither of them say much.

Pen heads straight to Mawmaw once she's in the door, as Lucy's delivering food.

"What's goin' on with those two?" I lean over and whisper to Spencer.

"I'm not sure," he says, shrugging his shoulders and picking the same booth we ate at the night everything went down. Though, that night feels like months ago now. Lucy's even come around, she's still not back to the lively blonde I met the first night, but I can tell she doesn't fucking hate me.

Progress.

Pen comes over and slides into the booth while Briar's off in the bathroom. She leans in, eyes moving to the bathroom door and back to us.

"Briar's 'friends' aren't very nice," she starts, and Spencer's dad-senses must be going off, because he sits straight up and looks over at the bathroom.

"I mean, they aren't out-right mean," she stops and sighs, licking her lips and starting again.

"They just made some comments that felt shady, you know?"

"What did they say?" Spencer asks, and by the tone of his voice, I recognize the dad mode going into effect.

"Just little snarky things and Briar laughed it off, but I think they were makin' fun'a

her,” Pen leans back in the booth the second the door opens, and Briar steps out. She lets her hair down. It's wavy, something I've come to realize is natural for her.

“We'll talk more about this,” Spencer promises, and Pen nods. The whole dinner is tense after that. Mawmaw must notice because she looks at Briar and lifts a brow.

“What's goin' on?” She says, setting down the tea pitcher she's using to refill glasses.

“Nothin’,” Briar answers, looking down at her lap.

Pen nudges her shoulder and smiles at her, and the interaction feels like there's something going on that might have been going on for a while.

“We're goin' to the farmers market in the mornin' Mawmaw,” Pen says, redirecting the attention to her.

Briar relaxes a little, and I make a mental note to talk to Spencer about it.

Since he explained to me why he was upset after I lied to Briar the first time, I've tried really hard not to cross any more boundaries with their relationship.

I'm not a parent, and I have no idea how to even go about it. However, Spencer's gentle encouragement and smiles when Briar and I do spend time together makes me think I've gained that trust back.

Then it hits me. I've not checked into the rodeo at all this past week.

Not once. The thought alone would make me run for the hills if it were anyone else. But with them, I know I'm in the right place.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

The next morning, we're all piling into the truck to head to the farmers market in town. It's a long stretch of old railroad station that's been converted into a market where farmers sell their goods.

Lucy's booth is stuffed to the brim with flowers every week, colorful blooms with long stems ready to be made into bouquets.

As we walk, people look at Heath with wide eyes, and part of me wonders if it's because of the media's coverage of Levi's death or because he's a rodeo champion.

The smell of freshly baked goodies permeates the air as we walk by booths offering bread, cookies, even some macaroons. Soap makers, fresh garden veggies, gourmet cheese, butchered meats, everything anyone could need.

"Hi, girls!" Lucy hollers, waving Briar and Pen down. "Build some bouquets for me, would ya?"

They giggle the whole time, bundling flowers together so Lucy can sell them premade. Heath and I walk around, checking out the other vendors and saying hello. Purchasing some steaks and cheese, we make the rounds heading back to Lucy's booth.

The girls have made three bouquets, which are already being sold to customers.

Lucy looks happy, which makes me smile. She deserves to move on, though I know it's not going to be easy.

She's going to have good days and bad, but ultimately, I think she's going to be just fine.

I'm sure part of her swift recovery is because she now knows that Levi lied to her for the whole of their fling.

Learning someone wasn't who you thought they were can certainly add painful clarity in the face of their death, and moving on doesn't feel quite as hard or daunting.

"Here," she hands Briar and Pen one of their own bouquets split into two and looks at me, "I'll see y'all later."

With a wink, she's greeting new customers, and the girls are heading out. Heath and I follow the girls to the truck so we can all enjoy a full breakfast from Mawmaw's diner. When we're finished, we have a few things to pick up from the store before getting ready for Briar's birthday cookout later.

The girls go nuts at the store, piling things into the cart, stating the absolute necessity of the items.

Logically, I know some of these aren't needed, but my girl only turns sixteen once.

Since Pen is in town, we're celebrating tonight. Briar invited her friends over to the ranch for a cookout, and Heath's been helping set up tables and chairs while Pen and Briar decorate with all the things we bought earlier.

They seem to be getting along better than last night, and I'm still trying to figure out the best way to approach Briar about what happened at Clara's.

"Dad!" Briar hollers from across the backyard. "Where's the backdrop for the photo booth?"

“It’s in the house, I’ll put it together,” Heath says, placing the last chair and heading inside. Passing by me, I catch him around the waist to stop him.

“Thank you,” I whisper, knowing Briar’s been on a teenage rampage all morning.

He smiles and brushes a kiss over my lips—it’s quick and light. Still, Briar doesn’t miss it.

“Awww!” Her and Pen sing in unison.

Heath smiles wide, teeth shining, cheeks flushed. Shaking my head, I turn to the girls and give them my best ‘stop it’ dad look, and they hurry back to decorating the tables.

I’ve pulled the grill out, and Uncle Scott’s supposed to be bringing the beer for the adults. It wouldn’t be a cookout without it. Mawmaw seasoned and pattied the hamburgers last night, and the local butcher delivered the hotdogs not long ago. My fridge is officially full.

Once all of the tables are decorated to Briar’s liking, the girls disappear into the house to get ready.

Lucy and Mawmaw drive up, parking in the grass in front of the house.

Lucy’s carrying a small box wrapped in newspaper.

It’s been a running joke that it’s the best wrapping paper for gifts in our family for years.

Slowly, the family starts to trickle in as Heath finishes setting up the photo booth, and Briar makes her entrance. She’s wearing a short dress Mawmaw must have bought for her. It’s sequined and has tassels hanging off it. She’s wearing a new pair of

bright blue boots and a matching hat.

“You look beautiful, Flower,” I tell her as she descends the stairs. Placing a kiss on the top of her head, she glows, and I know Pearl would be over the moon proud of her.

Heath flips on the string lights we’d strung up yesterday as the sun starts its descent.

Before long, the backyard is filled with people all here to celebrate Briar.

The photo booth flashes, people eat and drink, we’ve got music and people dancing.

All while Briar flits about with the biggest smile on her face.

“I think you did good, Daddy,” Heath says from behind me, leaning his body into my shoulders.

“You’re a brat, you know that?” I ask, turning my head so he can hear me.

He laughs. The sound’s like warm honey dripping into my veins.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Spencer must be at the barn since he's nowhere in the house, and it's not like there's a lot of space to go. After he dropped Pen off yesterday, Briar said she wanted to stay the night one more time with Mawmaw, so this is our last morning, just the two of us.

I know he lives on coffee for the first few hours of the day, and the pot looks dry as a bone. Grinding up the coffee he keeps above the fridge, I make a full pot and dig around the cabinets for a mug or something to carry it in.

Finding a tall thermos, I wait for the coffee to finish and fill the thermos all the way to the brim.

He doesn't like anything in it, so I forgo sugar or cream.

I've seen him eat these protein bars that he keeps in the fridge, and part of me wonders if he skipped his coffee or whether he's had anything at all to eat.

Deciding to throw one in my back pocket, just in case, I head out in search of him.

He's usually working close to the barn, I've not seen him run any cattle at this hour.

Luck's on my side, he's tinkering with the Massey beside the barn.

Laying on his back, on a tarp covered in questionable dark liquids I can't name.

"Hey," I start, not wanting to scare him into hitting his head under there. "I figured you might need a little breakfast."

He stills for a second, then shimmies out from under the tractor, covering his eyes with one of his big ol' tattooed arms.

"I already ate," he says, eyeing me as if I have three heads.

"Bullshit," I challenge, "Not even the coffee pot was used this mornin', and I know if you don't drink your quota of caffeine, you sure as hell haven't eaten."

Sitting up, he laughs, "When did you become so perceptive?"

"I pay attention when I care," I argue, knowing damn well I'm about to blow his mind with the protein bar. Pulling it from my pocket, I wave it around. His eyes widen, then narrow.

"How—"

"I told you, I pay attention."

Spencer pats the tarp beside him, and I sit, bumping my hip into his. Popping the travel mug off the top of the thermos, I pour him a cup of the dark roast and inhale the scent. I don't care much for the taste, but the smell is divine.

He takes the cup and smiles. Those sexy little dimples flare, and I have the urge to kiss him. I won't, though. There's something wholesome about this moment that feels fragile. New and... loving.

"I've got to head into the garage after this. Colt said something Friday that I never got around to," he says after finishing one cup of coffee, nudging me to pour another, and I do so happily.

"I'll go with you," I offer, putting the cap back on the thermos. "Maybe you could

teach me somethin' useful?"

Spencer laughs, one brow tugged down as if he's not sure what that could be. "Like what, changin' oil?" He keeps laughing like he thinks it's a joke, but when I simply continue to stare at him, he coughs and asks, "You don't know anythin' about cars?"

"Not a damn clue," I admit without shame. "I never drove 'til I was eighteen. Didn't have a car or any money to buy one, so it didn't seem that important to know things about them."

He leans back against the tractor, eyes looking me over.

"I know just the thing," he smiles, and his whole face lights up.

We stand not long after our conversation, and I wait as Spencer puts the tractor away and tidies up the barn. When he's done, he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into his body. "You ready to learn somethin' Cowboy?"

"Yes, Sir," I nod, licking my lips and waiting for him to plant his lips on mine. Instead, he swats my ass and takes a step back.

"Be good," he warns, "Or I'll have to punish you."

"Don't tempt me with a good time," I warn with a sly smile.

He shakes his head and pulls his keys from his pocket. Heading for his house, we drop in for just a second before we head out again. This time, Spencer walks to the old red truck, and I have a flashback to the night he rocked my world.

Stroking my beard, I smirk and he rolls his eyes.

The drive's silent but not awkward. Sometimes words aren't needed to fill every space.

He pulls the truck up to one of the bays, and the big metal door opens. Inside, I can see Brent, the mechanic who has a new baby, rolling up the door. He's wearing coveralls like Spencer's, but he doesn't look nearly as good wearing them as my man.

"Hey, boss," Brent says as Spencer steps out. "Didn't think you'd be in today."

"Colt called about somethin', and the ol' girl needs an oil change," he says, clapping Brent's shoulder as he walks by.

"Huh," Brent says, eyes looking up as if he's trying to figure something out. He snaps his fingers and looks back to Spencer, "Colt needed help on the Malibu in bay one. I already fixed it and contacted the owner, you just missed them."

"Oh, okay, great, thanks, Brent," Spencer laughs and heads around the first two garage bays to a closet. Emerging within the minute, he's carrying a few things I don't recognize and lays them out on a rolling cart he pulls from out of nowhere.

"Alright, you ready to learn something useful?" He asks, throwing my words back at me with a smirk.

"Really, changin' the oil?" I tease him, remembering that was what he laughed about me not knowing earlier.

"I feel like an asshole for laughin' at you, so yes, I'm gonna teach you how to change a vehicle's oil."

"Alrighty then. Teach me your ways, oh wise one," I quip in return.

He looks at Brent, who's pretending not to listen, and turns back to me with an expression I imagine is supposed to be angry but just looks delicious.

Ignoring my comment, he tells me what he's got on the cart and how this is supposed to work.

By the time he's run through his spiel, I feel pretty confident I can do this.

Still, his hands close around mine while we're both laying on what I've since learned are called 'creepers' and not little roly body pads.

Under the truck, he points out various things I probably won't remember but still pay attention to.

Guiding my hand, he pulls the plug, and oil shoots out in a steady flow.

It's dark and slippery, coating our hands since we didn't move fast enough. The pan Spencer brought under with us serves as a catch-all, and I'm glad for it. If not, that stuff would be everywhere.

Once it's slowed to a drip, he shows me the proper way to pull the filter out and replace it with the new one. His words are sure as he tells me how it works, and I ask questions while I do what he says to make sure I don't mess up. He looks my way once the plug is firmly back in place and smiles.

"Now we go up top," he says, rolling out from under the truck and standing. Following his motions, I meet him under the hood, where he's already pointing at the oil cap. "This is where you'll pour the new oil."

Nodding, I grab the funnel. I remember him saying we would need it, and his smile grows larger.

It makes my heart pump faster, knowing I made him happy doing something he loves.

“Put the small end here,” he says, pointing where to go, “and make sure the funnel’s up before pouring the oil.”

“You got it,” I click my tongue and pour the appropriate amount of liquid into the truck. He laughs when I finish and tests the oil level with the dipstick like he showed me. Putting the hood down, he claps his hands together.

“Congratulations, you just changed the oil in a truck.”

My smile grows, and I feel a little silly, but I want to shout that I did something useful. Walking by me, he places a swift kiss on my lips, and I melt.

“Come on, Cowboy, let’s go get Briar and bring her home.”

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The next morning, Spencer's still asleep beside me, and he looks so peaceful. Deciding not to wake him, I scooch out of the bed, trying not to jostle the bed so much. He takes care of so many things, I think he deserves a day to sleep in. Plus, I think Brent can handle opening the garage.

Pulling on sweatpants and a t-shirt, I head out of the room, taking care to close the door as softly as I can.

Briar's sitting on the couch, legs folded beneath her. A blanket's thrown over her shoulders, and she's staring at the blank TV.

Standing against the door, I wait like a spider looking at a human. Frozen and confused.

"Uh, Briar," I whisper, leaning forward as if that will help my voice carry. "Are you okay?"

That's a dumb question. She's clearly not okay, but I'm not well-versed in 'dad-instincts'.

She turns to look at me and tilts her head, "Fine, why?"

I'm acting ridiculous. Briar's not a fragile baby bird ready to take her first flight, she's just missing her best friend. Moving from the door to the back of the couch, I lean my forearms on the leather. "Are you hungry?"

She lifts one shoulder and lowers it back down.

“We could go to Maxine’s? Let your dad get some sleep,” I offer, raising my brows.

She nods and unfolds her legs but doesn’t say anything.

“Only if you want to,” I test, eyeing her. I don’t want her to be uncomfortable or feel like she has to hang out with me.

“Don’t be weird,” she says, eyeing me over her shoulder. “It doesn’t suit you.”

Well, alright then. Heading back into the room, I quickly change into jeans and throw on my socks. My boots are by the front door, along with my wallet and keys. Briar comes out of her room not long after I’ve pocketed my wallet and looped my keys on my belt.

“I’m gonna leave Dad a note, you know, so he doesn’t worry,” she says, pulling open drawers to find a scrap of paper to write on.

“No need,” I tell her, waving my phone, “I sent him a text lettin’ him know where we’re going.” I made sure his phone was on silent last night, so I know the text won’t wake him.

She shrugs, “Touché.”

Following her out of the house, she turns and looks at me, “Can I drive?”

“I don’t see why not. You have your permit, right?”

“Yep,” she says, popping the ‘p.’

Tossing her the keys, she does a little dance and heads to my truck. I have a feeling I might regret my choices later.

Briar's enthusiastic about driving, which is the most polite way I can describe it. She presses heavy on the gas and even heavier on the brakes, and I'm suddenly glad this isn't a stick shift.

We make it to the diner in one piece, and she laughs after putting the truck in park. "Dad didn't warn you about my drivin' did he?"

"He did not," I chuckle, "let's get some grub."

She laughs the whole way into Maxine's and still has a big smile when we sit. She tries hiding it behind a menu as if she doesn't know what she wants.

"Hi y'all welcome in—oh," the waitress starts, "Briar, honey, I didn't even notice it was you." Then she looks at me, and I can tell she's got questions, but Maxine walks over and winks, telling her she'll take over from here.

"Well, look who the cat dragged in," Maxine laughs. "Where's my grandson?"

"Dad's sleepin' in. Heath asked if I was hungry, and I'll never say no to an opportunity to see you," Briar says, giving her Mawmaw a big smile. "Plus, Heath said I could drive."

"Oh lordy, you let her drive?" She smirks, but tries to hide it.

"No one warned me," I mumble, feeling like I got played.

Maxine laughs and takes our orders. Once she's gone, I lean on my elbows with a sigh.

"Can I ask you something?" Briar says, messing with the sugar packets on the table. "Something about my dad."

“Sure,” I’m not sure what she wants to know that she doesn’t already. Spencer seems like an open book with her.

“Is he happy?”

Her question throws me and I’m not sure how to answer. After a beat, I take a deep breath, “I think so, though no one’s happy all the time.”

“I mean when you’re together,” she says, “I know he’s told you about my mama, and that’s always a hard subject for him.”

Choosing my words carefully, I say, “Your dad is one of the most special people I’ve ever met. He’s kind and resilient, and he’s loyal to a fault. When we’re together, I like to think I make him happy.”

“Good,” she says as our plates are delivered.

Detective Royce walks into the diner and goes to the counter.

The waitress from before takes his order, and he sits, eyeing the rest of the room.

When his eyes land on mine, he nods and stands.

Watching him saunter over to me makes my stomach fall to the floor.

I don’t want him saying anything in front of Briar about this.

She’s too young to hear anything about it, and I find myself wanting to protect her from the evils of the world.

“When you get a minute, I’d appreciate a word,” he says, looking at me. Nodding at

Briar, he walks back to the counter, and I sigh, excusing myself to see what he wants.

“Look, if I need a lawyer—” I start when I get to him, and he laughs, cutting me off.

“No lawyer. I’ve actually got some good news for you,” he leans around me to look at Briar.

“I’m sure whatever it is, you can communicate with my publicist,” I snap, turning and walking away. I wanted to have a peaceful breakfast with Briar, maybe connect with her a little, and being ambushed about the investigation wasn’t in my plans.

After a small gap of silence, we eat, laugh, and converse as if we’ve been friends for far longer than we have. She’s funny and a lot like her dad.

I catch Maxine looking our way a few times with a faraway smile as if she’s remembering something that brings her joy.

After we’ve eaten and I’ve paid, I drive us back while Briar holds onto Spencer’s to-go plate.

She tried to convince me to let her drive again, but I like being alive too much to fall for that.

Fool me once, or whatever they say. Spencer hasn’t texted, but I can’t imagine that man’s still asleep.

He’s usually up at the ass crack of dawn for work.

“Can I show you somethin’?” Briar asks, pulling me from my thoughts of Spencer. “His food’ll be fine for a few.”

She hops out of the truck and walks around to my side, motioning for me to get out. I do, eyeing her with a little suspicion.

“Come on,” she drags out the words and me along with it.

Walking past the backyard, she keeps walking to a little white fenced-in area that I’ve never noticed before. She unlatches the gate, pulling it open and allowing me to pass. Little purple flowers dot in clusters between higher blades of green grass.

Kneeling down, she runs her fingers over the bright petals.

“Ever since I was little, Dad always told me that these flowers are called ‘fairy flowers.’ They weren’t planted here, but they grow every year nonetheless.

Even when I picked them all to put in little jars throughout the house, and sometimes Mawmaw’s. ”

Her nose turns pink, and her eyes drop. “My mama used to come out here and sit with me, sometimes for hours. I was convinced I’d see a fairy planting more seeds.”

“She seems like a great mom,” I almost choke, holding back tears. Imagining a little blonde-haired girl looking for fairies every day because these flowers grew from nothing.

“I don’t have that many memories of her,” she admits with a sigh, “but this one... This one stands out the most vivid.”

“I can see why,” getting to my knees, I pick one of the flowers and lay it in her hand. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I think your world is beautiful, Briar.”

“I hope you can see beauty in a life with my dad someday. I know he’s guarded and

stubborn as hell,” she smiles and wipes at her cheeks before standing up. “But he deserves to have an epic love story, too.”

Briar makes her way to the house, grabbing Spencer’s plate from the truck as I follow, thinking about her words. She spots her dad on the couch with Thelma laid out on her back in his lap. She laughs, scooping her up and nuzzling her pet.

“We brought you breakfast,” I say, pointing to the to-go plate Briar haphazardly threw on the kitchen island.

“Thanks,” he says while tossing a smile my way and clearing his throat. I may be imagining things, but I swear I saw something a lot like love in his eyes when Briar and I got home.

Pen’s been gone for about a week now, and Levi’s murderer still hasn’t been found.

I haven’t had to go into the police station, which I’m counting as a plus.

The body under my trailer was identified yesterday as Moe Callus and announced in a press release made by Detective Royce, he stated the cause of death was multiple stab wounds by an unknown blade.

That must be why he wanted to check in on me when I was at the diner with Briar, but I haven’t bothered to check in with Staci.

Things around here must be slow, considering they don’t have a forensics lab and have to send everything off to be tested.

Spencer and I still haven’t gotten farther than kissing and cuddling, and it’s about to drive me up the walls. Having him for one night wasn’t enough, and I know I promised I could go slow, but the connection we share isn’t something I can forget.

We're all full from dinner, sitting on Maxine's porch. Listening to nature and talking about the case. Lucy still gets a little choked up, but she keeps it together.

Briar's falling asleep on the swing, head in Lucy's lap.

"Hey, Flower," Spencer says, bending down to wake her up. "You coming home or staying here?"

She mumbles, "here."

He laughs and pats her shoulder. "Come on then, let's get to bed."

Slowly, she moves, trudging into the house. As she makes her way up the stairs, Spencer doesn't follow. Instead, he listens at the bottom, and once he's satisfied she's settled in bed, he walks back out.

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Hanging his hands on the doorframe, he stretches, his stomach hanging out, exposed by his shirt rising up. His arms bulge, and my mouth immediately waters.

I've been a good boy. I deserve to taste him.

Standing from my chair, I cross the space and whisper in his ear, "I hope you know I'm ready to beg for it, Daddy."

His eyes widen a fraction, and his hands fall from the door casing.

"Go on then," Maxine says with a wink, "You two have a good night."

Spencer looks at his grandmother in disbelief and shakes his head before kissing her cheek and walking off the porch. Taking Maxine's hand and planting a swift kiss on the back of it, I smile and follow after him.

"I've got to go by the garage," he says, eyeing his phone. "Brett thinks he forgot to lock it up."

"Baby on the brain, huh?" I chuckle.

"It's his first weekend back," Spencer says, "I can cut him some slack."

Rolling into Goldspur Gears, Spencer gets out, and I follow. He turns and gives me a look, and I shrug.

He tries the door, and it opens. With a sigh, he continues in with sure, confident steps

as if he's not worried about anyone being in here. That's another thing I find sexy as hell, how fucking confident he is in himself.

"You can go to the truck," he says as if he can feel my apprehension.

"I'll stay. I know I'm safe with you," I respond, and he stops. Turning to look at me, he cocks his head to the side and smiles.

Stepping up to him, I press my chest into his and softly brush my lips over his neck. He stays rigid until my tongue swipes up his neck. At the contact, he gives in, pushing my shoulders until my back's against the corkboard in his office.

His lips are on mine, and he's leading our kiss in a way I've come to love. His groans of pleasure sink into my brain as my hands explore his body. He's ravishing my mouth, tongue exploring every inch as if it's the first time.

Tugging his shirt from his belt, he breaks the kiss to look at me.

"Let me make you feel good," I whisper into the otherwise silent room. "Please."

His groan is low and rumbles through his whole body, his hat falls to the ground with his shirt, and his hair's messy and wild.

Backing him toward the garage bay, the automatic lights come on, and I cage him in against the most recent car he's got in here. Its silver hood gleams, and when I move to press him down, he switches us, crowding me against the car instead.

With a chuckle, I say, "We've been here before."

"We have, but I think you forgot who's in charge here, Cowboy," he thunders. His words make my cock strain against my jeans, but tonight's about him. I want to make

him feel good without any strings.

“You’re always in charge, Daddy. I’m just asking you to let me take your load off,” I wink, and he groans, running a hand through his hair.

His tattoos are bright under the fluorescents, and the lighter skin of his chest and belly is still tan but doesn’t match his arms. Stretch marks line his stomach, and I drop to my knees to kiss each one.

I love his body, with all of its marks and freckles. His head’s thrown back as I get to his belt buckle, I pull on it, and it clanks open, so I’m left waiting for him to give me some kind of sign that he’s okay with this.

“Please, Spencer,” I groan, and when his eyes meet mine, I can sense the turmoil warring within him, the need I know he feels dancing the line with the caution he craves. “I need to taste you.”

He sucks in a breath and blows it out with a nod, “Show me how bad you want it.”

Standing, I grip his left hand in my right and with my left, unbuckle my own jeans. Pushing his hand into the denim, I wrap his hand around my shaft so he can feel just how fucking hard he makes me.

His eyes are trained on me as I move our hands. A wet spot forms on my boxers, and I could cum just from this. But I want to make this about him, to show him how fucking sexy I find him.

Removing our hands, I sink down to my knees. The hand that was on my cock brushes my chin, and he smirks down at me.

“You wanna suck my cock, Cowboy?” He growls.

“Please, Sir ,” I tease, hoping he’ll use me like I want.

His guttural growl makes my skin heat, and he shoves his jeans down to his ankles, leaving himself in only boxers.

“Go ahead then,” he says, placing his hands behind him on the car and taking a seat on the hood. “Suck my cock like a good boy.”

His arms are bulky and flexing with every move I make. I love the way his body responds to mine. It’s addicting, and I hope I never find a cure.

Slipping my fingers into the waistband of his boxers and rolling them down, his cock springs free. I’ve never made the noise that escapes my lips when I see him, and I’m not even close to caring that it sounds eager and wanting.

He needs to know what he does to me.

“God, your cock is beautiful,” I murmur, swallowing down the urge to suck him all the way to the hilt. I want this to last, I need him to enjoy every single second. The two barbells at the base of his cock shine, making me want to pull them into my mouth.

“I prefer Sir or Daddy, baby. There is no God here,” he rumbles and fists one hand in my hair.

Baby .

Cupping his balls, I massage them as I flatten my tongue and trail it slowly up his length. Lapping at the tip where I flick the slit and taste his precum. It’s tangy and salty and oh so fucking hot.

In my own world, as I play with him, he moans out an impatient sound, and it makes me smile. Daddy wants more. Closing my lips around his tip, I suck, and he gasps, fingers digging into my scalp.

Popping off and letting my spit travel down his cock is more erotic than it should be, but with Spencer, everything's fucking euphoric.

Watching my spit travel down to the base of his cock before smearing it over his length with my hand, I take my time. I make it messy and hot as sin.

Taking him back into my mouth, I use my hand at the base and my mouth on the tip. Working them in sync with one another while his head falls back and his fingers travel through my hair.

"Come on, Daddy," I taunt, "tell me how you like it."

He moans and looks down his nose, "Take me all the way until you can't take any more, then swallow."

Doing as he asks, I look up while I take him deep into my throat, wanting to see his reaction.

"Just like that, fuck," he says, eyes fixed on mine as he holds me there till there's tears in my eyes before he pulls back. "Now, suck while I fuck your bratty fucking mouth."

Moaning around his cock, I nod, and he starts slow. Moving in and out of my mouth in slow, long strokes until the tip of his dick meets the back of my throat, and I gag.

"Fuck, I love that sound," he says, pulling out and moving back in, "put that tongue to use, Cowboy."

His words make my eyes roll, and I do as he asks, touching myself over my jeans.

“Do you want to cum in your pants while choking on my cock, baby?” He teases, and the deep tone in his voice threatens to make me cum on the spot. “I want an answer.”

Withdrawing his cock from my mouth, he wrenches my head back so I have no choice but to look at him. I’m lost in a delirious haze of lust, and goddamn if he isn’t hot as hell right now.

“Yes, yes, I do, Sir.” I pant as saliva pools in the corners of my mouth.

“You’re such a little slut for me,” he praises, and my God, if I wasn’t already gone for this man, I would be now. “Take your shirt off. Let me see those muscles.”

Quickly doing as he asks, I whip my shirt off my head, and he bends down, capturing my lips with his.

“Now, be a good boy and take everything I give you, but don’t you dare cum until I tell you to do so,” he commands. “Understood?”

Nodding my head with more enthusiasm than I have in my whole life, he chuckles.

“Impatient,” he growls, “let me hear your words, Cowboy.”

“I’ll be a good boy,” I whine, licking my lips and dropping my eyes to his still-wet cock. “Please, Daddy, cum down my throat.”

His eyes blow wide, and his mouth turns up. Positioning himself, he thrusts into my mouth, working himself in and out as I gag around his length. The sounds are loud in the garage, but I couldn’t care less. Allowing him to use me like this feels so fucking good, and I have to hold myself back.

If I cum in my pants, he'll punish me, and knowing how long he's made me wait already, I don't want to find out what that punishment would be. Hollowing out my cheeks, I suck and moan around his cock, enjoying being used like his personal plaything.

"Your mouth feels so good, Cowboy," his praise makes it even harder not to cum. "I'm gonna coat your throat, and you're going to swallow every last drop."

He grunts as his thrusts become more erratic, and his stomach hits my forehead. Tickling his balls, he slaps my hand away and tells me, "Touch yourself over your boxers. I want you to make a mess."

My groan must be enough for him because he grips my hair and holds me still as he pumps in and out, "Be a good boy and cum for me."

My eyes roll back as he jerks and spills inside of me.

Hot ropes of his cum fill my throat, and I choke, trying to inhale through my nose as my own orgasm crests and washes over me.

Painting my boxers with cum, I moan as he pulls his cock from my mouth, eyes connecting with mine as I swallow.

His eyes are like liquid fire as he watches me clean my lips with my tongue, making sure not to lose a drop.

"Good. Fucking. Boy." He says, hauling me to my feet and turning us so my back's pressed against the car. His lips crash down on mine, and his body's pressed into me.

His hand runs down my chest, fingers trailing over the ridges there, until he gets to where I made a complete mess of myself. His smile is wide, dimples popping out.

“You’re a mess,” he says with a satisfied smirk.

“I’m a good listener,” I shrug.

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I 've never done anything like that before. I typically reserve my needs for the bedroom, and never would I have done this in my place of business, but seeing Heath so fucking needy on his knees... I couldn't resist.

He did so well for me, and while I usually enjoy aftercare for my partners, I'm more than aware we're still in my garage.

"Hey," Heath's voice breaks me out of my thoughts. His hands on my cheek, and he's looking at me with worried eyes. "Are you okay?"

Nodding, I avoid his eyes.

"You're overthinking this," he says, giving me a small smile when I find the courage to look at him.

"I've never done—"

"In a public place?" He laughs and rests his head against mine. His hand snakes around my neck, and he squeezes the muscles there. "There's no shame in what we did."

Looking up at him, I shake my head, "No, I'm not ashamed. God, no."

He chuckles and says, "There's no God here Daddy, remember?"

Closing my eyes, I laugh, "No I mean, I've always kept that in my home. You know?"

He nods and kisses me once more. “Well, you’re safe here, I locked the door behind us.”

With a laugh, I bend down and swipe our shirts off the floor. Offering him his, he looks down at his crotch and then back up. “You know this is gonna be a bitch to get out, right?”

With a smirk of my own, I nod and swat his ass to get moving. I’m ready to get home and shower, and I think I just might invite him to join me, especially since we’ll have the house to ourselves.

I’m getting way too comfortable having him in my bed. I don’t know what I’m going to do once he leaves again.

Briar’s asleep, curled up on the couch this morning, when I finally get my ass out of bed. Thelma’s laying on top of her lifting her sleepy head and blinking before laying it back down.

I don’t know when she got in, but it’s past seven, so I imagine Mawmaw got her up for morning chores and then dropped her off afterward. She’s still wearing her clothes from last night and her boots are by the front door.

Heath walks out of the room not long after me and looks down at the pair snuggled on the couch.

“Why is the fur demon so cute when she’s asleep?” He whispers, leaning over the back of the couch to observe.

Thelma lifts her head and chitters at him. He makes a face at her and backs away.

“Exhibit A,” he says, pointing toward the pair.

I laugh, trying to be quiet so I don't wake Briar. She's been quiet the past few days, and I'm not sure it's only because Pen had to go back home.

"I think you'll survive if Thelma doesn't like you," I chuckle, nuzzling his neck. He smells so good, like rain and dirt. It's homey and reminds me of how we met.

"Eddie called," Heath says, situating himself at a bar stool while I cook some sausage and potatoes. "The police questioned him about Moe being under my trailer."

My back tightens, shoulders stiffening. I know they're only doing their job, but they can't pin these murders on him.

"And what did he say?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even.

"Don't worry, he told them the truth. I was doin' my ride for the night and then talkin' to the press during the time of death," he says, and without looking, I can tell he's smiling. "I still can't get over the smell. I thought it was my trash..."

With a nod, I keep cooking. I'm worried about all the meetings the police have had. We haven't heard from them directly in a while, and I'm getting nervous. Logically, I know it's probably fine, but that's the overthinker in me.

"I love how worried you are," he teases.

Turning around after pulling a few links off the stove, I wave the spatula around, trying to come up with the words to explain how he should be taking this seriously.

They're still combing through his trailer for God knows what, and if he's got even a smidge of incriminating evidence, they'll arrest him.

"There's nothing in my trailer, Spence. I hardly own anything and only eat takeout on

the road,” he says, as if reading my body language for what it is.

“Still, whoever actually did this could have planted something in there,” I reason while he hops off the stool on socked feet and blocks me into the counter.

“And if they did, there won’t be any DNA evidence that connects me to it,” he places a kiss on my lips and smiles. His beard scratches my cheek, and I lift my hand to run it through his hair.

“This is all very cute, but Dad, I think your potatoes are burnin’,” Briar’s voice makes us both jump, and Heath laughs.

“Shit,” turning back to the stove, I pull the skillet off the eye and turn the burner off. “Well, I guess we’re not having breakfast potatoes this morning.”

We all laugh, and the moment solidifies in my brain. It was as if my gut had been waiting on my brain to play catch-up on this new reality.

I’m... happy.

We’re happy .

More than happy, if I’m honest, and I can’t remember a time that Briar and I have been this carefree.

“How about we go get some groceries and have a movie day in?” I ask, looking between the two.

Briar jumps up with renewed energy and hollers, “I get to pick dinner!”

Heath looks at me and shrugs with the cutest lip tilt and I chuckle, “Deal.”

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Briar chose steak and potatoes, a classic cowboy meal if I've ever known one.

She's got music on in the living room, blasting loud enough that we can hear it outside from the porch.

Spencer decided to grill the steaks, so while the potatoes bake in the oven, we're outside sipping beer and searing steaks.

"Come on, one song?" She asks us to dance once again, even though we've turned her down twice now.

My phone rings, and a number I don't recognize flashes on the screen. Showing Spencer, he nods and walks into the house to turn the volume down.

"Hello?" I answer, unsure since I'm not used to random numbers calling my phone.

"Mr. Macabe?" The undeniable voice of Detective Royce says.

"This is him."

"I'm sorry to interrupt your evening, but I wanted you to hear the news from me," he pauses as if I'm going to stop him to say something.

When I don't, he continues, "The Tennessee Bureau of Investigations has officially cleared you as a suspect, and you should be receiving information on your trailer as soon as tomorrow."

“What? I mean, well—thank you, obviously, but what happened?” I ask, “If you can’t discuss it with me, I understand.”

I don’t want him thinking I’m some asshole who thinks the whole world should tell me things.

“There was a hair identified on the body of Moe Callus, belonging to someone on the FBI’s most wanted list,” he sighs, and I choose not to ask any further questions.

“I’ve already spoken to your publicist and set a time for a press conference to announce our findings and clear you publicly of any and all suspicion. ”

“Thank you,” I almost trip over the words but get them out.

With a mutual ‘have a good night,’ we hang up, and I turn to find Spencer and Briar waiting in the doorway behind me.

“Well?” Briar starts as I stand there staring at my now blank phone screen.

“Who was that? What did they want?” He asks, and I walk up to him, grip his shirt, and kiss him. I’m free, I knew I would be, but it’s taken a long time, and now the rodeo can officially begin again. The thought makes me pause.

The rodeo.

“The police cleared me and my trailer,” I tell them, backing up a step and smiling. They both throw their arms around me, and I’ve never felt more alive than I do right now.

It’s this moment, I just know.

I'm done with the rodeo. I need to talk to Staci so I can tell her that I'm retiring. She can get everything wrapped up for me, and then I just need to tell the rest of my team. I have no idea how, but for him and Briar, I'll do it.

"Now you have to dance with me!" Briar laughs, and we do. Spencer turns off the grill, plates the steaks, and lays them on the kitchen island before joining us as Briar belts the lyrics to some pop song I don't know.

I'm a terrible dancer, but I don't really care. I'm free, and I'm with two people I've come to love. We're dancing around, singing at the top of our lungs, Thelma's perched on the television stand, watching us flail around.

When the song ends, Spencer wraps me up in his arms and kisses me. Briar hoots, and soon enough, we're enjoying our steak and baked potato on the back porch under the string lights Briar begged Spencer to leave up after her party.

It's damn near picture-perfect, at least for me.

Staci called this morning, telling me to get my ass to the police station for the press release. I guess I should have looked at her texts last night, but I was enjoying myself.

Sue me.

Rushing around, I quickly get dressed. Spencer and Briar left early this morning, heading out to tackle the farm chores.

Shooting a quick text to Spencer letting him know where I'm going, I head out to the truck.

I still have to put the address for the police station in my phone, just in case.

If I get lost and wind up late, Staci may castrate me.

Pulling in, there's a few uniformed officers milling about and a podium set up with a half dozen microphones. Camera crews I recognize as various other news outlets are set up a ways away from the podium. Kenzie steps out of the station, waving me in.

"Let's go, Show Pony!" She calls.

Staci doesn't spare me a glance when I walk in, only barks orders at me not to open my mouth.

Stand there. Look pretty. Smile and wave.

Understood.

In the haze of contentment with Briar and Spencer the last few weeks, I'd almost forgotten that's all I'm good for.

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“Heath’s on TV!” Briar shouts as soon as I see her racing toward me. “He’s at the station!”

Waving her phone around, I can see a live feed of something resembling the news, but it’s got hearts floating up from the bottom corner.

“What are you talkin’ about?” I ask, reaching for her phone so I can look at it without getting whiplash.

“Heath! He’s on the TV, and they’re talkin’ about those murders,” she screams as if I’m not standing beside her. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I look at the missed text from Heath telling me he left for the police station.

It’s good news that he’s been exonerated—something we celebrated last night—but I would’ve gone with him if he’d wanted me to. I’ve gotten to know him well enough to see that he must be nervous standing there listening to everything. But maybe he doesn’t need me.

The thought hits me in the chest, and I catch the newscaster asking about the rodeo.

“The rodeo has been given the okay to resume operations, as we have reason to believe the two murders are connected and that the killer has moved on,” Detective Royce states, and my heart sinks as another question is lobbed, this time at Heath.

“Mr. Macabe, when will you be returning to the arena?” A female reporter asks.

His smile is wide, teeth on full display as he says, “I look forward to returning when

the time is right. I've missed my team and the thrill of the ride."

My heart sinks, receding so far into my chest it presses against my spine, and I have to get away from Briar before I lose my breakfast.

Handing her phone back, I mumble something about checking on the garage and hop in the truck. Shooting a quick text to Mawmaw to come back to the ranch so Briar won't be left alone, I head to The Raven. I need to sit in the back room and drink myself stupid.

Drown my fears in a bottle. It's the one thing I never did after I lost Pearl. I couldn't. I had to be strong and responsible for my girl, but now?

Now, I plan to numb myself into oblivion for being so blind.

Once a playboy, always a playboy.

"Whoa," Uncle Scott says, stopping me on my way into the back entrance of the closed bar. "What's going on?"

"I need a drink or seven," I tell him.

He nods, bringing the box in his arms inside and setting it on a table before he walks behind the bar. I didn't expect anyone to be here, and I'm not sure I can hold myself together long enough to pretend I'm not spiraling.

I knew he would return to the rodeo. I knew he would, yet I let myself fall in love with him. I thought he was falling for me too, and I know he loves Briar. Their relationship's grown just as much as ours, and she loves, respects, and looks up to him.

Shit.

This is what I was worried about from the start. I didn't want my little girl to get her heart broken, and I've gone and gotten mine broken instead.

"What's going on?" Uncle Scott asks, putting a cold glass of my favorite beer in front of me. "Heard Heath was cleared, thought that would be celebratin' news."

Swallowing down half the glass, I try to hold back the tears, but it doesn't work. One traitorous drop slips free of my will and slides down my face.

"He's going back to the rodeo, and I'm the idiot who thought maybe, just maybe, he fell for us like we had for him." Whispering that into the empty bar makes my heart constrict even more.

"How do you know he's goin' back?" Uncle Scott asks, unbiased as always.

"He said as much during the police interview," I spit, downing the rest of the beer.

I've missed my team and the thrill of the ride.

It won't stop echoing inside my head.

"And you've talked to him about this possibility?" His question makes me pause. We haven't talked about it, as if it's a taboo subject. If I don't ask, he doesn't have to tell.

Shaking my head, he laughs. "Well, I'd say you two probably need to talk about it."

"Let me have one more before I do that?" I ask, drying up my face and gathering myself.

He chuckles and pours me another, sliding it across the bar and leaving me by myself while he stocks.

Once I've drunk the last drop, I steel my nerves and head outside.

We've got some things to discuss, and I guess I owe it to Heath to hear what he has to say. Walking to Mawmaw's, I need to make sure Briar's good and make sure Mawmaw can keep an eye on her while I talk to Heath.

Her truck is gone, and so is Lucy's. I pull out my phone and send a quick message to my girl before I panic.

Me: Where are y'all?

Briar: Mawmaw brought me to Clara's

Me: Oh, are her parents there?

Briar: Dad! *eye roll*

I can't argue with her via text, and if she's already there she's not going to answer my call. Instead of making a fuss, I head to the house to wait for Heath.

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After the press release, Eddie and I got the go-ahead to pull my trailer back into the rodeo lot and park it.

“It’s been a wild few weeks, huh?” He says, turning the truck off and rolling down the windows so the heat can blow through. It’s only gotten hotter, and I’m already starting to sweat.

“You’re tellin’ me,” I chuckle, swaying my head.

“How are Spencer and Briar?”

My smile tells it all, and he ‘ooooo’s with a laugh. “So what are you planning on doin’?”

With a heavy sigh, I hang my head. Spencer and I haven’t talked about life in the future or what it would look like. He hasn’t made any mention of the possibility, and part of me wonders if he’s waiting for me to bring it up.

Rodeo’s been my life for so long, it just feels like a given. If I left, I would miss it. Of course, I would, but knowing Spencer wants me... That’s worth so much more than the rodeo ever has.

I’ve dreamt time and time again about having a family, and experiencing life with someone else. If whatever Spencer and I could have is anything like those dreams, I’d quit rodeo, without question.

“It depends,” I tell him as my phone rings. Briar’s number pops up, and panic rises in

my gut. “Briar, are you okay?”

Spencer only gave her my number for emergencies and only recently.

She snuffles on the other line and hiccups, “Could you come get me?”

“Where are you?” I demand, hearing the stress in her voice.

“C-Clara’s,” she says around a sob, and fire spreads through my body. Something ugly rears its head as my sweet girl cries.

“Send me the address.”

“Just don’t call Dad, okay?”

I don’t know why she doesn’t want me to call Spencer, but I’m not about to argue. Eddie gives me a look of concern and starts the truck up. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, Sweet Girl,” I tell her before I hang up.

“Where are we goin’?” He asks.

Waiting for Briar to text me the address feels like a weight crushing my chest. When it finally comes through, I guide Eddie to Clara’s house, and the familiar look of the driveway has me hopping out before Eddie can even get it in park.

Running up to the front door, I try the handle, but it’s locked. I can hear music coming from somewhere out back. There’s a path beside the garage, and without thought, I follow it to the backyard where teens of all ages are enjoying a large pool.

There’s so many people here, and I can’t find Briar.

“Uhm, hello?” A nasally voice catches me off guard. A thin girl wearing a bikini that most certainly isn’t appropriate for her age stands by a gate surrounding the yard. “Can I help you, perv?”

A gasp echoes, and then people are swarming the gate. “Heath Macabe!” Someone shouts, and all I give a fuck about right now is finding Briar.

“Where’s Briar?” I ask one of the dark-haired girls standing near the pool. Their mouths fall open, and they gawk, but I’m not in the mood for fans at the moment. “Where’s Briar?”

Colt pushes through the crowd, looking guilty as hell, and my instincts kick in. To hell with trespassing, I’ve got to find her. I shove my way into the backyard and let myself into the house as they whisper and argue.

“I tried to h—” Colt starts.

“Briar!” I shout, as Eddie comes around the corner following me into the house. “I can’t find her, and these dipshits aren’t helping. Briar!”

The house echoes, there’s hardly any furniture in here and odd-looking paintings.

“Briar!” I shout, almost in hysterics.

“Heath, maybe we should call Spencer,” Colt says, looking down at his feet.

“Where is she?” My voice drops, and even to my ears, it sounds scary.

“Heath?” Her voice is small and meek, I never thought I would string those two words together to describe Briar Tritt.

A door off to my left opens, and she pokes her head out. Her green eyes are rimmed red, face pale, making her freckles stand out even more than normal.

“Are you okay?” Rushing over to her, I push the door open so I can see her. Making sure there are no visible marks on her. She takes a double breath before more tears fall.

“Whose clothes are these?” I seethe.

Her eyes look over my shoulder, and I find Colt looking at her with pity. Walking over to him, I grip his shoulder and push him into the closest wall I can. “Did you touch her?”

I yell, keeping him in my grip. Eddie comes over, laying his hand on mine.

“Dude, he’s a kid,” he says, trying to push me off.

“He’s eighteen,” I snarl, “and if you touched her, I’ll fuckin’ make sure you pay.”

“I didn’t, Heath, I swear,” he says, holding up his hands. Eyes wide and trained on me.

“Heath!” Briar says, coming out of the bathroom and edging toward the front door. “Colt helped me. He didn’t touch me. No one did.”

By now, we’ve got an audience, and I’m sure a few cell phones are recording. Letting Colt go, he looks over at Briar and gives her a small smile. “I’m sorry, B.”

Her eyes well again, and she turns. There’s a snicker from one of the teens, and I whirl. “Who’s laughing?”

“Heath,” Eddie warns, but I’m too far lost in anger to care about how I look.

“The pig wasn’t lying,” one of the taller guys says. A few of the kids laugh, and Briar’s shoulders fold in.

“The fuck did you just say?” I ask, hoping for his sake I didn’t hear him right. Taking a few steps that way, they all back up.

“Would you rather I call her a fatass? Maybe she’s not a liar, but she is fat,” he laughs. Fucking laughs and Eddie grabs my upper arm to keep me from moving any closer.

“What’s your name, asshole?” I ask because the little shit looks familiar.

“Jarrett Walker,” he says, shoulders pushed back, standing a little taller. “The next bull ridin’ champion.”

It’s my turn to laugh, “Listen close, you little bastard, that’s my girl you’re talking about, and ain’t none of the riders I know gonna be happy about what I’ve heard today.” His shoulders sink, but only a little. His smirk remains, and I drop my voice down low.

“You know, riders talk. Terrible gossips the lot of ‘em, and they all think the world of Briar.” His smile falters, and I take that as my cue to deliver the last blow, “So I can assure you, I will make for damn sure you’re the next big nothin’ in rodeo, boy.”

Eddie releases my shoulder, and I turn, gathering Briar up in one arm as Colt reaches for her. “Br—”

“Don’t you say a fuckin’ word. I’ll let Spencer deal with you,” I warn, and he nods.

Loading Briar up into the backseat of Eddie's truck, she grabs my hand as I go to leave and whispers, "Will you stay with me?"

I'm not about to deny her anything right now.

Nodding to Eddie, I crawl in and allow her to snuggle into my side. Colt's clothes are a little too tight on her, so I wrapped her into a blanket Eddie has in the back.

"When you're ready, will you tell me what happened?" I ask, attempting to soften my voice. Whatever she's been through, I want to fix it, if that's even possible.

She snuffles and sits up as Eddie drives aimlessly around town. "Do you want us to take you to Maxine's?" I ask, and she vehemently shakes her head no.

"Home?" I try again.

"Is Dad at work?" She questions.

"I don't think so," I remember him saying something about being home all day after he finished his chores.

"No, can we just keep driving?" Her voice cracks, and I nod. Eddie meets my eyes in the rearview and nods, letting me know he heard.

After twenty minutes of driving around listening to her pop music, she finally takes a big breath.

"Clara..." she starts and stops, pausing for a while before she starts again.

"Clara clipped the strings on my bikini while I was talkin' to Graham," she hiccups but continues, "My top fell off in the pool, and they took it. Tossing it around while I

covered myself. Some of them called me fat and piggy, taunting me. I know I'm not skinny like the other girls.

But I've never been mean to any of them.

Ever," the skin around her eyes goes red, and her lips turn down.

"I don't know why she did that. I thought she was my friend." She swallows down more tears as she continues, "I was so embarrassed, trying to figure out the best way to get out of the pool and not expose myself even more, all while they threw my top around and called me names."

My heart shatters, listening to her talk about what happened, and I hug her closer. Those fucking assholes will have their time, and I'll make sure to mention Jarrett's name to the rest of the riders.

"I'm sorry that happened, Sweet Girl," I whisper against her hair, "I'm so fuckin' sorry."

I don't have any magical words for her that will erase the emotional dent in her armor. I wish I did. I wish I could pull the dent out and polish it to a shine, but that's something only Briar can do.

Spencer and I will have to talk about this. There's no way in hell I'm not telling him what happened.

"I know you don't want to tell your dad, and you don't have to, but I do," I tell her, holding up a hand when she pops up with terrified eyes. "I know it's not what you want, but he deserves to know, and their parents need to be aware of what their kids are doing."

“But—” she starts, only to look down at her hands and nod. “I don’t want to relive it again.”

“That’s fair, but I can’t promise that your dad won’t ask you about it after he and I talk,” I warn.

She nods, and with a sigh, she snuggles back into my side and says, “Let’s go home.”

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Heath still isn't back, and the press conference ended hours ago. He hasn't texted or called, I'm starting to worry. I haven't heard a lick from Briar either, and she knows to keep me updated when she's at her friend's house.

A truck I don't recognize pulls up over the hill in my driveway, and I step out of the house. By now, I'm sober, and when I spot Heath stepping out of the truck, followed by Briar, swallowed in a quilt, my brain loses all rational function.

"Briar?" My voice is loud and commanding. "What's wrong?"

She leans into Heath's side as they walk toward the house. Her long hair hides her face, but I can tell from the way her shoulders shake that she's crying.

"Flower, honey," stepping in front of her, I fall to my knees so I can see her. "What's goin' on? Are you hurt?"

She only sobs in response. I look up at Heath, seeing his face carved in anger, and I'm a thin thread away from losing my cool.

"Let's get inside," he says, maneuvering her around me. "I'll talk to you once she's settled."

His clear control of the situation puts another weight on my shoulders, my daughter's leaning on him. I'm... jealous. Getting to my feet, I notice Eddie, the man from the rodeo, standing beside the truck, and I storm over his way. "What happened?"

He crosses his arms as I tower over him and nods to the door. When I look back,

Heath's standing there, hands in his pockets. "You can head back, Eddie."

"You sure?" He says from behind me.

Heath's small smile must be reassuring enough for him, because he steps up into the truck and starts the engine.

Walking up to Heath, I pass by him to get to my daughter, but he lays a hand on my chest. "I promised her I wouldn't call you."

What did he just say?

Without turning to face him, I growl, "You don't get to make those promises, Heath," I'm angry, too far rooted in my worries that he's going to leave and break us both. "I'm her father!"

"And I'm not negating that," he says, pushing me toward the rocking chair by the door.

Once I'm seated, he lowers to one knee and cocks his head to the side.

"Briar called me after an incident at Clara's, and before you fly off the handle, I need you to hear what she told me.

Then we can make a plan to speak to the other parents. "

"We?" I ask with a scoff, "I thought you missed your team, Cowboy."

He leans back sharply, with a look on his face that I can't read. "What's going on here, Spencer?"

“You tell me, Heath,” I respond, leaning down so I’m eye to eye with him.

With a humorless laugh, he drops his hand from my knee and stands. “I’m not sure what you think you know, but it’s clear you’ve got something to say.”

“The rodeo’s back, I heard what you said at the press release. You miss your team and the thrill of the ride,” I spit. “So what are you still doing here if you’re so eager to get back?”

He stares, incredulous, then looks away as if what I’ve said isn’t true.

As if I didn’t hear the words fall from his lips on national television.

“Should I not be? I’m only a cowboy, after all, right?

” He runs his tongue along the inside of his cheek in frustration as he looks back at me, his eyes lining in silver. “Give me a reason to stay, Spencer.”

I’m shocked and still pissed off about Briar and whatever happened at Clara’s, so I ignore his question and ask one of my own. “Tell me what happened to my daughter .”

If he notices the inference, he doesn’t say anything as he sucks in a shaky breath, nods, and spills everything that happened with Clara and the party at her house.

I’m so fucking pissed that I can’t see straight, and hearing that Levi’s little brother was the main culprit, calling my daughter names, makes me see red.

I’m so far gone into my own hatred and anger that I don’t notice when Heath goes into the house, packs his bags, and slings them into his truck bed.

“Give me a reason, Spencer. Please.” He asks one more time, and when I don’t, he lowers his head, gets into his truck, and drives off.

My thoughts circle around Briar and how horrible her so-called ‘friends’ treated her.

Time passes by, and the sky turns to a deep orange. Walking into the house, I find Briar passed out on her bed, curled into a ball on her side, with Thelma draped over her neck. She’s wearing clothes that don’t fit, and her pillow’s stained with tears.

“I’m going to make this right,” I promise, placing a swift kiss on her cheek.

Closing her bedroom door, I dial Clara’s parents and have a terse conversation with them before calling Jarrett’s folks.

I understand they lost their son, and no matter how awful he was, he was still their child. So I temper my voice and speak as calmly as possible while I inform her of her youngest boy’s actions. His mother was appalled, apologized on his behalf, and assured me that he would be dealt with.

After that’s settled and I’ve climbed into bed, I finally realize what I’ve done. I pushed Heath away, and for what?

Pride?

Insecurity that Briar called him to help her and not me?

I should be grateful she had someone she trusted enough to go to. Instead, I got angry at him, and now he’s gone.

I didn't answer when he asked me to give him a reason to stay. I should have told him to stay because he belongs here. Because he’s family. Because... I love him.

It's not long before my own tears start to fall as I clutch the pillow that smells like him. He's gone, and all of his things that I've gotten used to being around are, too, and my heart feels like a punching bag that's taken one too many hits today.

I miss him.

I should have stopped him.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Driving away from Spencer and Briar felt like leaving a piece of my soul.

Ripping myself in half and driving away, the most important half of me is still there, haunting the house.

Laying in bed alone, in my trailer that I haven't been in for weeks, depressing thoughts of Spencer replay in my mind.

His smile.

His steady heartbeat in my ear.

I miss it. The calmness of sharing a bed with him, the confidence in what we were building together. Tossed to the side over one stupid fucking comment. He didn't even give me a chance, nor did he give me a reason to stay.

He didn't stop me from leaving.

Eddie's bunked down not too far from me, and there's no way I'm getting any sleep now, so I get up and make my way over to his trailer.

Knocking on his door reminds me of opening the door and finding Spencer on the other side of it. The first night we both felt a shift in our relationship.

Eddie answers in a t-shirt and boxers. I didn't even look at the time, "Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so late. I'll just go."

“Come on, Muffin,” he says with a yawn, “I figured this was comin’.”

My best friend lets me rant in his trailer for however long it takes until I’m calm enough to hear him when he tells me to rest and go back to Spencer tomorrow.

“He didn’t stop me, Eddie!” I shout, pulling at my hair.

“He was already feelin’ things he was scared to talk about,” Eddie argues. “You told me he assumed you were comin’ back to the rodeo without talkin’ to him. You didn’t set him straight. Instead, you asked him to give you a reason to stay.”

“He didn’t, though,” I whisper.

“Heath, he told you upfront he wasn’t lookin’ for complicated, and if he heard what you said at the press conference, what Staci told you to say, that sounds like a complication to me.

Take the night, think long and hard about what makes you happy, then go from there.

And Heath,” he says, stalling before his bedroom door.

“Make sure you fight tooth and nail, I’ve never seen you happier or more miserable over anyone like this. ”

“He doesn’t want me,” I confess, but I’m hoping I’m wrong. I’m hoping that maybe, just fucking maybe , Spencer feels some of what I’m feeling right now, and when I show up at his house tomorrow, he gives me the reason I asked for.

Laying down on Eddie’s couch, I look up at the ceiling, hand over my hammering heart, wishing I were looking at stars with the man I’ve fallen in love with.

Eddie helps me pack up our gear, we're headed to the next stop about five hours from here. If we leave soon, we'll be able to compete in the last event. The rodeo commissioner called me personally to tell me he's looking forward to my return.

I didn't get the warm and fuzzy feelings I'm used to at hearing his enthusiasm over my return. Possibly because my heart's slowly decaying in my chest, and I still haven't called Spencer.

I don't think he'd answer even if I did, so I've been busying myself while I work up the courage to go over there and beg one last time.

"Incoming," Eddie mutters, nodding to the rest of the crew and telling them to find someplace else to be. Looking up, I watch them walk away and turn, finding Spencer with his hands in his back pockets, standing at my truck.

My heart leaps as if it knows where it belongs and can't wait to return.

"Got a minute?" He asks with a crooked smile.

"Only a few," I snip, feeling the same hurt and frustration from yesterday rising.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I shouldn't have gotten upset with you about Briar. You were only helping, and I was... jealous that she called you."

I scoff, tossing my hair back out of my face and turning back toward my trailer.
"Okay."

"Heath, I should have asked you about the interview," he blurts, "I shouldn't have assumed. I'm sorry."

“Yeah, you said that already,” I remind him, picking up the last box of equipment I need and stuffing it into my trailer.

“So, you are leavin’ then?” He asks, watching me lock up the trailer.

“I’m a rodeo cowboy, remember?”

“I thought,” he starts, running a hand through his hair, pausing for a moment. “I thought we—”

“I thought so too, Spencer. But then, you couldn’t give me a reason to stay, I asked you.

Begged you, and you didn’t even hear me.

You were so set on words that I was told to say, by the way, that you couldn’t even give me the benefit of the doubt.

” I pause, wondering if I should even bother telling him this, and choose to throw the ball in his court as I say, “After that press release, I told Staci I was done with rodeo. She nearly tore my head off, but I didn’t give a shit because I knew what I wanted. ”

He opens his mouth to respond, but nothing comes out.

Shoving past him, I double-check that everything is in the truck and stew in my feelings. Trying to keep what Eddie said in the back of my mind. He wasn’t looking for complications, I know that, but if he would ask me to stay, I would.

I wanted him to ask. I’ve been fucking living with him for the past however many weeks, I wanted him to want me enough to tell me to stay.

“You weren’t comin’ back?” His eyes widen, and he steps in front of me. “You were gonna quit rodeo?”

Looking up at the sky, licking my bottom lip, I have to fight to keep my frustrated tears from falling. “I love you, Spencer. Of course I was going to quit.”

I love you, Spencer.

His words play on repeat in my head as a tear escapes his golden eyes. He's looking at me as if I hold everything in his whole world at my fingertips.

"You love..." choking on the last word, I have to swallow down my disbelief.

"Yeah. I love you, you fucking idiot," he throws his hands up and continues, "or maybe I'm the real idiot."

"No," I stop him, "you aren't, but I can't ask you to give up your career. I won't have that on my shoulders."

He scoffs and shakes his head, "You're a real piece of work. I just told you I love you, and you still can't help but sabotage what we have."

"I—" I start but stop when he holds his hands up in front of his chest.

"No more excuses, Spence. When you're ready to admit how you feel about me," he pauses to wipe the tears from under his eyes, "call me."

With his last words, he disappears behind his trailer, and my heart plummets to my feet. Standing there like an asshole, I wait and wait for what feels like forever...

But he doesn't return.

When I finally snap myself out of it, I head home, and sit down on the couch and

stare at the wall.

He loves me.

He loves me, and he was ready to give up rodeo.

Am I ready to be everything for someone else?

The thought puts my hair on end. I promised to be everything for Pearl, but I failed.

I may be a halfway decent father, but I was an absent partner.

I loved Pearl with everything I had, but I was always too focused on being a provider that I didn't give her everything she deserved before we lost her.

I've never regretted anything in my life as much as I still, to this day, regret that.

Tears pour down my face, and I release a frustrated breath.

Briar's losing another person she cares about.

Because of me.

I don't know how long I've been sitting here before Briar flops down beside me after returning from her shift at the diner. She's in much better spirits since we talked about what happened at Clara's and set some new rules.

"Where's Heath?" She asks, looking around the room as if he's going to pop out from my room any second with his dazzling smile.

"He left," I sigh, knowing this conversation has to happen sooner or later.

“What do you mean, he left?” She tips her head to the side and leans back. “Left to go where?”

“He was cleared, and the rodeo’s back on. They’re on the way to their next stop on tour.” I need to rip the band-aid off, tell her the truth, and move on. I know it’s going to hurt, and that’s what kills me more than anything.

“And you didn’t want to go with him?” She asks, eyeing me like I’ve grown an extra head.

“That’s not an option. I have a whole life here, with you, plus the Ranch and Garage. I can’t just up and leave.”

“Well, then make him come back,” she demands.

“He’s not coming back, Flower,” I tell her with as much softness as I can muster.

She laughs, “Ha ha, bad joke, Dad.”

“It’s not a joke,” swallowing down the lump in my throat, I watch as her eyes start to well and turn red when she realizes I’m serious. “He’s gone back to the rodeo.”

“But, you love him,” she demands, wiping her eyes, “and he loves you. Did you ask him why? What if I called him—”

“Flower,” I sigh, “love isn’t a reason to stay.”

“Yes, it is!” She shouts, standing from the couch and backing away. Thelma scrambles out of the way before she trips, and Briar twists her head. “Love is the only reason to stay!”

“I know you’re upset,” I start.

“No! You’re not going to give up like this! Y’all are in love damn it!” She’s screaming, throwing her hands in the air, and pacing the floor. “Call him, call him right now, and tell him to turn around!”

Her words tug at the last thing Heath said to me.

When you’re ready to admit how you feel about me, call me.

But I can’t derail his whole life for my happiness. I did that once already when I convinced Pearl we could be a happy family, and though I have a beautifully happy daughter, I won’t push anyone else into something because of what I want, ever again.

“Call him,” she demands again, as if I didn’t hear her the first time. “Tell him you love him.”

“I can’t do that, Flower.”

“You can!” She cries, tears falling down her face. “I love him too! You’re not allowed to push him away!”

With her last words, what’s left of my heart shatters. Pausing to gather my thoughts, I allow her the space to say what she needs. When she’s done talking a mile a minute, I stand, scooping her up into my arms and holding her while she cries.

“I’m not pushing him away,” I tell her, “I’m letting him go.”

“But what if he doesn’t come back?” She sobs, looking up at me with her identical green eyes.

“That’s the price of love, Flower.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Three Months Later

I've been miserable waiting on Spencer to call for the last few months. I thought for sure he would after I told him I loved him, but then a week went by, and another and another, and he still hasn't.

My last rodeo ride feels bittersweet. It's been hell the last three months, even though I've ridden pretty damn well.

The familiar rush of the ride is there, hearing the crowd chant my name, the roar when the show begins.

But it's not the warmth I share with the two people I've come to love most in the world back in Goldspur Ridge, though.

"You ready, man?" Eddie says, clapping my shoulder, breaking me out of my almost spiral.

"It's weird," I chuckle, "knowin' this is it."

"I feel ya, man," he says, smiling up at the stands. "If I found what you did, I'd be outta here too."

With a fake ass smile, I turn to the crowd and wave before disappearing into the tunnel that leads me to the chutes. Fiona's already bucking and hawing, so tonight's ride will be a good one. Then, I'm heading back to Goldspur Ridge to claim the family I've found myself in.

Loading into the chute, Eddie runs through all of the normal things he does, and I nod, holding on to the riggin'. The chute door opens wide, and the whole world stops in my ears. For a split second, everything is silent until the buzzer sounds, and I'm hopping off Fiona's back.

Throwing my hat up in the air, movement catches my eye near the metal fence, but I figure it's kids waiting for me to come by and sign their things.

I'll get there, for now, I do what I've done at the end of every show—scan the stands, hoping that I'll find the love of my life standing tall among them.

When I don't spot him, my shoulders slump, and I jog over to the barrier. The announcer comes over the speakers, announcing my retirement. The crowd erupts in mixed sentiments. Cheers, gasps, and boos sound, but I can't pay them any attention.

Blinking to clear my eyes, I stand there in disbelief.

Spencer's standing at the fence, feet frozen, along with Briar and the rest of the family I've adopted in my heart. He's looking at me with tears streaming down his cheeks, and mine start to fall in return.

Briar's waving, already climbing the fence—and I'm grateful she decided to wear jeans because she's not graceful about it—screaming my name as she runs toward me.

“You're retiring?” She hollers, jumping into my arms. “You're coming home?”

“If you'll still have me, Sweet Girl,” I tell her, holding her as I look at my man over her head..

Lucy pushes Spencer, breaking him out of his stupor as Eddie runs over to him, directing him toward the chute entrance from the stands. His eyes gloss over as he

meets me in the arena. Briar let me go and stands beside me, practically bouncing out of her skin.

“Tell me you’re retiring because you want to, Cowboy,” he says, serious eyes fixed on mine, as if there’s nothing else in the world going on outside of the two of us. “Not because of me.”

“I’m not retirin’ for you. I’m retirin’ for us ,” I whisper, pulling him to me by his shirt and kissing him in front of the crowd.

They go wild, stomping, hooting, and hollering as Spencer pulls me closer. He kisses me back, and I can feel the wetness of tears on his mustache as his lips move against mine. Briar wraps her arms around us both when Spencer pulls back to look at me.

“You’re sure about this?” He asks, eyes looking over my face.

“More than anythin’ in the world,” I tell him. “Let’s get outta here.”

Briar cheers and waves Lucy and Mawmaw down from the stands. I didn’t see them before, but I couldn’t imagine this moment without them.

“You don’t want to stay for the rankin’s?” He asks, eyes fully focused on mine.

“I wanna be with the man I love,” I laugh, looking out at the crowd and waving. The announcer says something, and the crowd roars again. This time, I grab his hand and move toward the tunnel for riders.

“What about Briar?” Spencer stops us, looking back at our family.

“Mawmaw’s got her,” I whisper just as Mawmaw shoots Spencer a wink.

“You two are trouble,” he says, rubbing his nose against mine.

Following me out, we jump into my truck just as lightning strikes in the sky. Spencer laughs as I drive out past the rodeo traffic and into a field.

He reaches across the console with one hand to cup my face, this thumb dragging a slow back-and-forth motion. “I love you, Heath Macabe.”

With a watery smile, I nod and lean into his hand.

“Kept me lookin’ long enough, Spencer Tritt. I love you, too.”

His lips crash against mine, and I moan. My heart’s fit to burst, and as he maneuvers our bodies, we break apart.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to say it, Cowboy.”

“I knew you’d figure it out eventually. I’ve got quilts in the back,” I whisper. “Wanna watch the lightning storm with me?”

He smiles and nods, pulling the quilts from the back seat and stepping out of the truck. We meet at the tailgate in a rush of frenzied energy, just like the lightning cracking above us. He helps me spread out the blankets and settles atop them. His lips are on mine the second I sit down beside him.

Pulling at my clothes, he pops the buttons on my shirt, ripping at the buckle for my chaps. Chuckling into his mouth, I nip at his bottom lip. “Impatient, Daddy?”

He rumbles deep in his chest, “Take them off for me, Cowboy.”

Standing, I slowly strip down to nothing, watching his eyes light up with every strike

in the sky. Sweat slicks my body, and my cock stands ready and waiting for whatever he's got in mind.

Lifting from where he's laying in the truck bed, he crawls to me, kissing the muscles of my legs until he's breathing on my cock. His hands wrap around my thighs, and he looks up at me. Sticking his fingers in his mouth, he gets them nice and wet before pushing them between my cheeks.

"Are you gonna let me finger fuck your ass like a good boy?" He growls, pushing one finger into the muscle there.

"Yes, p-please," I stutter. His fingers feel so good, and his breath fans over my hard length. My hips move out of pure bliss, and he chuckles, tongue darting out to lick the bead of precum there. Letting out a hiss, he closes his mouth over me and sucks hard on the tip. "Fuck."

"Do you like how my lips feel around your cock, while my fingers are buried in your tight ass, Cowboy?"

"Mhmm," I mutter as my heart pounds and knees threaten to give out. He's moving his fingers in and out of my ass, scissoring them, drawing out sounds from my throat that are lewd even to my ears.

He licks a path up my straining cock and leans back, stripping down to nothing.

Laying down on his back, the silver of his piercings flash in the lightning, and my mouth waters.

Pulling a packet of lube from his jeans, he slathers it over his dick.

It glistens in the moonlight, and I can't wait to feel him inside of me.

“Come sit on my cock like a good little slut,” he commands, and fuck me if it isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever heard.

Obeying his instruction, I straddle his hips and sink down to my knees.

With our cocks lined up, he uses his hand to squeeze the rest of the lube onto my hole while the other guides my hips.

He pushes his tip into me, and I gasp at the stretch of his cock as he works me slowly up and down until I’m fully seated.

He murmurs praises while stroking my hair back behind my ear.

Holding me in place, he waits for me to look at him. Our eyes locked onto each other. Slowly, he rolls his hips, moving softly inside me.

Moaning his name, he smiles and pulls me down so he can kiss me. “That’s right, Cowboy, you let me worship your body, and call my name when you cum.”

“More, please. Faster.”

Thunder rolls in the distance, and with each strike of lightning, he snaps his hips up, drilling into me, driving me insane with lust.

Tugging on my cock with every movement threatens to push me over the edge. His calloused fingers wrapped around my length make it that much more sensitive, and the way he’s looking at me with so much love and admiration. A tear escapes, and he wipes it away with his other hand.

“Cum for me, baby,” he whispers against my lips, “and I promise to fill you with my cum until it’s drippin’ out of you for days.”

With a whimper and groan, thick ropes of my cum paint his round stomach, and he pistons in and out of me, chasing his own orgasm. Watching his neck muscles tighten and bulge, I know he's close.

Bending down, smearing my cum between us, I suck one of his nipples into my mouth, biting it with just enough pressure that he's roaring my name, releasing himself so deep inside of me that I have no doubt what he said is true.

Wrapping his arms around my back, his hands run up and down my spine, as we come down from our releases.

“Someday, Spencer Tritt, I'm gonna marry you.”

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After cleaning him up the best I could, we lay there, covered in nothing but stars and a quilt. Heath snuggled in my arms, with his head on my chest. For a long time, neither of us speaks. What words could be uttered after a declaration like that?

His soft snore sounds in the quiet night air, and I let him sleep, watching his dark lashes fan out across his cheeks.

Looking up into the starry sky, reflecting on how we got here, I smile.

I wasn't looking for love that day when I let Lucy drag me to the rodeo, but love found me in this twenty-five-year-old, never-say-no cowboy.

Letting him sleep for about an hour, I gently sway him awake. "Hey," I smile down at him, "We should get back."

He nods and stretches like a lazy cat, brushing his muscles against me. Chuckling at his not-so-subtle approach, I kiss his nose and pull my clothes from where I discarded them.

He watches me with the quilt loose around his hips and a sleepy smile on his face.

"Come on, Cowboy," I swat at his legs, "let's go get our little girl and go home."

His smile grows, and he scoots to the edge of the truck bed. "I like the sound of that."

Kissing him slowly, I know Pearl's looking down on us, happy that Briar and I found someone to love and care for us just like she did.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

Two Years Later

“ I can’t believe you’re letting me do this!” Briar laughs, pulling Heath and me into the tattoo shop on Main Street.

“It’s your birthday present,” I shrug while Heath laughs.

“Yeah, you wanna get tatted like your dad,” Heath jokes, making eyes at me.

“Let’s not get too carried away,” I remind him, Briar’s still my little girl. I’m not ready to watch her grow up too fast.

It’s been an amazing two years. Heath moved in not long after his last official ride in the rodeo.

Staci still calls every now and again, asking for him to come back, but he just tells her he misses her about as much as he misses shoveling cow shit.

He’s been working with Uncle Scott and Aunt LuAnna down at The Rowdy Raven.

It still hasn’t improved his dancing, though.

“I know exactly what we’re gettin’,” Briar says, and Heath turns to me.

“ We ?” He questions, and I nod.

“Briar wants matching tattoos. I didn’t mention that?”

Heath looks at me with a smirk that tells me he knows, that I know, that I didn't mention it. He's never had a tattoo, and I warned Briar that he might not be willing to get one. "As long as you want to," I shrug.

"And what tattoo does our dear daughter want us all to get?" He asks, squeezing her shoulders and planting a kiss on her temple. Lucy took her to get her hair done for her birthday, so now she's got little blue highlights throughout her hair.

"Fairy flowers," she smiles, looking up at me. "Every time I see them, it reminds me that anything is possible as long as you're watered with love."

"How can I say no to that?" Heath groans, looking at me with watery eyes. Of course, Briar and I came and spoke to the tattoo artist three weeks ago to discuss what she wanted, so when he pulls out the art, Heath chuckles.

"You two are going to be the death of me," he says, leaning on the jewelry display case.

"It wouldn't be matching tattoos if they weren't all in the same place," Briar teases. "I think we should all get them on our ribs!"

"Are you sure, Flower?" I ask, "That's a sensitive spot for your first tattoo."

"It's not that big! I think we can do it," she says, looking at Heath, who's smiling in disbelief.

"Whatever my sweet girl wants," he says, pulling me into his side. "And as long as my man will hold my hand."

Laughing, I plant a kiss on his lips and murmur, "Always."

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:33 am

My ribs are on fire, but Briar's smile makes the pain worth it. The artist places clear film over the tattoo as Spencer pays, and soon, we're walking to Mawmaw's diner for lunch. Lucy's waiting tables with a smile and waves when she spots us.

"You're such a baby," Briar mocks, sticking her tongue out at me, gently touching her ribs where her new ink sits.

"Who's a baby?" Mawmaw comes over with a big slice of coconut cake and a candle.

"Heath," both Briar and Spencer say in unison.

"Harsh!" I tease, with an open mouth.

Mawmaw laughs and lights the candle for Briar to blow out.

The whole diner chimes in as Mawmaw and Lucy start singing Happy Birthday. Briar turns the cutest shade of pink as they do and blows out the candle.

"I hope all of your wishes come true, Bee," Lucy says, kissing her head and wrapping her up in a side hug.

"They already have," she whispers.

Spencer nudges my shoulder, and I swipe at my eyes. It's been the best two years of my life, and I can't help being sentimental.

After I moved in, Spencer and I settled into a normal routine.

He heads to the garage most days, and I tend the farm.

It's worked out really well, giving Lucy more time at the diner she plans to run for Mawmaw, who's been talking about reducing her time there in order to enjoy life.

Especially since Briar decided to attend the local community college to start her degree.

Spencer has a look full of love on his face, but his gaze strays past me, and I turn, finding Kenzie at the door.

I haven't seen her since she left town along with the rest of my crew, and though Staci called to let me know, officials declared the Walker-Callus case cold, so I've not seen either of them.

She waves and heads to the counter, allowing us to continue celebrating Briar. Of course, most of her gifts are envelopes stuffed with cash. She's been chomping at the bit to open the ones mailed from family members who live out of state.

Kenzie walks over, wishes Briar a happy birthday, and hands her three VIP tickets to tonight's rodeo. "Boss lady told me you enjoy meeting the animals," she winks and eyes me, "maybe Heath will show you two behind the scenes since he's retired."

"Can you?" Briar asks, smiling at me as if she knows I won't say no.

"I guess we could visit the rodeo," turning toward Spencer, who smiles and nods his head. "Especially with these sweet VIP box seats."

Later that evening, we're piled into the truck on our way to the rodeo when Briar informs us of her wishlist tonight.

Eat greasy food.

Scream her lungs out.

See the animals.

Maybe meet a cowboy of her own.

Spencer laughs, one hand on the wheel, the other squeezing my knee.

“Looks like we’ve got a busy night,” he jokes, green eyes sliding my way.

“I’ll say,” I smirk, looking back at her.

She’s smiling ear to ear, and I know tonight’s going to be a core memory.

“You distract her with the animals, and I’ll scare the pants off all the riders.

Together we’ll make damn sure they know she’s off limits.

” Spencer laughs at my antics, but he doesn’t know those guys like I do, and I don’t want any of them within spitting distance of my Sweet Girl.

The rodeo’s in full swing by the time we find the suite Kenzie invited us to. It’s got fans mounted to the ceiling, and it’s positioned perfectly for the full experience Briar’s looking for. We watch as most of the events have gone, and she can’t help herself any longer.

Darting out of the VIP box, she squeals when one of the bulls-in-waiting rams the gate.

“I think you should stay with us,” I chuckle, pulling her away from the beast's horns. Introducing her to the riders I’ve known for a long time—the ones I trust—and the animals they ride. Eddie comes around a corner and smiles.

Running up to us, he wraps his arms around my shoulders and laughs, “How’ve you been, Muffin?”

“Never better, my friend.”

I haven’t seen him since our wedding, he’s been busy running a new team. I’m happy for him, he loves his job and his new rider.

Even though he’s a Walker.

He nods to something behind me, and I turn. Spotting Staci waiting by our suite. She looks every bit the gorgeous—and dangerous—dragon lady she’s always been. Taking off her sunglasses and resting them on top of her head, she sees me and gestures to the box. I sigh but make my way over anyway.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” I ask, throwing an arm around Kenzie and shaking Staci’s hand.

“Now, who do you think gave Kenzi those tickets, Playboy?” She smiles, showcasing all her perfectly white teeth.

“I’ve got a new rider on the circuit, and I thought I’d see how one of my most difficult clients was doing.

Plus, I wanted to relive some... fun memories,” Staci says, blue eyes lasered in on me.

I’m not sure I’d put fun in Staci’s vocabulary, yet here she stands smiling like the cat that got the canary.

“Well, alrighty then. I’d say this was fun, but it wasn’t. Good luck with that new rider,” I tell her, backing away.

She raises a brow and flicks her wrist to Kenzie, who exits the VIP box without a backward look and brushes past us.

Grabbing my hand before I can join my family back in the box, Staci stops me mid-stride.

“Look, I’m happy you gave up your playboy ways for married life.

God knows what would have happened to you if you’d kept it up.

I mean... just look at what happened to Levi.

” She tsks, and every hair on my body stands up. “He must’ve been in so much pain.”

Wracking my brain trying to understand what she means by that, I blink and look at where her hand still circles my wrist.

“Yeah, I don’t imagine getting your throat slit is a pleasant experience,” I say under my breath, and she lets out a sultry laugh.

“Oh no, Heath, not that. I happen to know that poor Levi’s dick was cut off and forced down his throat before it was slashed.

” She lets that little tidbit fall from her lips like it’s no big deal and leans in close to whisper in my ear, “He was a problem for both of us, so you’re welcome for taking care of it. ”

Her words sink in, and I gasp, as my wide eyes meet hers. Staci winks, throws her black shades back on and walks out, stilettos leaving holes in the dirt.