



Wrangled Up (Menage a Trouble #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: It'll take more than rope to tie down the man they love.

Heartsick cowboy Tucker couldn't be more knotted up. Between grieving his fiancée and being pressured by a coal company to sign over mineral rights to his land, he's boots-deep in emotional turmoil. On top of that, he and Claire are getting too close for comfort.

Then there's his buddy Christian and that smokin'-hot night of passion the three of them shared.

So what's a confused cowboy to do? He runs.

Christian and Claire are left caring for their lover's ranch—and each other. But when Tucker returns, flying fists and aching hearts might break them apart forever...or is their bulldogged determination just the glue they need to bond all three?

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The bartender tucked a hand under the brim of his cowboy hat and peered across the dim space through the grimy window of The Hellion.

Christian Davis grunted. “You gonna hand over that six-pack of Budweiser before I hit middle age, Shady?”

A few sharp metallic clinking noises sounded from the parking lot. Shady’s thick white mustache twitched as he winced. Three more sharp raps and Christian turned to follow the bartender’s gaze.

“You drivin’ that big ass Ram truck, Davis?”

“Uh, yeah.” He ducked his head, trying to get out of the shadow of his Stetson and see what the hell was going on in the parking lot .

The grating sound of glass breaking filtered into Christian’s senses just as he spotted her.

“Looks as if you’ve got a jilted lover taking her frustrations out on your truck with a Louisville Slugger.”

Adrenaline surged to the tips of his boots. “That’s not my truck!” he managed as he swung out the door without a care for his beer.

The big red Ram truck Christian had borrowed from his best friend, Tucker, stood in the gravel lot, both headlights bashed out and so many divots in the hood and fender that it looked pocked.

A gush of air froze in his throat as a little gal in teeny cut-off shorts and cowgirl boots danced around the side of the truck. Swinging.

“Jeezus, lady!” Christian hollered as she landed the bat full force and smashed in the side mirror.

He took off running, boots digging into gravel and heart thumping.

Tucker’s gonna wipe the floor with my ass.

He’d sent Christian on the beer run in his truck because it was parked in the way of Christian’s own vehicle.

Springy curls bobbed on the girl’s head as she cocked the bat for another blow. Christian caught the tip, ripping it from her hands before she swung.

She whirled on him, hands fisted, face pink with exertion. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He gaped at her. “Are you batshit crazy, girl? Or don’t you realize that destroying a Ram will earn you three-to-five in these parts?”

With a growl, she lunged for the bat, but he flipped it behind his back, out of her reach.

“Not crazy and I don’t give a damn about jail sentences. I’m related to just about every man with a badge in Reedy. Now give me back my bat!”

He looked at her harder, noting the tears standing in her almond-shaped brown eyes and the way her lower lip trembled. What the hell was going on?

“You got a problem with this here truck?”

“No, I’ve got a problem with the owner of this truck.”

Ah. So Tucker had pissed her off and she was reaping revenge. Not surprising, since Tucker’s fuck-’em-and-walk-away creed had gotten him into more than one jam .

She circled to Christian’s side to make another steal for the bat. “Uh-uh,” he drawled. “Give me your name.”

Shifting her weight to one hip, she dug her knuckles into her upper thigh. “Who wants to know?”

“Christian Davis, driver of this truck.”

Her eyes widened. “But...it’s Tucker’s truck. I know by that cross he has dangling from the mirror.”

Christian raked his gaze over her, starting at the curly roots of her dark hair, down her upper chest exposed by a white tank top, past the Daisy Dukes, and then lingered on her round thighs. Lightly tanned. Smooth. Perfect for tucking around a man on a cold autumn night.

Fuck the Budweiser. He wanted to curl up with her. What the hell was wrong with Tucker that he’d walk away from this glorious little darlin’?

His fiancée’s what’s wrong with him. Tucker’s fiancée had died in a car accident two years before and he couldn’t get past it. Couldn’t see the sun shining all around him because he walked in shadow .

Christian met her gaze, only to find a pained smirk twisting her pale pink lips.

“I can see you aren’t any better than Tucker,” she said.

Leaning against the door, still warm from the late afternoon sun, he clamped the bat under his arm. “That’s a broad statement from someone who doesn’t even know me.”

“Yeah, well, I see the way you’re looking at me, and it’s no different from your friend.” She dropped her gaze. “I thought he was the real thing.”

Christian scuffed a boot against the gravel and looked away. Yeah, he does that to a lot of us.

Still, he’d like to believe he wasn’t as much of a hound as Tucker. And besides, this girl couldn’t very well run around looking like that and expect a red-blooded male to be immune.

A pickup bumped into the parking lot, spraying gravel and dust around them. Christian stole another look at the girl’s face. “Your name?” When she hesitated, he said, “So I can at least give you credit for your handiwork.”

Pivoting away, she started across the lot.

“Hey! ”

“It’s Claire,” she tossed over her shoulder.

He watched her ass wiggle off, fighting the heavy ache in his groin. “Claire, you want your bat?”

“Give it to your friend as a souvenir.” With that, she yanked open the door of a midsize car that looked as if it belonged to an elderly person. The driver peeled out of the parking lot and lay rubber on the highway.

With a half sigh, half laugh, he tossed the bat into the truck bed and climbed behind the wheel.

Shaking his head, Christian pulled out and headed straight for the Quickie Mart. Two chili cheese dogs were in order. He wasn't about to face an irate best friend on an empty stomach. And after shoveling gravel for eight solid hours on the road crew, he was starved.

Gathering up his dogs and a giant soda, he turned the truck back toward Tucker's ranch. As he passed the wide open fields and the blue smudge of mountains on the horizon, all he could see were Claire's eyes, bright with anger. Swimming with tears.

"Man," he murmured and cranked the wheel to avoid two human-sized potholes in front of the driveway leading to the ranch .

As he bumped up the lane, he horked down the second chili dog and slurped the remainder of the soda. Tucker was gonna be pissed. Not only had he returned his truck with three thousand dollars' worth of damage, he'd left The Hellion without the six-pack.

Dammit, he couldn't help but think Tucker deserved it.

Leaving his trash for his friend to take care of, Christian mounted the three solid wood porch steps to the front door.

The ranch was picturesque against the satiny blue sky.

Dark wood with real working shutters and a glass door, the old homestead of the Langley family had been restored by Tucker's own hand.

He'd spilled a lot of blood and sweat on this land, making his ranch one of the finest

horse farms in the county.

Christian pushed open the door and clomped across the mudroom. In the living area, Tucker was kicked back in the recliner with the remote in hand.

Christian's cock stirred at the sight of his friend in this position. How many times had they sat in this same space, watching porn and jacking off together ?

For two years, they'd been enjoying this intimacy. Watching, urging on the other. But their rule was hands off, and Christian wanted nothing more than to jump that gap from friends fucking around to more.

He was work boots over hard hat in love with this guy.

Tucker met his gaze. The shoulder-length hair that Christian longed to run his hands through covered one smoldering eye. "Got the beer? I've got the movie."

Christian's cock reacted instantly, stretching, battering his fly.

Last night they'd shared a woman, not a self-love session.

Actually, Tucker hadn't participated, just stood at the bedside with his cock in his fist, watching Christian love on the woman.

And now that he thought of it, he realized this was most likely the reason for Claire's fury.

The scent of pine woods and strong coffee filled Christian's head as he drew a deep breath. He sank to the edge of the couch. "Not exactly."

"What's that mean? You get the beer or not?"

Christian raked his fingers through his short hair. “I paid for it but left without it. ”

Confusion creased Tucker’s brow. “Not followin’, friend.”

Plow on. “I ran into someone at The Hellion.”

“Yeah?” That rough, drink-nails-for-breakfast voice ripped through Christian’s senses. The same voice drove him wild as Tucker pumped out his pleasure.

“Yeah, a hot little number by the name of Claire.” He drew her name out on his tongue, testing its flavor. Hell, it even tasted like her. Decadent with a hint of quirkiness.

And violence.

The corner of his mouth tipped up.

Tucker stared at him hard. “What the hell happened, man?”

Was that jealousy he read on Tucker’s face? “It seems Claire was mighty upset by something. So upset, in fact, that she beat the living fuck out of your truck.”

At that, Tucker laughed out loud. “She weighs a hundred and ten pounds dripping wet. How much damage could she have done?”

Christian scraped his fingers over his scalp. “Quite a bit with a baseball bat. ”

Tucker’s eyes bugged out, and in a flash, he was on his feet and storming out the door. Christian didn’t budge from his spot, one ear cocked, waiting.

A howl of rage drifted in. A few seconds later, Tucker’s violent footfalls preceded the

man.

“Holy—”

“I know,” Christian cut him off. “Question is what did you do to her?”

Tucker dropped abruptly to the sofa arm and buried his head in his hands. “I stood her up last night.”

Just as Christian had suspected. Instead of staying with one girl who he might fall for, Tucker ran out and found one to share with Christian.

“You’re runnin’ again.”

Tucker snapped his head up and he leveled his glare at Christian.

Gaining his feet, Christian stared him down.

Dammit, it was time to intervene. If Tucker wouldn’t come around and accept a relationship with Christian, he needed to at least set up house with a sweet little gal and have a string of horse-riding babies .

His friend clenched his hands into fists. “And you’re crossin’ a line.”

“Man, you can’t keep doing this. Running from these girls who might change your world.”

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Christian's stomach bottomed out at the memory of Claire's words. I thought he was the real thing.

"Shut up, Davis. You don't know what you're talking about, and it's none of your goddamn business."

None of my business that you didn't join in last night because your heart is in a relationship, even if your hard head won't allow it?

"Yeah," Christian said, brushing past Tucker on the way out, "it's never my business."

* * * * *

Still fighting the trembles of rage, Claire sank to the stool at the kitchen counter and watched her Aunt Letty flit from stove to refrigerator to microwave like a chickadee bouncing from branch to branch.

It was impossible for Claire to see the woman who'd raised her any other way.

But the tiny frame of her aunt hid a strong spirit.

Letty assessed Claire out of the corner of her eye as she pulled a steaming bowl of buttered corn from the microwave. "Everything okay? You look a might flushed."

Claire knotted her hands in her lap. She'd cried all the way home from The Hellion and gained calm just as she reached the big old house where she'd grown up. She

should have known that Letty would spot her red eyes.

When she didn't answer, Letty went on. "Man trouble." Her dark, knowing gaze pinned Claire to the oak stool. She shifted, and the wood creaked, a wail that she couldn't bring herself to make.

Letty turned to mashing a small pot of potatoes. Though there were only two of them, her aunt insisted on making a big, home-cooked meal, especially on nights when Claire had a midnight shift at the diner.

"I daresay that man went and screwed up with you," Letty said.

"Yes," Claire responded to her hands.

"Well, I've seen plenty of men practically begging to put a ring on your finger and his boots under your bed.

Your pa has been spared all these years from having to scare them off at gunpoint, as he's rattled across the country in that semi-truck of his.

But I've watched more than one man fall for Jake Mickelson's little girl. "

Talk of her father sent a lump into Claire's throat. Over the years, he'd hauled more loads from New York to California and Maine to Florida than Claire could count, working hard to keep his only daughter fed and clothed and given pretty much everything she ever dreamed of.

Except his presence. Letty had been left to raise Claire. Secretly, Claire believed her dad couldn't face life without his wife, who'd died of a brain tumor a couple years after Claire was born. He found his solace in the landscape and behind the wheel of an eighteen-wheeler.

“Now don’t look so down, girl. Any man who could hurt you is not the right one. Believe me. I spent forty years of my life with the right one. I should know.” Letty used a spatula to scrape the potatoes into a serving bowl.

Claire climbed off the stool and gathered the plates and silverware.

“I wish I’d known Uncle Dash.” The man had died years before Claire was given into Letty’s care.

Her aunt was actually her great-aunt, and no one knew her true age, but she was definitely in her nineties.

And likely to go well into her hundreds, if her spry step and bright gaze were indications.

A small, private smile captured her aunt’s lips. “He would have loved you as I do.” She set the food on the counter. “Now, you fill your belly with my good cookin’. Don’t want you eating that diner food in the wee hours of the morning. Indigestion.”

Claire never ate the food she served at that time of night. Placing platters of greasy breakfasts in front of truck drivers and rowdy teens and lonely bachelors had turned her long ago. Too many sad stories came with those late-shift encounters.

“It worries me, you working that dead-man’s shift. You have an innocent look about you that might invite trouble.”

Claire scooped some potatoes and gravy onto her aunt’s plate. “Don’t you worry about me. People talk to me, that’s all.” In fact, she often wondered if someone had stamped “spill your guts” on her forehead, because that’s exactly what people did when they saw her.

Women in grocery stores, telling her stories about their eating disorders and how they fought to even food shop for their children.

Vacationers to the small town of Reedy, filling her in on their entire family's criminal history.

Hell, even the mayor had come into the diner once and talked Claire's ear off about his wife troubles.

She shook her head. It was her lot in life to listen—one she was proud of, because she'd inherited it from her Aunt Letty.

Slipping an arm around the woman's frail shoulders, she squeezed. Gently. "Love you, Letty."

"Because I made your favorite country steak."

Claire laughed out loud, a belly laugh that parted the sorrow in her heart over Tucker. "You caught me out."

After dinner, Claire did the dishes while Letty rested, and then she got ready for her work shift. Peeling off her tank top and denim shorts and donning the navy uniform dress, she couldn't keep her thoughts off Tucker .

She'd really smashed his truck all to hell. A hint of remorse filled her, but he just made her so crazed. Wild to make him hers. From the moment she'd set eyes on his blazing blue eyes and bad-boy swagger, she'd felt a shift in her soul.

This man was meant for her. Deep down, her gut screamed it.

Except he'd stood her up last evening, and in the early hours of the morning, a

woman had come into the diner, claiming to have just spent the whole night at Tucker's place.

As the pine and coffee smell belonging to Tucker clung to the curvaceous blonde, Claire had believed it instantly.

She didn't even have to prod for information—the girl gave it gladly.

She'd definitely spent the night in Tucker's bed.

Claire's shift at the diner ran from nine to nine. And the first thing she did was make two massive pots of coffee. One for her and one for the customers.

With her apron in place and the coffee brewing, she grabbed a pitcher of water and made her rounds to the tables and booths, refilling glasses. She stopped to chat with an older man who frequented the diner .

When the bell on the front door jingled, she automatically glanced up.

And saw him.

The guy who'd found her in The Hellion's parking lot.

Christian.

His name sparked in her memory and sent shards of electricity through her veins. The way he'd looked at her this evening still heated her, dammit. Like he'd eat her for breakfast, lunch and supper. Maybe even a late-night snack.

She shivered and drifted away from the table she was serving just as he slid his bulky frame into a booth. With broad, beefy shoulder muscles coiling under his tight white

T-shirt and biceps that any woman would drool over, the man was sex in jeans and work boots.

And with that hat tugged low over his eyes...

No way. Any friend of Tucker's is no friend of mine.

Steeling her spine, she approached with the water pitcher. Leaning over him, she flipped over the glass on the laminate table top and filled it .

He glanced up from his menu. And did a double take.

A country tune blasted through the restaurant—a crooning ballad that seemed the perfect backdrop for the man seated here. Something about his brooding expression called to her.

Maybe he'll spill his guts to me.

Wait. Did she seriously just think that would be a good thing?

Yet something dark lived behind his pale green eyes that said this guy had secrets.

“Claire.” His low voice washed over her, sounding with shock. His gaze dipped to her breasts, which practically spilled out of her dress.

Prickling with irritation, she took a step back. “What will you have?”

He gawked at her for a full minute. “Huh?”

“To eat.”

He opened his mouth and shut it with a snap, then said, “Sit down.”

She backed up another step. In all of her years working the night shift, she’d never felt so cornered, her heart threatening to drum out of her chest. Shaking her head, she said, “I’m working.”

“I can see that. Just please sit. For a moment.” The urgent note in his voice resounded in her core like a gong.

He knows something about Tucker.

The wellspring of love she felt for that man overflowed and she drowned in memories of Tucker’s lips brushing over her temple, of his smoldering stare, of sitting locked in his arms at the movie theater, popcorn between them.

Damn, she could almost smell him. Or was that masculine scent coming from Christian?

Wordlessly, she sank to the plush seat opposite him, clutching her pen so hard that it dug into her palm.

Christian’s chest heaved as he gazed at her. Seconds passed, with only the ballad and the clink of silverware on plates to break the silence.

“I’m sorry for the way Tucker treated you.”

A fist of surprise struck her gut. She curled forward around it, unable to process what he’d said. “What? ”

“He treats girls like shit, and you didn’t deserve to be one of them.”

She knitted her brows together, mirroring Christian's look. "And you know this how?"

"Because I know Tucker. He runs when he gets scared."

The breath whooshed from her. Scared? Of her?

Of what he felt for me? Oh God, it was too much to hope for.

"I-I don't understand."

Christian doffed his hat and set it on the table at his elbow. Scraping his fingers through his hair, he fixed her in his gaze. Warmth blossomed in her belly, an awareness she didn't want to own.

"Tucker's a good man. A great friend..." Breaking off, he struggled for a moment before plowing on. "He's driven to make his ranch the best in the county and his horses the most sought-after. But he has holes in him—the kind that you can't mend."

Her throat closed off, narrowly allowing air to pass. The hot, dreaded tears gathered in her eyes and bulged at the rims, ready to spill over at a single word .

The pain in her heart that Tucker had cheated on her was bad enough, but—

"You know about his fiancée, don't you?"

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Jesus. Her world spun, a slow revolution like a carnival ride. She clamped the pen harder, allowing the stab of pain on her palm to ground her.

“You don’t know.” Christian slapped a hand off the table and sat back, shaking his head. “Damn him.”

“Tell me,” she heard herself say from far away.

Christian inched a hand across the table and stroked Claire’s tense white knuckles.

She jerked away. His thick eyebrow rippled then settled over his concerned gaze.

Taking a deep breath, he said, “He and Heather were engaged for a year. They were literally days away from the wedding. Hall decorated, tux rented, dress hanging in her closet.”

Claire’s stomach pitched and heaved, and it wasn’t helping that the house special tonight was meatloaf. Heather. Now that the name was emblazoned on her brain, she’d never stop wondering what the girl looked like, if she was prettier or more fun than Claire .

“What happened between them?”

“She died in a car accident. It took her swift. On a dark road at night, coming home from a concert with friends, a sort of last hoorah as a bachelorette.”

A ragged breath left Claire. “That actually explains a lot about Tucker.”

Christian bobbed his head and took a sip of water. “Unfortunately, I don’t know if he’ll ever pull out of his grief. It’s like he caved in when she died. I’ve tried for two years to yank him back into the living, but...”

“But no one can compete with a memory,” Claire murmured, staring blankly at Christian’s clenched fingers. She ticked her gaze up to his and saw raw pain there as well.

“None of us can.” His voice was calloused, rough across her skin.

And though he didn’t come out and say it, she knew that the man before her was in love with Tucker too.

* * * * *

Thick mud clung to the soles of Tucker’s boots as he crossed the pasture to meet the riders on horseback—his kin, though they looked like a posse coming to string him up. Well, that’s probably what they’re here for, in a way.

High grasses churned around his calves as he strode toward the two riders. From a closer look at the expensive drover coat of the man on the right, he recognized his Uncle Leon. That meant the other rider was his cousin Dale.

“Fuck,” Tucker growled and dug his boots in, taking out his frustrations on the very land they were fighting over.

In the distance, the steady beep of a back-up alarm on heavy equipment broke the peaceful quiet of the Wyoming ranch.

Tucker tugged on the brim of his cowboy hat. “Boys,” he said as his relatives drew up a few feet from him.

“Tucker,” Uncle Leon acknowledged. The man was decked out in expensive new jeans and boots, and his hat didn’t have a speck of dust on it. He definitely liked his money, which was probably why he wanted Tucker to sign off on more of his land so he could gain more of the green stuff.

Dale’s horse danced a bit, and his cousin gained immediate control, wrapping brand new leather reins around his gloved fist. The horse’s tack shone—not from a good polishing and care, but because it was new too.

“I like the new saddle, Dale. I see you even had your initials tooled into it.” Tucker peered up at his cousin, wishing he could rip him off the horse and beat him into a pulp. He and Dale were oil and water. Or in this case, coal and water.

Uncle Leon didn’t beat around the bush. He stared over Tucker’s head in the direction of Tucker’s house and barns. His lean, freshly shaven cheeks pulled in as he pursed his lips.

“Coal company needs those papers signed, Tucker. You get around to doing that?”

“No,” Tucker drawled, hooking a thumb in his jeans pocket. Adrenaline surged in his system, but he wasn’t about to let on that he was anything but cool. His bastard family would take advantage of any weakness.

Uncle Leon’s gaze snapped to his. “When you going to do that, son?”

“I ain’t your son, and don’t know as I am. If the coal company digs up all of your ground and ruins your water, that’s fine by me. Keep on supplying those people on the Gulf Coast. But they aren’t touching my land. ”

“Not even for three million more dollars in your bank account?” Dale sneered.

To Dale, money was air. But Tucker thought more of the land, the ranch.

He needed to preserve it if he wanted to raise healthy horses.

And where Bradley Coal wanted to dig an escape access for a new mine, they'd surely contaminate Tucker's water source.

What good would his ranch be without water for his horses?

"Look here, Tucker, I didn't want to play this card—" Uncle Leon began.

"Then don't," Tucker cut him off. He narrowed his eyes, coming just short of glaring at his family members.

While he wished like hell he could just kick them off the property that had been left to him by his parents, a soft spot for the thought of family kept him from doing so.

Hell, when he and Dale were little, they'd actually played in the sandbox together.

Too bad the kid was such a jackass adult, greedy and money-hungry.

Tucker sighed. "I'm not out to start a family feud. You've taken your portion of Granddaddy's ranch and turned a good profit from the natural resources. I intend to do the same—with my stock. "

Leon's lip curled and the fine white line of his mustache rippled. "You received a sizable sum from the access portal on the north two hundred acres, if I recall. Benefitted quite handsomely."

The last thing Tucker wanted to discuss with his family was his bank account. Yeah, he had enough to live on for the rest of his life. Hell, his children's lives. If he ever

had any.

Heather's glowing face rose up in his mind's eye, and he fought the sudden emotion that flared to life. She should be here now, standing beside him, maybe with a little one on her hip.

Swallowing hard, he shook his head. "Bradley Coal can dig their escape access on that two-hundred then. Or dig it on your land."

Leon leaned over on his horse's neck, putting his face close to Tucker's. Gritting his teeth, Tucker held his ground.

"They are digging on my ground, in case you don't remember that I'm doing what's best for this family."

As Tucker had inherited a portion of all mineral rights on his grandfather's property, he got royalties off everything that his family did to their portion of the ground.

"That portal needs to go in, Tucker, or Bradley Coal can't dig the new mine. Which means they're pretty much done with us."

Tucker bobbed his head. "Seems as if we all have enough money."

Dale made a hissing noise.

"What's that, Dale? You in need of more custom-made saddles? More sports cars?"

The kid smiled but before he could speak, Leon turned his horse and gave a "yaw" to order it across the pasture, away from Tucker.

Dale and Tucker stared at each other for a long moment. Still holding his gaze, Dale

wheeled his mare around and sent her after Uncle Leon.

“Well, that went well.” Tucker kicked his heel into the turf, creating a divot.

Striding for the far end of the field, he drew deep breaths to regain his precious control.

The whole time he’d spoken with his relatives, his stomach had quivered with nerves.

In the past two days, he’d been agitated, annoyed.

Ever since Claire.

No. Ever since Heather .

He stared at the big pine cluster where several of his horses gathered in the shade, but all he could imagine was the look on Claire’s face as she beat in his truck.

He’d hurt her, and she had reason to do that damage.

But she’d caused some destruction of her own—she was the first person to nearly slip into his damaged heart since Heather.

Tearing off his hat, he shoved his long hair off his face.

The first time he’d set eyes on Claire at the summer festival, he’d been drawn to her.

And not only for the way his body responded—his cock standing at attention in seconds.

But for the sweetness of her tone when she offered him lemonade from a big glass

punchbowl.

And from her eyes—two deep pools that made a man fall in headfirst.

Heart and all.

He never should have asked her out, knowing that flurry of excitement in his chest was too close to what he felt for Heather. He should have run like hell. Instead, he'd dated Claire for two months, and what an adventure those months had been.

She'd made him laugh with her carefree view of the world. Set him on fire between the sheets with her hot little mouth and tight, wet pussy.

But as soon as he realized the blaze was getting too close to his heart, he went out and did the only thing he could think of—he grabbed Allie at The Hellion and took her home to share with Christian.

Except Tucker hadn't laid a hand on the blonde beauty. Instead, he'd gotten off on watching his friend fuck her seven ways to church day. And if he was honest, he loved looking at Christian's body more than the woman's.

Tucker veered away from the horses and headed down the dirt path leading to the house. His dented pickup stood in the drive, reminding him too much of Claire.

He'd never had a woman react so strongly to him.

When she gave herself, it was wholeheartedly.

In bed, in the barn or in the field. And how often had she given him that searing look that melted his very bones as well as the wall he'd erected after Heather died?

A you're-my-entire-universe-I-want-us-forever look.

He threw open his truck door and slid in. Twisting the key in the ignition, he barely waited for the engine to start before slamming the Ram into reverse. He backed out in a cloud of dust and floored it for the main road, narrowly missing the massive pot holes at the end of the drive.

He bumped up and down but locked his boot on the gas pedal. He had to get off the ranch and clear his head. Claire, Heather...even Christian. They were all part of this property. Tucker could barely look in any direction without memories haunting him.

Christian had stormed off last night and Tucker hadn't heard from him since. Probably just as well. Their jack-off sessions were growing more frequent. What had started as some innocent fun on a Saturday night with too much beer had morphed into a craving.

Tucker loved to see Christian's thick cock in his hand, his strong fingers pumping to a rhythm Tucker practically needed now to climax solo. His shaft swelled just thinking about it.

But last night when Christian had said Claire's name, it came with a peal of alarm bells in Tucker's mind. The fevered light in Christian's eyes indicated his interest in the curly-haired cowgirl .

Which would not do at all.

Pressure mounted in Tucker's chest. If his so-called friend came within a country mile of Claire...

What? You purposely threw her away.

But only because his grief was so great.

There was no getting over his fiancée. Heather had been his high school sweetheart.

His first. Her family had loved him almost as much as Heather had and when Tucker's parents had passed away within months of each other to separate causes, Heather's family had become his.

Now he was stuck with assholes like Leon and Dale.

He did have a few cousins he still spoke to civilly, and one was Darcy. The sixteen-year-old was all cowgirl. Roping champion, voted most likely to win rodeo queen in her sophomore year. Right now, she had her heart set on cleaning up at the next fair with a prized alpaca.

Except her father, Leon, had no idea how to raise livestock, though he'd grown up around it. He'd gone off to college and gotten a business degree but knew little about the ranching his father tried to instill in him .

Darcy had her eyes on Tucker's alpaca, Boomerang, which had a cozy little place on Tucker's ranch.

Every day he cared for it and talked to it.

The strange-looking creature with the insanely long eyelashes had won Tucker over, and now he actually looked forward to getting up at dawn and seeing the stupid animal he'd won in a bet down at The Hellion.

Cresting a hill, Tucker directed his gaze to the sky. Heat had bleached it out today, creating a pale blue canvas for a few thin clouds. As always when he looked at the sky, he thought of Heather in heaven, riding gilded chariots and wearing flowing

robes, her loose brown waves soft on her spine.

He'd fucked up so much in his life. Should have driven her to that concert. Should have asked Christian to stay last night.

Should talk to Claire.

Where would she be right now? He glanced at the clock on his dash. She'd be asleep after her late shift at the diner. He couldn't contemplate swinging by her house and trying to wake her up. Her Aunt Letty would greet him with a shotgun, she was so protective of Claire .

That meant he had to go find Christian first. After a glance in the rearview mirror, Tucker cranked the wheel sharply to the left and did a one-eighty in the middle of the road, heading back toward town, where he knew his best friend would be out in the baking sun, working on the road crew.

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With the six-pack of beer he'd left The Hellion without last night, Christian climbed into his truck. Setting the frosty cans on the passenger seat, he turned back to close his door. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed dark, springy curls.

A jolt of electricity speared his chest and spread through his limbs, tracing paths through his system he didn't know existed.

"Claire." Her name came out as a rough whisper.

He cleared his throat just as she approached his truck in a short denim miniskirt and blue suede cowgirl boots.

Her hair was a wild halo around her head, and he longed to dig his fingers into the thick mass just to feel the tight whorls under his fingers.

His own hair was curly as well, though he kept it clipped with a number two .

Her gaze flicked from him to the side of his truck, where his business logo was painted in dark blue against the white.

"Trimming Service, huh?" she asked.

He raked his gaze over her. Impossible not to linger on those tan little thighs. His balls clenched even as his cock stretched. He took in her tiny waist and the coral-colored tank top she wore, landing on her beautiful face. His breath caught. "You need anything trimmed?" he asked.

To his relief, a bubble of laughter burst from her. Her narrow shoulders shook and her curls rioted around her face. “I can’t take an offer like that, considering you’re wearing that T-shirt.”

He glanced down to see what he even had on. After work, he’d run to his apartment and thrown on the first clean thing in the laundry basket, eager to be off to Tucker’s for their...session.

Christian’s black T-shirt was a souvenir from the rowdiest night of the year at The Hellion. Beer and Wild Girls, it said.

“The Woodstock of the West, complete with free love. You were there?” Claire asked. Mirth toyed with the corners of her lips. He stared at the delicious bow of her mouth, desperate to do anything to get her to smile.

“Got the T-shirt, don’t I?”

She laughed again, musical notes that threaded into his brain and took up residence like a well-loved song put on repeat.

“This is what you do for a living? Trim trees?”

He nodded. “It’s a side job.” In the spring and fall, he got the most business—last year enough to pay off his truck loan. It also supported him between jobs. The construction work was fickle, and he was often laid off. In fact, after this road was done, Christian would be sitting idle.

With any luck, next year the extra income from his side job might afford him some heavy equipment to start up an excavation business. Putting in water lines, digging ditches and basement foundations.

“Where else do you work?”

“You know old Highway 3?”

“Yeah.”

“The place with all the orange cones. I’m the one with the shovel. ”

Her grin stretched wide enough to reveal a tiny dimple in her cheek, which reminded him of Tucker. The man had a dimple in his chin that distracted the hell out of Christian, especially when Tucker was in the throes of ecstasy.

Too bad Tucker had broken up with her. If she already had feelings for his friend, she might not be averse to letting Christian in on the action.

For a moment, he drowned in images of her golden skin against Tucker’s cowboy tan, of their hips meeting and parting to a slow beat while Claire opened her lips around Christian’s cock and he succumbed to her warmth.

But Christian wanted to convince his friend to reconsider his relationship with Claire for more reasons than the hot sex Christian might take part in. Tucker needed her. And though she was smiling, an underlying glint of pain in her eyes made Christian’s heart flex.

“You going in there to have a drink?”

“I’m meeting friends,” Claire answered. The fast notes of a Jason Aldean tune blared through the door of The Hellion as it opened and a group of girls vanished into the dark depths.

When Christian glanced back at Claire, she was bootscootin’ in the parking lot—a

little Baby Bop step that drew even more of his attention to her legs.

She stopped and grinned. “In fact, that’s them. I’ll see ya around, Christian.”

The sound of his name on her lips slowed his pulse. He watched her ass shake all the way to the door. She went inside without a backward glance.

She wasn’t interested in him. It was Tucker she loved. She was just being nice, making conversation. Her smiles didn’t mean more.

Too bad Christian’s body didn’t understand that.

With a throbbing hard-on, he headed toward Tucker’s ranch. His friend had swung by the construction site this morning and shocked Christian with an apology. The warmth that had blossomed in his chest at the harshly spoken words spread through him now.

You’ve got it bad.

Well, even if Tucker would never let Christian close to him, he still got to see his eight rigid inches in his hand and Tucker’s bright blue eyes, glassy with pleasure. Christian’s dick distended his fly, and he nudged it to give it ease.

It had been two days since their last session with pay-per-view. The thing was, the visuals were background noise. When he and Tucker jacked off together, their gazes were on each other.

By the time he reached the Langley Ranch, he was aching. Throbbing to get into that rustic farmhouse and his cock in hand.

To see Tucker.

Inside, the living room was empty. “Tucker?” he called, heading for the kitchen with the beer. The old-fashioned porcelain sink stood full of dishes and the floors were dusty with mud. But no Tucker.

At the hallway leading to the bedrooms, Christian called Tucker’s name. No answer.

After revolving through the house with the rough wood walls and the stone hearths, he headed back outside into the cooler evening air. He scanned the fencing that housed Boomerang and saw Tucker’s hard form leaning against the fence .

This was a first. Tucker was always ready for Christian, remote in hand, lube on the side table.

But his head was dipped low, so only the back brim of his cowboy hat was up. Christian crossed the porch and drifted down the steps, boots scraping the wood. As he neared, Tucker lifted his head.

“You watching the corn grow again?” Christian asked.

A snort of laughter emerged from his friend. “Asshole.”

“Not as much as you,” he jabbed lightly. Christian braced his forearms on the split-rail fence, shoulder to shoulder with Tucker. The dark scents of pine and man filtered into his senses, causing the knot in his stomach to tighten with want.

“Get the beer this time?”

“It’s already in the fridge.”

“That’s good. I could use one after I discovered how much money it will take to repair the body of my Ram.”

Tucker's voice was tight with something Christian couldn't identify. He sent him a sidelong look. The man's face was in the shadows, but even if he'd been standing in a beam of sunlight, Christian knew his expression would still be inscrutable. He did that—hid behind a mask.

Christian shifted, brushing shoulders with Tucker. A spike of desire sank deep into his groin. "I'm sorry I didn't stop her before she did that last thousand dollars' worth of damage."

The corner of Tucker's mouth twitched. "Just that last thousand?"

"Well, yeah, I wouldn't want to put a financial strain on you."

At that, Tucker laughed out loud. He gripped Christian's shoulder and squeezed. Their gazes met. Dark blue sparks glittered in Tucker's. "I'm not worried about getting it fixed for a while. Let's break open that beer."

And break out our cocks.

Christian followed his friend into the house, aware of the long lines of his back and the hard muscles rolling beneath his western shirt and Wranglers. Tucker went to the kitchen for the beer, which was new too, since Christian was always the beer runner .

Unsure of what to do with himself, Christian shuffled around the living room, listening to the refrigerator door opening and closing. When Tucker entered the space, a cloud of testosterone crowded in with him.

Christian swallowed hard and wordlessly accepted the beer. The dynamics had changed between them, but why? Had it been Tucker's apology? Or the fact that he felt the need to apologize at all?

“Been thinking a lot about Claire today.” His friend’s words made Christian’s heart constrict.

Sinking to his regular spot on the sofa, Christian cracked open his beer. “Yeah?”

“I fucked up.”

“So go get her back.”

“I intend to.”

Without thought, Christian’s words tumbled out. “I want to be part of that. As a third.”

Tucker’s gaze snapped to his and clung. A painful heartbeat stretched between them. Unable to battle his need anymore, Christian set his beer aside, leaned back on the sofa and unzipped his jeans .

A quiet noise broke from Tucker as he sank to the recliner and did the same.

The grating noise of his zipper lowering had Christian’s cock hard and weeping with pre-come.

While nudging his jeans and boxers off his hips, he kicked off his boots.

Usually Christian left his T-shirt on, but today he yanked it off too, leaving him completely bare.

Every inch of himself exposed to Tucker.

Taking his cue, Tucker stripped down too, abandoning jeans with the leather belt and

silver buckle still in the loops. When his pearl-button shirt hit the carpet, Christian drank in the sight of his friend's well-muscled chest, sprinkled with golden brown hair.

Christian rubbed a palm over his own bare chest to the dark trail of hair leading to his cock.

As one, he and Tucker cupped their balls, fondling the tight sacs, gazes locked on each other.

Webs of want spread through Christian's body as he thought about finally dropping to his knees and taking Tucker's long shaft in his mouth.

Of sucking that dark purple head and gathering the ropes of come.

He shuddered .

Tucker rolled his shaft through his hand, pumping it once and holding it out, erect, for Christian to see the glistening tip.

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Choking off a groan, Christian fisted his cock, pressing down on the flared head so the tip slitted. Juices oozed out.

Then they were off. Hips rocking upward to meet their hands, cords standing out on Tucker's neck and Christian's belly dipping with each harsh breath.

Tucker threw his head back and slid down in the chair a bit, parting his legs and giving Christian the peek at the shadow beneath his balls.

Fuck, that does it for me every time.

With a guttural cry, Christian came. Jets of cream spurted over his knuckles and shot upward onto his abs. Blinding waves of pleasure enveloped him along with the scents of pine and musk.

"Jesus," Tucker groaned.

Christian jerked his gaze to his friend's, watched Tucker's pupils dilate until his blue irises were almost obliterated. Another hot spurt of come shot out of Christian's cock .

And Tucker came. Pearly ropes stretched from his pulsating shaft to his tanned skin. Christian issued a final moan. As Tucker unraveled, Christian held his friend's gaze.

Were they only friends? Or did sharing this intimacy make them lovers?

Tucker's eyes slipped closed as he continued to glide his cock through his palm, that

distracting chin dimple winking. In the other room, the air conditioner whirred to life. Outside, one of Tucker's roosters gave a last crow at the setting sun.

Usually, he and Tucker sat around and watched some movies and drank more beer until they'd recovered from their session.

It wouldn't take Christian long to work himself into a frenzy again. His shaft was still rock-hard, bouncing against his stomach. Tucker ran his fingers down his arousal to his balls, which he gently kneaded in the after-bliss.

Tucker gave a nod at Christian's obvious state of need. He arched a long, golden brow. "A movie then we'll go again?"

Again and again. "Fuck, yeah," Christian grated out as Tucker switched on the TV.

* * * * *

The diner was a dead zone tonight. Not a customer in the house.

With a rodeo taking place nearby and it being a Thursday night, Claire hadn't even seen the regular group of kids coming in after their football game at the high school.

No Bob the fruit truck driver stopping for a ham steak after a long day of hopping from supermarket to small town grocery.

Not even Mr. Lundy from the post office, hanging around for hours and drinking coffee to avoid going home to his lonely house.

Claire sighed and flattened her palms against the counter, pushing up and hitching her rear onto the laminate. The cook, with nothing to keep her occupied, was sitting on a chair with the back door propped open, smoking into the night.

Without anyone to talk to, Claire was left to think.

Last night at The Hellion, she'd barely gotten one song's worth of dancing in before the blonde who Tucker had taken to bed came in and found her.

Dropping dramatically to the empty chair at the table where Claire and her friends were sitting, the woman said, "I'm Allie.

We talked a few days ago in the diner. I wanted to apologize for that night.

I was a little crazed." She rolled her eyes and fluttered her hands as if to punctuate her point.

"It's fine," Claire said, trying not to notice the way Allie's peachy cleavage spilled perfectly over her low-cut top or the way her hair was styled like the most up-to-date movie starlet's.

Allie leaned across the table, causing it to tremble on uneven legs. Claire's Long Island iced tea sloshed over the rim. "I wasn't even drinking that night, but I felt high and drunk both. Gawd, any girl would be out of her head after an experience like that!"

"I don't want to hear this. Go tell someone who gives a fuck." Claire stood abruptly, completely knocking over her drink. She snagged up her purse and rushed to the ladies' room, fighting her rising tears.

The ache in her heart was still a dull thud, but at any given moment, it could flare into a hot, angry pain. She circled a forefinger over the laminate, tracing the swirls.

Where was she going in life? Working a dead-end job with no man in her future. She was going to end up listening to everyone's joys and never knowing her own.

The bell on the door tinkled. At the sound, she hopped off the counter and glanced up.

She stopped breathing.

Tucker.

And right behind him, Christian.

Claire backed up until the counter dug painfully into her spine. Please don't make me wait on you.

The last thing she was capable of was acting nonchalant while serving eggs and home fries to the man she was in love with—especially when she wanted to roll out of his bed and pad off to his kitchen to prepare them herself.

But the look on Tucker's handsome face told her that he was here for more than eggs. She'd seen that blazing look before, right before he trapped her hands behind her back and bent her over a hay bale.

Dark heat slithered downward to capture her folds. Her nipples bunched up hard.

"We've got some unfinished business, Claire." When Tucker used this commanding tone, she'd follow him around like a pony, doing tricks until he rewarded her with the sweet sugar of his kisses.

He and Christian strode across the dining room, muscles rolling with purpose. She dragged in a harsh breath. "I don't think—"

"I do." Tucker planted his hands on her waist and leaned over her, dizzying her with his personal spice before he slammed his mouth over hers. She gasped around his

lips, and he slid in his tongue. Plundering. Stealing any protestation.

Her body reacted with a violent shiver. Cream soaked her panties as she took note of his hardness—every inch of it.

Christian made a noise that brought Tucker's head up. He stared into her eyes for a split second before plucking her off her feet and bearing her to the back of the diner, past the mish-mash of photographs plastering the walls of several generations of patrons. Smiling faces. Voyeuristic faces.

Tucker pressed her into the last booth and crowded in beside her. Christian hung back a little, leaning against a table a few feet off. She sent Christian a frantic look, but he gave her a slow, amused smile that twisted the knot tighter in her core .

“Wait, Tucker—”

He nuzzled her temple, spattered kisses down to her jaw then circled around to her earlobe, which he bit sharply.

She squirmed, watching Christian's smile widen.

“What's going on?” While she longed for more of Tucker's kisses—the hottest brand she'd ever known—she couldn't let him drag her heart behind his horse anymore.

“I never laid a hand on Allie,” Tucker whispered into her ear. Hot words that did hotter things to her body and incinerated her heart.

“But...”

Tucker's blue eyes loomed close as he stared into hers. “That was Christian. Sometimes we...watch each other. Christian thinks you're as gorgeous as I do. In

fact, you've been the object of one of our joint fantasies."

She twitched as he slipped a finger down her spine. Her breath came faster. Joint fantasy? Her mind reeled around the words, and she opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out .

Tucker's slow grin heated her core. But his statement melted her into a puddle of want. "Right now, Christian wants me to finger your pussy so he can see. You all right with that, baby?"

Her leg muscles burned to snap shut even as she hungered to let them part.

"Beautiful Claire, I'm sorry." He nipped her throat in that sweet spot that made all the hair on her body stand up. "Let me make it up to you. And let Christian be witness to it."

Briefly, a thread of a question wove through her mind. Make it up to me by getting me off in front of another man? But then Tucker plunged his tongue into her mouth, and she lost control completely.

A long minute passed as she let Tucker's flavors fill her head even as Christian looked on. His strong presence and hooded gaze excited the hell out of her.

"With Christian?" Tucker asked.

"Yes," she gasped between kisses.

Her breath hitched as he inched rough fingers up her inner thighs to her soaking heat. Christian crossed his arms and leaned back a bit, his gaze directed under the table. Tucker positioned her, draping a calf over his big thigh and pushing aside the small patch of fabric covering her pussy.

Being back in his arms again, with his mouth on hers, drove away thoughts of her surroundings and the previous state of her heart. She gave in to the swirling caress of his fingertip on her clit.

Christian's moan reverberated in the quiet of the diner. Tucker echoed it, easing his finger over her slit and into her dripping channel. Shards of electric desire burst inside her. She bucked her hips, trying to draw his thick digit into her pussy.

Tucker nibbled her parted lips, her tongue. His soft hair swept over her cheek, reminding her more of making love to him. Sweet tears burned in her throat.

"That's it, baby. Open to me. Let me make you cling to the ceiling while Christian watches you come apart."

Claire pasted a hand over Tucker's chest, absorbing the rumble of his words. She darted a glance at Christian to find his eyes hooded with longing, his hard jaw set and fists clenched as if struggling to keep from diving into the booth with them .

Tucker drove his finger deep into her pussy, plunging it in and out twice then smearing the juices over her distended button. Pleasure surged, rushed in her ears. He circled her clit once...twice.

Ground it against her body.

And she spasmed. Digging her fingers into Tucker's nape, she drew his mouth to hers as her pussy contracted wildly.

All the time, she stared into Christian's eyes.

Her head spun as she came back down to reality. Crash landed, actually, when the cook called her name from the back room.

Tucker pulled his hand free and his mouth free and slid out of the booth. “I’ll handle this, baby doll.”

A boneless lump still twitching with pleasure, Claire could do nothing more than watch her lover stride across the diner to intercept the cook.

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Claire met Christian's dark, excited gaze. "You're beautiful, you know."

Warmth shot to her heart, causing a blossom of sudden affection. She felt her smile spread. "So are you. So is he." She jerked her jaw at the man that wicked up all of the life in the room.

Christian swung his gaze toward the cowboy who was persuading the cook to take over the operation of the whole diner tonight, since it was so slow. "Yeah," Christian said slowly, as if dumbstruck, "a man like that should have a warning label."

* * * * *

Tucker couldn't get enough of her. Her silky skin against his, her plush lips, her glittering, dark eyes. Fuck, he was in too deep and there was nothing he could do about it right now. He couldn't tear himself from her arms if he tried.

Raising a boot, he kicked the bedroom door, sending it careening against the wall. For a second, he paused in the doorway with Claire in his arms. Holding her. Breathing her essence. Just breathing.

Impossible to erase memories of Heather in his bed. Though he'd had other women here—shared them with Christian too—he'd never known emotion with anyone but Heather.

Tonight might be the night.

Shifting Claire's weight, he stepped into the room. The plush carpet grabbed at the

soles of his boots but offered no resistance. Hell, was there anything that might stop him from giving himself away again?

Claire nuzzled Tucker's throat, rubbing her delicate skin against his five o'clock shadow. She made a humming sound not unlike a kitten with a belly full of cream.

Christian's heat flamed over Tucker's back as his friend drew up behind him. He could almost hear the man's mind tick. Christian was waiting to see if Tucker would throw away this opportunity.

Ducking his head, Tucker captured Claire's lips. She tilted her face up to his, bliss punctuated in her dark, slanting brows. A slight tremor ran through her and into him. The warm fingers of that involuntary show of emotion wrapped around his heart.

In two steps, he came up against the bed.

Slowly, he bent and stretched her out on the smooth cotton coverlet.

Then straightening, he stared at her. Her skin glowed against the backdrop of charcoal gray.

Curls framed her face, corkscrews he longed to thread his fingers into, letting them tighten and hold him.

As if he needed more reason to stay.

He had more reasons to run.

I'm sorry, Heather.

Tucker crawled onto the bed with Claire and lowered his weight atop her body.

Bracing himself on his elbows, he stared at her until she squirmed. Christian rotated around the room, as restless as Tucker had ever seen him.

“Kiss her,” Christian whispered from his left.

Claire turned her head to take in Christian. Something warm lived in her eyes for Tucker’s best friend. Tucker had seen it before in women—she’d been exposed in brand new ways, and therefore had gained a connection with Christian.

Easing his fingers down her side, Tucker leaned in and kissed her. She parted her lips instantly, and he drove his tongue deep. Chasing her warm, wet tongue around her mouth, he lost himself to the sensations in his body—heaviness of want and the puddle that was his heart .

Claire rocked upward, her hips perfectly cradling his. He ground his erection into the V of her legs. Grasping her upper thigh, he bunched the cloth of her uniform dress, drawing it up to expose more of her legs.

Inching higher and higher, he then slipped his fingers between their bodies and found the wet lace covering her pussy. Christian groaned at the same moment she did.

Tucker’s grin spread over Claire’s lips. She hitched her legs up to provide better access.

“Christ, I can smell her need.” Christian raked his fingers through his hair. He paced toward the bed and leaned against the side, watching.

Tucker pushed back onto his knees and pressed Claire’s thighs upward to expose her juicy center. A choked noise sounded in Christian’s throat.

“Have you touched her yet, Chris?”

Claire shook her head and Christian followed.

Tucker swung his gaze to Claire's. Dark, glittering pools of want met his. "Will you let Christian learn you as I have? "

"Yes," she said breathlessly. A pink flush stole over her cheeks.

Tucker's smile widened. With quick flicks, he popped the buttons of her dress, exposing the flesh beneath bit by bit. The sweet curves of her breasts swelled from her lacy bra cups.

Using one finger, he traced the top of one then the other. She arched her back off the bed.

"Peel this dress off her, Christian."

With jerky movements, Christian eased the fabric from her shoulders. Scooping his hands under her, he pressed the dress down her spine until Tucker was able to strip it over her hips.

Claire's belly dipped with her harsh breathing. Tucker zeroed in on the tiny depression of her navel, just big enough to fit the tip of his pinky. Or his tongue.

He dove for it. She gasped, coming off the bed. But he and Christian restrained her. While Tucker circled her belly button with his tongue, dragging over it with deliberate slowness, Christian stroked her breasts.

Licking a path downward, Tucker reached her hot, wet pussy.

The mound rose up like a tender peach, the folds barely concealed by damp lace.

He snagged the elastic with his finger and roughly yanked her panties down.

She pointed her toes as he pulled them off, writhing beneath Christian's nimble fingers.

Dark heat consumed Tucker's insides. His cock battered the front of his jeans, demanding exit. But he wanted to hold on a bit longer and give Claire the full threesome experience. Somehow, this encounter meant so much more than the others, and he wanted it to be perfect.

Christian twisted her nipples, learning how hard she could take it. When he pinched too hard, she cried out, and he backed off, strumming the buds like a lover stroked the strings of a beloved instrument.

Claire raked her fingers over Tucker's shoulders when he covered her pussy in one big, open-mouthed kiss.

The salty-sweet flavors burst on his tongue. A groan tore from him as he lapped at the juices he'd made her spill. Before the night was over, he planned to make her wetter, hotter. When she left his bed, she'd never forget him or Christian.

Claire lifted a hand from Tucker's shoulder, and Christian caught it, holding it prisoner.

The first contact of souls .

A rush of desire made Tucker speed his tongue action. He dipped the tip into her channel and flicked as far as he could reach. Then with short, upward licks, he found her straining pearl again. Pressing the hood back, he laved it with the flat of his tongue. Again and again.

Christian released her nipples. In seconds, Christian had his work boots off and his jeans and T-shirt piled on top of them. His blue, striped boxer briefs followed.

At the glimpse of his friend's distended cock and leaking head, Tucker almost lost it.

Christian wrapped his tanned fingers around the veined length and stroked it from root to tip. The end flared open and Tucker nearly came then and there.

Growling, Tucker got down to business with little Miss Claire. He sucked on her clit, grazed it with his teeth, delivered sensuous licks, and barely breathed on it. When he started all over again, drawing the tiny nub into his mouth, she came apart.

As her orgasm hit, she shuddered. Rasping breaths escaped her throat. One balled fist thumped his shoulder. The juices that flooded his tongue spurred him to push her. More, more, and more please . Thank ya, darlin' .

“Mmm.”

“Tastes like heaven, I'll bet,” Christian moaned while jerking his long shaft.

The word “heaven” jerked Tucker from his headspace.

But this time, he wasn't going to allow his deceased fiancée to stop him from living in the moment.

Pushing back to his knees, he ripped off his shirt. Still flushed from her release, Claire sat up and ran her hands all over his chest and abs, as if she couldn't keep her hands off.

She yanked at his button, and it sprung free. The head of his erection was right there, ready to jump into her hand. With the pad of her thumb, she caressed it. Insanity

threatened, and for a moment, Tucker only saw red hot passion.

In a blink, he'd abandoned his jeans, briefs, socks and cowboy boots.

It took less than four seconds to roll on a condom, but that was ten seconds past his desired time frame.

Then throwing himself forward, he slipped between her open thighs, through the wet heat of her outer lips, until he was fully seated in her tight sheath.

“God, yes. You’re what I need,” he grated and saw her heart bloom in the depths of her eyes as he began to move.

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“Jeezus, she’s coming again.” Christian fondled the tip of his cock. Claire primed him with her throaty cries, and Tucker with his dirty talk.

“That’s it, baby. Grip my fingers with your pussy. Wet them.”

“Ohhhh.” A light dew of perspiration broke out on her hairline. Christian’s mouth watered to taste it—hell, to taste her. After only an hour, he’d explored everything from the hollows of her collarbones to the arches of her feet, but he had yet to put his mouth on her.

His gaze locked on her luscious lips, swollen from Tucker’s rough kisses and from biting them in the throes of passion. Christian longed to cover her mouth with his and just breathe her in for a full minute before drinking her sweetness .

But that wasn’t the role of the third in their games. Usually, Tucker had the woman or Christian did. And on a rare occasion, they penetrated her together.

And God, those times...slipping back and forth against each other through the barrier of the woman’s body... Christian shuddered.

Tightening his muscles, he fought the urge to keep from just throwing himself at Claire—at Tucker—and taking what he wanted.

He rubbed the underside of his shaft, teasing himself into a frenzy.

Tucker lifted his head from Claire’s breasts and met Christian’s gaze. Do it, he seemed to say.

Gritting his teeth, Christian lashed his balls to his body with one hand and jacked himself with the other. Tucker watched him, eyelids drooping, breathing harsh.

When Claire stopped twitching from her orgasm, Tucker slid his fingers from her body and spent a long minute licking them clean.

“Fuck,” Christian said through clenched jaw.

Claire stretched, arms above her head, bare and beautiful. Christian alternately stared at Tucker’s tongue against his hard knuckles and the dark patch of curls on her mound. God, to feel those rubbing against his body as he fucked her deep, then shallow, then deep.

She flicked her fingers, drawing his attention to her face once more. “Come here, Christian. I want to taste you.”

“Holy...” Fuck. Hell, yes.

Tucker fell back onto a stack of pillows, his erection lying against his carved abs, his gaze sharp.

A thread of trepidation wove through Christian.

Touching his friend’s woman might cause more trouble than he was willing to take on.

Would he willingly proclaim Tucker his lover?

Absolutely. Was he willing to dive into Claire’s world, getting to know her quirky mind, what made her laugh and how her lips tasted?

Abso-fucking-lutely. But crossing this boundary drew him up short.

He glanced at Tucker.

That shit-eating grin graced the corner of his mouth. Green light .

Shuffling forward, Christian brought his cock within inches of Claire's face. She drew a deep breath, eyes closed. Savoring his personal aroma?

"Damn," he whispered, almost a prayer.

"Take him in your mouth, Claire. He's leaking for you." Tucker's voice hoarsened, a sure sign he was about to burst himself. During their jack-off sessions, Tucker often vocalized how much he loved watching streamers of come ooze from Christian's cock.

Purposely, Christian gripped the root and angled the head downward. Brushing the plump pillows of Claire's lips.

A spike of heat rammed deep into his groin. He threw his head back at the pleasure of just feeling her mouth close to his cock. But he couldn't look at the ceiling for long. He snapped his gaze back to her mouth.

She opened her lips. The glistening pink of her tongue drove him over a line he'd never expected to cross. A raw, animalistic sound spiraled from his chest as Claire clasped his hip and drew him closer. She snaked her tongue out and licked the ribbon of juice stringing from the purple head.

A soft moan sounded from her .

"All the way, sweetheart. Take him into your mouth."

Claire did as Tucker instructed, opening wide to accept him.

When her warm mouth settled around his head, a shudder tore through Christian. He swayed, his mind boggling. She pressed her lips firmly on the spot just under the head. Then she sank her nails lightly into his ass and jerked him in.

Completely.

He stared down at her, shocked to see her beautiful lips resting against his groin. Her wide gaze met his. Then she pulled back enough to breathe.

“You didn’t tell me...” Christian began but gulped when she sucked in his length once more.

Tucker rumbled with laughter. “Yeah, she’s amazing at deep-throating.” He jerked his hips upward, shoving his shaft through the tight clasp of his fist.

Christian’s mouth grew dry as Claire worked over every inch of his cock, tongue maneuvering in ways he’d never dreamed possible. He cupped her face, finding the soft spots behind her ears, learning the silken whorl of her curls beneath his fingers.

“Bring him off, baby. Just like that. Chris likes the pressure.”

God, only Tucker would know such a thing, and hearing him say it made Christian’s stomach bottom out. In a fury, he churned his hips, sinking himself deep into Claire’s mind-blowingly hot mouth.

She increased her pull on his shaft according to Tucker’s words, eyes wide and trancelike. He’d heard of women who loved blowjobs, got off on the giving, and who could come without anyone touching them. But he’d never seen it in person. Claire might be that girl.

He dug his fingers into her scalp, drawing her closer and then letting her retreat, half in fucking love with her already. The slapping sound of Tucker's hand on his cock sent a spear of pressure to his balls. In one violent rush, he came. Hot jets of come poured into Claire's perfect mouth.

Tucker's groan ripped through the air. At the moment his release claimed him, he and Christian's gazes locked. Held in a trance of their own .

Twitches of sensation plucked at the nerves of Christian's body as he came off his high. He fingered Claire's jaw tenderly, devouring her impossibly long lashes and the spiky shadows they created on her flushed cheeks.

She released him with a soft pop and opened her eyes.

Christian's Adam's apple bobbed with the emotion clogging his throat. Would she let him crawl into bed and hold her, kiss her? Would she breathe his name into his ear the way she'd done Tucker's?

But it wasn't meant to be.

Tucker hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her so she half lay across his broad chest. He cupped each breast, rolling the peaks between his fingers. "Go down on her, Chris."

Christian bowed his head, struggling with the need to plunge his tongue deep into her pussy then suck Tucker's cock to the root, as Claire had just done for him. Alternating back and forth, delivering pleasure to both until they succumbed to ecstasy.

One step at a time. He gripped Claire's hips and angled her upward, fitting her pussy against his mouth. As her sweet musk mingled with the earthier scents of the man

who held her still for Christian, he lost himself—fell into a chasm, mind, body and soul.

* * * * *

Shivers of pleasure coursed through Claire as she dove head first into the mattress. Arms to the side and mouth filled with cotton comforter, she fought to gain control of her emotions.

Tucker was more tender and giving than he'd ever been with her. An apology for ditching her earlier in the week? Or had he truly missed her and his regret pushed him to show her in brand new ways?

And Christian...that man's strong, silent presence was slowly picking at her heartstrings. When Tucker had first suggested they share her, she'd thought to only gain as much pleasure as possible. After all, what woman would turn down a chance to be with two deliciously rugged men?

"We've killed her," Christian mused.

Tucker tucked a finger under her chin and stroked the ticklish spot that made her twitch. She jackknifed on the bed, attempting to protect her overly sensitive body from more flicking, licking and stroking.

Then again, she craved it.

"To the shower." Tucker's voice was a rough lick to her senses.

She continued to lay still, unable to move. Long minutes passed as she dozed. Finally, warm hands scooped her up.

As her lovers bore her off to the bathroom, she fought to make sense of her emotions. Tucker—she loved. But Christian was a brand new entity. She'd never given herself to two men at once, and her pleasure was blurring the lines in her heart.

She opened her eyes as her feet met cool tile. Christian's carved body crowded in front of her. He reached into the shower and switched the water on.

"Nothing to strip off." Tucker grinned. The dimple she couldn't tear her gaze from flashed on his chin, just off center. A peek at the soft gooey insides of the man, she'd always thought.

Christian turned with a satisfied smile. Steam boiled out of the shower, along with that woodsy scent she associated with Tucker. For a long second, Claire studied Christian. A smudge of five o'clock shadow on his angular jaw dizzied her with memories of him going down between her legs.

She shivered. Damn, had she really done this? Gotten so carried away with Tucker that she'd do anything for him?

I did this for myself. No use lying.

Tucker planted his hands on her hips. She looked down to see the tanned digits against her body. Then he lifted her over the side of the tub and planted her in the shower. They stepped inside too.

"It's crowded in here."

Tucker grabbed the soap and held it under the stream. "This bathtub was installed in the 1920's. Threesomes weren't that popular then."

She giggled as Tucker passed Christian the soap. Watching their manly hands work

up a lather did things to her insides. Was it possible that she could still want them?
After so many orgasms?

Tucker stood in front of her, eyes snapping as he reached for her. She let him press her against the wall of flesh that was Christian and soap her breasts with painstaking thoroughness.

“Those are hardly dirty,” she murmured. Sharp pleasure racked her core.

“Hmm. Here then?” Tucker ran his palm downward to cup her mound.

She squeaked.

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From behind, Christian's cock lengthened, jabbing into her lower back. She wondered if all his arousal was really from her or the fact that Tucker's shaft was waving slowly back and forth, as if seeking a target.

She'd never considered how erotic it was to see two men so comfortable in their skins and with each other, but it could quickly become her obsession.

Over her shoulder, they looked at each other. Tucker eased his fingers down her seam, soaping her pussy. Up and down, riding the outer folds. Juices spilled from her.

At that moment, she felt Christian's hands on her ass. Gliding down another seam and right past her pucker.

She cried out. No one had ever touched her this way before. She bit off the urge to say, "Again." But her body was more brazen. She pushed back against Christian's finger.

He circled her intimately, loosening her every muscle and her mind. For long, sensual minutes she drifted, speared on Tucker's probing fingers and Christian's gentle touch. When he applied more pressure, she couldn't take it another second.

"Please," she rasped. The word bounced off the tiled walls of the shower.

"Go on," Tucker ordered.

Christian pressed harder until the tip of his finger breeched the tight ring of muscle. With a cry, she felt her body pull at his finger. Drawing him in.

His thigh muscles trembled. He ground his length into her back. She ground too, which drew his finger in completely.

Tucker plunged two fingers into her pussy.

“Oh my God.” She squeezed her eyes shut and thrashed. How would it feel to have them both inside her? Was she a crazed slut for thinking such a thought? Playing with Christian was one thing, but taking him into her body was another.

It felt too intimate .

“Feels good, doesn’t it, baby?” Tucker murmured against her ear. Water sluiced off his skin and wet hers. He slipped his fingers out. In again. She moaned.

Christian eased his finger out to the tip then rammed it home in one go.

“Fuck, yes,” she cried.

“Think of us moving inside you together.”

She couldn’t think of anything else.

They set a rhythm, moving at the same time, until her knees buckled. They suspended her between them, hard arms lashing her to big, wet muscles. Heat ricocheted around her body. She was going to die from the pleasure.

Suddenly, their movements grew disjointed. Christian plunged in while Tucker pulled out. The change sent her over the edge, sailing. Her ass clamped down on Christian’s finger at the moment her pussy pulsed wildly.

A long scream bounced off the walls. Hell, was that her? She hung limply in their

arms for several seconds, trying to regain her equilibrium.

“I do believe you’ve popped her ass cherry,” Tucker said .

Christian grunted. “Her first anal orgasm.” He placed his lips against her ear and breathed, “I’m honored to be your first.”

Something warm and fuzzy settled in her belly, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it before Tucker thrust his cock into her hand. Her lips stretched into a grin as she reached for Christian too, bringing the three of them together for another round.

* * * * *

Christian caressed the curve of Claire’s hip, his erection bobbing against his ridged abs.

At the sight of his friend touching his woman, a growl settled in Tucker’s chest. He bit it off, unsure whether to break Christian’s fingers or thread them with his in order to feel Claire’s peachy-soft skin together.

She was spread out beneath him, curls tumbling in wild disarray, a daredevil smile gracing her lips. After a quick nap, she seemed to be rejuvenated.

“Uh-oh,” Tucker said.

“What’s uh-oh?” Christian reached for her again, running his hands up the sides of her torso, over the outside swells of her full breasts. The man couldn’t keep his damn hands off her either.

“I know that smile,” Tucker said a split second before Claire rolled out from under him, twisting like a trick rider.

She locked her arms around Tucker's neck and wrestled him to the mattress.

Excitement swirled in his groin. Several hours and orgasms later, and he was ready for her again.

Especially when she shimmied around in the saddle of his groin and slid over his condom-covered cock reverse cowgirl style.

"Jesus God," he groaned.

Her tight pussy hugged his shaft perfectly, milking him before he had anything to give. But when she extended a hand to Christian and drew him around to the foot of the bed so she could lean all the way forward and suck his cock, Tucker thought she might kill him with ecstasy.

The golden cheeks of her ass wiggled in his face as she rose and fell over his length. Dark pressure built in his core, mirroring the almost delicious ache in his heart. He stared between her legs as her wet sex swallowed him .

Christian made a choked noise. Hell, had his friend ever looked so absorbed with another woman? No. With Tucker, alone? Maybe.

Christian's tanned skin rippled on his stomach when Claire released his cock with a soft pop. Immediately, she caught it in her mouth again, still fucking Tucker with a brand new rhythm that made his balls clench.

Tucker gripped her hips and rammed his shaft home. The head bumped something deep within her body. She cried out, so he did it again. And again.

Over her body, his and Christian's gazes collided. Sparks sprayed like metal sheered against metal. Throwing his head back, Christian broke their connection. He dug his

hands into Claire's hair and churned his hips. She made a humming noise and sent Christian over the edge.

Tucker's own orgasm rushed up, stronger than the last. spurts shot from his engorged prick. For a split second, he imagined filling her body without the barrier of a condom. Of truly owning this woman.

She wanted him to .

Her throaty cry echoed at the moment her tight sheath contracted around him. Palms on her ass cheeks, he parted them slightly to watch her muscles squeeze and release him. Long seconds spiraled between them as the sexual haze dissipated. Outside, a steady drip from the gutter tapped a beat.

Heather loved lying in Tucker's arms, listening to the rain. Would Claire?

Christian slid his arms around her, gathering her trembling body close. The coarse hair of his friend's legs brushed Tucker's, sending a warm splash of wanting against the walls of Tucker's heart.

Without warning, more images of Heather rose in his mind's eye. No, he couldn't feel these things for anyone else. She was it for him. Forever.

Claire collapsed fully into Christian's arms, and he drew her down onto the mattress, cradling her with his body from head to foot. A lump of jealousy formed in Tucker's throat, but he had no right to feel it. Slinging a forearm over his eyes, he fought down rising panic.

Nothing had changed tonight between him and Claire. He couldn't give her his heart, because it was buried in a cemetery on the south side of Reedy. He'd been wrong to toy with her emotions, but maybe something good could come of it.

Judging by the way Christian had clamped her to him, some feelings were stirring there. But could Tucker handle that? Knowing Claire was in Christian's bed, giving him those smoldering you're-my-universe looks? And if Christian had her, that meant he wouldn't come around Tucker's place as often.

Controlling a weighty sigh, he blew it out in small increments.

A slideshow of happy moments with Claire slid through his mind.

The time she stripped off her boots and ran barefoot through the mud, uncaring of it splashing up her tight calves, until he caught her around the waist and swung her off her feet.

They'd crashed to the ground together, rolling in the mud as he delivered lingering, open-mouthed kisses.

Or the time she'd jumped the fence to chase Tucker's dog, Rocky, romping like a child.

Christian gave a stuttering sigh that indicated he might be falling asleep. Tucker opened his eyes wide to strike away the images of his friend shooting hot droplets all over his fist and Claire's round breasts .

Too much, he loved seeing that son of a bitch come. When had Christian's pleasure gotten all tangled up with Tucker's? It was like they were a goddamn unit.

The drip outside increased. With a jerk, Tucker realized his mind was on the people in his bed, not with Heather on this rainy night. Guilt wove into his chest. He scrambled for a memory of his sweet little fiancée—any memory. Threads waved in his mind, but he couldn't catch one.

Guilt transformed into anger directed at himself. He locked his jaw and glared at the black pane of glass until a thin band of light appeared on the horizon. If I stay here with them, I'll lose her.

The notion materialized like a ghost walking out of the swirling fog.

Easing out of bed, Tucker quietly crossed the bedroom. As he drew on his clothes, he stared at Claire's lovely features. Blue light played over her long brows and cast shadows in the hollows of her cheeks.

Tucker's heart was too full—his head too full. He needed to strip these images of Claire and Christian from his mind and fill it once again with Heather. There was one place in particular where he could do that.

Her family's house.

Clutching his boots and hat, Tucker crept out of his room, in search of the ghost that haunted him.

Driving through Reedy in the pre-dawn hours afforded him some calm. Heather's family lived on the outskirts, up in the mountains. The twisty road was a gray ribbon, unfurling for him, greeting him like an old friend. He'd driven this road countless times.

By the time he reached the homestead, the sun's golden fingers were stretching into the dusty blue sky.

Just as he expected, the two-story house was lit up as the family sat around a big, scrubbed table and shared a hearty breakfast before a hard day was put into caring for the animals and working the land.

He reached the front door and raised his fist to knock, but the door opened. Heather's mother stood there, neat and tidy as ever in jeans and an apron, her warm brown hair shot with silver and pulled off her face in a low ponytail.

This is what Heather would have looked like in thirty years .

His heart turned over and his voice came out rough, bruised. "Mornin'."

"Tucker. Come and have some coffee. There's plenty."

"I hoped you'd say that." Stepping into the house was like embracing his lost love. Scents of baking had always clung to her, even after Tucker had marked her from head to toe with his scent.

When he entered the kitchen, Heather's dad and brother looked up. Her older sister had gotten married a year after he and Heather should have and was now living in the next town.

"Mornin', Tucker," her dad said gruffly.

Tucker gave a nod and moved to pull out a ladder-back chair. His eye caught the family photographs plastered on one wall, homing in on the spot where his and Heather's engagement photo had hung.

The space was filled with a new picture of Heather's sister and her new husband.

His heart squeezed so violently, he thought he'd throw up. Dropping his head forward, he gripped the chair back for support. "Where's our picture? "

The coffee pot hissed. Outside, the rain pattered the old windows.

But no one spoke.

Finally, Heather's mother sighed. "We need to talk about that, Tucker."

Dread washed over him, turning his fingers to ice. If he tried to pry them off the chair now, they'd splinter. He had to touch this wood. Heather had touched this wood.

Heather's mom placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We think it's best to start moving forward. We've had some time to grieve—we'll always grieve. But..."

"But you put her wedding gown away, didn't you?" His tone had a sharp edge.

Her mom nodded, eyes downcast. "It couldn't hang in her room forever, waiting for her, Tucker. And you can't hang around here forever either. She's not...she's not coming back, son."

The use of the word "son" plucked at the strands of his control. Tears scorched his throat and lay salty on his tongue. "What are you saying, Mrs. Lander?"

Mr. Lander spoke up. "It's time you get movin' on in your life too. You have years and years ahead of you to laugh again, love again—"

"No," he barked.

"It's best this way," Mrs. Lander said with tears in her voice. "Time to let go."

"And you don't want me here anymore?" A giant fist punched through Tucker's chest, grasped his heart and yanked it out still beating.

And I thought it was buried.

Mrs. Lander patted his shoulder. “Time for you to go.”

Through a fog of pain and betrayal, Tucker scoured Mr. Lander’s face, Heather’s young brother’s face, the old tabletop where he’d sat through countless meals and games of cards.

Jerkily, he pivoted on his boot heels and ambled to the door, resisting the urge to clutch his guts to hold them in.

They don’t want me. They put away her weddin’ gown. Oh, Heather.

Somehow he’d gotten behind the wheel of his still-dented Ram. He looked out across the landscape, suddenly despising Reedy and all of Wyoming. Was the sky a different color in other parts ?

Stomping on the gas, he pointed the truck north, away from everyone who could possibly cut themselves on the shattered shards of his being.

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Christian moved around Tucker's kitchen, feeding the coffee maker some fresh water and fragrant dark roast. A smile continually returned, twitching the corner of his mouth upward.

This morning, he'd awakened to find Claire still slumbering in his arms, her sweet body conformed to his. Tucker was gone and his truck wasn't in the drive, but he'd probably gone out to check the horses.

With the coffee pot filling, Christian hitched a thumb in his jeans pocket and drifted to the window to gaze out at the landscape. Pissing down rain. And Tucker was out in it. Poor bastard .

Last night had far surpassed any other ménage a trois that he and Tucker had ever participated in. Having Claire between them felt like having a third sharing an amplified jack-off session. Though Christian hadn't even kissed her, it was enough that she'd slept in his embrace.

Warmth flowed in his veins.

In his back pocket, his cell vibrated. Fishing it out, he hit the talk button without checking the caller ID. It was probably his foreman calling to let him know they weren't working in this filthy weather, as if Christian couldn't have already guessed.

"Davis."

"Christian." Tucker's voice filtered into his brain, causing a jerk in his lower abdomen.

“Yeah, what’s up? You coming in soon? I’ve got coffee brewing.”

There was a beat of silence. “Actually, no. Listen, I’m gonna be gone for a few days.”

“What?” Christian’s pulse thundered in his ears.

“Look, I can’t get into it. I just had to get some distance.”

“From Claire.” Christian bit the words off, fury and protectiveness mingling into one whirlwind of emotion.

It spun inside his mind, threatening to dislodge the dam holding back his cream-your-ass-and-wipe-the-floor-with-you tongue.

He’d spent his entire life trying to corral his mouth when he got hotheaded and in one sentence, Tucker had smashed his progress.

There was a clicking sound on the line, as if it took some effort for Tucker to swallow. Good.

“From her, yeah. And other things. Listen, I didn’t call to get my ass chewed.”

“Then what the hell did you call for?”

“To ask you to take care of my ranch while I’m gone.”

That sent Christian reeling in a new direction. “As in make sure it’s locked up and the windows are shut?”

“No, as in feed and water my livestock.”

Christian plowed furrows in his hair, one ear cocked to the small bumping noises coming from the bathroom. Fuck, the last thing Claire needed was to overhear this conversation. She was going to be devastated enough that Tucker was gone.

“Listen, you son of a bitch,” Christian growled low into the cell, “you get your weakling ass back here and make this right. I’m not picking up all of your pieces.”

Another stretch of silence, then, “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t need your help.”

Christian ground his molars until his jaw popped. Damn him to hell. He knew exactly which card to drop onto the table to twist Christian all up. “Tucker...”

“Just take care of my horses, Chris.”

The line went dead.

Fingers tightened around the cell phone. His biceps flexed in readiness to hurl it through the goddamn window. Anger boiled in his chest, churned his guts.

“Mmm, coffee. Where’s Tucker?”

Christian whirled to face Claire. She wore only Tucker’s big flannel shirt, hanging mid-thigh and open to reveal her maddening seam of cleavage. Her half smile froze as she got a look at Christian’s expression.

Her words were hot with pain. “What’s wrong?”

How to tell her that the man who’d made amends with her last night had once again fled? Leaving Christian to glue her back together as well as look after God-knew-how-many horses? Not to mention chickens and an alpaca.

Claire's curls bounced with a tremble and in one step, Christian was with her, hauling her into his arms. He burrowed his face against her neck, dragging in deep draughts of her feminine scent, which was mixed with his own and Tucker's.

Damn that man to hell for leaving her.

"Where's Tucker?" she asked against his shoulder.

When Christian couldn't find the words, she pulled free of his embrace and looked him square in the face. "I should have known he'd do this..." Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, threatening to fall and break Christian's heart.

Trouble was, it was already cracked. A single tear would be the end of him. Using his thumbs to catch any drops before they tumbled down Claire's satiny cheeks, he searched her gaze. Tried to convey that somehow, they'd be all right if they stuck together.

She shook her head and backed away from him. "He has holes in him, the kind you can't mend," she whispered, repeating the words he'd spoken days before .

"Yes," Christian said raggedly.

"And he's gone."

"Gone," he echoed, staring past her and through the window that framed the rolling pastures. Horses began to circle as a herd, restless for food and care that Christian was clueless about how to provide. He was equally lost as to how to make Claire whole again.

He continued to stare outside as the coffee pot hissed its finish.

“I’ll need a ride to the diner so I can get my car,” she whispered.

Christian turned. “Not yet. I...Tucker asked me to take care of his animals, but I don’t know how.”

Her brow crinkled. “How is it a man in these parts doesn’t know how to feed and water animals?”

He swiped a hand through the air. “I’m an asphalt cowboy. My dad’s an asphalt cowboy. Mom’s a banker. I’ve only ever been around dogs for any length of time.”

Her chest heaved with a sob-laugh. “Well, it isn’t much different.”

Stretching a hand toward her, he clasped her fingers. “We’ll work together. ”

What would he do if she walked out? Not only would he be left to stumble through daily ranch chores, but he was just as fucking lost without Tucker as she was.

As if feeling this too, she met his gaze and nodded. “But I don’t have any jeans or boots. I only have my uniform...” Her words trailed off. Was she recalling their session in the diner booth last night?

Christian swallowed hard. “Tucker has belts. Rubber boots. We’ll come up with something.”

After some digging, they unearthed a pair of clean jeans. When Christian tossed them to Claire, the scent of the owner wafted out.

Claire froze. Her gaze dropped. Then she eased her feet into the leg holes, heedless of the fact that she wasn’t wearing panties. Where had they left them anyway? She fastened the button and zipper, but the denim hung off her hips. “Belt?”

“Yeah.” Christian pulled his attention from her and rooted around in the closet. Three belts hung there. One cracked brown leather that had seen better days. Tucker had worn it during some of their first sessions together.

He shook himself .

The second belt had a big buckle that would swallow half of Claire’s midsection and sported the stamp of some rodeo from four years ago. The last belt was a thin strip of black. The glossy leather would have been worn with a suit. To a funeral.

Christian grabbed the cracked leather and Claire accepted it. He watched her feed the end into the belt loops. When she cinched it around her narrow waist, he smiled. Then she knotted the loose ends of the flannel shirt, creating an instant shape to her womanly form.

“Boots?” she prompted, and he realized he’d been staring.

“Right.” He led the way out of the bedroom. In the entryway, a metal tray was tucked against the wall, holding boots. He plucked the pair of rubber boots into one hand and flipped them over. “Size ten. It’s all we’ve got. I’d give you mine, but they’re an eleven.”

She dropped her gaze from the boots to his crotch for a second. A flush washed over her, but she ducked to put the boots on, effectively avoiding his stare.

Dressed and ready for chores, she paused on the front porch. The land was awakening, the clouds banked and every drop of rain seeming grayer than the next.

“When will he come back?” Her words were low.

“I don’t know.” With a shake of his head, he grasped her forearm and led her down

the steps and across the grounds to the barn.

“We should let the chickens out first. They need to get a start on their scavenging for the day, and that will give me a chance to gather eggs without them coming after me. That big rooster can be mean.”

He changed paths, Claire’s wrist still in his grip. The fine bones under his fingers shifted, muscles tensed. He let her go.

I haven’t kissed her. She isn’t mine.

By the time they reached the chicken coop, the rain had plastered her hair to her skull. The wet ends curled, giving her a whimsical appearance.

“Sorry—should have gotten you a hat.” He opened the door of the coop and chickens flooded out, clucking and pecking before they hit the turf, which was full of bugs and seeds that comprised their diet .

The rooster made a rush at him, and he sent a boot out as a reflex.

“Don’t hurt him!” Claire dove between the chicken and Christian. The bird squawked and skittered away, following his harem into the grass.

Smooth. Saved by a girl.

Wiping a drop of water off his jaw, he located the egg basket. After five minutes, the basket was brimming. What the hell did Tucker do with all of these eggs? No man, even a hungry one, could consume that many.

“He must sell these or give them away,” Claire mused as she tried to balance one more egg on the top.

“I’m not sure.” Now what?

“We’ll just put these on the porch and then see to the horses, okay?” She turned her face up to his, lip caught in her teeth. A deep-seated ache took up residence in his chest at the sight of her blatant pain. Tucker had reclaimed her, only to leave her again.

And from what Christian knew about Claire, she wasn’t the type of girl to burst into tears. No, she went and found herself a weapon instead .

In the barn, she moved gingerly from stall to stall, talking quietly to the horses and tipping pellets into their buckets. He took his cues from her, moving slowly so as not to frighten the animals.

“You ever ridden?” she asked.

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“Couple times.” But he didn’t know tack from the sharp kind that got stuck in the sole of his boot.

She reached the final stall. “These are Tucker’s prized horses used for breeding.

But there are a lot running free in the fields.

We need to check on their troughs, make sure they’ve got enough water.

It’s raining like crazy, but it would take a day of rain to provide enough water for this amount of horses. ”

“He’s got a big tank in the back of an old pickup out back.”

She nodded. “That’s what we need.”

Christian put her into the truck, but she crowded against the passenger door, too far away. After last night, his emotions were in a jumble. She felt like his, but she wasn’t. No, she was Tucker’s, and his friend had abandoned her .

She turned her face to the window. Silence stretched.

How could Christian bring her back to him? To let go of this girl meant he might never see her again. She would drift away in a fog of pain—pain they both felt.

He opened his mouth to speak, but words tumbled from her. “Ever notice that the smallest birds sing the prettiest songs?”

The windows were up and the rain would keep the birds tucked into their nests, so the question caught him off guard. He searched the landscape for signs of a bird. Then he realized she might be talking about something entirely different.

“Tucker...he doesn’t talk a lot.”

Instant understanding took him. How Christian “got her” was beyond him, but it was as if he channeled her meaning.

Tucker was far from a small man—his body, personality, presence—all larger than life.

But he kept to himself, so he had the ability to blend into the background.

But when he did unglue his lips, he had something important to say.

Either that, or he fucking rocked someone’s world, yanking him in with a growled apology or sexual command .

What did he say to Claire when they were alone? Had he told her that he loved her?

Christian reached across the seat and caught a wet curl between his fingers. He gave it a slight tug, and she looked at him. “We’ll water these horses then check on Boomerang.”

That brought a smile to her lips. “I’ve never really cared for an alpaca before. I grew up on my aunt’s farm, but we only had a few animals. Nothing like this.” She swept a hand in front of her to indicate the rolling land Tucker owned.

Christian pulled up along the fence. A big old porcelain bathtub used as a trough set against the fence.

He jumped out and found only a bit of rainwater in the bottom.

“I’ll get this,” he started to say, but Claire was already rounding the truck.

She climbed into the bed and grabbed the hose they’d use to fill the trough.

As rain soaked them both, he could only think of what he would like to do with her after these chores were finished. Take her inside and run a hot bath for her. Look on as she soaked in the depths and relaxed.

What was it about this little country girl that had so thoroughly worked her way under his skin? A sharp splinter he’d never felt going in. Now it itched but he never wanted to get rid of it.

With efficient movements, she lowered the hose to him. He fed it through the split rail and into the trough. Then she shoved on the release valve. Water flooded the old bathtub.

Christian threw her a grin over his shoulder, which she returned. But her eyes were hollow.

Damn Tucker for fracturing her.

Five troughs later, they headed back to the house. The water tank was empty. If Tucker didn’t come home tonight, Christian had no idea where to go to fill it again. But he’d worry about that later.

He had to get that spark back into Claire’s eyes. The last time he’d seen it was while discussing Boomerang.

After parking the truck, he climbed out with the intention of opening her door, but

she beat him to it. What was he thinking? This wasn't a date. This was two people who had spent a mind-blowing night in one man's bed, and were now thrown together out of circumstance .

Christian hadn't even kissed her.

Without looking back, Claire strode toward the small pen where Boomerang was kept. The animal was drenched, too stupid to get under the shelter it was given. When Claire approached, it trotted up to the fence.

She reached to fondle the strange puff of hair on its crown, a white afro over a curious face. Boomerang blinked at her, unmoving, its mouth shifted to the side in a totally laughable expression.

Claire did laugh. The musical sound washed over Christian, warming his skin against the cold sting of rain. "Get out of the rain, Boomerang," she said.

When it didn't move, she hooked a leg over the fence, preparing herself to jump in.

Christian lashed his fingers around her arm. "Is that safe?"

She laughed again. "What's she going to do? Attack?"

He swung his gaze to the animal, whose tongue now lazed out between its lips. "All right. What do you feed it?"

"I think I see a feed bag in that shed." She jerked her jaw toward the shelter .

"Okay, I'll carry some buckets of water for it." Christian left her to go in search of buckets. When he returned, she'd managed to lure the animal into the shelter with her and had her arms around it. Her face was buried against its side and her shoulders

shook.

Christian slowed his step, a stitch in his heart. “God,” he breathed as he set the buckets outside the fence. Bracing one hand on the rail, he vaulted over, easily landing in the mud and slop.

With care, he approached Claire, using his new knowledge of animals. The last thing he wanted was a skittish woman. Hurting her was out of the question.

At the sound of his steps, she raised her head, staring him down, eyes ablaze with tears. “Why can’t those holes be mended, Christian? Why?”

He drew her into his embrace. With her wrapped solidly against his chest, he listened to the fat rain splat on the metal roof of the shed. He had no answers, but she didn’t seem to need them.

* * * * *

The first thing Claire did once inside The Hellion was to make a revolution of the bar, tables and dance floor, searching the sea of faces for Allie, the blonde who had spent the night with Tucker and Christian.

A new pang of jealousy smashed into Claire full force. Now that she knew the joys to be had in that bed between two men, she didn’t want to know about another woman having experienced it too.

Hell, Claire still felt that drunken high as the memories assaulted her.

The low country twang of George Jones rushed from the jukebox. Soon the DJ would kick things up and the dance floor would crowd with bodies.

She loved to dance but not tonight. Her heart ached. Two days without Tucker was an eternity. Knowing he was out there somewhere, alone and hurting too, shoved a knife deep in her guts.

I can't compete with a memory.

If she kept telling herself this, her love-fogged brain might someday accept it and move on .

To someone like Christian?

The thought blindsided her. She'd spent two days with him, caring for the animals and making sure the ranch was operating smoothly. In those two days, she and Christian hadn't spoken much, but a quiet camaraderie held them together. Two people working toward a common purpose.

And they worked well together. Cleaning stalls, holding a horse still while Claire examined its hoof.

There was something more to Christian. He was steadfast, calm. He eased her with his presence alone.

And Lord knew the man was walking sex poured into worn jeans and a T-shirt. Watching his back ripple with muscles as he shoveled manure or forked hay tempted her body.

Satisfied that Allie was nowhere to be found in The Hellion, Claire went to the bar to get a drink. While she waited for her usual Long Island iced tea, the man on the stool beside her started chatting her up.

“Ever wonder why people come here, little gal? ”

She shot him a sidelong glance. She felt a story coming on and wished she could run. “I suppose it’s for entertainment.”

“Entertainment or fellowship?” he asked, his voice raised a notch like a preacher’s. “Was in the early 80’s when I came down here, looking for a friend. I’d just lost my brother. Had a good relationship, we did, talked every day. Lost my best friend when I lost Brian.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, taking a fortifying sip of her drink. She eased one foot away from the bar, prepared to take flight the instant she got an opening.

“I didn’t find a friend that day here at the bar, but I did take a sweet little woman home with me. She needed money bad, had a little ‘un to feed, so I looked at it as helping out a fellow human, not as paying for sex.”

Great. Why do half of these stories end with sexual escapades? She had no desire to hear about how many times he plunged into the woman or her flexible feats.

“Turned out the woman and I had a lot in common. We’d shared sex, but I ended up falling for her. Hard. ”

“Excuse me, I just have to head back to my table. I think I see my friend.” She smiled at the man and turned away.

Her breath caught as she came up against the burning hunger in Christian’s eyes.

He stood five feet away, his expression burning with want even though she’d just had her heart carved out. Anger bubbled up inside her.

She reached over the bar and snagged the hose used to dispense soda. With a yank, she drew it over the bar top and aimed it right at Christian’s groin.

“Looks like you need something to cool off.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but she sprayed him before he got a word past his kissable lips. The club soda shot out and soaked his fly. She aimed lower, thoroughly wetting him.

“Son of a—Claire, what the hell’s the matter with you?”

Satisfaction replaced her irritation, and she handed the soda hose back to the bartender with an exchanged grin. Then she strode away from the bar, drink in hand .

Christian was on her instantly, snapping at her heels, his voice angry in her ear. “What the hell was that for?”

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For devouring me with your eyes. For making me feel things I'm not ready to feel.

She glanced over her shoulder at his furious expression. His musky scent filled her head. "For looking at me as if I'm a dessert and you haven't eaten in a week."

He stopped short, but she kept walking. Feeling him fall away, she continued on with a bounce in her step. She didn't take five steps before he appeared at her side, as if on a spring.

"Look, I know you're hurting—"

She whirled on him, and her drink sloshed over her fingers. "Don't talk to me about that."

He met her gaze, and the understanding she saw there sliced through her more easily than any blade. Her chest tightened.

Christian wrapped his fingers around her wrist and drew her in. "Who knows how you feel better than I do, huh, Claire?"

She slumped in his hold. For a second, she hung there while George Jones crooned to a finish and a Barbara Mandrell song started up. Christian's hard chest was inches from her nose. She longed to drop her face to the front of his shirt and breathe him in.

He removed the glass from her hand and set it on the nearest table. "That's it. Come outside with me."

She let him draw her through the obstacle course of tables and outside. The cooler night air struck her hot face. She gulped.

“I haven’t heard from him,” Christian said. He released her and kicked a boot into the gravel.

Claire studied his expression in the blue glow from the single parking light. Shadows accentuated the hollows of his cheeks and his unshaven jaw. His eyes glittered.

“He’s not here, but we are,” he said hoarsely.

Knotting her hands, she struggled to keep from touching him.

Yes, he could comfort her. Make her feel alive again.

But what if they were no good without Tucker?

Some magic might have taken place that night, and without Tucker’s spell, she and Christian were nothing but silent pawns on a game board .

When she didn’t speak or react, he kicked the ground harder and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “Let’s go get a chili dog, all right?”

At least six inches of pure fat on a bun didn’t come with heartache.

“Okay.”

He led her to his truck and opened the door for her. She slid onto the vinyl seat, too aware of his closeness. He came around the front of the vehicle and hopped in the driver’s side.

She'd sat beside him a number of times while shuttling around the Langley Ranch, but this felt more formal.

She didn't know Christian, yet she knew how his face looked when he climaxed. Knew how he tasted and how gentle he was with the animals. And how desperately he was hurting from Tucker's loss too.

He started the engine and top forty radio blared into the cab. Giving her a sheepish smile, he turned the music down.

"Where's the best place to grab a chili dog?"

"The Quickie Mart, of course." Shooting her a crooked grin, he braced a hand on the seat near her shoulder and twisted in order to back up.

She dug out her cell and texted her friend to let her know she wouldn't be at The Hellion as planned. As she flipped through contacts, she paused on Tucker's name. For an excruciating moment, she considered texting him.

Miss u.

Why did u go?

Chris and I are getting too close.

None of those seemed appropriate, so she stuffed her phone in her purse.

"You wouldn't believe the work it took to make this road surface so perfect." Christian's low voice slid over her senses, a caress she didn't want.

Playing along, she asked, "Like what?"

“Ten twelve-hour days for a crew of twenty men. Up here, we had to hand dig the ditch, because the space was too tight for the machinery.” He glanced at her. “It’s strange. You can drive this stretch of road a hundred times and never really know it until you’ve touched it.”

She could look at Christian as a handsome man who made her body hum, but since that night she’d come against his mouth and on his fingers, she’d never think of him the same way.

After a while, he asked, “You were meeting friends at The Hellion again?”

“Yes, we have a standing date.”

“Who do you have in your life besides friends?”

“My aunt.”

“Brothers or sisters?”

“No, just a dad who drives truck. I don’t see him very often. My aunt has taken care of me forever.”

His lips tightened, causing a bracket to form around the corner. “I have a sister, Moira, who lives about two hours away with her family. She has four kids and one on the way.” He shook his head. “I don’t know when she became a brood mare, but—”

Claire smacked his biceps hard, and he hunched around the steering wheel in laughter

.

“Thank God it’s not foal season. I can’t possibly be expected to know how to pull a foal on the ranch.”

“Yeah, that’s beyond my scope too.”

The weight of their new responsibilities crashed over them.

Tucker had told Christian that he’d be gone for a few days.

Two had passed without word from him. When would he come back?

What happened when the animals ran out of food?

On a waitress’s income, there was no way Claire could buy food.

And she was sure Christian’s income wouldn’t get them much further than a couple of chili dogs scarfed down in the parking lot of the Quickie Mart.

They bumped into the parking lot. She gripped the “holy shit” handle to brace herself.

Christian pulled into a parking spot and sat there for a minute.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Umm. I forgot about my wet jeans.”

Laughter bubbled from her. Too easily she recalled his shocked expression when the cold liquid hit his man parts.

He dug into his back pocket and produced a battered leather wallet. He peeled off a couple of bills, but her gaze was locked to the small ring where a condom obviously was tucked. “Here, get what you want and two dogs for me.”

She accepted the bills, careful not to touch his fingers. “Drink?”

“Biggest sweet tea you can get your hands on.” His smile was infectious.

“Be back in a few. You stay here with your wet jeans.”

“Smartass.”

Grinning, she went inside. While getting drinks, she ran into a woman who told Claire she was there buying cough medicine for her child. She was a single mom and had to ask her neighbor to sit with the feverish child because her deadbeat ex was never around when she needed him.

Claire nodded politely and made all the right sounds. By now, she was so accustomed to listening to people she knew who needed a sympathetic ear and who required a couple of words to soothe them.

On some level she was glad to be an outlet for so many, but on the other...who was ever going to help her ?

While she was checking out, she stared through the big windows at Christian’s truck. He was a dark shadow in the depths of the cab, his ball cap pulled low over his eyes.

Lust spiked in her. Visions of Christian tumbling her into the mattress, his strong body pinning her, spiraled in her mind.

Her stomach leaped. With a bag of chili dogs and two drinks in hand, she pushed through the door of the convenience store. Outside, she froze in her tracks as their gazes met.

Sparks flew between them. On the heels of that was a rush of panic and guilt. This wasn’t how she should react after Tucker left. She still wanted that man with every cell of her being.

Except she wanted Christian too.

She made her feet move. He leaned across the seats and opened her door for her. Then he took everything from her hands and set it aside. His big body loomed so close. What would happen if she just wrapped her arms tight around him and yanked him down for a kiss?

“Claire.” His voice was choked, as if he’d just guzzled two shots and a beer chaser .

She swung her gaze to his magnetic one. A quiet noise sounded in her throat.

Slowly, Christian cradled her face in his hands. She zeroed in on his mouth. The upper bow was completely shadowed by hair growth, but she easily recalled how sensual his upper lip was while working over her folds.

She shuddered.

And he kissed her.

Her breath caught in her chest and dizzying pleasure stole her senses. Automatically, she spun her arms around his shoulders.

He held the kiss for a long minute, lips unmoving. Tenderness washed through her like floodwaters through a gorge, stripping away any rough edges she might have and leaving only the soft woman behind.

She melted into the kiss.

With a growl, he angled his head and pressed on the seam of her lips. She opened to him instantly, accepting his plunging tongue.

His chest rumbled against hers as he captured her tongue in an erotic dance. In the background the faint strains of a Taylor Swift song floated, mingling with their heavy breathing.

Claire shifted to draw away, but he sank his fingers into her hair and held her. For a heartbeat, they stared into each other's eyes.

“Come home with me.” His gruff tone made her pussy flood.

Before her head could catch up with her body, she found herself nodding. Dazed with passion.

A crooked smile spread over Christian's face, crinkling the corners of his eyes. Without a word, he eased back into his seat and got the truck rolling.

The air buzzed with innuendo. Her heart pattered like a wild rabbit's, tripping over itself even as thoughts fell over each other. But there was no making sense of what was going on.

Tucker gone.

Her longing.

Christian here.

Her longing.

Christian dug inside the paper bag and pulled out a foil-wrapped chili dog. He passed it to her. The aroma hit her, and her stomach grumbled .

He shot her a smile and bit into his. In four big bites, he wiped out his first dog. She

unwrapped hers slowly and nibbled at it.

“Where do you live?”

“Up on Mac Hill.”

Her eyes bugged. “The place everyone goes parking?”

He gave a light laugh. “Well, they don’t go parking at my place. I live in a basement apartment about a mile from the make-out grounds.” He eyed her, steering with one hand and pulling the foil off his second chili dog. “But we can go there if you want.”

“What—go parking?”

“I haven’t gone in a decade or so.”

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She stared at the road ahead. Maybe having a romp in the truck would make their encounter less intimate. Purely fun.

Who am I kidding?

She gave a nod.

By the time Christian guided the truck into the wooded spot that was so perfect for concealing lovers, she was soaking wet. Her pussy tingled and her nipples throbbed.

He cut the engine and popped a mint into his mouth .

“Can I have one too? That chili...”

“We’ll share.”

She couldn’t stop her smile from blooming on her face. He leaned across the console and gathered her up. In a swift tug, he yanked her so she was half lying on his lap.

“This is cozier,” he said a split second before claiming her lips. The first brush ignited her. Moaning, she wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth under his.

He neatly tipped the mint onto her tongue.

“Mmm.” She sucked, letting the peppermint fill her head, along with the musk of the man.

“I like you, sweetheart. Probably too much.”

She quivered at his words, but before she had a chance to fully process what they meant to her already cracked heart, Christian slipped his hand over her breast. She arched, filling his palm completely.

He chased the mint around her mouth with his tongue, batting it around, scooping it up. Finally, he stole it back.

“Hey! ”

He closed his fingers over her hard nipple, and she gave a throaty cry.

As he circled her bud, she dropped her head back.

He closed in on her throat, licking a path to the sensitive hollow.

Then he pressed the mint against her skin and skated it upward.

The coolness in comparison to his scorching tongue threatened to make her come without a single stroke.

His erection dug into her ass, and once in a while, he rocked upward.

Through the barrier of their jeans—his still damp—she imagined she could feel every ridge of his cock.

She wanted it inside her. During their threesome, he hadn’t actually filled her with his shaft.

Now she couldn’t wait to get to that dirty little part of their game.

“Fuck, you make me want you.” He gulped the mint and crunched it up. When he kissed her, the strong flavor drowned her.

Wild with want, she kissed and nipped at his lips and tongue. She knocked off his hat and dug her hands into his hair, scraping his shorn scalp with her short nails while kissing him with abandon.

He found a slit of skin between her jeans and top and trailed hot fingers over it. Her pussy squeezed hard and juices flooded her thong.

Running his hand under her shirt and up her ribs, he plucked at her bra cup. She shifted, bringing the steering wheel against her side hard. She grunted.

“Times like this I wish I had a big ole SUV.”

“You’ve got a bed.”

“Yeah, and a blanket.” He popped the door and eased her out onto her feet. Then he reached behind the seat and retrieved a red plaid blanket.

“I thought you said you haven’t gone parking in a decade.” She shivered at the sight of his distended jeans.

“Haven’t. But anyone with common sense in these parts carries blankets, water and flashlights in case you’re stranded.” He climbed out and plucked her off her feet. She squealed as he lifted her up to the height of his chest and tipped her over the side of the truck into the bed.

In a second, he launched over the side too and had the blanket unrolled .

Their gazes clung. “Come here, darlin’.” He hooked an arm around her spine and

drew her upward to meet his mouth. She wrapped her calves around his back and bucked. Doing the old bump and grind. But for some reason, this felt like so much more.

She burned to touch him. Pinching the cloth between his shoulder blades, she yanked off his shirt. He drew hers overhead as well. The first kiss of their bare bodies raised all the hair on her skin.

Christian skidded a broad hand down her side. "I'll warm you. Here." He sucked on her neck. "And here." Through the cloth of her bra, he sucked her nipple into his mouth. The wet cloth conformed to her shape. When he grazed her nipple with his teeth, she could stand no more.

She worked frantically at his fly. The thick length of his cock distended his boxer briefs. Running her fingers up his shaft, she found a wet circle at the head.

"Christ," he said through gritted teeth. "Keep doing that and I won't last."

"I've barely touched you," she whispered against his ear .

He turned his mouth against hers and said, "You don't have to do much to make me want you, darlin'."

With that, he attacked her boots and jeans. The panties and bra came off last, all lying in a heap in the corner of the truck bed. She watched as he kicked off his own boots and jeans. Finally, she was properly able to trace the outline of his cock in his boxers.

She ran a fingertip up the underside to the swollen head.

He sucked in a harsh breath.

Prodding the flared head, she stared into his eyes.

Christian grabbed her wrist roughly and pinned it to the blanket. “Enough.” He leaned in and placed nipping bites on her lips, her breasts, belly. When she could breathe again, she found he’d wriggled out of his boxer briefs.

His shaft rose high and proud from a nest of curls. She wet her lips.

“Tell me what you want.” He reached into the pocket of his discarded jeans for his wallet. He flipped it open and located that circle she’d noticed earlier .

She curled her fingers around the base of his shaft, angling the head toward her mouth. “This. I loved sucking you.”

“Jeezus,” he breathed. He fell still, every chiseled ridge of his abdomen standing out as she took him into her mouth.

She sucked him in and kept going until the spongy tip met the back of her throat.

He bucked once, head thrown back, cords on his neck straining. Then just as swiftly, he pulled out. In a jerky movement, he had a condom in place and was poised at the quick of her.

Gazing up at his outline silhouetted against the big sky, she wondered what Tucker would think of this.

But then Christian hitched her leg around him and filled her in one solid thrust. They rocked together, arms tight around each other, squeezing, bringing the other closer and closer. Her inner walls contracted around his cock.

“God, it’s going to be...over...too soon,” he ground out.

She stroked his chest, ran a finger around the dark circle of his nipple. “Be nice to watch the sunrise here with you. ”

His white teeth flashed as he grinned. Drove deep. Ground his cock against her g-spot. She cried out as spasms started in her core.

Heat spread rapidly, claiming her control. She grabbed onto him and jerked her hips. A guttural growl erupted from his chest. He stared down at her unblinkingly as he plunged once...twice.

Tremors rushed her. Her pussy clamped down on his shaft just as he began to spurt. The warmth of his release sent her higher.

As the final shudders racked her body, she buried her face against his neck and stared at the stars glittering on the velvet backdrop of the sky. Where was Tucker at this moment? A big part of her was out there with him.

But a part she hadn't thought she had to give now lay warm and safe in the ring of Christian's arms.

* * * * *

Tucker knuckled the grit out of his eyes and turned toward the truck stop. After driving for two solid days and nights, his back muscles were screaming. This rest stop boasted a hotel as well as the area's “meanest ham steak”.

When he climbed out of his truck, pain sliced up his leg from his knee. As a kid, he'd taken a bad fall from a horse and cracked the patella. It had healed on its own, but when he wasn't as active, he felt a twinge or two.

Or three, in this case.

Not to mention the twinges in his heart. For Heather, Claire, even Christian. Hell, right now, he was so homesick that if he laid eyes on Boomerang, he'd plant a big fat kiss right on the alpaca's crooked mouth.

As he approached the restaurant, he caught sight of his reflection. Disheveled. Wrinkled shirt, crumpled hat brim. And he could smell himself. Not good.

Veering from the restaurant, he headed for the hotel. A nice shower, a meal, then sleep. Right now, he didn't want anything more than the basics in life.

Except Heather.

While he signed in to his room, he played and replayed the last moments with her family. When they'd rejected him, he'd lost a bit of his soul. His identity had taken a hit. If he was no longer part of the Lander crew, who was he? Where did he fucking belong?

His Uncle Leon and Dale and Darcy were far from a supportive family. In the past couple of years since Heather's passing, Tucker had only one consistent person in his life besides the Landers—Christian.

And he'd probably fucked up that relationship forever. Leaving him to run Tucker's ranch, when he knew nothing of animals? Hell, it was drawing near the harvest season too.

Tucker couldn't stay away indefinitely, yet that was exactly what he wanted to do. Going back meant he'd have to face a life without Heather, her family...damn, even knowing her wedding gown still hung on the peg in her bedroom had given him comfort.

He tossed the few belongings he always kept in the truck—a change of clothes—onto

the king-sized coverlet, too aware of the last time he'd been in bed.

With Christian and Claire.

Sweet Claire with the round limbs and honey lips. Giving her a night of passion was more than she deserved. He'd been shocked at how Christian had held himself in check with her, not touching her until Tucker gave him the go-ahead. Out of respect for Tucker? Or was there another reason?

Tucker cranked on the hot water in the shower and stripped out of his sweaty clothes. When he stepped under the spray, visions of his last shower struck him fully in the gut.

"Fuck." He couldn't even get away from Claire here. She was going to be his goddamn end. Giving himself again was out of the question. But hadn't he done just that when he dragged her into his life?

Holding back with her was as impossible as with Heather.

He soaped himself, washed it all off and got the hell out of the shower.

The ham steak was calling to him.

But when he got to the restaurant, they were out of ham steak. And the waitress wore a dress not unlike Claire's waitress uniform.

Christ, what was he going to do?

Part of him yearned to move along down the highway. Look for a new place to dig in. His roots were miles away, back at the ranch with his horses and his green fields—with Claire and Christian.

As he forked a bite of chicken and dumplings into his mouth, he turned away from any idea of going home yet. His head was a mess, and he had to get it screwed on straight before confronting his ghosts and one little curly-haired angel.

He had no idea what to do with the emotions coursing through him for Claire. She deserved much better than a broken-down cowboy who was still in love with his dead fiancée.

She deserves someone like Christian.

Pain plucked at his heartstrings. What if he returned to find that Claire and Christian had hooked up? Christian was the perfect no-baggage solution to Claire's needs. And they had enjoyed each other in bed.

Shaking himself, Tucker set aside his fork and tossed a few bills on the table.

"Was there something wrong with your chicken and biscuits?" the waitress asked.

"No, it was fine." There's something wrong with me .

As he walked back to the motel, he couldn't stop the freight train of his thoughts from barreling out of control.

If he wanted Claire, claiming her would be easy enough.

She was just waiting for him. But he wasn't the kind of guy to switch directions so easily.

Once his sights were set on a goal, he rushed at it with all speed.

Trouble was, he'd been running toward Heather forever. He didn't know how to stop.

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“Davis, heads up!”

Christian braced his forearms on the man-sized hole he’d just dug to lay pipe in and popped his head over the rim. He spotted the excavator rolling toward him and his fellow road workers scattering out of its way.

Locking his muscles, Christian hoisted himself, throwing his upper body across the ground. Then he scrambled up and out of the way.

As he stood at the roadside, covered in crumbles of earth, he watched the equipment straddle the hole and continue on down the road.

He started back to his hole—joining pipes a solid goal in his mind—when a horn blast made him look up .

Traffic was backed up for half a mile on this stretch of single-lane construction, but there weren’t so many cars that he didn’t immediately pick out the old, faded blue one that belonged to Claire’s Aunt Letty.

A grin stretched over his face so far, his cheeks ached. Heat bloomed in his stomach and began a heavy throb in his groin.

Jogging across the road to her, he ducked to smile through her open window.

“Hey, asphalt cowboy. You feeling that barn work this morning as much as I am?” Her hair was pulled back today in a messy knot, the curls a riot of dark springs.

“Yessum.” He tipped his hard hat into his hands and cradled it before him. This morning, they’d met in the barn at first light in order to muck out as many stalls as possible before he had to come to work.

She chewed on her lower lip then released it with agonizing slowness. He watched each plump bit emerge from her white teeth, his heart a wild staccato. His gaze locked onto the wetness on that luscious, pink lip.

“You got to go back to bed?” He’d tucked her exhausted form into her car after their hard work and sent her home, hoping she’d crawl back into bed before her own shift at the diner. Only one of them was going to be completely dead on their feet, if he had his way.

“Nah. I ended up eating a big breakfast Letty cooked me and helping her around the house.”

Golden sun danced over her face and illuminated one eye. For an instant, his breath caught. He studied the depths of that dark iris and each amber ray extending from the fathomless pupil.

She blinked and shifted so she was in his shadow. “Well, cowboy, the line’s moving. I’ve gotta roll along now.”

He reached in and squeezed her hand. They hadn’t made love since that night in the truck, but there was nothing uneasy about their relationship.

He looked forward to getting out of bed before dawn every day just to see her in tight jeans and mud boots, sleeves rolled to the elbow as she shoveled alongside him.

“See you for the evening watering.” He tapped her door twice, and she let off the brake, inching forward even as her gaze clung to his .

When she had to twist her head to continue to look at him, she finally faced the road and drove off.

Christian shoved his hat onto his head and trotted toward his hole again. Distracted, this time. God, that prim white collar of her uniform dress against her throat roused images of him nudging it down with his jaw to gain access to her savory skin.

A slap on his shoulder made him jerk from his reverie.

Tommy Newlin grinned at him. Mud was streaked from his hairline to his jaw, as if he'd recently wiped away sweat and left behind the residue. "You got it bad for that girl, Davis."

Christian gave him a quizzical smile. "What are you talkin' about?"

"That little Curlilocks in the Buick. You're head over steel toes for her." The widower stared at Christian knowingly, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"No idea what you're talking about. We've been working together on the Langley Ranch. That's all." He accepted a shovel from another worker with a nod .

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that story before. Seems to me I lived it. A teen working at a fast food restaurant with a certain girl I couldn't take my eyes off."

"How'd that end?"

"Married her." Tommy's expression darkened, though he held his smile. His wife had died a few years ago after an extended illness. Christian had never asked many questions, but now he wondered if he should, for Tucker's sake. How long did it take to move on after a man lost the love of his life?

Christian peered at Tommy, a half smile on his face in response to his friend's.

“When they turn their heads to keep looking at you, you don't let them go, Davis. Now get your mangy ass back into that hole. Clock's tickin'.”

After two chili dogs, a big soda and a grueling nine hours on the road crew, Christian headed to the ranch. As he wound through the hills and valleys that led from town to Tucker's land, he thought of Claire and what Tommy had said.

What did she feel for him, if anything? Maybe it's time to find out .

On autopilot, he navigated the road that ran along the creek for a mile before it spilled onto Tucker's land. Every wisp of a smile Claire had ever graced him with lined up in his head until there were dozens. Evidence that Tommy may be right?

A dark voice in the back of Christian's head whispered that it was Tucker she loved—Tucker was the reason she was helping with the animals.

Then why have I collected so many of her smiles?

He drew his big soda cup to his lips and slurped the last through the straw. By the time he reached the ranch, he had gained a bit of self-confidence.

What could Tucker offer that Christian couldn't? Yeah, Tucker had tons of land, a house, and obviously money wasn't tight, if the pristine state of the outbuildings were indications. But Christian had a place to live, a steady income and more where that came from thanks to his trimming business.

He had humor and an easy-going nature that always had drawn women to him. But would it be enough to draw Claire to him? Did he want to ?

Losing Tucker's friendship wasn't an option. Hell, Christian had long ago admitted to himself that he loved the man. Trouble was, he was starting to love Tucker's woman too.

Clamping his fingers on the steering wheel, he squeezed until his muscles shook. Barely harnessed energy and excitement roiled through his system, snapping in his senses.

Drawing a deep gulp of the country air streaming through his truck window, he cut the engine and climbed out. He looked to the sky for an estimation of the time. In a little while Claire would bump up the drive. If he got up enough courage, he would soon find out how serious she was about him.

What if she told him "thanks but no thanks"?

No time to think of that. He needed a shower and there were a few chores he needed to see to before she arrived. Hard work—heavy lifting he didn't want her to attempt to help him with.

He stretched his arms overhead to work out the kinks in his back. Christ, this double physical labor was catching up to him. If he had the opportunity to take Claire to bed again, he'd likely fall asleep .

Grabbing a sledgehammer and a length of fence stile he'd cut that morning, he headed up the hill.

Yesterday a couple of the horses had been spooked by a coyote and stampeded the fence, knocking down the electric wire and breaking free.

Christian had managed to get them corralled into another paddock, only after having run his ass off for an hour.

As he passed the paddock, he noted the escaped horse stood against the far fence, away from the others. “Make friends now,” he called. The horse’s tail flicked, arched high.

At the top of the hill, Christian crouched to check the power box for the electric fence. He’d turned it off last night, but he couldn’t be too careful about getting thrown on his ass by 5000 volts.

Next time the horses had the choice between a coyote or a wire surging with power, they might think twice about busting through it. That horse had limped all over the fields before Christian had caught it. After watching it carefully, he saw the horse no longer favored its leg.

From sun up to sun down, Christian was breaking his back with work. He almost wished for some really foul weather so he could have another day off from the road crew. Still, the ranch duties never ceased.

He tugged his gloves out of his back pocket and grabbed the fence gingerly. When he didn’t piss down his leg, he set about disconnecting the wires from the broken stile. A few twists of the screwdriver freed the wires. Then he set about replacing the post.

A dull ache between his shoulder blades distracted him. As soon as he finished this chore, a scalding shower had his name on it. Standing under a hot spray for half an hour sounded like the most decadent pleasure right now.

He squinted at the sun. Nope—no time to dawdle in that shower. Claire would be coming up the gravel drive soon.

Shivers started in his core, excitement building. He tapped the top of the post with the sledge, watching the base disappear into the rich, loamy earth.

The tump of hooves brought his head up from his task. Two horses, black-and-white speckled beasts with manes flying, galloped past him in the fenced-in area beside the one where he worked .

For a moment, Christian watched their display of strength and grace. Wishing he had someone to share this with. His muscles were screaming with exhaustion, but the crisp, grass-scented breeze was in his face.

Tucker was out there running the prairie like a wild mustang too, tamed by no one. It should anger Christian more that he was left to do his friend's dirty work. But if he were here, Christian wouldn't have gotten a chance to know Claire.

All those smiles .

The grinding noise of tires on gravel made his heart freeze, flip and fly out of control. With quick movements, he compressed the earth around the post with his boot then reconnected the wires.

By the time he switched on the power, Claire was wandering the grounds, looking for him. "Christian!" Her melodic voice drifted to him on the wind.

With a shake of his head, he wondered how the hell he'd gotten so lucky this time.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Davis. You don't know how she feels yet .

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Shouldering the sledge and the old post, and with the screwdriver in hand, he strode down the hill toward her.

She stood against the fence with Boomerang, watching him come.

Hair loose now around her shoulders, the wind grabbing at her uniform dress.

That stiff little white collar stood up as if waving at him to come on and do his worst. Tell her how he felt, shove that crisp fabric aside and kiss her throat.

As their gazes locked, they shared a grin. He came on, loping faster.

Boomerang nudged her hand, and she lifted it to absently stroke the animal's furry head.

"So much for getting a shower before you arrived." He tipped the things he carried to the ground and leaned them against the fence.

"Don't let me stop you. I still need to change too. Not very easy to climb the fences in this." She smoothed her palms down her hips, conforming the cloth to her curves.

For a moment, she just stared at him. "You look tired."

"Am tired." Dog tired. But if you agree to wrap those round thighs around my head, I'll show you just how not tired I can be .

She swayed toward him but caught herself before their bodies touched.

Words jumped onto his tongue. “I was thinking.”

“Do that often?”

“Smartass.” He huffed out a chuckle. Then he wrapped his fingers around her wrist, overlapping the digits. “Look. You waste a hell of a lot of gas and lose extra minutes of sleep coming up here every morning.”

Something shifted behind her eyes. “I’m happy to help out.” Her voice raised on the last word in a defensive echo of her posture. She extended one foot and tapped it.

“No, Claire, you misunderstand me. I don’t want you to stop coming up. I want you to start staying here with me.”

Shock washed her features clean. “What?”

“Yeah.” He wanted to look away, too worried about her rejection, but he refused to be that sort of man. “I’ve been sleeping in the guest room. Actually, I’ve been waking up on the couch fully dressed most mornings, but that’s beside the point.”

A reluctant smile twitched the corner of her lips .

“If you stay here, you don’t have to get up so early.”

“That’s all? The only reason for me to stay?”

He reeled her in by the wrist, bringing her so close that her breasts brushed his chest. Leaning over her, he whispered, “I want you to sleep in my arms.”

She dropped her head so he stared at the glossy curls inches from his nose. He ran his finger over her pulse and found it tripping out of control.

“Say you’ll try it for one night.”

“I won’t say that because I know I’ll want more.”

Her words split his heart. It opened up and tugged her more firmly inside.

He caressed her head with his lips, tasting her citrusy shampoo. His smile spread over the sun-warmed curls. “We’ll have more then.”

A heartbeat stretched between them, then she wrapped her arms around his waist. “One thing I need if I’m to stay here though.”

“Anything.” Breakfast in bed. Late-night cowgirl rides. His balls tightened .

She tilted her face up to meet his gaze. And he couldn’t help himself. He hooked a finger under her chin and drew her mouth to his. The crush of lips was sweet, filled with promise and an underlying thread of passion.

When she pulled away, she gave him another smile to add to his horde. “I come as a package deal, Christian. If I stay here on the ranch with you, so does Aunt Letty.”

* * * * *

“That coyote has one of the chickens!” Claire shrieked. Reddish brown feathers were scattered over the grass, and the squawking raised the hair all over Claire’s body.

“Get behind me. Where?” Christian jerked a rifle to his shoulder just as she skittered behind him. The predator was out of sight, so he started stalking forward.

A curdling squeal from the chicken ended abruptly as its life was obviously snuffed out.

“Goddamn it.” He fired a shot.

She plastered herself against his back, trembling slightly. A slight pause, then Christian swung the weapon downward and reached behind him, grasping at Claire’s side.

“Got away.”

“It’s my fault,” she whispered.

At that, he turned. “How can it be your fault? You put that hen in the coyote’s jaws?”

“I didn’t put the chickens away early enough.” She’d been lagging with this evening’s chores, her body exhausted but her mind on other things—like on Christian’s muscled chest and soul-shattering kisses.

The click of the safety sounded, then Christian leaned the rifle against the coop. Gathering her into his arms, he nestled her against that chest she ached to feel moving over her. “Not your fault. Now come on inside and I’ll make you a mean grilled cheese while you clean up.”

She shook her head. “I’ll go home tonight. I need to talk with Letty about this decision. I know she’ll want to be wherever I am, but it might unnerve her to uproot herself from her comfortable house. She’s not young, you know.”

He pressed a kiss to the corner of Claire’s mouth, maddeningly close. So close that her mouth watered and her pussy pulsated. A hum of want issued from her chest unbidden.

With a swift movement, he plucked her off her feet and pinned her against the rough wood of the coop.

Heat lashed at her insides. His musky scent captured her, sucked her in. He ground his lower body against hers—thighs and denim and a thick erection. Her panties grew wet and she wished she hadn't changed out of her uniform into jeans. Her dress would be easier access.

Christian wasn't about to let that stop him. He gripped her thighs and hitched her upward, pressing her legs around his waist. She clung to him, rocking her aching pussy against the steel of his shaft.

When he kissed her, he scraped his rough facial hair over her sensitive skin, raising prickles of awareness. Every nerve in her body was attuned to him—his scent, taste, feel.

And God, was he a looker. Especially when he gave her that blazing, I'm-going-to-fuck-you-against-this-wall stare.

She moaned .

The barn wood covering the building at her back snagged at her shirt, heightening her experience. Suddenly she wanted to know those rough edges on her skin while Christian assaulted her from the front.

He slipped his palms under her ass and squeezed. "Give me your tongue."

She opened for him, and he sucked her in. Drew on her until she bucked wildly.

He tore his mouth away, panting hard. "Jeezus, sweetheart."

Fumbling between them, she located his button and zipper. When she eased his throbbing length from his clothing, his eyes dilated. Remnants of daylight faded, leaving only purple shadows and the hot rasp of his breath.

“Not here,” she said, squeezing the tip of his cock lightly. Juices oozed over her fingers.

He dragged her away from the coop to the solid barn ten paces away. “Here. I can’t wait another minute for you.”

“Mmm.”

“Hell, yes,” he grated out. He let her slide down his body slowly, allowing her to feel every straining inch of him.

The instant her feet hit the ground, he attacked her clothing, reaching under her hem, locating her bra hooks and popping them.

She stripped off her shirt and took the bra with it, throwing them to the ground.

Her jeans were no match for his adept fingers, which navigated her body like the most experienced lover. Though they’d only been alone together once, he knew the places to touch that drove her to the brink of insanity.

Sweet heat pulsed in her core. The view of his bobbing erection filled her with wanting as strong as any she’d known with Tucker.

The realization took her breath away.

She threw herself into kissing Christian, raking her fingers over his broad shoulders and delivering open-mouthed sweeps that made him groan. When he shoved her jeans and panties down her hips, she toed off her boots and stepped out of the cloth.

He dropped his own jeans to his ankles. His T-shirt clung to his skin, but he peeled it away too. A whiff of his personal musk and hard work fueled her need. With shaking

hands, he fumbled with a condom .

As he stared at her, electricity snapped between them. His chest worked as if he'd just run a mile after an escaped horse.

Slowly, she flattened her palms on his broad chest.

In a violent motion, he lifted her and speared her on his rubber-covered cock. She cried out as the thick tip parted her inner walls and channeled directly to the spot that would flay every last nerve.

She clutched at his shoulders, riding him, levered by his strong arms and her own want.

“Christ, sweetheart. You’re. So. Damn. Tight.”

Twisting to find his mouth, she kissed him wildly. Tasting. Giving, taking. In the recesses of her mind, she was aware of the sharp chafe of the wood against her back and the low clucking of chickens scattered around them. Her breathing grew labored as her release pounded her body.

Crying out, she gripped Christian hard. “Come with me,” she whimpered.

He did, back muscles rigid as he poured himself into her. The heated waves slammed her, towed her under, raked her flat .

She gained her senses to find him completely lucid, eyes shining with joy.

Dipping his head, he claimed her mouth in a sweet and tender kiss.

The light crush of his lips undid her more than the tempest of their fuck against the

barn.

She closed her eyes and held in the droplets that threatened to spill.

Tears for the loss of her heart, which was already in a state of agony at Tucker's loss.

Still, she handed over the cracked organ to Christian. As he plundered her mouth in the gentlest of kisses, she hoped to God it would be safe.

* * * * *

Tucker slid onto the barstool and braced his elbows on the wood bar. Something sticky caught at the fibers of his denim shirt, and he pulled back with a grimace.

“What'll ya have, cowboy?”

“Gimme what's on tap.” He didn't care how his beer tasted. He just wanted to pour some down his throat and slow the crazy carousel of thoughts .

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How was it that a town ten hours north of Reedy boasted a bar so like The Hellion that he was afraid to look toward the back corner for fear he'd spot Christian at the pool table?

And Tucker had sat too long in the local diner in this run-down town, simply because the atmosphere brought Claire to mind.

"Bit early to be drinkin'," the bartender said as he set a glass with a foamy head before Tucker.

"Yeah, well, I intend to hold down this stool all night."

"Just don't get rowdy and we'll be friends."

Tucker wrapped his fingers around his glass and raised it in offering.

"Deal." He downed the cool beer and found it didn't taste as much like swill as he'd expected.

Above the bar, an old TV was mounted and the midday news was just coming on.

Tucker stared at it through news of house fires and wanted pictures.

But when the anchorwoman started relating car accidents, Tucker averted his gaze.

"You aren't from these parts," the bartender noted, wiping glasses.

“Nope. ”

“From south, near Reedy, is my guess. I’ve heard that drawl before.”

Every muscle on either side of Tucker’s spine tightened. His shirt pulled across his shoulders. He’d stopped here to get away from home, but he’d only succeeded in finding himself a poor man’s Reedy.

What was happening with his ranch right now? There was no doubt in his mind that Christian was there, seeing to the operations as Tucker had asked.

That didn’t mean Tucker didn’t feel like a Grade-A asshole for abandoning all of his work to Christian. That burn of shame was reaching an unbearable point. Maybe he could do something to help ease his friend’s way—wire money to cover his time, expenses on the ranch, and to even hire a ranch hand.

Christian could handle it. When his friend committed, he did it with all of his being.

Had he also committed himself to taking care of Claire’s needs?

You’re the ass who shoved them together. Now man up.

He dumped the last of his beer down his throat. “Another. ”

“I’ll keep a tab.” The bartender’s eyes sharpened, but he didn’t press for more information from Tucker about his origins. He probably figured that over time, the alcohol would loosen his tongue, anyway.

“Name’s Jones,” the gray-haired man said as he set a fresh beer on the bar.

Tucker pinched his hat brim. “Lan—” He couldn’t give his real name. If this man

knew Reedy, he knew the Langleys. Tucker's family owned too much land to be ignored. He pretended to belch to cover his pause. "Lander."

Jones leaned against the bar and studied Tucker. "Knew me a Lander or two from that way. They'd all be dead and gone now though."

Tucker's heart pitched and rolled. Nausea flooded in on the spurs of the sharp pain.

His Lander was gone too, but Jones wouldn't mean Heather.

Tucker swung his gaze back to the TV. A commercial for car insurance was on.

He locked his gaze to it as if it were the most exciting broadcast he'd ever seen.

Jones took the hint and rooted around in the cooler at his feet, shifting bottles until the clinking drove Tucker mad .

"Another beer."

"Try this one," Jones said, popping up with a dark, longneck bottle.

He slid it across the bar until Tucker could wrap his fingers around the frosty outside.

The mere coolness beneath his fingers roused images of Christian.

Of the man bared, cock in his fist, pumping violent spurts over his chest and fingers.

"Hell," he muttered under his breath. He took a swig. The liquid pooled on his tongue, igniting more images of his sessions with Christian. Drinking away his sorrows was only bringing his ghosts closer. They crowded around him, pulled at his clothes, threatened to strip him.

He'd never intended to bind his emotions and sexual fantasies to his friend. When they'd started jacking off together, it was for pure male release. Somehow, though, Tucker could barely get off alone without bringing Christian into his mind.

He wasn't gay.

But hell, he wasn't exactly straight either, was he, if he got off on seeing his friend gain pleasure?

"You likin' that beer, cowboy?" Jones asked .

"Sure. Nice and cold, ain't it?"

Jones grunted and heaved a case of whiskey onto the counter. As he began to unpack it, he talked. "I know a truck driver from Reedy. Passes through here and stops for a drink every time."

"Yeah?" Tucker asked out of politeness.

Jones gave him his back. "By the name of Mickelson. Jake."

The dark brew hitched in Tucker's throat, and he nearly choked. Convulsively, he swallowed twice. Jones, with his back still to Tucker, hadn't noticed. He set bottle after bottle of liquor on the bar top with precise clinks.

"Yeah, there's a wanderer for ya. Last I heard, Mickelson hadn't been home for more than an overnigher in ten years."

Tucker firmed his jaw. For ten years he'd neglected Claire. When she'd related this information to Tucker, he'd wanted to punch the man's teeth down his throat. Now the urge was stronger.

A protective cloud rose in his skull that had nothing to do with three beers in half an hour .

“Not right when a man doesn’t have a home. Or has one and runs from it.”

Tucker’s gut clenched, threatening to hurl all the beer he’d drunk from it. He jammed a boot heel into the floor. “Restroom?”

“That-a-way.” Jones pointed to a blackened corner of the bar without turning.

Tucker made his way into the bathroom, which smelled just like a bar facility. The wooden walls of the single stall were carved from top to bottom with initials and dirty words. Above the urinal, someone had written “Piss Ripples” in permanent marker.

And below that, was a tiny C someone had painstakingly nicked out of the drywall, probably with a pocket knife.

Tucker squeezed his eyes shut. Fuck, he couldn’t even relieve himself without them haunting him. Christian and Claire. He’d left them. Didn’t they at least deserve word from him?

What would he say if he called them though? I’m in a Podunk town that’s not at all like Reedy yet exactly like Reedy, and I can’t get you two out of my fucking mind .

No, better to let them heal some from the pain he’d more than likely inflicted.

Tucker would stay away for a while longer.

But how long would it take to get his head on straight?

It had already been two years since Heather had been buried, and he felt as much

turmoil now as he had then. Lost. Confused.

Or maybe that was the beer talking, after all. His head had gained a pleasant fog. He zipped up, washed his hands and strode straight for the bar where he polished off the last of his longneck and asked for another.

Jones eyed him. “Better pace yourself there, son. I like you. I don’t want to kick you out of the bar by noon.”

“Another,” Tucker grated out.

With a sigh, Jones reluctantly placed a beer before him. “This’ll be your last until that big hand moves around the twelve there.”

Tucker gave a huff of laughter. “Yessir.”

The corner of Jones’s mouth twitched with a smile.

Clearing his throat, Tucker plunged through the opening he’d been waiting for. The only way to assuage his guilt was to remind himself of what he’d walked away from— Claire deserved so much better than a wounded man.

“Now back to this Mickelson fella,” Tucker said. He knew the man—had run into him a few times in town and disliked him even before he knew what a horrible parent he’d been to Claire. While he’d never spoken of it with her, Tucker knew she’d been hurt by her father.

And anyone who hurt Claire had it coming, as far as Tucker was concerned.

“Says he’s got a daughter, a pretty little thing, who lives in Reedy,” Jones said.

Pretty little thing isn't the half of it.

He brought the bottle to his lips but didn't drink.

Instead, he drowned in memories of Claire's arms around his neck, swaying to the jukebox.

The first time she'd met him here for a date, Tucker had stumbled.

Actually tripped over the threshold coming into The Hellion.

All he saw were blue cowgirl boots and legs and curls.

Lots of curls.

His fingers convulsed around the bottle.

The fog in his brain swirled, and he found himself setting the bottle down and opening his mouth. Exactly what he hadn't wanted to do.

"You know her?" Jones asked.

"I know Jake Mickelson's girl. Pretty well." He eyed Jones, daring him to question him further.

"That so? Hmm." Jones stroked his goatee, blinking into the dimness at nothing in particular.

"Yeah, she's a waitress at the diner."

"And more than that to you, I can tell from your voice."

Tucker swigged and set the bottle precisely in the water ring again. “That too. It seems to me that her father has no right to be in here blowing smoke up your ass with his proud daddy act. He doesn’t even know her.”

Jones folded his arms and stared at Tucker for a long minute. “Seems like you’re running from something too, Lander.”

He winced at the use of Heather’s last name. “Well, I haven’t been gone for ten years.” Not yet.

“Glad to hear it.” Before Tucker could ask for another beer, Jones set one before him .

Tucker glared at the label on the bottle.

He kept telling himself that he was dying to get back to Reedy so he could sit in front of Heather’s headstone and relive their sweetest moments.

In reality, he didn’t feel soft brown hair under his fingers, but dark curls.

He wasn’t picturing himself in the cemetery but on his front porch with Claire on his lap, rocking to the beat of the countryside after a hard day’s work.

Watching Christian mount the stairs with a grin.

He’d been a coward to leave. It wasn’t too late to return, nor was it the right time. He was in a funk, useless to his horses, his friend or his girl. Until he got his head screwed on straight—maybe with the help of a nonstop beer IV—he was going to sit here and hold down this barstool.

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Christian lay on the sofa in the space where he and Tucker had shared so many moments, staring at the plaster ceiling. His feet hung off the edge and the blanket had slipped to the floor sometime during the agonizing night.

Agonizing because Claire had slept feet away from him in Tucker's bed. Last night, she had brought her Aunt Letty and two suitcases. They'd installed Letty in the guest room, which meant Christian got the lumpy sofa.

What he really wanted was to climb into bed with Claire and tuck her body close, to breathe her sweet scent as she slept.

Letty tinkered in the kitchen, obviously grinding coffee and filling the pot. When the scents of something boiling reached Christian, he sat up and scrubbed his hands over his face .

Claire emerged from the bathroom, fresh and bright in jeans and a red top that made her skin glow. Christian's morning glory strained against his boxer briefs, yearning toward the woman he'd had wet dreams about all night.

"Mornin', Christian."

He reached for the first article of clothing he could find—his hat—and jammed it onto his head. Clothes would act as a barrier. Without them, Letty would catch him ravaging her favorite niece.

He cracked a smile at the thought and drawled, "Claire."

She paused, one foot bouncing. With the urge to come to him? He sure as hell hoped so.

“Letty’s got oatmeal on the stove. Why don’t you get dressed and we’ll have a warm breakfast before heading out to the barn?”

Oatmeal? Nothing more disgusting, in his book. He was a grab-an-energy-bar kind of guy. Then later, he’d hit the Quickie Mart or a fast food joint for lunch.

“All right.” He reached for his jeans and slid his legs into the worn denim .

Claire continued to watch him. When he looked up at her, he found her gaze locked on his groin.

Shocks of want chased through his core. Her gaze snapped up to his and a pink flush coated her cheeks. With a jerky movement, she pivoted toward the kitchen and left Christian alone. Grinning, he dressed and spent a few minutes in the bathroom. Then he joined Claire and her aunt in the kitchen.

Sunlight streamed through the faded cotton curtains covering the window over the sink. The sight of this made Tucker spring to mind. Where was he right now?

When Christian’s step sounded, both women looked up. Letty was a slip of a woman, probably ninety pounds, just as she was ninety years old. Her white curls were worn in a short wreath around her happy face.

“Come on in here, boy, and get some of this good food.” She lifted a pot off the stove. Claire took it from her and spooned some white gruel into three bowls. A fourth bowl was set in the center of the table filled with nuts, raisins and dates. Christian fought to keep from making a face.

“Is that toast up yet?” Letty asked .

“Heard it a second ago.”

“I’ll just butter it.” Christian watched the woman smear a yellow streak of butter across the toasted bread without a care to cholesterol or healthy living.

Christian grabbed a cup of coffee and drew a scalding sip into his mouth, wishing he could make a run for the door and avoid their idea of a good breakfast.

Claire placed his bowl in front of his chair and sank to her own with a smile. “Smells like home, Letty.”

“That’s the point, girl. Can’t have you up here working so hard on nothing more than cold pizza.”

Christian’s stomach clawed at his insides at the mention of pizza.

Smiling, Claire scooped up some raisins, nuts and dates, and spooned them onto her oatmeal. “It’s a nice day. We should get all the horses out into the yard and give them a good bath.”

He struggled to keep from eyeing her. What he wanted was to give her a long, luxurious bath, taking care to soap every delicious inch. When he and Tucker had locked her between their bodies in the shower, it had practically blown his mind. He’d never be the same man.

Letty drifted to the table with a plate piled high with toast. A jar of homemade grape jam set near his elbow. Maybe he could manage toast if he drowned it in jam. He hurriedly took the plate from her and pushed her chair out so she could sit.

Claire beamed at him.

“Loved grooming the horses in my day,” Letty said, spooning up her oatmeal plain.

Christian selected two pieces of toast dripping with butter and spread jam liberally over them. “Never gave a horse a bath, but I’m willing to try. What we need to do first is find the food and water stores.”

“Seems to me there would be a spring around here somewhere,” Letty said. She turned her head to look out the window. “Find the low ground and that’s where your spring will be.”

Claire caught his eye, hers twinkling. She took a big bite of oatmeal and sighed. “Tastes delicious, Letty. ”

The older lady bobbed her head as if it were on a spring. “Soul food. Try yours, young man. Got a whole pot here to stick to your ribs.” Letty reached across the table and squeezed his biceps appreciatively. Claire ducked her head, hiding a grin.

When both women looked away, he spooned a hefty dollop of oatmeal onto his napkin and folded it into a wad. Yes, just like a child, but he didn’t care. If it kept him from having to eat it, he was willing to stoop to immature levels.

He hammered his toast and shoved away from the table. “I’ll just go hunt up that spring so I can fill the water tank. Claire, I’ll meet you in the barn.”

“I’ll let the chickens out first and see to Boom Boom.”

He started toward the door but stopped dead at her words. A smile spread through his gut and rumbled from his chest. “Excuse me?”

She polished off her oatmeal. “I said I’d let the chickens...” Her eyes flared with understanding. “Oh, Boom Boom.”

“I take it that you’re referring to Tucker’s alpaca?” He could barely trap his mirth behind his lips. He couldn’t wait for Tucker to hear her call his animal Boom Boom, like some seedy pole dancer.

He dumped his dishes into the sink and his soggy napkin filled with oatmeal into the trash. On the way out of the kitchen, he lightly squeezed Letty’s shoulder. “Great breakfast, ma’am. Thank you.”

She beamed. “I’ll save this oatmeal for you for later!”

God help me. Catching Claire’s gaze, he winked. Slowly. Suggestively. Getting her up against the barn again was on the top of his to-do list. He took his time letting his gaze travel over the tops of her breasts to the narrow indentation of her waist, then the flare of her hips.

She shuddered.

Satisfied that he could get her as heated as she did him, he gave her another wink and headed outside.

Breakfast had cut into his work time, so he’d have to hurry to catch up. He didn’t want to be stuck out here, slinging manure all day, when he could have Claire beneath him. Could be moving within her .

His sac clenched up tight to his body, his cock aching. His morning erection had never really gone down. Even through the smell of oatmeal, he’d held onto his need. Hell, for Claire he’d eat a big, healthy bite.

He climbed into the old pickup with the water tank in the back and started it. Cruising the ranch for signs of the spring wasn't something he'd thought to do. Good thing he had a few friends to guide him on this endeavor. Otherwise, Tucker would return home to dead animals and a failing ranch.

Tucker. Where the hell was he? Days without word. Claire was concerned about the food for the horses running out. If he had to, Christian could charge some food and Tucker would pay him back. But what if the man just kept running?

While Claire hid her pain behind a happy facade, Christian knew she was one of those people who smiled through their pain.

Most people didn't recognize it. But he was aware.

Too aware that her heart was broken and she was leaning on him as a way to cope with her suffering.

If Tucker were to step back into the picture, Christian would be out on his ear .

Or would he? When she looked at him, sparks sizzled between them. Sex was explosive.

He drove past Boomerang's shed and caught a glimpse of the beast against the fence, long neck stretched to nibble grass on the other side. Again, he cracked up laughing. "Morning, Boom Boom."

Ten minutes and several passes of the ranch later, he finally spotted a small wooden structure down in a natural dip in the hillside.

He bumped across the grass and stopped beside it.

After jumping out, he crouched to see the thing that looked like a doghouse actually covered a spring bubbling from the ground.

And that smart friend of his had rigged a sort of pump that could be attached to the black hose leading to the water tank. Christian hooked it up swiftly and leaned against the side of the truck, gazing over the land as the tank filled.

Twenty minutes and about five hundred gallons of water later, Christian drove up in front of the house. Claire was out with Boomerang, wielding a big pink brush on the animal's coat .

“Oh Lord.” He drew up beside her and cranked down the window manually. “Hey, pretty lady. Coming with me to water the stock?”

She flashed him a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. His stomach tightened. Something about being in the company of that animal made her let down her guard. While caring for the alpaca, she allowed herself to think about Tucker, to feel and ache for his loss.

“Hey,” Christian rumbled, “get in.”

She carefully speared the pink wire brush on a nail inside the shed and got into the truck without meeting his gaze.

All the time they took care of the horses in the pastures, she didn't speak.

So by the time they started leading the horses out of the barn one by one and tethering them near the outside hose, he didn't hold out much hope for that romp against the wall.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her lovingly brush out the snarls in a white

mare's mane and tail. He filled a big tub with water and soap then used a big brush to clean the horse in front of him .

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A swift movement made him jerk his head around, just in time to see Claire slip onto the mare's bare back. Her grip on the mane lessened, but the horse danced sideways at the unexpected weight.

"Claire." The word came out hot and urgent. If she fell from that height or the horse threw her...

He swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. She dropped her chest, plastering her body to the animal. Her lips moved but he couldn't make out what she was saying to the beast.

The mare stamped a front foot, and Christian tensed, prepared to leap forward and snag Claire out of midair if the horse tossed her.

"Jesus, don't make any sudden moves."

Claire turned her head and gave him a smile.

A genuine smile. One that sent her eyes dancing—two merry little coals burning with life.

His heart thumped heavily as he stared at her.

The untamed, wild beauty she possessed matched that of the horse she seated.

But to say he was petrified for her safety was like saying he had a little hard-on for Tucker.

He inched forward .

Suddenly, Claire applied pressure with her heels, sending the horse into a graceful trot. Unable to watch her move away from him on the four-legged hell train, Christian jogged alongside her.

Claire giggled, a joyous sound that sent a pang of want straight to his cock. He didn't tear his gaze off her but continued to run beside her. "Don't look so worried, Chris."

Her use of his nickname gave him a new warm, fuzzy feeling, somewhat higher up in his anatomy.

"Letty taught me to ride when I was hardly able to walk without falling on my nose. She was a great rider, you know. Letty. A few years ago, she broke her ankle on some ice though. Two big pins in her spindly bones keep her from riding anymore."

"Damn good thing." He raked his gaze over another woman with fine bones—one he'd hate to see laid up with a cast. Then again, maybe it would be sexy to hook the plaster over his shoulder and pound into her tight, wet heat.

He scuffed a hand over his face. What was wrong with him?

"I'm going to take her for a gallop. "

"Like hell," he ground out.

Claire's eyes widened, and she brought the mare to a walk. "You can't be...you're afraid something will happen to me?"

Her voice held something like wonder. Hadn't Tucker ever told her how important she was in this world? Damn the man for worshipping a dead woman and ignoring

the living.

Christian held out a hand to her. Her warm fingers clasped his, and he drew her off the horse's back and into his arms. With all of his control stripped away, he locked his hands on her ass and lifted her against him even as he slammed his mouth onto hers.

She gasped at the contact. He drove his tongue between her lips, gathering her sweetness.

"You taste like oatmeal," he growled and plunged in for more. A rushing noise in his ears might have been the wind ruffling the grasses, but was probably more like the blood flooding out of his head into his cock.

He pushed his shaft into her belly and she moaned in response. She knocked his hat off and cradled his head, angling her mouth to better receive his kisses .

The quiet rasp of his unshaven face against her silky skin set fire to his control, and any restraint went up in smoke.

"How charming." A rough voice dug into the center of his psyche. Claire tore her mouth free, a tremor running through her.

That voice...so like Tucker's, yet not his at all.

Christian swung toward the speaker and found two men leading horses. Now that he wasn't drunk on lust, he noticed the whickers of Tucker's horses, alerting him to the fact that two new stallions were in their midst.

He squeezed Claire's waist and let her go. "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

The taller of the two narrowed his eyes and wrapped the reins more securely around his leather-clad fist. "I'm Leon Langley and this is my son Dale. Seems to me you folks are squatting in Tucker's house."

Christian didn't like the way he said that. No, he did not. "He asked us to take care of his stock while he's away." Claire inched closer to his side.

Dale gave a start. "Away?" Suspicion dripped from each syllable .

"That's right. Had some business up north."

The strangers exchanged a glance. Leon released his reins and eased forward on boots that cost more than Christian's entire wardrobe, plus Claire's. The rustle of his leather drover coat probably wasn't meant to be intimidating, yet Christian felt his menace.

"Listen, son." Leon tipped his hat back so they could see his eyes. "This here is Langley land. Me and Tucker, we're mixed up in deeds and coal contracts. So what happens on this land concerns me quite a bit. You understand?"

"Not following your train of thought, sir." Christian squared his shoulders and looked the man in the eye.

"Don't you think that my nephew would have mentioned he had business up north and that he'd asked two inexperienced and... impassioned friends..." he swept Claire with a gaze that had Christian's hands knotting, "...running the ranch?"

Christian shifted his weight, pressing his thigh up the length of Claire's. She trembled. "Seems to me that Tucker would have mentioned an uncle and cousin living so nearby, if he held any stock in that familial connection."

Dale gave a harsh laugh and the horse tethered behind Claire pawed the ground.

Leon's glare was icy. "You watch your tongue, boy."

"I'm no one's boy, and I'd ask that you take up any trouble with Tucker.

We're just the ranch hands." Christian took Claire's forearm and turned her away.

Accusing him of taking over the ranch didn't set well at all.

If he decided to take it up with the law, Christian had no proof that Tucker had asked them to keep his ranch running.

Then again, Christian, Claire and now Letty were squatting in his house, uninvited.

Without releasing Claire's arm, he bent and swiped the water hose off the ground. Then he switched it on and trickled the flow over the horse's hide. Behind him, the creak of leather and the stamp of horses moved away.

"They're gone," Claire whispered from the corner of her mouth.

Christian caressed her forearm and released her.

"I don't know what to make of that conversation, but...I think he was threatening us or Tucker."

"Or all," he ground out. He had a feeling that if Leon went up to the house and saw Letty established in the kitchen, he'd shove the frail woman out the door. He dipped the scrub brush into the soapy water and employed it on the horse's speckled flank.

"What are we going to do?" Claire's voice dipped a notch, indicating her fear.

Christian caught her eye, wishing his hat wasn't on the ground and the shadow of the

brim could disguise any worry he couldn't strain from his gaze.

He'd texted Tucker numerous times just to check on him, and he hadn't bothered to answer either those or Christian's voicemails.

Dammit, this wasn't his problem. He'd gladly stand beside his friend in this fight, but he shouldn't have to do it alone, operating half blind.

"Only thing I know to do is keep trying to contact Tucker. This is his problem."

Even as he said it, he recognized it for a lie. If Tucker only thought of him and Claire as ranch hands, he wouldn't be on the run. The man had fled from his emotions, pure and simple.

* * * * *

"I seen those apple trees are loaded. Another two weeks and we'll be ready to harvest." Letty wielded the paring knife on potatoes as if the spuds were intruders and she defending their dwelling.

A smile drifted over Claire's face, but it didn't remain long. Following the encounter with Tucker's relatives, her nerves were shot. They could dump them off the ranch with ease. That wasn't the true concern, but rather why Tucker had left if he was aware his family was grappling for control.

Maybe he really doesn't know.

No, that couldn't be the case. Tucker was one of the savviest judges of character she knew.

He'd once sat in the diner during her shift and people-watched, a mug of high test

coffee in his fist. After she finished clearing tables for the night, he'd recounted the men who had looked at her too long and the women who darted jealous glances her way—Tucker's way of telling her to steer clear.

Had it also been a bit possessive? Claire shook her head. She couldn't allow herself to think that. Belonging to him was too much to hope for.

Letty dropped another potato into the pot. "Think that man of yours likes potatoes?"

She started. With Tucker on the mind, it took her a full minute to figure out that her aunt spoke of Christian. "I don't know. I've never seen him eat anything but chili dogs."

A squeak of mirth escaped Letty, more of a wheeze than a laugh. For twenty years, Claire had never heard any other type of laughter from her aunt, and it gave her a warm feeling.

"No wonder he hid his oatmeal in his napkin," Letty said.

Mention of the oatmeal dragged up memories of the delectable, scorch-your-panties off kiss they'd shared in the yard. "I think he may give the oatmeal another try, Auntie."

"I wonder if a bachelor like your Langley fella might have canning jars sitting around here? "

Claire's breath caught. Letty had just called Christian her man and Tucker her fella. Did she realize they'd shared a wanton night together? That it was all Claire could think about—being in bed, limbs entwined with two hard men?

She took a swallow of hot tea. The apple spice filled her head. "I'll dig around in the

basement for some canning jars. If he doesn't have any, I'll buy some."

"You sure feel strongly that this harvest mustn't go to waste, if you're putting up your own funds." Her sharp eyes missed nothing.

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“I hate to see it rot on the vine.” Behind the house was a small kitchen garden with tomatoes and beans, which still needed to be picked.

What a bachelor did with all the produce was beyond her.

She could barely unload the daily eggs from the chickens.

Even the owner of the diner didn’t need more than a few dozen a day for the patrons.

“Be careful with that hot glue gun,” Letty advised.

On the table before her, Claire had a wooden plaque, two pots of different shades of pink paint, and a bunch of pink and silver gems. The glue gun set at her elbow, dripping goo onto a sliver of cardboard.

She took up the thin paintbrush and dipped it into the darker pink paint. In a flowing freehand, she wrote “Boom Boom”.

Letty came to look over her shoulder. “Always did have the prettiest handwriting, Claire.”

A faint smile touched her lips. She pushed the paint around the wood to thicken the lines. Then she used a second brush to highlight in pale pink.

“When I went into the craft shop in town, Marcella Evans couldn’t quit cackling at the reason for my buying these supplies.”

Claire slanted a look of amusement at her aunt. Half of Reedy thought both her and Letty eccentric. Growing up, girls had made fun of her, saying she was so weird that even her father didn't want to be around her.

Her grip tightened around the brush as she added a final flourish under the alpaca's name.

"Looks mighty nice. Think that animal will appreciate it?" Something in Letty's voice told her that she lumped Christian and Tucker into said group of animals .

Tucker might not care, but I think Christian does.

She set aside the brush and swiped a curl out of her eye before taking up the glue gun. With her left hand, she pinched a hot pink star with tweezers and applied glue to the flat side.

Letty started humming a church hymn under her breath, and the pleasant tick of potato peels dropping into the wastebasket were soothing beats. After Claire had placed a row of pink and silver stars, she sat back to look at the name plate.

"Needs a few more stars on the top."

"That's what I was thinking." Claire placed five more stars then added a couple hearts for good measure. When she looked at the finished product, she envisioned it hanging on Boom Boom's gate.

"When are you gonna get to work on those fancy ankle cuffs for the beastie?" Letty washed her hands.

"Later. I'll let this dry here in the meantime." Claire had been thinking about fashioning some leather anklets for the alpaca. Letty had laughed outright after first

learning of it, but it was something to take Claire's mind off her sadness .

She pushed away from the table, taking her tea with her. She drained the cup and placed it in the bottom of the sink. "We'll make applesauce and spaghetti sauce. I'll make sure we have jars. Gonna go help Christian." She dropped a kiss to her aunt's baby soft cheek.

"Don't be late for pork chops and potatoes."

"Not on your life."

Moving through the rooms of Tucker's house felt oddly familiar now. Almost like being in the house where she'd grown up. The wood floors underfoot, the warm furnishings. Even the dim glow of the afternoon sun provided a feeling of belonging.

What happened when Tucker came home though? Better yet, if he came home.

After they'd finished washing the horses, Christian had called Tucker on his cell.

No answer. At that point, Christian had stormed off into the field, and Claire had gone inside to seek solace from her aunt.

She'd called off work at the diner several times since she and Christian had taken over the ranch, but she had to stop that.

She couldn't afford to lose her job. Luckily, Christian was already laid off until the next construction job. She didn't have that luxury.

Tomorrow I'll go in.

She slowly drifted across the yard to Boom Boom's pen. When the ball of wool

trotted to the fence, Claire couldn't help the smile that stretched her lips. Even with all the pain and confusion in her heart, she still had much for which to be joyful.

Automatically, she looked around for Christian. When she was outside, he was never far from her. But she didn't hear him shifting feed in the barn or swearing at the chickens that were always in his way.

Her body responded too easily to him, but on some level, she felt as if she were being untrue to Tucker.

No, he threw us together. Her body lit up at the reverie of Tucker's hand moving within her as Christian stretched her ass with his thick fingers. Their thighs pressing her from both sides as she climaxed between them. On them. For them.

She shuddered.

Boom Boom nosed her palm .

"I didn't bring you an apple this time, you greedy pig." She chuckled and patted the tuft of hair on its head. "You need a good shearing. We'll have a spa day soon, okay, girl?"

She moved away from the alpaca and strode out into the field behind the barn.

Christian was often found here, working on an odd piece of equipment.

It turned out that Tucker had a lot of broken chainsaws, weed eaters and other things that would keep the property nice-looking once fixed.

It kept Christian's hands busy to fiddle with these repairs.

The sun fractured around a big cloud, beaming down in random spots as she crossed the field and mounted the hill. Tucker sure was lucky to have this kind of land. All inherited, from what she gathered, and old money, if she was correct in judging the men who claimed to be his relations.

As her boyfriend, Tucker had never talked of his possessions or flaunted wealth.

He didn't take her for hundred dollar meals at Brisbee's Steak and Sea Restaurant on the outskirts of Reedy.

And he didn't lavish her with jewelry. Even if she were this type of girl, Tucker wasn't that guy.

Also, they'd only been together two months.

He was a rough and tumble, sidle up to the bar at The Hellion, go out for a midnight drive kind of man. And that suited her just fine.

Had it also suited his lost fiancée, Heather?

An itch of jealousy slipped down her spine. It was so wrong to be jealous of that poor woman just because she had loved Tucker first. But it was impossible to keep the envy out of her heart for a woman who still held such power over him.

Claire dragged her feet to the top of the hill, purposely crushing the grasses so she could drink in the earthy scent.

It invoked thoughts of her childhood, of lying back and gazing up at the stars.

On one rare occasion, her father had been at her side.

She'd pillowed her head on his arm and felt like the most loved child in the world.

About time for his monthly phone call.

With her father in and out of her life, it was no wonder she enabled Tucker to do the same. But it wasn't exactly right, was it? A woman should be treated better .

She reached the top of the hill and peered out over the landscape. Rolling hills, mountains in the distance. Horses dotting the ranch like tiny fleas on a dog's back. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of stirring dust. And out of the dust walked a man.

Her breath hitched and her heart did a slow flip. Christian's solid form drifted down the dirt path, boots churning the dry earth. He walked with a rolling swagger that drenched her panties instantly. Her breasts seemed to swell, pressing hard against her shirt.

His arms swung loose at his sides, but he gripped a coil of rope in his gloved fists.

Oh my God, where's his shirt?

At some point, he'd stripped it off and tucked the end into his back pocket. It moved with him, brushing his leg in a way she longed to do.

Who was she kidding? She wanted to rub herself all over him.

She stuck two fingers into her mouth and blew. Her shrill whistle pierced the air. Christian stopped walking and looked straight at her .

Her heart throbbed once...twice. Then it flipped again and sped out of control. Racing, just like her feet were now. Without conscious thought, she'd taken off

toward him, running through the grass like a lovestruck woman in a cheesy commercial.

The matching corny grin claimed her features.

Christian kicked it into high gear too, walking impossibly fast even for his long legs. As she neared, she was able to see the harsh rise and fall of his chest and sweat beading his torso.

She drew up short, her curls jiggling forward as if to reach him first. She released several small pants that had nothing to do with exertion.

“Hell, Claire.” He yanked her flush against him.

Dark heat slithered low through her belly. He jerked her off balance, and they tumbled into the high grasses, his strong body pinning hers. The scents of wild switchgrass flooded her senses, along with hard-working male musk .

He stared down into her eyes for a single beat before slamming his mouth over hers. Claiming her. Devouring her.

She nipped at his lips and tongue, writhing to get closer to his extreme heat. His steely erection ground the V of her legs, causing her clit to swell and throb.

“I need you. Right here. Now.” He spattered kisses down her throat to the tops of her breasts even as he adeptly stripped her.

“Hurry,” she breathed. She raked her fingers over his shoulders and down his spine, weaving them under the fabric of his waistband.

He flashed a crooked grin, then ducked his head and sucked her nipple through the

cloth of her shirt. Gasping, she arched, seeking more of his insanely hot touch.

When he popped her jeans button, she thought she'd combust. His scent maddened her. The heat of his skin drove her out of control.

He sank his teeth into her nipple hard enough to make her squeak. But oh, what a delicious feeling. Her skin broke out in goose bumps. Then suddenly, he manhandled her out of her top and bra, her jeans, panties and boots, until she was stretched bare beneath the hot harvest sky.

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He rested back on his heels, gazing at her with an intensity that made her squirm. Wetness pooled between her thighs and her need to be touched chased over her skin.

He yanked his jeans to his knees and then stood to kick out of boots and fabric. She stared up at him, memorizing the ripples of his upper body and the hard bulk of his hips.

She let her thighs fall apart.

Christian groaned. Very slowly, he stooped to collect the abandoned rope from the ground. She shivered when he doubled it and created a loose loop. “Give me your wrist.”

Her stomach pitched sharply with excitement. She extended her hand, and he slipped the rope around her wrist. With a few tugs, he tightened the coarse hemp. Prickles of awareness broke over her.

“Other wrist.” His gravelly tone made her pussy squeeze hard. She did his bidding, and he bound her hands together but about a foot apart. She waited helplessly, gagging for what would come next, as he located one of the rubbers in his wallet and slid it into place .

His eyes darkened. Easing over her body, he guided the rope loop around his neck and poised at her apex. “Hold on, cowgirl. This is gonna be a bumpy ride.”

He buried himself to the root. His cock stretched her perfectly, and she cried out. Juices pooled around his invasion. Using the rope, she tugged his head down and

kissed him.

With a jerk of his hips, he pulled out. Gazed at her until her skin pebbled. Then slammed into her once more. Every inch of his cock set her ablaze. A throb the same tempo as her heart took up residence in her belly.

She yanked him down using the rope again.

He hissed as the fibers obviously abraded his skin, just as it was chafing hers. She didn't care. If he wore her marks and she his, she'd go to bed happy tonight.

Christian licked her lips, her tongue, the inner walls of her mouth. He rolled his tongue down to her cleavage, which he worshiped for long minutes while the sun started its descent in the sky .

When he sucked her bud into his mouth, she felt the first spasms of her release washing over her.

“Hell,” he ground out and bit her nipple.

She eased the rope down his spine and locked him to her, bucking against his hips, taking him as deep as possible. “More. I’m so close.”

“You can’t come until I tell you it’s time, cowgirl. Now ride me harder.” He snapped his hips with a groan. “Yeah, just like thaaaat.”

His cock provided a fullness she couldn’t get enough of. She wanted him deeper and on the verge, so filled with lust that he distended her. Just when she thought she’d surely die, he reached under her, ran a fingertip around her rim and drove a finger into her ass.

The breach sent her flying over the edge.

“Now, baby.”

She couldn't have held back if she tried. Juices soaked him as each spasm stole more of her breath.

And her heart.

He thrust his finger in and out in time to her pulsations. He splayed her open on his cock. Their eyes met briefly. In that look, a thousand silent words were exchanged.

Christian threw his head back and roared his release. Liquid heat filled her pussy, driving two more mind-stealing throbs from her.

Several moments passed. When he shifted over her, she realized she had the rope pulled so tightly over his back, it was likely cutting into him.

He raised his head and smiled at her. Eased his finger from her body, which clutched at the air, wanting him inside her again. Gently, he removed his cock and toppled into the grass, shoulder first.

She giggled and rolled with him, the rope still connecting them. But the sound was removed from the turmoil she knew in her heart. Somehow, Christian had grown on her. Too much. This wasn't only a man who could give her toe-curling orgasms or acted as a friend when she longed for Tucker the most.

No, Christian possessed his own corner of that body part thumping under her breast. He searched her gaze, and God help her, she thought she saw the same emotion pooling in the depths of his pale green eyes .

She purposely tightened the rope on his back.

* * * * *

Tucker picked out Jake Mickelson the instant he walked into the bar. The man leaned against the counter, beefy arms crossed, casually talking to Jones.

Goddammit. Jones had mentioned Mickelson stopped here every time he passed through, but did it have to be during Tucker's extended stay?

Tucker hated everything about Claire's father.

From the way he wore his 49ers cap low over eyes that looked too much like Claire's, to the arrogant set of his shoulders.

This was a man who knew who he was, or at least thought he did.

He probably considered himself to be a good dad, on the road providing for his little girl all these years, when in actuality he had taken so much away from her.

Claire didn't talk about her father except in passing, but Tucker was good at reading between the lines .

While he looked on, Jones said something to Jake that made the man look up. Directly at Tucker.

Every muscle all the way down his spine tightened. His heart rate slowed as they took each other's measure.

The jukebox rolled over to a whiney tune by an artist whose voice had always gotten stuck in Tucker's craw.

Jake pulled away from the bar and started for him. Tucker steeled himself, legs braced wide, crouching low enough to hit the bigger man's midsection and tip him off balance if necessary. And it might be. Claire's father looked like a bull ready to charge.

He wore cowboy boots with gleaming silver tips and a pair of jeans that rode low under his trucker's paunch. The closer he got, the more Tucker found that the wide-spaced, almond eyes were the only feature this man shared with Claire.

But damn, seeing those eyes tore Tucker up.

"Langley. "

Jones hadn't been given his real name. He snapped his hands into fists and gave a sharp nod. "Yeah."

Jake stopped a few paces from him. His cheeks and jaw were darkened by a shadow of a beard and mustache. Tucker stared at him for a full minute before he realized that the facial hair reminded him of Christian.

He scuffed a hand over his own clean-shaven face.

"I talked to Claire this morning."

Tucker jerked. The last thing he'd expected to hear was that.

"She's told me a lot about you. Say...what are ya drinkin'?"

Drawing a deep breath through his nostrils, Tucker analyzed the emotions ping-ponging through his body. Punch the man square in the teeth or sink to a barstool next to him?

“Beer.” His throat constricted around the word, making him sound as if he really needed that drink.

Tucker shot a glare at Jones on his way to the stool, but his bartender friend tried to make peace by sliding a longneck of Tucker’s favorite brew across the wooden bar top.

Damn the man for knowing too much, but most bartenders did.

Of course he would know. Tucker had been holding down this barstool long enough.

Mickelson hitched himself onto the stool beside Tucker. Too close for Tucker’s comfort, but there was nothing to do but wait to see if the man challenged him.

Tucker took three long swallows of the earthy liquid before Claire’s father spoke.

“Heard you was on the run from my little girl.”

The cords in Tucker’s neck grew taut. He slowly turned his head to pierce the man in his gaze. “You heard that, huh?” Hurting Claire made Tucker’s stomach burn.

“Letty told me.” Mickelson raised a brow as if in challenge then sipped from his foamy glass.

For a moment, Tucker couldn’t make sense of the name. Then it filtered in, along with the wail of the woman on the jukebox. Claire’s aunt. Sweet woman, who also saw too goddamn much.

“Ah. ”

Mickelson shifted on the stool. “A lot of guys are clamoring for my girl’s attention,

you know. She's a beauty, and men want her. Letty acts as a sort of buffer between them, and in my stead."

In your absence.

"So my mother's sister tells me everything about the goings-on with Claire. Says she's living in your house."

Tucker dug his boot into the wrung of the stool to keep from falling off. "What?"

Mickelson's eyes were dark, too much like Claire's when she got angry. "Yeah, Claire moved in to take care of your cattle—"

With Christian. Fuck.

"—and she brought Letty along."

So they were all living there, cozy as three bugs, while Tucker camped out in a shitty motel room with nothing but beer and afternoon game shows for company. But whose fault was that?

"Seems that you had something serious with my little girl." The accusation was clear in Mickelson's tone as well as the set of his jaw.

Tucker looked away. That dark shadow of hair on her father's face brought a dizzying need for Christian. He brought the mouth of the bottle to his lips and drank the rest down.

"Drowning yourself in beer won't make that guilt go away."

Tucker swung around in a flash. "What do you know of my guilt?"

“I know you were fooling with my Claire, and you left her. Anyone with a brain would feel guilty about that. Hurting her is like hurting Mother Theresa.”

Fuck, the man was right. Maybe he did know his daughter—at least well enough to know she was soft and pure as new snow.

Tucker nudged the brim of his hat lower. “Your daughter is an amazing woman.” And she deserves better than me. “And I wish her the best.” Tucker climbed off the stool and made it two steps before Mickelson’s low voice reached him over the dying remnants of the song.

“What if the best was you?”

Swallowing convulsively, Tucker stared at the door.

Move toward it. Don’t look back. With supreme willpower, he moved one boot ahead of the other.

Outside, he controlled the urge to break into a run.

To run long and hard across the land until grasses swished around his knees and his lungs burned for air.

Instead, he calmly strode to the motel. Inside his room, the maids had tidied the bed and even piled his discarded clothes on top of the cheap laminate dresser. He glared around the space, hating the lumpy wallpaper and the striped bedspread. He wanted his ranch, the smell of horses.

He wanted Claire.

“Fuck.” He ripped off his cowboy hat and threw it to the floor, then jammed his

fingers through the long strands of his hair. Since Heather had died, everything in his life had been on a downward spiral.

Hell, even his ranch was jeopardized by his own family and the coal mining greed. And Christian and Claire were there, unaware of the trouble.

He snatched up his cell and jabbed a number to connect with Christian. Usually a touch of that button summoned the man to his house to play cocks, and even as the phone trilled in his ear, he grew hard.

It rang four times. Five. Went to voicemail .

“Dammit!” He tossed the phone to the bed hard enough to bounce.

His cock was aching, straining for release. In a violent motion, he ripped open his belt and popped the button and zipper of his jeans. He slid the mass partway down his hips before freeing his shaft.

The ridges pulsed in his hand. He lashed his sac to his body and started pumping his erection with his other hand. A quiver of sensation tore through him as he rolled the swollen head through his grip. Pressing open the tight slit that glistened with cream.

Imagining that it was Christian’s cock he stared at, he ran a finger between his balls, low, just as his friend love to see. A moan echoed in the room at the memory of him doing exactly this thing and watching Christian’s eyes roll back in his head.

Jerking his hips, Tucker slid his thick length through his palm, squeezing, releasing. Hot whips in his groin spurred him to move faster. A golden glow of ease was on the horizon, close but so far away.

Juices gathered on the tip as he stroked himself faster. More. More. Fuck, yes,

Christian .

In a violent spasm, he came. He tightened his hold on the head, letting the pressure build. When he released it, a spurt shot into the air.

He hissed with pleasure, letting come flow over his fingers, down his shaft, to pool around his cupped balls.

Stars sparked behind his eyes, along with a vision of Christian's cock in Claire's sweet mouth.

No Heather within a country mile of this moment.

Guilt flooded his veins, replacing every ounce of ecstasy. With a growl, he snagged a handful of tissue from the box on the dresser and cleaned himself up. Then he hurled himself into the mattress, tears burning his throat.

Heather, Claire, Christian. All wrapped up in his mind and tied with a tough little string that was Jake Mickelson's words. What if the best was you?

What if Claire really did need him and his staying away wasn't actually going to help her in the long run, but carve more of her heart out ?

She hid her pain behind smiles. When she talked about her father, she always wore a serene smile, but a burning in her eyes told more of the story.

Anger erupted in Tucker's chest. Where did that son of a bitch Jake Mickelson get off talking to him about guilt and hurt?

Every day he stayed away from his daughter planted one more seed of pain in her.

Soon she'd sprout nothing but tangled vines of hurt, and they would obliterate the sunny disposition Tucker and so many others loved about her.

Rolling to his feet, Tucker looked for the wastepaper basket. He tossed the used tissue into it and went into the bathroom to clean up. He had a mind to go back to the bar and say his piece to that man.

In fact, that's exactly what he'd do. Fighting for Claire right now seemed the only course.

By the time he strode across the parking lots, past the diner that boasted a special of the day sign for fresh cod—in a landlocked state—he was ready to do battle.

He shoved through the door of the bar, squinting at the dimness. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but it only took seconds for him to find that Mickelson wasn't here.

From behind the bar, Jones opened his mouth to say something, but Tucker spun and left before the words were uttered.

Outside the door, Tucker jabbed a few buttons on his phone and in minutes had a cashier's check wired to Christian.

If he couldn't be there to help out on the ranch, the least he could do was ease the monetary strain.

Christian probably wasn't even working right now and Claire couldn't bring home much on a waitress's salary.

Across the parking lots again, back to the room, where he found that he'd missed a call from Christian.

With a harsh noise in his throat, Tucker cradled the phone. He stared at the display with Christian's number, hollow-bellied and aching but without any ability to give it voice.

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The growl of ATV engines made Christian's head snap up. He dropped the shovel he was using to even out a bit of churned earth in the paddock and started toward the sound.

There was no reason he should feel alarm bells gonging in his mind, but he was on high alert. Lengthening his strides, he looked around for Claire. She was several yards away, doting on Boom Boom. The animal preened under the brush Claire was using, extending its neck like a cat rubbed a palm.

Don't blame you a bit, Boom Boom.

Claire looked up as he approached. A smile graced her lips even as a worry line took up residence between her long brows. "What is that? Hunters? "

"Nah, too early." He had a gut instinct about who was coming right for the house, but he didn't want to frighten her. If only she were working at the diner today, but dammit, she had wrangled another day off. The last time Tucker's relatives had shown up uninvited, Claire had been on edge for days.

Christian would keep by her and make sure they didn't bring her distress.

The black vehicles popped over the ridge like two hounds of hell. Christian scuffed a hand through the perspiration by his ear. "Come on, you sons of a bitches," he said under his breath.

He walked out to meet the riders. Sure enough, it was Tucker's uncle and cousin. They rode top-of-the-line ATVs, tricked out with winches and warm seats, shovels

strapped to the back. Why they were carrying shovels was anyone's guess.

Leon stopped abruptly and cut the engine of his four-wheeler.

Christian lowered his head and gave him a long, assessing look. Tucker's cousin drew up beside his father and turned off the engine too.

"What can I help you gentlemen with this evening?"

Leon's false grin widened. "A man who gets right to the point. I admire that, son."

"I'm not your son."

The smile turned wolfish. "I see I'm up against a loyal recruit of Tucker's."

Christian might have been forced into taking over the ranch for Tucker, but now he couldn't imagine getting up in the morning and not going out to take care of the animals.

"What do you need?" Christian asked.

"Had word from Tucker the other day," Dale said.

Christian's heart dropped to the pit of his stomach at the news. So Tucker couldn't accept his or Claire's calls, but he got in touch with these assholes?

From behind him, he felt Claire drift forward to stand at the fence corralling Boom Boom. He didn't want to turn and see her expression.

"Yeah?" Christian tried to keep his tone nonchalant, but his heart was about to slam out of his chest. It beat heavily in his ears.

Leon stared at him. Did he detect the pitch and heave of Christian's emotions? He felt as if he was riding a sharp wave down into blackened waters, never to resurface.

"Tucker and I have unfinished business. He left before he could sign a contract, and that bit of ink is holding up a large sum of money, which should have long ago been deposited into my bank account."

"Mister, I don't know anything about your money troubles. I'm here as a ranch hand until Tucker returns. Nothing more." His gritty tone betrayed him.

Leon's eyes sparked. "Are you able to get in touch with Tucker?"

"No," Claire answered before Christian could.

Dale turned his lascivious gaze on Claire. His lip curled as he took in her curves and beauty. Christian's muscles hardened, ready to pounce. One word. Say one motherfucking word to her that's out of line, and I'll smash your teeth down your throat.

Christian shifted, trying to shield her from the guy's view, but it was no good. He heard Claire's boots hit the ground right behind him, indicating that she'd jumped the fence and stood in the yard with him .

"You're operating this ranch without direction from the owner?" Leon pushed.

"We've got plenty of experience," Christian challenged, though it was a total lie. "And when Tucker left, he gave us instruction. Look, we don't want trouble. Whatever bone you're fighting over with Tucker's got nothing to do with us."

Leon folded his arms. "You ever hear of a little company called Bradley Coal?"

“Yes.”

“Then you know that they lease out property in this area and pay the landowners for the rights to mine.”

“I don’t know firsthand, but whatever you say.

” Christian wasn’t going to give an inch to this man.

He’d dealt with way too many hotheads like him—men who manipulated and used aggression to bow people to their wills.

No wonder Tucker wasn’t signing that contract.

If Leon had his thumb on Tucker, he’d only jerk himself out from under it and go his own way.

“Listen, kid. We need to get hold of Tucker, and if you help us, there’s something in it for you. ”

Christian reeled. A bribe, eh? Flash a fat wallet and Christian would hand over Tucker on a platter, complete with the trimmings, is that what Leon thought?

“We can’t—” Claire started, but Christian reached behind him and gripped her forearm. Her words cut off, and she let out a low breath. He squeezed lightly.

“We can’t force Tucker to get in touch with you. He knows where to find you if he wants you.”

“I see he may have told you to keep quiet. Well, no matter,” Leon said.

“We’ll take what we want,” Dale added. He stabbed a button that fired the engine of his four-wheeler. Leon took his son’s lead and in seconds, they had torn a circle in the turf and were riding hell-bent for the ridge.

Christian watched them until they were out of sight. Then he twisted to gather Claire into his arms.

“What kind of family is that—bribing us for information and to sell out Tucker?” She dropped her head to his chest.

He smoothed a hand over her curls and down her spine. She was as tense as a bomb defuser at a crowded mall. “You got your cell on you?”

She drew away from him, surprise crossing her glowing face. “Always do. Why?”

“Put a call in to Tucker. If we bombard him with calls and voicemails, eventually he’ll have to cave and call us back. Just don’t tell him about his family. We want to do that once we get him on the line.”

She caught her lip in her teeth and stepped away with her cell, as if she couldn’t touch Christian while thinking about Tucker. If he didn’t know better, he’d believe that. But as they made love, Tucker was there between them, always. The man’s spirit locked them together.

Christian gripped Boom Boom’s fence and stared at the animal as Claire made the call.

“Tucker, it’s Claire. Talk to us, please.

” A pause from her that drove Christian over the edge with emotion.

During the times Claire had called Tucker, how the hell could the man listen to the longing in her voice and ignore it?

Just overhearing her now made Christian want to put his fist through the barn wall.

Selfish son of a bitch .

“Christian and I really need you to call us back. There are things going on around here that we need to discuss with you.” She faltered. If Tucker didn’t hear that break in her voice and feel like the biggest horse patty on the planet, Christian would kick his ass until he did.

“Call us back. Today.” She ended the call and huffed out a long breath. When she plastered her body to Christian’s back, he turned to hold her.

“Are you going to make a call now too?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Later.” Tucker was going to get a piece of his mind—his protective hackles were up and the man was going to know it.

There would be no pleases or thank yous.

Just Christian telling his friend where his priorities lay, and to quit acting like a horse with a bruised foot that won’t stop running.

Claire moved out of his arms and climbed over the fence to be with Boom Boom again.

The alpaca gave her a solace that Christian couldn’t always provide.

When she was with the animal, Tucker was close in her mind.

The moment when Christian had discovered her smashing in Tucker's truck, he'd stepped between them.

Even when Tucker had pulled Christian into bed with him and Claire, he'd been a barrier Tucker threw up to keep from showing too much emotion.

Claire strode to the alpaca's shed, and the beast trotted at her heels. She reached onto a peg and pulled down a pink rhinestone leash. Clipping it onto Boom Boom's neck, she crooned to the animal.

"Gonna take a walk and learn how to strut."

A laugh burbled in Christian's chest. "Strut, you say?"

Claire glanced at him, her smile back in place. Though her eyes danced, he detected the underlying pain ebbing from her. She tugged on the leash, and the alpaca followed easily.

"Yes, a sweet little alpaca like Boom Boom is going to the fair. You don't suppose she can walk past the judges like a common hog, do you?"

Christian laughed deeply. Leave it to Claire to clear the atmosphere—hell, the stratosphere—of tension. Her lightheartedness was a true gift. And anyone who didn't see her for a perfect specimen of womanly charms was an idiot .

"You take your alpaca for a strut. I'll be mixing up the hot mash.

" In the evenings, they'd been tucking the horses into the stalls with a yummy treat, and their spirits seemed improved as a result.

He swore the animals mourned Tucker's loss too.

Hell, when Claire worked her shifts at the diner, the animals seemed to miss her.

Claire blew him a kiss and walked across the fenced-in area with Boom Boom trailing slowly behind. Christian headed to the barn. Once he reached the double doors, he turned around to look at the woman who captivated him.

She tugged on the leash, and Boom Boom kicked up her heels, her rhinestone ankle cuffs flashing in the dying sun.

As he often did when alone, Christian held a mental conversation with the man who'd left them aching.

You think that money you wired to my account is going to make up for you being an asshole, you're wrong. Besides, I'm not touching that money. I'll do this myself—as you initially intended.

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The imaginary Tucker didn't respond, so Christian did the only thing he knew would take his mind off his friend—he threw himself into his work.

* * * * *

The old Buick sputtered, and Claire stomped on the gas to keep it running.

The car grumbled and threatened to stall as she approached the one red light in town.

Main Street was filled with tourists at this time of day, buying hats too big for their heads that they'd never wear once they got home, and filling their cars with antiques and handmade crafts from the local vendors.

Another loud rumble alerted her that the engine was about to sputter again, so she put it in park and gassed it. Several people in the crosswalk shot her terrified looks.

She bit down on her lip, fighting a laugh. Poor pedestrians and poor old car. Claire really needed to try harder to find a new job. Trouble was, she was completely happy at the diner. She'd never seen herself as a college graduate. Never wanted to go away from Reedy .

But her wages and Letty's pension weren't conducive to buying new vehicles. Besides, she didn't need much in life.

Except two men.

She released a long, low sigh. The sound mingled with the whirl of air in the vents.

How had she gotten so entangled with Christian? And what would happen when Tucker came home?

If he comes home.

No, he would. His ranch was probably worth a couple million dollars. No one could walk away from that indefinitely.

The traffic light changed, and she eased the Buick forward with a light touch on the gas.

Too much and she'd stall for sure. As she progressed slowly through town, past the library where she had an overdue book and farther out to the local grocery, she mentally ran through the list of supplies she needed to put up the harvest.

Jars, large mouth and small, quart and pint-sized. Lids. Seals. Yesterday Letty had run home to their old house to lug their big canning pot out of the storage closet, but she didn't have any spare jars to use for Tucker's harvest. So after her shift at the diner, Claire would go buy the items.

Out of the corner of her eye, a light flashed. She turned her head to the sparkling facade of the local nail salon. The front was studded with shiny tiles and the sign had more bling than Boom Boom's ankle cuffs.

Which looked pretty damn adorable, if Claire did say so herself.

Five cars were parked in front of the salon, and as she rolled past, one woman with blonde waves down to her waist strode out on teetering heels.

Ugh. Reedy was like a depository for alien life forms. Nine out of ten women in this town looked as if they'd stepped off a runway—from fresh-faced country girls who

could grace the pages of a Country Outfitter ad to women who could fit right into the Playboy mansion.

Even that woman standing in front of the antique shop was gorgeous in a pinup-girl way—curves and blonde locks. As Claire drove past, a tall man she recognized as the town's orthodontist wrapped his arms around the woman from behind.

Jealousy panged in Claire's soul. She ran her fingers through her kinky hair. What Tucker or Christian had seen in her at the start, she had no idea. She'd only had Tucker for two months and spent the last few weeks wanting him with a hunger that was almost primal.

When she approached the Quickie Mart, her heart thudded, then a goofy grin spread over her face. Christian's truck was parked in the lot.

A laugh bubbled up her throat. "Christian, you little liar."

This morning, Letty had made a big spread of pancakes and homemade blueberry topping, but Christian had rushed out, saying he needed to see to the lame horse in the upper field. As she had watched him running out to the truck, she and Letty had dissolved into hysterical laughter.

"That man hates his breakfasts," Letty wheezed.

"Not if it involves a high fat content and a bun," Claire said.

Claire slowed the car. As she sailed by the Quickie Mart, Christian emerged from the building, armed with a large-sized soda and a small bag, probably filled with greasy breakfast sandwiches or donuts .

Her smile didn't stop all the way through her shift. Even though she heard about a

man's foot operation, detail by gruesome detail, and a young mom talked about how frazzled she was with raising her two-year-old alone, Claire offered nothing but smiles and support.

Maybe that was the reason Christian was in her life.

He lifted her spirits, which she could then pass on to others.

Spread the love. Even if he was stubborn to the nth degree.

Besides refusing Letty's home-cooking, he was getting more and more protective of Claire, telling her to go inside while he worked into the night.

Whenever she tried to insert herself in the task, he'd kiss her mindless, pat her on the bottom and send her off to the house.

Before she realized he'd bewitched her again, she was already inside.

By the time the breakfast and lunch rushes were over, she was eager to get out of the diner. As she passed the night shift waitress, she smiled and gave a nod. "See you tomorrow, Anna."

"Hey, wait up a sec." The gentle lady stopped Claire with a hand on her arm.

Claire looked up from the cell she held. No messages from Tucker. In fact, Christian hadn't even texted her. Not unusual for either, but she still felt a letdown. "Sure, what's up?"

Anna was in her mid-thirties and had two kids by a truck drivin' man.

She was lonely and the kids missed their dad—something Claire could easily identify

with.

When she'd come around to Anna's house for cookouts or holiday drinks, Claire always made it a point to take a little gift for the kids to let them know they were special.

Claire stared into her friend's face. Anna shifted her blue gaze away.

"Have you talked to your daddy lately, hon?" Anna asked.

"Um..." She thought back. When had she and her father actually spoken?

After years of him being on the road, his destinations blended in with his phone calls.

She didn't know if he called on a Wednesday from San Francisco or Saturday from Missoula.

All she knew was that he'd been strange during their last conversation, probing about where she'd been staying and if she had a boyfriend.

Anna moved closer and lowered her voice. Though the mad lunch rush was over, four old gentlemen still held down the stools at the counter, and they were sometimes more gossipy than old women.

"My Rodney crossed paths with your father two days ago. Guess they sat down together and had a few beers."

"Okay," Claire said slowly.

"That young man you brought around here a few times... Tucker, was it?"

Claire's heart convulsed. The blood drained from her face, giving her a dizzy feeling. "What about him?" Her voice came out a breathless whisper.

Anna kept her hand on Claire's arm, a concerned crinkle alighting between her eyebrows. "I hear tell that your daddy did some talking to Tucker."

Claire jerked. "What?" They were together? Talking? And where? When Tucker's relatives had come nosing around yesterday and told her and Christian that they'd heard from Tucker, Claire had known a dark jealousy unlike any she'd had before.

Except right now.

Tucker didn't have the decency to get in touch with the two people he'd fucked and left with all of his work, but he could hang out with her father?

"What would they have to talk about?"

Anna's eyes saddened. "You, honey. I guess your father told him what a good catch you are."

Claire's sinking feeling transformed to one of instant irritation. She rolled her eyes. "Damn him for interfering." But she had to ask the one question burning in her heart. "How did he look—Tucker? He's all right?"

Anna lifted a rounded shoulder in a dainty shrug. "Men don't notice things about other men like that. But you know, I guess he was doing fine."

Claire felt herself nodding—an autonomic reflex akin to breathing. Nod, smile, let everyone know I'm okay.

I'm not okay.

She fought down the knot bobbing in her throat and gave Anna's arm a pat. "Thank you for letting me know. Now, have a good shift. Don't take any crap from Mr. McGinley. His supper does not need to be sent back to be warmed. You hear?"

Anna looked uncertain .

Claire provided one of her bravest smiles and then fled the diner. Ordinarily, she might have checked her phone one more time for messages from Tucker. Instead, she shoved her cell into her purse.

The air was cooler outside, a shifty breeze that smelled of wild things, growing things.

Dying things. Her love with Tucker had been born in the summer, when the world was ripe with promise.

Autumn was upon them, and his loss and refusal to come back were killing off every sweet emotion she ever held for him.

She ripped open her car door and tossed her purse onto the passenger seat. For a long minute, she stared at the side of the diner. The concrete blocks had been painted a retro baby blue a few shades darker than the washed-out sky.

Somewhere out there, Tucker was talking about her with her father. Two men who thought they knew enough about her to deserve the right to speak of her.

Tears welled in her eyes. She dropped her forehead to the steering wheel and tried to conjure any image but that of Tucker seated beside her dad sharing beers and talk of her .

Before her mind's eye, she brought forth the picture of Christian with his contraband

breakfast and Letty's jovial laugh when he'd practically run from this morning's pancakes as if they were ninjas.

And Boom Boom. Such a silly, dim-witted creature, but one she loved.

She sniffed back the sting of tears and raised her head.

Pulling her lips tight against her teeth in some form of a smile, she drove out of the parking lot and down the road toward Reedy's hardware store.

There she spent forty-five minutes at the cash register while Marla Crump, the old owner's daughter who had the misfortune of losing her beauty to a house fire as a child, poured her lonely heart out to Claire.

So by the time Claire left the store armed with all the supplies needed to harvest Tucker's crops, she was once again thankful in her heart for the things she had, and her watery smile was almost real.

* * * * *

Tucker's heart groaned as he glanced at his phone and found two missed calls from Claire.

"Dammit." He threw himself into the hard-backed chair in front of the shabby laminate hotel desk. Lacing his hands behind his head, he stared up at the popcorn ceiling. Ugly space. Goddamn ugly excuse for a human being was living in it too.

What was he doing, drifting between diner and bar and hotel room, as if this was all he needed in life? The wide open plains called to him. An itch to return to his life had long ago begun deep in his blood, but he ignored it. He was good at ignoring things.

He let his hat tip off his head onto the floor and played connect the plaster dots on the ceiling. Was it his imagination, or did they create a big L pattern over his head? L for loser.

Hurting Claire like this ate at his soul. She loved him, and fuck, if he didn't feel something for her too. How had she gotten past his steel defenses?

All of a sudden, he jackknifed forward, elbows digging into his thighs, head in his palms. Jake Mickelson was getting under his motherfucking skin with his damned talk about his daughter. Relating stories of Claire's good deeds and her sweet disposition. As if Tucker didn't already know.

His cell buzzed in his lap again, and he growled in frustration. His resistance was too low as it was—if he saw her name on his digital display, he was damn well going to pick up.

But it wasn't her. His uncle's name flashed across the screen.

Tucker ground his molars until his jaw popped. With the flick of his thumb, he stabbed the talk button. He jerked the phone to his ear. "Yeah?"

"What a surprise that you're answering your phone two days in a row."

"Get to the point, Leon. I don't have a lot of time." All I have is time. What was he going to do with the gobs of time on his hands? His horses would be tucked into their stalls back on the ranch. And what of Christian? Was he sprawled on a recliner, cock in fist?

He had to put it from his mind. Drawing a deep breath, he carefully spoke. "Listen, Uncle, I know you're waiting for me to come home and sign those papers—"

“Damn straight. When’s that gonna happen?”

If his weasly relative were in front of him right now, Tucker would fit his hand very precisely around his throat and squeeze ever so slightly. At least until the man’s eyeballs bulged.

“You’re gonna be waiting a long time, because I ain’t signing those papers. Bradley Coal is not getting another piece of my land, no matter how big or small.”

“And the money?”

“I don’t care about the money. Never did.”

“Then what do you care about? If family is so unimportant to you, and your friends even more so—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tucker leaped to his feet and did a quick rotation of the cramped room. Past the bed, bathroom door, back to the laminate desk.

“These so-called friends of yours who are living in your house. They claim you haven’t been in touch with them.”

“Jesus, you’ve been there? For what? Hassling them.” The last was a dead statement. Of course Dale and Leon would be riding out to Tucker’s ranch. He was an idiot for overlooking that possibility in the first place. It must have been the reason for Claire’s shaky voicemail.

There was a beat of silence, while Tucker envisioned the smug look on his uncle’s face.

“If you trouble them, so help me...”

“What? You’ll find your balls and come home and man up to your responsibilities?”

That was exactly what Leon wanted. Also what Tucker should do. Dammit, how galling that his manipulative relative was right in this matter.

“Just keep yourselves on your own property, Leon. Christian and Claire—” his voice broke in speaking their names, “—they aren’t part of our ongoing discussion about Bradley Coal.”

“Oh? Seems you might want to get back and see what’s happening on your ranch, nephew.” With that, Leon clicked off.

The roar of frustration erupted from Tucker’s chest. He hurled his phone to the bed and paced three more rapid-fire loops around the room. Then he sank slowly to the bed and stared at his hands. Hands that should be caring for his own animals and crops.

And caring for Claire.

He drew a deep gulp of air and lay back on the mattress again to find new letters in the plaster of the ceiling.

A pair of C’s taunted him—so close yet so far away.

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The sweet fragrances of Claire's citrus shampoo and female arousal stimulated Christian all over again as he leaned over her. She was curled on her side, dark curls mashed to her cheek and rose lips parted in sleep.

He hovered over her for a moment, drowning in her scents and battling the need to jump back into bed with her. But dawn was a bright prick on the horizon, and it was time to take care of the stock.

He trailed his lips over her temple, and she roused.

"Stay in bed this morning, sweetheart. Sleep in and I'll do the chores."

She mewed in reply and tilted her face up to his. He stared at her closed eyes, the dark webs of her lashes and her full, smiling pout. Unable to wait until she was fully awake, he swooped in for a kiss.

Her lips gave under his, and she opened to him, somehow tasting delicious even after sleep. He dipped his tongue into her mouth, his cock distending instantly with the need to sink into her hot body.

She lifted a fist and twisted his shirt, directly over his heart.

A grunt left him as he held her face in one hand. Emotions filtered into his head, telling him exactly what he should do. Claim her. Take her. Cherish her forever.

Yesterday she'd asked him to hang a blinged-out name sign on Boomerang's pen. And while he drilled holes in the wood and screwed it to the wooden fence, she'd

hitched herself up on the rail and watched. Smooth legs dangling inches from his face as he crouched to work.

Something about that moment would live forever in his heart, because it was so real. He wanted to do crazy things for her for the rest of his life.

He slowed the kiss, nuzzled her little upturned nose. “Sleep, baby. ”

“Okay,” she murmured and turned back onto her side, immediately drifting off.

Christian stared down at her for a full minute.

How had it happened in such a short time?

In his past, he’d counted himself in love twice before, but this was a helluva lot different.

That hitch in his heart had nothing to do with a slow tumble into love.

This was a desperate need to possess and to make her love him back.

His shirt was still crumpled from her hold on it. He smoothed his hand over the spot, just to touch something she’d touched.

With a shit-eating grin on his face, he quietly eased out of the bedroom, walked down the hall and let himself out of the house.

Letty would have a warm crock pot of oatmeal ready for him, but he would face it later.

Right now, he wanted to get these horses cared for.

Recently, he'd spotted one in the upper field limping.

He ran through his daily routine with the chickens and the horses in the barn. Later, he'd turn the few in the barn out to pasture. He had no idea if this was an action Tucker would approve of, but Claire had advised it, and Tucker wasn't here to say differently .

The air was crisp this morning, tinged with autumn.

He drew it into his lungs and savored the turn of seasons.

Even though the change brought new dilemmas, such as how to harvest fields of corn.

Claire and Letty could deal with the kitchen garden, but those forty acres of corn worried the hell out of him.

Up in the field, he slowly moved toward the glimmering brown body of the limping horse. It moved gingerly along the fence line.

He approached with care, taking in the lines of the horse's back and haunches. All looked well. Its head was down, though, and that was different.

As he progressed through the pasture, he started talking to the horse, just as Claire did. "I'm here to see what's up with that hoof, boy. Is it sore?"

The other horses were clustered in the bottom of the field, grazing. But this one was all alone. A stallion. Huge and intimidating.

Christian preferred heavy equipment to big-bodied animals, but at the moment, this was his gig, so he'd roll with it.

For how long, though ?

He pulled a hoof pick out of his back pocket and eased up to the animal. “Hey boy. I’m going to check on this back hoof. Clean it out and make sure it’s all right.”

The horse swung its head around and gave him a baleful look. Christian patted its nose. “I know. It sucks to be lame.”

A year ago, he’d spent six weeks of the spring laid up with a broken foot, caused by a slip in a ditch. A minor break that had cost him money in his trimming business. Mostly, it had driven him wild to be out of commission.

“I sympathize. Lemme have a look.” He ran his hand down the horse’s leg, and it allowed him to fold it upward to look at the hoof. With the pick, Christian scraped away the debris around the frog. The horse’s hide shivered, and it gave a snort.

“Tender, I see. Wonder what the hell a person does to fix that?” He probed the area above the hoof and didn’t see anything amiss, but it was a strange color compared to the others.

Gently, he lowered the hoof to the ground. The horse stamped a foreleg and snorted.

“Okay, I’ll consult with someone.” Who, was another question. Alone, he couldn’t afford to call a vet in, but Tucker’s money had been dumped into his account.

Nope. Not using it.

There had to be a hundred old timers around these parts willing to give sound advice. Letty might even know.

He patted the horse’s flank and loped off toward the house again.

The chickens were hard at work, foraging for food.

Several scattered out of his path. On the way to the house, he picked up the basket of fresh eggs.

Letty had proved herself with oatmeal, and today she'd likely try to ply him with eggs and biscuits and gravy, but what he really wanted was a fountain drink and a couple of donuts.

Hard to sneak off to the Quickie Mart without the ladies of the house taking offense though.

He started across the yard to the house, but a noise in the barn brought him around.

Singing.

A clear, high voice. Claire crooning to the animals. His smile spread like fire licking dry kindling. Heat surged in his chest.

He set the egg basket down and stepped into the dark depths of the barn. Dust motes swirled crazily in the morning light slanting through the vents. He turned automatically toward the sound of her voice.

Her tone dipped to a husky murmur, and the scuff of her boots on floorboards kept beat. She paused in her song to speak to Noddy, the oldest mare among the stock. Not that he'd know—he was going off her words.

“Let's dump out this old grain and get you new, eh, girl?” As the pellets hit the trash bucket, she resumed her singing.

Christian's eyes finally adjusted, and he picked out the lines of her body. Round hips

in a denim skirt. Slim T-shirt ending just above her waistband. As she moved, skin flashed, making him harden painfully.

He strode in and caught her up mid-line of her song. Her eyes widened as he slammed his mouth over hers. He bent her back over his arm. The feed scoop clattered to the floor, and she spun her arms around his neck.

“Need you. Now.” He slanted his mouth over hers again and again, each pass growing in intensity.

She moved close, her body locked to his like Velcro. He laughed into her mouth, and she bit his lower lip .

With a growl, he reared back. Her eyes were dark with lust, her lips swollen. Fuck, he needed to find out if she was wet.

“You’re gonna pay for that, sweetheart.” Sliding his hand down her taut belly, he moved lower, fumbling under the hem of her skirt.

Her slippery folds met his fingers, unhindered by panties.

“Jeezus,” he gasped, mind whirling with lust and passion and so much more. “You’re slick and ready for me.”

“That dream-kiss we shared this morning had me all worked up.”

“And you thought you’d let me find this soaking wet treasure, hmmm?” He bathed her lower lip with his tongue, teasing the corner of her smiling mouth. She darted her tongue out to meet his, and they wrangled for another long minute.

He walked her backward, aware of a hay bale against the wall. A horse blanket hung

on a nail, and he snagged it. His fingers were still wet with her cream, and he wanted nothing more than to draw them under his nose and inhale her need .

Soon.

Not soon enough. He tossed the blanket over the hay bale, gripped her shoulders, and spun her to face away from him. Planting a hand on her lower back, he pressed her down until she was bent over the bale, ass up.

Her breath came in short pants, but she didn't beg. Not yet. Hell, he couldn't wait to make her ask him to fill her.

Shuddering, he stared at the fine curves of her thighs. The skirt rode high, inches from her wet slash. He slipped his fingers into that crevice and met with even more wetness.

“You’re gonna kill me, woman.”

She cooed as he traversed her tight seam with his fingers. Her outer lips were engorged, a juicy treat. He probed deeper and found her core scalding hot.

She pressed back against his hand, and he drove two fingers into her channel, burying them to the first knuckles.

For a moment, he pinched his eyes shut and let the heat travel up his wrist to his arm and higher. His cock battered the front of his jeans like an untamed beast. Curling his fingers, he stroked the spongy inner wall of her pussy.

She flooded his fingers.

“Holy...Christ.” He withdrew his fingers and dropped to his knees. Pressing the

denim over her hips, he exposed her to him fully. The first taste stole all control. Wildly, he plunged his tongue deep into her cunt, licking and tasting her want.

For me. All for me.

Her sweet juices coated his lips and chin, but he wanted more. Shoving lightly on her lower back, he caused her to arch and give him total access. He ran his tongue over her lips and inner folds, up to capture her straining nub.

She cried out, and he swore to every god in the universe that she was pulsating already.

“That’s it, baby. Don’t hold back. I’ll make you come twice this way before I take you.”

“Yessss.” She wriggled.

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He circled her clit, painting it with his saliva and her juices. With the point of his tongue, he ground it into her body. He held still, allowing the pressure to build within her .

Then with a quick flick, he strummed her bundle of nerves.

She came undone.

Cream soaked his chin. He licked her madly to the sway of her ass against his face. Long, hoarse cries escaped her.

He slowed, bringing her down with ease but not allowing her to retreat. Avoiding her ultra-sensitive nerves, he lapped at her opening. When he sent a forefinger into her pussy, she clamped down around him and held on.

He crooked his finger and pressed hard.

She jerked and moaned. “Oh...my...Chris!”

An acute ache took up residence in his pants, but fuck, it was good. He savored the burn, knowing his release would be so good in the end.

He lessened the pressure on her g-spot. She groaned. Before she could draw a full breath, he pinned her down again.

As he fingered her pussy, he listened to her body. The breaths she dragged through her lungs were punctuated by squeaks. His hand was drenched with her want .

After a few plunges, he added a second finger. She wailed in pleasure.

He guided a third into her tight sheath.

“Faster,” she gasped.

Following her direction, he watched the slow pulsations of her body around his hand. The erotic sight nearly stole his control, and he had to squeeze the head of his cock hard through his jeans to keep from blowing.

He splayed his fingers wide.

Contractions squeezed his fingers, but they might as well have squeezed his cock. He couldn't take another minute. Before she finished with her orgasm, he withdrew his hand.

As fast as he could, he tore his jeans down his hips and had a condom in place. Then gathering her up with an arm around the middle, he drove into her. Deep.

A dark need to possess her mind, body and soul drove him higher than ever before. Ticklish wisps of heat wove through his belly. They tangled around his heart and filled his brain with nothing but Claire.

He dug his fingers into her hips and yanked her into his pistoning hips. His balls slapped her flesh, the quiet sound stimulating him further.

“Damn, I can't hold back for long.”

Her body gripped him harder in response. He became attuned to her rasping breaths but wanted more.

“Cry out if it feels good, sweetheart.”

A low mew broke from her. Not enough.

He ground his cock against her womb.

A long moan spiraled from her.

Jerking out, he hesitated before plunging back into her long enough to make her squirm. He slid his fingers into her wet heat and gathered all of her cream.

With an abrupt shove, he filled her with his cock again even as he circled her rim with his damp fingers.

She cried out and shoved against him.

“Like that, do you?” he growled in her ear.

He eased a finger into her ass, past the muscular ring that barely gave him resistance. She was ready, so ready.

When he was buried balls and knuckle deep, she loosed a tremulous cry that splintered the silence .

“Fuck, yessss. You want him. You want both of us.”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

He plunged his finger in and out of her ass. “As long as the stars burn, he’ll be between us. He gave us this.” He churned his hips, twisting his cock in her tight sheath.

“As long as the stars burn,” she echoed.

He lost himself to sensation. The need to pour his seed into her tight little body stole all control, and he pounded into her.

She came apart. Her pucker clenched and released his finger even as her pussy grew as tight as a hot glove. Her hoarse scream triggered a violent spasm in his core. With a barely contained bellow, he unloaded. Spurt after spurt left his swollen cock even as his heart seemed to pour out into her.

Lashing her body to his, he whispered hotly into her ear, “Come on me, sweetheart. Don’t stop until you’ve given me everything.”

A final shudder ripped through her. She turned her head to the side, bringing her lips up against his. He brushed his mouth over hers gently, back and forth as the last remnants of his release tingled through his system .

“Christian,” she whispered. Her eyes were closed and a light dew spangled her hairline and throat. The sun beamed down from the high windows and vents, bathing her in a golden glow.

His nymph. Glorious girl.

Was she truly his, though? Or was he a stand-in for Tucker? No, she’d admitted she wanted them both. If Claire was anything, it was honest.

He pulled out of her body and dealt with his condom, dropping it into the trash amongst the old feed and a few soda cans. By the time he turned to her again, she’d wiggled her skirt down her hips and was seated on the hay bale, knees together and ankles splayed.

When he neared, she crooked a finger at him. The tenderness in her eyes was unmistakable.

In two long strides, he reached her. Plucking her off the hay bale, he sat and tucked her on his lap. She locked her arms around him and he hooked a finger in the belt loop of her denim skirt, tethering her to him.

Emotion warred inside him. If Tucker came home, he could lose Claire. But all he wanted was for his friend to return. It wasn't even possible to orgasm without Tucker's face flashing in his mind's eye. They were all irrevocably connected.

She settled in the cage of his arms. Her head rested in the crook of his neck, and her curls teased his jaw.

Her voice cracked the silence. "I'm growing attached to you."

He smiled against the top of her head. You couldn't pry me away from you. "Mmm. What does that mean?"

"It should mean that I don't think of Tucker as much as I think of you, but it's not the case. I'm sorry, Christian."

He brushed his lips over her hair as he shook his head. "Don't be. He brought us together. He's our roots. We couldn't chop him out if we wanted."

"Which means we need to bring him back to us."

Christian flexed his arms around her, squeezing her tighter. He didn't know how to do that, but he sure as hell had to try. For him. For Claire.

For the man who was on the run and needed to come home.

* * * * *

The scents of cooking tomatoes clouded the warm autumn air. Claire ran a long wooden spoon around the edges and bottom of the big cook pot where the sauce bubbled.

Around her was the detritus of her foray into sauce-making. Crates upon crates of tomatoes, onions, garlic, green peppers and a big bag of jalapenos that provided Letty's special kick. Basil and oregano filled two big jars—fresh-picked from the kitchen garden.

Letty sat at a folding table, chopping vegetables to put into the next batch of sauce.

Christian had recruited a group of men he worked with on the road crew to help haul heavy crates and pots.

They dotted the yard, drinking beer Christian had toted outside in a big cooler.

One bottle set at Letty's elbow, and occasionally she would take a long pull before resuming her chopping.

The more Claire stirred, the more her tensions flowed away. Tucker had been gone three and a half weeks now. When she or Christian called him, he never answered, and her hopes for his return were growing fainter.

She sighed.

Today they'd work hard to put up all of the tomatoes, and tomorrow they'd start picking apples. By the week's end, they'd have full pantries. Some of the wares were going home with Christian's friends, but he'd suggested that they donate a few crates to the local food bank.

So Claire's contribution of the jars and canning supplies would go to a worthy cause.

The sauce thickened, indicating it might have scorched.

"Damn."

"What's the matter, Claire girl?" Letty asked without looking up from the papery skins of garlic sticking to her fingers.

"I think the sauce may be scorched, but I can't taste anything but garlic. Chris?"

He shook his head. "I've got a chew in."

Surprise flitted through her. Apparently he chewed tobacco in the company of his coworkers. She'd never seen so much as a pouch of it in his pocket .

She glanced at the next man, who shook his head.

"Anyone here without a chew in who can taste this?"

They all stared at Letty. Her aunt looked up over her wire-rimmed glasses. Suddenly, her cheek distended as she poked her tongue into the small pouch that held the wintergreen snuff she sometimes enjoyed.

"Nah, I've got me a wintergreen in."

A few guffaws from the men rippled around the yard.

"That'd be me." The low tone stood up every hair on Claire's body.

She went dead still as Tucker's voice washed over her from behind. Her heart

thumped heavily. Slowly, she raised her head. Christian stood five paces away in her line of vision, his gaze fixed on the man they'd both yearned for.

As long as the stars burn.

Her throat went bone dry. Christian flicked his gaze to her, and she had to bite off a cry of pain.

His gaze was dark and penetrating—wounded—staring right through her .

A shift of a boot on gravel alerted Claire that Tucker was circling her. His worn Wranglers appeared in the line of her vision. Suddenly, her adrenaline kicked into high gear, flooding her system, and she had to move.

She dipped the spoon into the sauce with a shaky hand and held it out.

Tucker folded his muscular body into a crouch inches away from her. His soap and water and pine scents chased each other around her head. His familiar angular jaw, straight nose and bright eyes loomed close. So damn close.

She tightened her grip on the spoon, but her hand surged up and down with nerves.

Tucker wrapped his fingers around hers to hold her hand steady. Then he leaned in and parted his firm lips to accept a taste of the sauce.

She shuddered, her pussy instantly wet. But it was the heartstrings plucking a crazy hoedown that nearly made her fall off her stool.

“Not scorched a bit.” When he spoke, silver flashed under his lower lip, along with his dimple. She looked hard to see a labret piercing hidden in his dirty beard.

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As if seeing him for the first time, her scope of vision widened and she drank in his entire appearance. He'd cut his hair. No longer did the warm brown ends brush his shoulders. Instead, it curled up from under the brim of his black Larry Mahan cowboy hat.

His shirt was open at the throat, exposing the tanned flesh she'd dreamed of each night since he left weeks ago. She snapped her free fingers into a fist to keep from reaching for him.

"Let me at that sauce, girl. You go and take a break." Letty removed the spoon from her hand.

Still, she sat in shock, staring at Tucker. He dropped his gaze to her mouth and stared at it for a full minute before lifting his eyes.

A flurry of motion behind Tucker drew her attention to Christian. He spit out his chew and jammed a breath mint he always carried into his mouth. Then he spun on his heel and strode toward the house.

Her heart turned over. She jumped to her feet, skirted Letty and Tucker and broke toward the house with Tucker on her heels .

"You aren't glad to see me." Tucker's voice burned with pain and accusation.

She shook her head hard. How could he believe that? She and Christian had suffered daily while he was gone.

But she couldn't force the words past her frozen lips, because Christian's rod-straight back was disappearing into the house.

"Chris!" She launched herself up the stairs after him and ran into the cool recesses of the house. Tucker slammed the door behind them all.

Christian whirled, fists clenched, a vein pulsing in his throat. "Where the hell do you get off, Langley?"

Tucker widened his stance and hitched his thumb in his jeans pocket. "You mean by returning home—to my ranch?"

"Oh, that's dirty. A man walks—no runs—away from everything he has, leaving two people to pick up his slack, and then he acts as if we're stepping on his toes."

"That's what this is about? You're pissed off because you had to water a few horses?"

Christian's face mottled red then interspersed with alarming purple. Claire mentally bounced between the men. Every cell of her being strained to touch Tucker. To put her arms around him, bury her face against his delicious throat and inhale him.

But the fathomless struggle in Christian's eyes drew her to him.

With a jerk, Christian closed the gap between Tucker and himself. He butted a blunt finger into Tucker's chest, rocking him on his heels. "A few horses? How about all the particulars of running this ranch, such as how to find a way to purchase feed or cure a case of hoof rot?"

Tucker's face blanched. "I wired you money... You didn't use it? You stubborn ass. How is that my fault?"

“I didn’t want your guilt money. I take care of my own. I don’t run.” Christian glared at him.

For several heartbeats, Claire held her breath.

“I was trying to be nice,” Tucker grated out.

“Would have been nicer of you to keep your goddamn relatives from threatening us. ”

“Leon and Dale?” His voice strained, as if he’d gulped down some barbed wire, not spaghetti sauce.

“That’s right. We never know where they’ll pop up next, but it seems they have me and Claire pinned down right nice. See, they think we’re squatting on your land with thoughts of stealing something. If I don’t keep Claire in my sights at all times, I’m afraid of what they might do or say to her!”

Surprise speared her. She’d had no idea that Christian might have these fears or that he wasn’t with her every second simply because he wanted to be.

She must have made some noise, because Christian swung his gaze toward her. The depths glimmered with fury and hurt and something deeper she didn’t understand. But it wounded her to see it.

She reached for him. He slashed the air with a hand and tore into Tucker again.

“What the hell do they want with your land?”

With an unsteady hand, Tucker pulled off his hat. The shorter ends of his hair stuck up, giving him a more boyish look. Claire’s heart tumbled straight into the dark heaven-hell it was to love this man.

“They want another access shoot for the coal mining taking place on their adjoining property. But I won’t grant it because I want to preserve the water and land for my stock.”

“You mean our stock.”

“Chris,” Claire gasped. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Did he mean to challenge Tucker for part ownership of the animals or ranch since he’d invested some time?

Tucker shot her a look then returned his attention to the pissed-off laborer who’d turned cowboy in front of him. As Tucker stared at Christian, his expression softened. “Look, man, I’m sorry.”

Christian’s composure shattered. His features convulsed, and he scrubbed a hand over his face. Claire couldn’t take it another minute. She drifted to Christian’s side.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her into his body.

Tucker gave a slow blink at the sight. “I was afraid it would be this way. ”

She opened her mouth to stop him from jumping to conclusions, but Christian beat her to it.

Looking right at Tucker, he wrapped a possessive arm around Claire. “We’ll leave right after we’ve finished this sauce.”

* * * * *

Christian leaned against the porch railing and stared at the spot in the yard where so many people had just enjoyed each other’s company. Several tables had been clumped together and Letty had insisted upon feeding everyone who had come to

help with the sauce-making.

Now the only evidence he'd even shared a civil meal with Tucker were the depressions on the grass where the table legs had rested.

Damn that man for believing he could just march into the middle of it all and take over. Did Christian's hard work amount to nothing? Even Tucker's possessive gaze on Claire fueled Christian's annoyance .

A boot scraped over the porch floor behind him. Without turning, Christian sensed Tucker's presence.

"We'll be goin' soon."

Tucker sidled up to the rail beside him. "Don't go. Stay on the ranch and take my bed. I'll sleep on the sofa."

Christian glanced at Tucker's face, hoping to see anything but the remorse that lived on his rugged features.

The kettle of anger in Christian's soul bubbled.

Tucker had hurt Claire—hurt both of them.

His leaving had heaped stress and work on them.

If Tucker believed just turning up on the ranch would earn him forgiveness, he was dead wrong.

Christian stared at Tucker for a long minute. Tension stretched between them. Finally, Christian tugged on the brim of his hat. "Thank you for that. Claire and Letty

are pretty exhausted after working all day. We'll take your offer tonight and figure out what to do tomorrow."

Tucker turned away, eyes averted. Christian sucked in one more deep lung full of fresh air and went in search of Claire.

He found her at the kitchen table, head in her hands. His stomach hollowed out at the sight of her despondent pose. Wrapping his fingers around her wrist, he said, "Come to bed with me."

She looked up. Her gaze wasn't focused on him but on some faraway point in her mind.

On Tucker, most likely, as his was.

Drawing her against his side, Christian led her down the hall to the bedroom they'd been sharing since Tucker left. So many amazing moments they'd spent together, always wishing for the man who'd run. Now he'd returned and Christian was pissed off at him for it.

No, not angry because he'd returned. Angry because Tucker hadn't begun to say jack shit about being sorry. He and Claire needed more than Tucker's handsome face to make their burning pain of the past weeks recede.

Claire allowed Christian to strip her. Then he pulled down the covers and tucked her into bed. When he had abandoned his dusty clothes and boots, he slipped in behind her.

The kiss of her bare flesh against his cock instantly aroused him. His shaft lengthened against her ass .

She reached back and sank her nails into his hip, wriggling closer. “I need you tonight. Just like this.”

As he nuzzled her fragrant neck, he located a condom and rolled it in place. By the time he pressed his cock on her slick folds, he was aching. The hollow in his chest closed a bit as he guided his erection home.

Deep into her tight pussy.

She gasped at his sleek invasion, pressing her back against his chest. Reaching back, she pulled on his hip. He rocked into her hard. She cried out, her pussy clamped around his throbbing cock.

Knowing Tucker was in the other room haunted Christian, but he wasn’t about to stop. The extreme pleasure and solace he gained in Claire’s sweet body blew his mind. With a few violent shoves, he reached a depth only achieved by their position.

She curled back against him, small, muted sounds bursting from her as if she didn’t want to parade their lovemaking in front of the man who wasn’t participating either.

Christian sucked on the side of her neck, lost in her flavor and feel. When the first pulsations struck her, he could hold back no longer. He palmed her breast as he exploded. Waves of release slammed him, heightened by their quiet passion.

Claire’s tight channel gripped him like a glove as her own orgasm stretched on. After several moments, Christian’s senses returned—along with throat-tightening remorse that they’d shared this in Tucker’s bed while he was on the couch.

And while both he and Claire wanted Tucker with every fiber of their beings.

A soft sob from Claire made Christian pull out of her. Flipping her onto her back, he

stared down into her beautiful face. Tears streamed from the outside corners of her eyes.

“Oh sweetheart.”

“It feels weird without him. This was the first time we shut him out.”

The ache in Christian’s chest increased. He buried his face against her neck.

“I think he’s hurting bad, Chris.”

“Me too.”

“He hasn’t been whole. We need to help him heal. And I care enough to try. Do you?”

“I fucking shouldn’t, but I do.” He raised his head to meet her gaze .

She swiped the tears away and gave him a watery smile. “Clean up and let’s open the bedroom door.”

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Christian's mouth quirked up, suddenly tugged by a feeling of lightness.

The clouds parted and he was able to see a clearer path.

He disposed of the condom, slipped on his boxers and fetched a warm washcloth from the adjoining bathroom for Claire to clean up.

When she was once more wearing a T-shirt and panties and lying under the covers, Christian opened the door.

There, Tucker stood, face ravaged by pain, both hands braced against the doorframe. His shoulders bowed forward. "I just—I'm so damn sorry." His gaze penetrated Christian then slid past him to Claire.

The last ember of anger in Christian's chest burned out and sailed up to the sky on the breeze of loving this man. He hooked an arm around Tucker's neck and tugged him against him.

Dark passion flared in the place of the hurt as Christian drank in Tucker's familiar scents. "You're a dumbass, but I'll forgive ya."

"And I forgive you for being a stubborn ass about the money. "

Claire's raspy laugh floated from behind them.

Christian shook his head, mouth opened to protest, when Claire's silky touch on his arm stopped him.

“You were being stubborn. And you should have told me about it. You weren’t the only one filling in the gaps on this ranch.”

A spasm of hurt pinched Tucker’s rugged features. “What about you, Claire? Can you forgive me?” He locked an arm around Christian’s middle.

She must have nodded because the look on Tucker’s face transformed to one of joy. He shoved Christian into the room and shut the door behind them. When Tucker took Claire into his arms, Christian smiled wider than he had in weeks.

They crawled under the covers together and just held each other for a long time. The moon rode higher in the sky, climbing toward its peak. Christian stared at it, his mind foggy with fatigue but his body on high alert. Being in this bed with both of them was a dream come true.

“Is there room on this ranch for us?” Christian asked .

“Of course—I wouldn’t dream of putting you off if you want to stay.”

“Claire here has room in her heart for you and me both.” Christian stroked her side, close to her breast.

“That so?” Tucker swallowed, a shadow crossing his face. His voice sounded as if his dog had just died and the country song about it was belted out by his most hated performer.

“Well, she hasn’t come out and said it yet...” Christian looked deep into her eyes, “...but I know she’s in love with you.”

She nodded, unable to help herself.

“And I think she’s in love with me.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, and she grinned at Christian.

Tucker scuffed a hand over his jaw, fingertip resting on the silver stud under his lip. “So what does that mean?”

Christian swallowed hard, his throat working. “Means there’s one more confession to be made.”

Tucker waited, as did Claire. Time ticked by.

“Say it,” Tucker said softly .

“I...I want to be part of this ranch, because it’s the only place I’ve truly felt as if I do some good.”

Claire squeezed him close.

“And?” Tucker prompted after a minute of silence.

Christian dropped his gaze, then snapped it back to the man they both longed for. “And I want you too.”

Tucker’s chest heaved at the blow Christian’s words delivered. Dark heat clawed at his insides, and his cock was instantly erect. Throbbing, hard as steel.

His friend wasn’t only talking about jacking off together on the couch with cold beers beside them. If his tone of voice didn’t alert Tucker that Christian wanted more, his friend’s burning gaze did.

Tucker met that gaze straight on. In that instant, he accepted everything that Christian was to him—more than a friend. Their sex had entangled them but Claire had united them.

She made a quiet noise that made Tucker's sac draw up close to his body in need.

Again, he locked his gaze on her sweet, tormenting mouth .

He wrapped her tight to his body. With a cry, she threw her arms around him. He crushed her lips beneath his, bruising her, devouring. Christian pressed close to them, his body hard and hot as hell.

Without releasing her mouth, Tucker removed an arm from around her waist and reached for Christian.

His friend shuddered and dropped his forehead to Tucker's neck as Claire kissed the fucking hell out of him.

Her tongue was wild, driving him to the brink. Tucker tightened his hold on Christian, and the three of them grappled in their embrace. Hands moving. Exploring. Tugging at clothes, which they didn't want to be there.

Tucker tore his mouth free from Claire's. She moaned her displeasure.

I'll take care of you, baby. But I need to take care of him too.

Catching Christian's gaze, Tucker let understanding flash between them. All of the passion he'd ever known with his friend had suddenly escalated to a monumental peak. This was it.

Their mouths collided in a fury of need. Hard lips, tooth against tender flesh. The

pain shot through Tucker's heart and shattered some of the old hurt, bringing only warmth and desire.

Christian gripped Tucker's nape and plunged his tongue deep into his mouth.

Sensation ripped through Tucker as their kiss spiraled out of control.

The stroke of Christian's hot tongue brought him to the quivering edge of the precipice.

Another damn swirl, a scrape of Christian's face hair, would make Tucker come too soon.

Claire wiggled between them, her soft hands working back and forth over his pecs.

Heather was gone. Claire and Christian were here, and he wanted them bad.

Claire arched and gasped under their hands. Christian drew a broad palm down the center of her chest, over the slope of her bared belly, to her exposed mound. A path he'd obviously traversed more than once.

Tucker fell back, struck by the magnitude of what he'd done by leaving.

Immediately, Claire sat up and wrapped her arms around him. Christian moved around the bed and pressed close. "As long as the stars burn," she said .

"What does that mean?" Tucker grated out. Longing for these two people broke over him once more.

"It means you belong here with us. Between us. Now c'mere." Christian's firm lips were inches away, and his flavors still lived on Tucker's tongue.

With a growl, he swooped in and kissed Christian.

“We wanted you so fucking bad,” Christian murmured between kisses.

“I couldn’t get you two out of my head,” Tucker answered.

He pulled free. With chest working for air, he watched Claire reach for Christian. She plucked at Christian’s nipples with a singular knowledge.

Tucker’s cock strained.

Christian’s carved abs had haunted him almost hourly, and he wasn’t about to miss touching them along with Claire.

“I’m part of this,” he said.

Her eyes pooled with joy. “You couldn’t be anything else.” She skittered a hand over Tucker’s chest, down to his cock .

Christian’s attention riveted on her grip on Tucker’s shaft. “Ffffuck. Pull it back a bit at the head.”

A bead of come appeared in the slit.

“Jesus, yeah, like that.” Christian passed a hand over his face in testament to his internal struggle.

They’d been in this bed together, but it felt different this time. Before, there had been boundaries. Christian had been afraid to touch Claire. She’d been reluctant to put her hands on a man that wasn’t Tucker.

And Tucker's walls had all been erected.

Now they were crumbled ruins, and he let his emotion pour forth.

Reaching out, he caught Christian's thick length in his fist. His friend—no, lover—shuddered violently. Tucker squeezed his eyes shut as the velvety heat permeated his fingers and palm. His cock twitched, ready to spurt.

“No,” he ground out. He moved to squeeze his shaft to stop his release, but Christian was too quick. Their gazes clashed as they started to roll each other's shafts through their hands .

“Oh my God,” Claire cooed. She stretched out on the bed, lips swollen and inviting, her nipples two rosy peaks stabbing the air. Her eyes were hooded as she watched them pleasure each other. “Kiss again.”

Her murmured command settled into Tucker's groin. Pressure built. When Christian leaned in and claimed his mouth, Tucker surrendered to the man's passion. He let Christian tug and prod his lips and tongue, drawing sensations up from his toes.

The scariest thing should have been the emotion Christian raised in Tucker, but he threw all caution aside and let himself feel.

Christian pressed a wide thumb against the tip of Tucker's cock. Cream gathered there, and he smeared it over the distended head. Christian was shaking. “Fuck, I've gotta...” His lover stopped.

“Do it,” Tucker demanded.

Christian dropped down on all fours and caught Tucker's bobbing shaft between his scorching lips.

Tucker threw his head back and released a long, guttural groan. For a long minute, he drowned in the insane heat of his friend's mouth. He'd experienced a lot of blowjobs in his life, and while Claire was amazing, Christian knew how to give head.

He sucked Tucker to the root without hesitation. Tucker's thighs quivered, his muscles straining. He dug his fingers into his lover's scalp and guided him back and forth on his dick.

"Hottest thing I've ever seen." Claire plunged her fingers between her thighs, caressing her wet folds as she looked on.

Tucker couldn't have stopped his grin from devouring his face if he'd tried. Christian working him with his skilled mouth and Claire fingering her clit in time to their rhythm...it was fantasy times ten.

Pressure escalated in Tucker's core until he had to bite off his groans, for fear of alerting Aunt Letty as to their activities. Group sex wasn't exactly conventional around these parts, but he couldn't care less.

He pounded into Christian's mouth. The head of his cock struck the back of his lover's throat. With only a grunt of pleasure, Christian took him. Claire reached under Christian's legs and ran her fingers in the spots that Tucker wanted to touch .

Hell, for months he'd wanted to bury his face in the shadowy area beneath the man's balls and learn his taste.

Tonight. Now.

In another minute.

Want claimed his control, and he felt the first rush of orgasm. spurts jetted from his

cock. Normally, they'd shoot into the air or into a condom. But this time, Christian caught them. Gulpd them down, milking his shaft expertly.

Tucker brayed with bliss. He held Christian's head to him as he surrendered it all. Body, heart and soul.

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Christian continued to suck Tucker's long shaft, drawing on it gently. Flicking it with his tongue. He slipped his tongue down the underside, over the spot he'd seen his friend apply pressure to with his fingers.

Tucker bucked. Opening his eyes, Christian caught Tucker's expression of rapture—something he'd craved these past weeks. The eroticism of having caused that look singlehandedly threatened Christian's sanity.

He moaned around Tucker's cock.

"Hell," he said in response then pulled free of Christian's mouth.

Claire's heated gaze met Christian's. He placed a soft bite on Tucker's thigh before shifting to position himself at Claire's center. "Your turn," he rasped and dove into her beckoning heat.

As he stroked her soaking folds with his tongue, Tucker cradled the back of his head, guiding him over her. Pressing him more firmly. Claire cried out, her pussy quivering under his mouth.

"Make her wetter than she's ever been," Tucker urged. He skipped his finger down the rim of Christian's ear. "Get her primed so you can fuck her."

And where will you be while I fuck her? Christian drowned in visions. He cupped Claire's ass and drew her up to feast on her pussy. She tasted sweeter than ever, as if her body had tapped some hidden store and emulated the passion and love in her heart for both of them.

He swirled his tongue over her taut bud. She shattered. Tucker's hand left Christian's nape, and he glanced up to see their lover twisting Claire's nipples.

Her orgasm vibrated through Christian's lips and tongue, deep into his soul. Yes, this was right. The three of them all together. So right. Long overdue .

The throb in Christian's cock grew unbearable. He delivered one last, wide-tongued lick to her pussy. Tucker pressed a condom into his hand and he rolled it on, holding Claire's heated gaze.

"Get between those round thighs and slide home," Tucker ordered.

Christian's heart sped up, tripping over itself, as wobbly as a newborn foal.

There were no words for the emotion boiling in his heart, and the only thing to do was express it with his body.

For months—a year—he'd longed to do just that with Tucker.

And Claire had finally admitted to allowing Christian past a door in her heart.

He hovered over Claire and dropped a tender kiss to her sweet mouth. She opened to him, eager and salty-sweet. Fresh herbs danced on her tongue, reminding him that they'd been making sauce earlier, never dreaming that Tucker would choose that moment to come home.

Tucker drew up behind Christian, the head of his cock stretched with a condom and probing his ass. He placed his mouth at Christian's ear. "Sink into her. Then be glad you've got some muscle, because I won't be goin' gentle."

Claire's eyes dilated. Concentrating on the rise and fall of her chest and Tucker's

harsh breathing in his ear, Christian eased into her tight channel. Her body gripped and released him, still sensitive and pulsating from her recent release.

When he was rooted balls deep, Tucker wrapped a strong arm around Christian's middle. A cool smear of lubrication from behind made his cock twitch with eagerness.

Tucker skimmed his chest and abs with a palm. "Relax. I'll go slow at first."

Christian made himself loosen as much as possible, but every nerve in his body was twanging like a steel guitar.

Then in one short jerk of his hips, Tucker pressed on the ring of Christian's anus, parting him to the thick head. He hissed as Tucker pressed more insistently, burrowing his way into his body as he'd long ago done to his heart.

The pleasure pain of the new link stole Christian's control. He dropped his head forward and huffed raggedly. Claire squeezed him with her walls. When he met her gaze, she wore a soft expression that completed him.

Tucker eased his head inside inch by inch, somehow twisting it. The burn of being stretched echoed that of his heart. Two people, filling him up so damn much. He'd never be the same and didn't want to be.

"Move." Tucker's warm whisper drifted past Christian's ear.

Christian slowly slid his cock within Claire's damp heat. A long groan was pulled from her, dragged into him and fed to Tucker as the three of them gained pleasure from one slight movement.

Tucker pressed his mouth against Christian's neck. "Okay?"

Jesus God, yeah. He didn't know if he was about to rut like a bull, sandwiched between the woman and man he loved or if just being still would bring him more pleasure.

Claire gripped his hips at the same time Tucker tightened his arm. A wave of ecstasy threatened to make Christian black out. He swayed between them. Rocking forward into Claire. Back into Tucker. They let him set the pace, and within seconds, he was out of control .

The bed creaked under their assault. If Aunt Letty woke up, she would hear the strains of their ménage a symphony—opus hell-bent for release, movement number one.

Dark coils of lust rose sharply in Christian as he sank again and again into Claire's wet pussy and Tucker filled him from behind.

He focused on their mingled scents—pine, citrus and passion.

Tucker had come home, and he wanted them.

Maybe his sabbatical from life had finally exorcised him of Heather.

A cry broke from Claire. Tucker reached around Christian and twined his fingers with hers. The sight of their hands joined around his body made his control slip even more.

With perfect rhythm, Tucker's cock slid over Christian's sweet spot. Shooting him higher. His balls tightened.

Christian reached between his body and Claire's and ground his thumb against her clit. The stiff bud softened, gave way at the same moment she shattered around him.

The wild pulsations of her pussy tipped him off the deep end. A primal roar burst from him as jets of come emptied into her. Tucker went utterly still. Then in a fury, he pounded into Christian, over the gland that suddenly gave him more pleasure than he'd ever known.

His orgasm went on forever.

He came back to himself slowly. The first thing that filled his thoughts was a song Tommy Newlin had played earlier on the guitar during their sauce-making party. An old country song about love and hope that revolved through his memory.

Hell, it was perfect.

Claire's face shone beneath him, glowing with her release and a light sheen of perspiration. Her hair rioted against the blue cotton sheets. A smile spread across her face, stealing Christian's breath.

"You're fucking beautiful," he grated out.

Tucker bit into Christian's shoulder, causing him to jolt. He skimmed his palm down Christian's abs. Very slowly, he pulled free of his body.

Christian leaned over Claire and gave her a tender, open-mouthed kiss. Until that moment, he hadn't realized she'd ever held back. As he tangled his tongue with hers and knew no restraint or tension, an ache of happiness blossomed in his chest .

Yes, this was right. She was like him in so many ways that they were extensions of each other. But they were like a three-legged cat without Tucker—mobile but phantom-limbed.

"There room for me in this kiss?" Tucker's voice came low, unsure. Christian's skin

prickled in gooseflesh.

They pulled apart as Tucker sank to the bed, having disposed of his condom. Christian shot him a look—wanting to devour him yet punch his perfect, handsome face too. Damn him for stealing these moments from them. They might have been complete long before now.

“Keep her warm for me.” Christian regretfully left Claire’s body to dispose of his own condom. When he returned, Claire was wound tightly in Tucker’s arms. Christian paused beside the bed, chest tight, watching their mouths move in sweet abandon.

If asked, he couldn’t explain their twisted trio. He could only relate what it felt like—a warm ache in his heart, a syrupy knife he hoped no one ever pulled free for fear that he’d bleed out.

* * * * *

Claire rubbed her cheek against Christian’s coarse, unshaven cheek then Tucker’s stubble.

The sweet hum of her release rolled out through her veins, loosening her by degrees.

Big muscles cradled her body from every angle—Tucker’s lightly furred calves, Christian’s strong thighs.

Hips trapping her into a confined space she never wanted to escape.

And God, their hands. Exploring, roving over her bare flesh until she couldn’t think of anything but making both men hard and ready again, to stare at them in the morning light.

From the yard, a shout. Then louder words—clearer words. “What the hell do you mean she’s in there with both of them? That’s my little girl!”

She bolted upright. Tucker followed, fists clenched and body tense.

“Claire!” came from the yard.

She leaped from the bed as if it were a runaway horse headed for a brick wall. Wild panic made her search frantically through a pile of discarded clothes for her panties. No thought lived in her mind besides getting her panties on before her daddy burst into the bedroom and found her with two men.

“Who the fuck is that?” Christian asked, voice slurred with sleep and pleasure.

“Claire’s father,” Tucker said at the same time she said, “My father.”

She paused with one leg in her lace panties and swung her gaze to Tucker’s. How did he know...?

Oh yeah. He’d been pow-wowing with her father while on the run.

She dropped her gaze and rushed into the rest of her clothes.

Tucker and Christian dressed too. If she wasn’t so keyed up that her father was about to beat down the door to get to her and possibly attempt to defend her virtue, she might have taken more time to sigh over the touching way Tucker handed Christian his jeans and Christian straightened the collar on Tucker’s shirt.

Boot thuds in the kitchen.

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Her heart surged into her throat. In a flurry, she ran to the bedroom door and ripped it open. She didn't know which guy had the presence of mind to shut the door but she was grateful not to be faced with looking up in the throes of passion to find her daddy standing there.

“Claire!”

“Daddy,” she said breathlessly as she rushed from the room. She met him in the living area and stopped dead.

Barefoot, disheveled and smelling of sex. Hell, she detected the tangy flavor of her men on her tongue. The old phrase “you kiss your mama with that mouth” had never felt so close.

She jammed her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and stared right into her father's eyes.

He'd aged since the last time she'd seen him. His hat sat a little lower, shading more creases around his eyes. And his shoulders looked softer. When she was little, she'd thought his shoulders the best and broadest in the universe—able to shelter her so perfectly.

Behind her, Christian and Tucker emerged and stood at her back, their shoulders creating an impenetrable wall.

Judging by her dad's dark expression, they would need their strength.

“Which one of you thought it was a good idea to tag-team my little girl?” he asked .

“Hell,” she said under her breath. Then gaining a bit of footing, she straightened her spine. “Daddy—”

“Step aside, Claire doll,” he drawled. He jabbed a finger in the direction of the men behind her. “You and you. Outside now.”

“Jake,” Letty gave her warning tone from the doorway.

“Daddy, no—”

Tucker placed a warm, strong hand on her forearm and guided her out of the way. “Let me take care of this.” He stared right at her father.

“I’m willing to take it outside,” Christian said.

What the hell? “No!” She threw herself between the two men she loved and another she’d loved a lot longer.

In a rustle of denim and a thud of boots, all three men spilled out the door into the yard. She tripped behind with Letty wrapped around her like a ninety-pound suit.

“Don’t get in the middle of this, Claire. It’s what men do,” Letty pleaded .

“I’m an adult, dammit! He has no right barging in here and challenging my lovers as if they sawed off my chastity belt.”

“Lovers,” her father roared. He spun around, swinging a thick arm in a wide arc.

Christian ducked, and Tucker rushed her father. Using his shoulder, he caught him in

the midsection—the softest part of him. Her dad grunted but reached down and gripped Tucker by the collar. He shook him, but Tucker remained on his feet.

“Stop! Letty, make them stop!” She couldn’t tear her gaze off the grappling limbs but clung to her aunt. Tucker steeled his thigh muscle. It bulged against the denim as he used it to lever himself up, lifting her father off his feet a bit.

Unbalanced, her dad staggered and took another swipe at Christian. “At least I knew Langley was fucking my daughter. But you?”

Christian’s eyes flashed dark, his jaw so tight she saw a feral flutter in the corner. “Name’s Christian Davis. Haven’t heard yours.”

It was a dig. He was letting her father know that she didn’t talk about him. Ever. Partly because it hurt too much that he was never around, but mostly because there was little to say about a man she’d seen five times in as many years.

“You bastards are taking advantage of my little girl.” He gained a hold on Tucker’s shoulder and flipped him off his feet.

Tucker scrambled back up, fury rippling over his body in waves. He circled her father as Christian dodged a punch.

“Stop it!”

This was insane.

Speaking of crazy, were those four-wheeler engines she heard?

“Claire’s not a kid. She’s old enough to make her own choices.” Christian shrank away from her father’s right hook before he could land it.

“And from what I understand,” Tucker huffed, still circling, “you weren’t around to help her with those choices even when she was a child.”

A sharp cry broke from her. “No more! Please!”

Her father cocked his fist and drove it at Christian, who jumped away before the knuckles dented his face .

Letty was back at her side and twisting her hands.

“You dare to accuse me of not seeing to my daughter’s needs?” her father demanded, arms widespread as if he’d gather Tucker and Christian together and crush them. His eyes, usually mild, were blazing with anger.

“I believe Chris and I just did that infinitely better,” Tucker goaded.

Her father’s face mottled red. A vein pounded in his neck. “You son of a bitch—”

“Jake Mickelson,” Letty bellowed from Claire’s side. “In the name of your mother, stop.”

He paused mid-reach for Tucker and pivoted his head toward his mother’s sister, perhaps the only person on earth who still held some clout with him.

“Sit yourself down and I’ll fix you something to eat,” Letty said, smoothing things with a good home-cooked meal as usual.

Her father looked from Letty to Claire, then turned to Tucker. “You wouldn’t have come back if not for me, and now I see I messed up bad by talking to you frankly. ”

Christian looked confused. Tucker shook his head. “I came back of my own free will.

This place needed me. This ranch, my horses, land. And these two people.”

“Jesus Christ.” Her father yanked off his ball cap and raked his fingers through his full head of hair.

Claire tripped forward on unsteady legs and right into her father’s embrace. Her father gathered her up, and she breathed his familiar scent.

“Why, Claire?” he asked, low enough she wasn’t sure the others could hear.

She tipped her face up to look at his beloved, craggy features. “Because I love them.”

Her father was silent for a long minute. Letty put her hand on his arm. “If you could have found two loves like Caren, would you have jumped onto that ship?” she asked.

Claire jerked. It had to have been a decade since she’d heard her mother’s name. When she was born, her father had insisted her name start with a C, just like her momma’s.

Her father tightened his hold around her until she could barely draw breath. Then all at once, he released her. She staggered, but Tucker was right there to steady her.

She felt the flow of unrequited anger running just under Tucker’s skin. As her father moved off with Letty into the house, Claire worked to gain control of her emotions.

In a short time, she’d risen to the peak with Tucker’s return. Then just as quickly been made to feel like a teenager, caught sneaking two boys into her room.

She squeezed Tucker. “Thank you.”

At any time he and Christian could have easily attacked her father. Instead, they’d

danced with him enough to let him feel as if he was making some progress. She believed her father still had the fortitude to hold his own against either of her lovers one-on-one though.

Tucker gave her a boyish quirk of his mouth, and the silver glint of his new piercing drew her attention. “Why don’t you take her inside, Chris? I’ve got other family business to attend to.”

Claire followed his gaze to the corner of the barn, where his uncle and cousin casually leaned against the rough wood .

She sucked in a harsh breath. Tucker released her and strode toward his relatives. Christian caught her hand and towed her along to face the people who were most definitely there to cause trouble.

Without throwing a glance over his shoulder, Tucker said, “Take her inside.”

“Like hell.”

As they passed Boom Boom’s pen, the alpaca rushed out to meet Claire. Tucker twisted his head, obviously taking in the spangled sign and the pink bow sitting jauntily atop the animal’s head.

He kept walking.

“Leon. Dale.”

Leon spat a stream of tobacco juice and braced his legs wide. “See you’ve got the whole county riled up with your arrival home, nephew.”

“Nah, only a few people are going to get put in their place today.” Tucker clenched

and unclenched his hands.

Dale's clothes were splattered with mud and his boots were caked with it.

He sneered at Claire until her stomach flipped.

She never wanted to be alone with this man—not only because he was sure to make a pass at her, but because he would probably spill his guts to her.

The last thing she wanted was a door to open to his brain. The way he smiled was creepy enough.

Christian stopped within feet of the men, his fingers tightening around hers.

“Got the papers right here, Tucker.” Leon reached inside his coat and eased a thick sheaf of papers out.

“Put them right back in that pocket. What about the words ‘not signing’ don’t you understand? You have enough money and land galore. If you used that land for raising stock, you’d be a millionaire for what...the sixth time? Seventh?”

Millionaire? Claire stared at his relatives.

Leon leveled his glare at Tucker. “I didn’t want to go to these lengths to get you to sign, Tucker, but I don’t have a choice. You realize there are ways I can work around you, legally?”

Tucker dug his boot heel into the earth.

It was the only outward sign that his uncle was getting to him.

“Not sure how you think you can do that, but I invite you to visit the offices of Sterns and Brindle. I believe my deed is all locked up tight against people who might...how should I put this? Try to force my hand.”

They stared at each other for long seconds. Claire glanced up to find Dale giving her a greasy smile. She shrank against Christian's side.

Finally, Leon shoved the papers back into his coat and took a moment to tug his gloves more tightly onto his hands.

“You don't leave me any choice, Tucker.” He lowered his head and cocked a brow at him. “It's war.”

Tucker sliced the air with his hand casually. “I'm ready. But remember that now that you've declared war, I will do anything in my power to defend my property. Which means...” he took a step toward them, “...you'd better haul ass out of here.”

When they didn't move, he said, “Now.”

Leon's glare turned evil as he leaned in and poked a finger at Tucker's chest. “Prepare yourself, boy.”

“I've got his back,” Christian spoke up.

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Dale dissolved into sniggers. Leon shook his head and the pair of them loped back around the barn to where their four-wheelers were obviously parked.

For a long moment, the air was fogged with tense silence. When the engines started and droned away up the ridge, Tucker's shoulders slumped.

"Goddamn, I never should have left." He spoke so quietly, and the words were edged with such pain, Claire's heart pricked.

Christian turned to her. "Go into the house. I'll be there in a minute."

She swallowed hard. Things needed to be said between Tucker and Christian, and she wanted to be privy to it. But she also respected that they might hold back if she was present.

With a nod, she started to move toward the house. Christian caught her back, and Tucker wrapped his hand around her arm. They spun her into them, sheltering her, warming her.

Letting her know that despite the insanity of the past few minutes, their feelings hadn't changed.

Tucker grazed her forehead with his lips. "You need us to go inside and take care of your daddy? "

She shook her head. "Letty and I can handle him. Don't worry about us." She shot him a grin and a comical roll of her eyes. Tucker released her with a smile of his own.

Christian gave her a parting smooch and sent her off toward the house with a pat on the bottom.

By the time she reached the kitchen, she was ready to take on her daddy as well as Tucker's overbearing family. He'd come back to them, which counted for everything.

* * * * *

Tucker stared at the pink gems on Boomerang's ankle cuffs.

His eyes blurred. Leaning against the fence until the wood cut into his forearms did nothing to wake him out of his strange dream.

A dream where his own relatives had completely turned against him, Claire's father finally showed up after a year and butted into their business, and where alpacas were suddenly prima donna pets named Boom Boom .

Christian stood beside him, arms on the fence and head dipped in the same pose Tucker chose.

"What the fuck happened to my alpaca?" He scudded his gaze over the silly bow on its head and the way its body had been sheared into fluffy balls like a poodle. From the depths of the shed, he spied the glittering pink of a leash.

His lover gave a snort. Lover. How had it happened?

Easy—he'd set eyes on Christian and allowed his true feelings to emerge with no thought to the fog of pain Heather had left behind. In fact, at this minute, he felt more alive than he had since that fateful night of her accident.

"She's somethin'," Christian said.

Tucker shifted, bringing his hip flush against Christian's simply to feel his heat.
"That she is."

"But you hurt her badly when you left, Langley." Christian pivoted his head to eye him.

Tucker met his gaze then let it skitter away. He saw too much hurt in Christian's eyes. Hurt he'd put there and deserved to see every day of his life, but dammit, didn't they understand his reasons for running?

No, they didn't. He hadn't spoken to them in weeks or explained himself in any way.

When he didn't reply, Christian plowed on.

"There were a lot of things we didn't know how to do on the ranch, she and I.

But she's tenacious. If she doesn't know, she spends hours on the Internet looking it up.

Or asking people at the diner. And Letty is a valuable source of information.

" Christian swept a hand before him to indicate the land behind Boomerang's pen.

"So we managed to keep this up. For you."

Tucker ducked his head between his hunched shoulders. "It's complicated."

"Always is, man."

How to tell him about Heather's family kicking him out forever? Or that he'd had to run from the love he felt for Claire?

“Forward,” Christian said to Boomerang, and she strutted across the pen like a goddamn supermodel. If Tucker’s chest wasn’t so tight, he would have burst into hysterical laughter .

Christian turned to him. “Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Tucker cocked a brow. “I’d say you’ve been spending too much time with Letty. You’re talking like an old lady.”

The corner of Christian’s mouth quirked up. “That’s true. We’ve been living here like a cozy family. What do you have to say to that ?”

It hurts like hell that you were able to survive at all without me.

He couldn’t say it. Jealousy was a hot coal in his gut. “I’m thankful that you took care of things.”

“Things meaning Claire.”

“Yeah, and more. She sure deserves someone better than me.”

“Someone like me,” Christian said in a voice that said he really believed it. He met Tucker’s gaze head-on, the lights in his eyes as challenging as the headlights of a big rig barreling at him without brakes. “If you intend to hurt her again, I’m going to have to kick your ass, Langley.”

He nodded once, hard. Then probed Christian’s stare deeper. “And if I hurt you? ”

“You have. I think you know...my feelings for you. In case letting you take me in the ass wasn’t enough of an indication.”

A huff of laughter left Tucker, making room in his lungs to draw a breath big enough to make his ribs creak.

Working his new piercing between his teeth, he slung an arm around Christian's shoulders and drew their foreheads together until they bumped.

The spicy scents of his lover infused him with fresh lust.

"We're in a tangle, that's for sure."

"Yeah." Christian's breath washed across his face, smelling of mint. "We'd better go rescue Claire."

"You sure you want me to come in there with you and do that?"

Christian glared at him. "You runnin' again?"

He considered it for the first time. While away, he'd spent many long hours contemplating his life's path. Heather was his entire existence, but she no longer could be. There were people in his life too important to let suffer because he couldn't get his head together .

He squeezed Christian's nape lightly. "Not runnin'. Well, I am, I guess. I'm running straight at you and Claire."

Christian's eyes flickered shut at his words. Before he could open them, Tucker leaned in and brushed his mouth over Christian's. Lightly. Then getting a real taste of him, he went back for more.

A groan rumbled in Christian's chest as they grappled with each other, mouths hot and open, tongues liquid mercury. Slipping, demanding, plunging deep. The

Wyoming wind that seemed to be ever-present plucked at their clothes, as if asking for consent to strip them.

Tucker kneaded Christian's spine, skimming the hard planes of muscle he'd watched straining while he fisted his cock. Before he could think twice about what he was doing, he tightened his hold on Christian and dragged him toward the barn.

Christian followed without resistance, plucking at Tucker's shirt buttons as they hit the pool of dark shadows inside. Hay and clean stalls greeted Tucker's nostrils, and he took a second to appreciate all that this man had done for him .

For them.

He shoved Christian against the wall and slanted his mouth hungrily over his. Lust sparked between them, primal and greedy. They tore at each other's waistbands, searching until they found their prizes.

He groaned as Christian wrapped his thick fingers around his cock. Tucker reached deep into Christian's boxers, gliding his fingers up from the base of his cock to the velvety head.

A bead of pre-come welled on the tip, which he flicked with his thumb. Christian growled into Tucker's mouth. Tucker bit his lover's lip savagely as he began to pump his shaft.

Christian worked over his cock with nimble fingers, applying the perfect pressure, tugging his length and knowing all of Tucker's sweet spots. Tucker hooked his pinky around Christian's and they stroked each other in wild abandon.

Curls of heat rose through Tucker's body and stole his mind. He shoved his lover harder against the wall. He angled Christian's cock so it rubbed sensuously against

his own.

Their breath rasped louder .

“Hell,” Christian groaned.

“Spill on me. Let me feel your come on my dick.”

Christian stiffened and pumped Tucker’s shaft faster. Squeezing, releasing. Tucker’s balls drew up tight to his body. Fuck, he was going to explode first, and he didn’t want that.

“Not yet. Together,” Christian grated out.

Tucker ran his tongue around Christian’s mouth. Christian chased his right back. Passion elevated to a level so high, his head was fogged with cloud cover. He could no longer see, only feel.

Rough hands, scrape of beard, velvet tongue. Come .

Christian erupted. He shook as each pump of cream shot from his body. The heated drops struck Tucker’s shaft and he lost it.

He tore his mouth away from Christian’s and roared his release. Their spurts mingled. “Shit, shit, shit,” he growled. The idea of their juices mixing made him empty completely.

At that instant, a snippet of a song floated through his head—a line from the chorus of a song he associated with Heather. A song slated to play at their wedding reception

.

He jerked back. Gave Christian's cock one last slow pump then released it as pain froze his heart. Did he really have any business giving himself to Christian and Claire if he couldn't even fucking orgasm without thinking of Heather?

In a blinding second, the pendulum of his decision to stay swung sharply to the other side. He could leave his lovers to each other—watch their love build until their initials were emblazoned in gold on a linen invitation. C and C.

There could never be C, C and T.

Afraid to hurt Christian further, he gave him one last brush of his lips. Then still breathing heavily, he tried for a smile. "I've got horses to tend."

He zipped up, mess and all, and headed out to his truck. Deep down, he knew he was being a coward for leaving Claire to deal with her father alone. But Letty was there and could obviously handle the big truck driver.

And Christian would probably walk into the kitchen and charm Jake Mickelson with his solid, down-to-earth personality. By the time Jake walked out, he'd be ready to write a check for a big wedding .

Tucker revved his engine and headed down the drive toward town, away from too many emotions.

He needed a beer.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:18 am

“Hey, Davis.” Shady’s familiar twang rang through the house phone into Christian’s head.

He shook his head. Did he have a tab at The Hellion that needed paid? He hadn’t gone for a beer run in weeks. “Yeah?”

“I got your buddy down here, drunk as a Wyoming skunk and picking fights with the customers.”

“Fuck.” Christian swung his gaze to the homey scene in the kitchen, where Claire and Letty were coring apples for sauce. Jake had made himself comfy with a newspaper and a cup of coffee.

He lowered his voice and said to Shady, “I’ll be there in ten.”

Pocketing his cell, he fished in the front of his jeans for his keys. Then he poked his head into the kitchen. “I’m running into town for a few minutes. Need anything, Claire?”

She looked up from the mess before her. A little curl hung in one dark, amused eye. “No, we’ve got everything we need.”

“Kay. Be back soon.” He swung toward the front door, and a laughing echo of “Quickie Mart” followed him.

In the truck, he gnashed his molars in frustration.

No chili dog in the world could ease his anger with Tucker.

He'd been home less than a day. During that time, he'd delivered countless orgasms, had a wrestling match with Claire's father and a pissing contest with his relatives over the land.

Now he was down at The Hellion, drunk off his ass?

"Damn idiot," Christian muttered.

He spun up gravel in his rush to get down the drive and on to the main road. Veering around the massive pothole at the mouth of the driveway, he locked his boot to the pedal and took off.

He didn't exactly relate to Tucker's thought process. His fiancée had been gone for years. While grief never went away, it lessened in time. Christian suspected that Tucker was clinging to his pain, nurturing it as a way to protect himself from ever getting hurt again.

Did he believe Claire would cut his heart out? She was as sweet as they came. Saccharine. But maybe it was time for her to get pissed too and give Tucker a hard talking-to. If she finally got angry...

Christian's mouth quirked at the corner at the thought of his calm girl getting riled up as she'd been when they met. Too easily he could picture her beautiful face flushed pink and her curls rioting around her head.

But this was perhaps the worst part of the situation. Tucker was taking advantage of Claire's good nature, and dammit, she deserved better.

Tucker said he was running straight at him and Claire. For a moment, warmth infused

Christian's chest, tingling through his body and down to the low throb of awareness where Tucker had penetrated him earlier. God, the pleasure he'd gained from being joined with the man he loved.

He shifted as his cock began to swell. When he found Tucker, he was going to give him a good reaming too—with words.

When he was sober, Christian would show him who could run the show.

Tucker wasn't the only one who could take what he wanted—and Christian wanted to deliver more pleasure to Tucker than the man had ever known.

When he bumped into the parking lot of The Hellion, he spotted only one available space, clear at the end of the lot. The place was hopping tonight. Loud strains of music blared from the rough wooden walls. Even the big sign above the doors seemed to tremble with the bass.

Inside, he spotted Tucker right away. Mostly because the guy was the center of attention—shirt off and roped muscles straining as he hurled himself at two men who circled him.

Tucker was slightly unsteady from too much alcohol, but the bald determination on his red face told Christian that he could do some serious damage to these guys.

“Langley!” Christian's holler brought Tucker's head up. He focused on Christian. At that moment, a lanky man with tight Wranglers hugging his spaghetti thin legs took a chance. He lunged forward and delivered a sharp uppercut to Tucker's jaw.

Tucker roared with fury, fists clenched. He lowered his head and charged the man. He caught him off his feet and threw him to the dirty wooden floor. Cries reverberated from the girls in the crowd, and the men jeered.

Shady appeared at Christian's side. "Get his ass out of here before the cops haul him away. They'll be here any minute."

With a sigh, Christian ducked into the fray. The second man was on Tucker's back. Thuds of fists against midsection made Christian's stomach hollow. He gripped the man's arm and tried to haul him off Tucker, but he clung like a burr on a dog's tail.

"Get the hell off, man!"

The guy swung blindly at Christian, catching him square in the eye.

A primal rage burst in his chest. With a bellow, he threw a punch right at the burr's ear. His knuckles smashed brutally, splitting around bone and cartilage. Pain radiated up his wrist to his elbow, but he ignored it and reveled in the man's howl of pain.

The burr rolled off Tucker, who was beating the skinny cowboy into a piece of linguini. Through the flurry of fists, Christian saw that Tucker had the man's face uglified up .

"Stop, you ass," Christian ground out, close to Tucker's ear.

He caught Tucker's arm mid-punch and twisted it ruthlessly behind his back.

When his friend started to break his hold, Christian jerked his arm higher, putting pressure on the shoulder socket.

"Get up and apologize and walk away or get a dislocated shoulder. Those are your choices."

Blood and tears stung the eye that had been punched, and it was swelling rapidly.

The fight went out of Tucker. Under Christian's body, Tucker's went lax.

Passed out.

"Fucking hell." Christian rolled his friend off the string bean cowboy and offered the man a hand up. The guy gripped Christian's hand, and he launched to his feet.

"Get him outta here, Davis," Shady said.

Christian hitched a thumb in his pocket and stared down at his friend's unconscious face. Beautiful face—rugged in a way that stirred Christian. Even that new piercing made him look manlier.

With a nod, he grasped Tucker's shirt and hauled him up and over his shoulder. The dead weight made Christian stagger a bit, but he righted himself.

On his way past the guys Tucker had fought, Christian caught their stares. "Sorry for the trouble."

"Tell your friend when he wakes up that he should learn to handle his whisky better."

Whisky? Yeah, now that Christian was in such close proximity to his friend, he smelled the sharp alcohol all over him. Was this what he'd learned while away? How to be a drunk?

Someone opened the door for Christian, and he passed through it, leaving the crowd and the loud music behind. Tucker's hard body rode on Christian's shoulder easily as he crossed the parking lot. Only problem was getting the truck door open.

Then again...

He dumped Tucker over the side of the truck, right into the metal bed. The crash roused Tucker, and he loosed a growl.

“Sons of a bitches, I’ll finish this!”

Christian stepped on the bumper and hooked a leg over the side, perching on the tailgate. He stared down at Tucker, who was pushing himself into a sitting position. A groan eased from him as he found he’d taken more blows than originally thought.

Tucker touched the top of his head. “Lost my hat.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t lose your teeth. Or your freedom. Cops on their way, called to a bar brawl. Why did you pick a fight with those guys?”

Tucker dropped his gaze. “Can’t recall.”

“Yeah, I thought that was the case.”

“Am I allowed to sit inside your truck on the way home?” Tucker’s voice was low, contrite.

It tugged at Christian’s heartstrings. Damn him to hell. “That depends. You gonna puke?”

Tucker contemplated a moment and shook his head. Christian climbed off the tailgate and went around to the driver’s door while Tucker hauled his body out of the bed. He joined Christian in the cab a long minute later.

“Sorry about your black eye. I didn’t do that, did I?”

“If you had, you’d be feeling it now.” Something about Christian’s comment cast a

net of charged silence over them .

“That’s the thing I need, you know,” Tucker said, his words only slightly slurred.

“What’s that?” Christian fought the rising need in him—a desire to run.

“I need to feel something different from the old pain.”

A few raindrops struck the windshield and ran down like tears. Christian stared at them, taking in what his friend was trying to say.

“In other words, you’re causing yourself new pains to wipe out the old.”

Tucker’s eyes glistened. “Somethin’ like that.”

“Man, you can throw yourself off bridges, ravines or a horse’s back. Go full tilt on your path to self-destruction. But. Do. Not. Take. Claire. With. You.”

A little voice in the back of Christian’s head cried, “Or me.” But he didn’t say it. If Tucker harbored an ounce of emotion for him, he would hear the bell toll loud and clear.

Christian put the truck into gear. “You might want to think about this, man.”

Tucker’s voice was fogged. “What’s that?”

“Know what they do with horses that can’t be tamed? ”

Tucker turned his face to the window, and his silence meant he understood that Christian and Claire could cut him loose. Forever.

Christian stared through the drops of rain, unwilling to release his blurred look at the world just yet.

Finally, on the main highway, a car's headlights hit the water, and Christian turned on the wipers.

Across the space, he glanced at Tucker, who was rubbing his thigh muscle gingerly as if it was bruised.

Yeah, it was time for Tucker to get his head out of his ass. And Christian intended to do just that—then later replace it with something equally as hard until Tucker screamed with release.

* * * * *

Claire's uniform felt sticky with the residue of a soda a child had spilled all over her during the lunch rush.

While Claire had mopped at the little girl's mess, the mother had filled her ears with a stream of consciousness outburst about the mess in the house and how her lazy kids and husband didn't help .

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By the time Claire had the mess sopped up, the child was in tears and Claire was ready to toss the soaking cloth in the mother's lap.

With a sigh, she rubbed a palm over the front of her dress.

Her shift couldn't have ended too soon. Tourists and hunters were demanding and the locals edgy as a result.

But she couldn't have escaped even if she'd wanted, as she'd left the car to Letty.

Her aunt was meeting with the church gals to begin preparations for a big hunter's breakfast that earned their parish a sizable sum.

This morning, Christian had dropped Claire at the diner and instead of turning toward the ranch, he'd headed in the direction of town. Probably the Quickie Mart and two chili dogs, she mused.

She leaned against the open back door of the kitchen and stared across the rolling land. The road swirled through the fields like chocolate through ice cream. Soon that decadent strip of asphalt would bring one of her lovers.

Even as she thought this, Tucker's yellow truck appeared around a bend. At the sight, she squirmed. He still hadn't gotten the body fixed after her fury with the baseball bat, and she harbored an extreme amount of guilt over it. A moment of madness that she'd never before allowed to rule her.

And never would again. If Tucker walked away, she'd have to accept it, just as she

had these past weeks.

As the truck drew closer, she spotted a smiling face in the passenger's seat. Her heart did a lazy flip. Christian and Tucker come to fetch her. Surely, she was Cinderella being swept up by two rugged princes.

With a suppressed squeal, she bounced across the parking lot to greet them. Christian hopped out before the truck finished its forward roll. "Hey, pretty lady. You need a lift?"

"Why, thank ya, sir." She planted a foot on the gleaming silver pipe serving as a foothold and launched herself across the leather bench seat. Straight into Tucker's waiting arms.

He gathered her close, nose buried in her hair. She trembled a little, still unaccustomed to his nearness. The door closed, and at her back, she felt Christian's heat. It scorched her spine and spread rapid-fire through her limbs. Her pussy throbbed in time to her heart .

Tucker hooked a finger under her jaw and raised her head for a kiss. The hard claim of his lips addled her brain. Christian groaned, his hands roaming over her sides, up to cup her breasts through her sticky dress.

"My turn," he said roughly.

Tearing his mouth away, breathing hard, Tucker stared into her eyes for a long heartbeat. The things she saw there—passion and wanting, mixed with a question. A hesitancy. Did he believe she'd hurt him?

She skidded a finger over his cheek, avoiding the cut he'd received in a bar brawl the previous night. Boy, had that gotten her daddy riled up. Before he'd pulled out early

this morning, her father had hugged her and asked her to rethink the men she had chosen.

Tucker turned her to face Christian. Her other hunky man had one eye swollen shut, but his good eye blazed with love.

“Come here, sweetheart.” He scooped her against his chest and crushed his lips against hers. The dark scents of lust and male infused her brain. Her nipples tightened into pebbles and cream slipped from her folds, readying her pussy for their fingers, mouths and cocks .

She sucked on Christian’s tongue, but he pulled away too quickly for her taste.

“Get movin’.” Christian’s command was nails and gravel washed down with whisky.

Tucker put the truck in gear and they headed down the road with her perfectly squashed between two hard bodies.

“Open up that dress. Get those beautiful titties out,” Tucker said, keeping only one eye on the road.

Christian reached for the buttons of her dress, and she wiggled as he freed each inch of skin. When her bra was visible, Tucker eased a hand into one lace cup and withdrew her breast.

He skimmed the nipple with his callused thumb, drawing a harsh moan from her. Christian pulled her other breast free and together, they plucked at her nipples until she was drenched and writhing.

Christian nibbled her lips, catching her cries. The pressure building in her core was huge. The final release would be of volcanic proportions. She dropped her head back

against the seat, eyes closed, and let them have their way .

When Tucker walked his fingers up her inner thigh, she bucked upward.

“We’ve got a wild one here. Better get the rope.” Tucker pulled off the road and cut the engine. But the faint strains of a Taylor Swift song threaded around them, tying them all in a web.

“Got it right here,” Christian said.

She started and opened her eyes to see him pulling a length of rope from the glove compartment. Her eyes widened, and he chuckled. “You liked the rope last time, baby. Remember?”

God, did she.

Tucker stiffened and withdrew his fingers from her thigh. Claire wound an arm around his neck and pulled him down to her lips. When he remained cold to her kisses, she sank her teeth into his lip.

“As long as the stars burn,” Christian muttered against her throat.

Tucker yanked away. “You two seem to have more than a few memories.”

Christian lifted his mouth from her neck and stared across her at Tucker. Tension crackled .

“You’re the one who left. Of course we have a few experiences between us. But what I just said—as long as the stars burn—it means you.”

“It’s our way of keeping you between us, even when you weren’t here,” Claire

explained.

Something dark shattered behind Tucker's bright blue gaze. A sunbeam glaring off the hood of the truck lit his eyes, making them look like two fathomless pools.

And what she saw was love and happiness.

With a quiet noise in her throat, she tugged him to her mouth again. This time, he kissed the hell out of her. Seeking, plying, bruising, driving her up a steep slope toward a desperate pinnacle.

While she kissed Tucker, Christian gathered her wrists before him and looped the smooth hemp around them several times. When he gave a yank to create a knot, her pussy answered with a flood of juices.

Tucker burrowed his fingers beneath her panties and groaned as he found her damp heat. "Fuck, she's so wet. "

Christian pulled his shirt over his head. She flicked her gaze over his hooded eyes and the amused bracket at the corner of his lips. The cab was close and hot, but she reveled in the sheen of perspiration slicking her skin.

In one smooth move, Christian opened the door and climbed out of the truck.

Arms encircled her and she was yanked out into the cooler air.

She squirmed against Christian, wanting to get closer, as he took a few steps to the back of the truck.

Tucker released the tailgate and after a pause, Christian climbed in with her and spread her on a blanket Tucker had obviously laid there.

Tucker flashed a grin a split second before he popped the elastic band on her panties, breaking the stitching.

The cloth fluttered away from her mound, and he spent a second pulling off her shoes, then shimmying the panties down her thighs.

Above, clouds wheeled, dizzying her as much as the caress of four hands.

“I want to touch you,” she cooed, flexing the rope binding her.

Tucker grinned—a cocky, I-am-gonna-fucking-rock-your-world grin—and attacked his clothing.

In seconds, he was bared to her. Coiled muscles, dips and swells.

Faint sprinkling of chest hair glinting in the fading afternoon sun.

Hell, even his new piercing flashed, enticing her to run her tongue over it.

He still hadn’t explained his reason for getting it.

Claire shot Christian a glance and found him nude as well. At some point, he’d managed to overwhelm her so much she hadn’t realized he’d shed his clothes. He hovered near her. For a moment, his cock and hips filled her vision, larger than life.

She sucked in a breath.

Tucker gained her attention with one forefinger prodding her slick seam. She moaned, immediately on the edge of the precipice. He slid his finger to the crest of her clit and kept going. She followed his finger, dying to have that sensation again.

Gripping her hips, he maneuvered her right where he wanted her. He stretched out in the truck bed and eased her into a straddle. From behind, the tearing of paper sounded. Then Tucker bucked.

She didn't need to look to realize Christian was slowly rolling a condom over Tucker's shaft. The lust on his face was enough indication.

When he released a jagged sigh, another rip of paper sounded, and Christian similarly outfitted himself.

Oh my God. She was about to get it. The big double P. Her thigh muscles jumped and her belly knotted. Could she handle both of them at once? Neither were undersized.

Christian smeared a lubed finger over her pucker. She cried out and pressed her ass back for more.

Yes, she was ready. Needy. If they both didn't fill her up, she'd never be completed.

With a sobbing breath, she allowed Tucker to guide her over his cock. She stretched around him, pussy contracting wildly already. Her nipples ached for his warm hands even as her ass throbbed for Christian.

"Both of you. Please."

Tucker tugged on her rope, positioning her hands behind his head. "Lean forward all the way, baby. Relax your muscles."

She grunted as Christian probed her rosette with the head of his cock. He withdrew, and she felt more of the lube spread over her skin.

Tucker lifted a hand, and Christian's appeared at her shoulder. They twined their

fingers.

The simple sight was an erotic kickstart to the libido. With a shove, she impaled herself on the head of Christian's cock.

He grunted. Tucker echoed the noise as she shifted restlessly on his shaft. Cream flooded over him. The cool breeze circulated over her fevered skin, drying the dew on her body.

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Christian grasped the fabric of her dress around her waist and levered himself deeper into her body. She fell still as the rush of pain and pleasure assaulted her. Against her shoulder, her male lovers' hands grappled as if trying to restrain each other.

Their raw power could crush her, yet she felt perfectly safe and precious within their holds.

"Bear down," Christian growled. She did, and he entered her fully with a pop. Tucker strained, the chords on his tanned neck standing out .

"Jesus, man, I can feel you."

"Ditto." Christian sounded as if he'd just outrun a souped-up steamroller in a macabre construction crew 10k race. He ground his hips.

Tucker plunged upward, and both of them were filling her. Stretching her impossibly.

And oh, it felt so good.

She started to move. They let her set the pace, groaning and grunting as she fucked and squeezed them in unison. She lost herself to the notes of their lovemaking. In the back of her head, she provided the lyrics.

Joined. Mine. Need you both. Love you forever.

With a blinding burst, she came. Sharp waves slammed her, towed her under. She sputtered for air but could gain none as Christian pounded more roughly into her ass

and Tucker took what he wanted. Their cocks slipped against each other through the thin barrier in her body.

As one, her men hit their peaks. Tucker's face, lit with bliss, and Christian's hot breath on her spine was all she needed.

She collapsed against Tucker, a boneless mass of twitching nerves. Just as she thought their experience couldn't get any better, he said it.

"I fucking love you both...so damn much."

The sweetest words she'd ever heard.

* * * * *

Tucker drew the steaming mug of coffee to his lips.

When the delicious brew hit his tongue, he groaned.

No one made coffee like Letty. A time or two early on when he was toying with Claire, he'd been invited into Letty's small and efficient kitchen and given the aromatic nectar.

Now with her as a permanent fixture in his home, he couldn't regret sharing his space with Claire's aunt.

"Mmm."

"Good?" Letty cocked a brow at him. Her hair was loose around her shoulders today—she'd gotten up early, insisting upon fixing him breakfast, and hadn't pinned her hair into the usual neat curls.

“Delicious. I don’t know how you make black sand and water taste so good, but you do. ”

“Oh, I have a few years’ worth of practice.” Letty turned back to the ham slices she was frying.

Tucker appreciated every meal this woman put before him. It was nice to have someone take care of him. It had been too long since he’d grabbed more than a store-bought bagel or a bowl of cold cereal before hitting the ranch chores.

Letty finished frying the ham while Tucker sipped. When she set a plate of ham, biscuits and gravy before him, he shot her a grin.

“Don’t you turn your charms on me, young man. I see right through your act.”

His grin spread. “Yeah?” Holding his fork tines down and using his knife, he sliced off a square of ham.

Letty pulled a vacant chair away from the table and sank to it. Her wispy figure hit the chair. This morning, she looked worn.

Tucker studied her face, trying to detect pain or illness. If she were sick, he’d feel like a total shit since she’d gotten up early on his account. “Everything okay?”

She sighed and dragged her coffee mug across the table. But she didn’t lift it. “Oh, just that I’m sitting here with my niece’s boyfriend, while she’s still in bed with her other boyfriend.”

Tucker’s mouth quirked up higher on one side. He stuffed a bite of ham into his mouth. “Bother you, does it?”

“Not as much as it might,” Letty said in a quieter tone.

He laughed outright. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not as much as it bothers Claire’s daddy.”

He sobered. “Well, he’s an ass.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute then finally nodded.

Her white hair brushed her shoulders like fine, thick webs dangling from a strong but wiry oak.

“I can’t deny he puts me on edge with the way he storms in and tries to take over Claire’s life.

She’s a grown woman, has been since she was a child, if you really look at it. ”

Tucker blinked at her until she explained.

“Claire’s momma was a loss early on. The girl had to grow up fast. I didn’t always have the care of her, you know. She had about a year alone with Jake, and he hauled her around on the rig with him.”

“What?” Shock sidled through his belly, low and slow. Damn good thing the man had taken off after a home-cooked meal and a night’s sleep on the couch. If he’d decided to hang around, Tucker would have no choice but to take Jake’s challenges to fight.

“That’s right. Claire was taking care of that man when he shoulda been caring for her.

Wore on that girl heavy. You know she is a listener and will hardly say anything out

of turn.

But by the time I got ahold of her, she was a shadow of herself.

Fought hard and long with Jake to let me take her.

Jake pulled her into the middle of it and asked her outright if she preferred staying with him over me. ”

“Unfair.” Tucker speared his ham with a clack. Too easily he pictured the vulnerable girl, torn between what she wanted for herself and what she thought her father needed—

Wait. Tucker felt as if he’d just spent eight seconds on a bucking nightmare. He was as guilty of not providing the things Claire needed—deserved—as her father .

He set his fork down with a clatter and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I’m such an ass, Letty. How can I make it up to her?”

When he’d left Claire, he had just furthered the cycle her father had begun years before. Leaving her yearning for a relationship she felt was out of reach had probably abraded their relationship more than he knew. Mostly because Claire would never say.

“I have to make her tell me what she wants and needs. She has to demand it,” he cut in when Letty opened her mouth.

The woman gave a nod. Then she buried her nose in her mug and drank deeply. Somehow the scorching coffee didn’t affect her at all. She cradled her mug and smiled. “Knew you were a smart one.”

“And Christian?”

“He’s always been a quick study.”

“So he’s your favorite?”

Letty’s eyes gleamed with mirth. “Christian has his flaws. Loving Claire isn’t one of them.”

A hollow ache took up residence in Tucker’s gut. He didn’t want to be second. They should be on even playing ground. After all, he intended to take care of Claire in every way Christian did.

“What is his flaw?” Tucker asked, because he didn’t see it. The man drove him crazy with want and obviously did the same for the woman they shared.

Letty rose from the chair noiselessly. “Stubborn man doesn’t like my cookin’.”

Tucker tilted his head. Yeah, he could see that. Christian was a beer and dog kind of guy. Still, if his only downfall was his stupid pride wouldn’t let him accept Tucker’s money and he didn’t rave about Letty’s cooking, then Tucker needed to step up his game quite a bit.

He pushed his chair back and gathered up his empty plate and coffee cup. He took them to the sink. He’d best get on with his day if he intended to start making it up to Claire.

Maybe it was time to tame that wild part of himself that longed to run and run from his emotions. Claire—and Christian—deserved it.

Outside, he strode across the yard to the barn.

Fog hung around the property in patches, giving the whole place a storybook feel.

As he rolled the heavy wood door open, he thought about owning this fairy tale he'd started.

Successful ranch, land he loved, and people to share his passions with.

Heather hadn't been part of his happily ever after, but that didn't mean he couldn't take another.

His boot heels thudded on the barn boards as he made his way from stall to stall. His horses were all in good health, though he kicked himself for not putting mare and stallion together so they could have a few new foals in the spring. He'd fucked up, but he didn't intend to do it again.

The crunch of dirt under a heel made him glance up at the door. Silhouetted by the early light and fog was a tall figure that couldn't be anyone besides Dale.

"What the hell you want this early?" Tucker asked, turning his attention back to the chestnut mare with the white star on her nose. The horse nuzzled his hand and he scratched her ears lovingly.

"Swinging by to see about that alpaca for Darcy. She's whipped into a lather about showing it."

"That so?" Claire would be heartbroken when she learned that the animal she'd spent weeks readying for the fair actually was slated to be shown by someone else .

Dale stepped into the barn. "I noticed last time we were here that the little gal of yours has the alpaca all ready for the show."

“Because she plans to show it,” Tucker ground out.

“Oh, I see. So you’re going against your word again? Didn’t you promise to take care of Boomerang so my sister can win the blue ribbon?”

Darcy actually was excited to gain the notoriety of winning her favored category in the big county fair. Helping a girl who lived her life under her father’s and brother’s thumbs was important to Tucker. But Claire was more important.

“I heard there’s a beautiful alpaca up for auction next week. Why don’t we let Darcy show it?”

Dale strode closer. Occasionally he paused at a stall to hold his hand out to a horse, but none of them even sniffed his hand. Tucker’s horses knew good from bad.

“You plan to pay for a new alpaca for my sister?”

“Sure.” He could buy her a whole herd and still have plenty of money left to comfortably run his ranch and pamper his two lovers.

“That easy, huh?” Dale fondled a worn leather bridle hanging from a nail. He caressed it for a long minute then suddenly stretched the leather taut until it snapped in two.

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Anger bubbled in Tucker's chest. He faced his cousin, legs braced wide, ready to show him once and for all to keep his hands off his belongings. He eyed the broken leather in Dale's hand. "What the fuck do you really want, Dale?"

"Well..." He dropped the bridle. "We each have something we want. What if you sign these papers and Darcy forgets about Boomerang?"

Tucker shook his head. Was the man flaming nuts? Tucker's horses and water resources were much more important and valuable than a funny-looking, pink-anklet-wearing alpaca.

Claire will be devastated.

"No deal."

He'd make it up to her. She would understand. But how did one floppy-tongued beast become a pawn ?

"How about this?" Dale withdrew a packet of papers from his coat. So like his father in mannerisms, the sight made Tucker's stomach lurch. Until now, he'd never considered Dale to be much of a threat, but now he was seeing him for what he was—manipulative and crazy enough to be dangerous.

"I'll leave these papers for you." He unfolded the trifold sheaf and with a violent whack , he impaled the sheets on the nail where the bridle had hung. Like a wanted poster on a tree, the papers stared Tucker down.

“You sign and we’ll talk about letting your little gal keep her pet. Don’t want to upset someone with a hot little ass like that—”

The heels of Tucker’s hands hit his cousin’s chest before he knew what he was doing. Dale stumbled back a few steps but didn’t fall. In fact, he didn’t even get mad, as Tucker hoped. He just started laughing.

“Found a weak spot in Tucker Langley’s armor, did I?” He guffawed. The hackles on Tucker’s neck rose. Dale continued, “Funny. Never thought I’d see that again after Heather.”

He dragged her name out until Tucker’s mind was ready to snap. Fury was a hot charcoal in his chest. Glowing bright with pain and rage.

“Get the hell off my property, Dale, and don’t come back.”

“I’ll do that.” Dale gave a nod and started to back toward the barn door as if afraid Tucker would tackle him from behind. Good. I fucking might yet.

At the opening, he paused. “Oh, yeah, and I saw one of your horses up in the top field limping. Someone as conscientious of his stock as you will surely be concerned.”

With that, he disappeared.

“What. The. Fuck?” Tucker said to the silent barn.

“What was Dale doing here?” Claire’s voice vibrated the air like a gong in his soul. She stepped through the back door and closed it behind her.

Tucker ground his molars. The last thing he wanted to tell her was that they were squabbling over Boom Boom.

Her gaze took in his expression, which must have been thunderous. Then she tripped across the space and into his arms. He caught her against him, enfolding her tightly. Never wanting to let go. Dale had brought Heather into his mind again, but he had Claire to chase away her ghost.

He trailed his lips over the top of her head. “My cousin is sticking his nose into business that isn’t his.”

“He’s fueled by money. Did you see his boots and coat? He must require a lot of money to keep up his appearance alone.”

As always, she was a keen observer. Not only of people’s physical appearances, but she probably knew Dale’s depths and capabilities better than anyone.

Tucker locked her curves to him and replayed his conversation with Letty in his mind. He couldn’t hurt Claire—would do anything but keep her around for his own ends.

That meant that Claire deserved to be brought into the circle of trust. Tucker had never discussed his worth before, but if anyone deserved to know, it was her. They’d fill Christian in later.

He eased his hold on her, allowing her a bit of room. Catching her gaze, he gave her a small smile that felt tighter than he wanted. He dragged a deep breath into his lungs .

Before he could speak, she ran her fingertip over the silver ball stud below his lip. “You never told us why you decided to get this. It’s not exactly commonplace for cowboys around here to have piercings.”

He glanced down then returned his gaze to hers. “It means something to me.”

“Things like that usually do. What does it mean?” She held her breath as if awaiting the worst.

Sliding his fingers over the crest of her cheek, he then skated them down to her full lips. The pink curves taunted him. Too easily he could recall every nuance of her kisses. And her mouth on him.

He snapped his attention back to her before he got a hard-on and ended up pounding her against the barn wall and forgetting to tell her about his real situation with his family.

“The piercing symbolizes a new beginning for me. When I... ran ...I left behind people who are important to me to chase a ghost.” His voice broke, his throat tight on the word that meant his lost love.

Claire’s eyes darkened with sympathy, but a spark of something else lived there. Sadness? Did she think he’d never love her as much as he’d loved Heather?

“Go on...” she said quietly.

“Well...” he looked at his boots, then back up, “...some people believe that hanging silver in a stable will keep ghosts away.”

Confusion settled over her features.

He traced the outline of her mouth with his thumb. “And in the stable that houses my soul, I’ve hung my silver.” With his other hand, he flicked his lip stud.

Understanding flashed in her dark eyes, quicksilver bright. A soft sound broke from her, and she lurched onto her tiptoes at the same moment he claimed her mouth.

Desire coated his nerves, numbing him to anything but this woman. Claire, beautiful girl who deserved a better man than him. But maybe between him and Christian, they could fulfill her every need.

Tucker drove his tongue into her mouth, gathering her flavors. He started to harden, lengthen, and clamped down on it immediately.

When he withdrew, she followed him. He groaned and grasped her shoulders, holding her steady while he told her the reality of the situation—the reason that his family would probably try to put him in the grave if he refused to sign those papers on the wall.

“Baby, I have to tell you about Leon and Dale.”

“Yes?” Her voice was a breathless whisper. He glided his finger along her collarbone, feeling her tripping pulse.

“They want me to sign those papers because it’s worth millions of dollars to them.”

“Chris and I figured it was something along those lines.”

“And it affects me quite a bit too. If I sign, I lose my clean water for my stock and the ranch is a worthless wasteland.”

She nodded, a little curl bouncing on her brow.

“But if I don’t sign, I lose out too.”

“How so?”

“I lose two million dollars that could be added to my already sizable fortune.”

Her breath hitched as if he'd run a finger over her slick seam. Damn, he wanted to.
“Sizable...fortune?”

“Yeah, I'm sitting on an egg here, as is Leon. I want you to quit your job at the diner, baby. Let me take care of you. We need you on the ranch.”

She started and blinked at him for a moment.

Finally, the tension flowed out of her shoulders.

“I don't know if I can do that. I've taken care of myself forever—well, with Letty's help.

I'll have to think about it. I do love being on the ranch rather than listening to people talk my ear off.

But I wouldn't accept your offer without working for it.”

He glided a hand down her side, giving her the eye.

“Not that. I'll be in charge of the alpacas.

” Her tone was so solemn, he searched her face for signs of emotion, afraid she'd be angry that he'd kept this information about his fortune from her, after two months of dating.

Hell, he'd never even bought her the trinkets of a typical beau—flowers, charm bracelets.

After a long minute, she looked him fully in the eyes. “So I've been fucking a millionaire all this time?”

He couldn't stop himself from smiling at her question. "Yeah, I guess."

"That's good. "

"Is it?"

"Yeah, you can use your money for things."

Unease threaded through him. He didn't peg her as a money-grubber, but...

"Like what?"

She lifted her wrists. Each wore a little pink circlet where the rope from the previous day had chafed her white skin. "I know you boys are fond of your ropes, but could we please get something a little softer? Silk? Satin?"

A huff of laughter and relief burst from him as he yanked her into his arms. He dangled her inches off the wooden floor and with her lips dangerously close to his. Leaning in, he captured her mouth in a long, tongue-tangling kiss that left her gasping and him as hard as a fucking telephone pole.

"Silk it is, baby." He whirled her to the wall, pressed her back against it and proceeded to maul her mouth, breasts and finally dropped to his knees and worshipped her pussy until she was a puddle of sweet female.

The silver in the stable was doing the trick.

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A rivulet of sweat ran between Christian's shoulder blades and all the way to the waist of his jeans.

The sun ground him and Tucker into the Wyoming dust. Indian summer had returned with a vengeance, and Christian was half surprised this morning not to have received a call from the road crew.

On good days, they scrambled the team to eke out another day of work.

He had, however, received a phone call for a side job to be completed over the weekend.

That meant some cash flow, which was always good.

Especially since he'd invested in the shipment of horse feed while Tucker was away.

He'd never accepted the cashier's check and had no need for it now.

His personal bank account was in the black and he wouldn't need much to sustain himself .

Christian jammed the point of the shovel he was using into the earth and peeled off his T-shirt. They'd already dug five post holes for new fencing, but they had a sight more to go, by his estimate.

"Gettin' hot." The rasp in Tucker's voice made Christian look up. His lover's gaze was locked on Christian's torso. A jolt of awareness ran through him.

“Yeah. Could use more of that teasy wind.” In these parts, it wasn’t unusual for a cold breeze to blow, which dropped the temperature considerably. Unfortunately, today the breeze wasn’t showing its fickle face.

Christian went back to digging holes. The silence between them was companionable. Working together toward a common goal besides making Claire scream in release felt good.

“When are those alpacas showing up?”

Tucker had gone to auction the previous day and bought fifteen new alpacas to keep Boom Boom company.

“Tomorrow at noon. Claire’s inside whipping up booties for them now.” Tucker caught Christian’s eye, and they shared a grin .

“Why’d you buy them again?” Christian swiped a gloved finger over a bead of sweat on his brow.

“I don’t know. Price was right. Felt like it. Claire’s going to take care of them. One of them is for my cousin. I promised her.” Tucker kept his gaze trained on the hole he’d just dug deep enough to fit a post.

“Claire agreed to stay here and be alpaca mistress? That’s surprising.” Christian snorted in a way that punctuated his sarcasm, but Tucker detected a hint of worry.

“She’s thinking about it. I want you to stay too.”

Christian glanced at him. “That so?”

“Yeah, I could use the help, and you’ve more than proved yourself.”

“And you wouldn’t possibly want me to stay for other reasons.”

Tucker grinned, sweat zigzagging down his jaw. “Plenty of other reasons.”

Smiling, Christian hoisted one of the heavy steel posts, carried it to the hole and dropped it in. Tucker immediately started shoveling dirt around it. When it stood upright on its own, Christian employed his shovel to tamp down the soil.

“Six down. Thirty to go.”

“Then we’ve gotta check on that lame horse again.”

Yesterday Tucker had informed him that Dale had appeared to hassle him some more about the papers and had left on a word about an injured horse.

The second injured horse on the ranch since Christian had gotten involved. He didn’t know a lot about the ranching business, but it seemed fishy to him.

“So you think Dale did something to that horse?”

Tucker jerked. From under his hat, he eyed Christian for a long minute. Shock spread over his features.

“What?” Christian asked. “You didn’t think of it?”

“No. Jesus, no . My family is capable of doing a lot, but hurting animals on purpose?” Tucker chopped at the ground, creating deep slices like macabre smiles. Finally, he looked up at Christian again, a muscle jumping in the crease of his jaw. “You think this could be the case?”

“It’s possible. And Claire thinks he’s capable. Your family’s been here before on

four-wheelers with shovels on the backs.”

“Shit, you talked to Claire about this?”

“After the first horse was hurt.”

“ What? ” Tucker threw down his shovel and faced him. Wrath played over his rugged features like a tornado eating up the surface of a volcano. Apocalyptic rage. “He hurt my fucking horses?”

“I don’t know that for sure, man. Just a theory. But yeah, a horse in the top pasture was limping. I checked it myself, and when I figured out what was wrong with it, Claire talked to some people and I spoke with Cyril Wells down at the feed store about how to care for it.”

Tucker’s shoulders relaxed minutely, but a vein throbbed violently in his throat. “You did right, Chris. I appreciate it.”

“I didn’t think about telling you. It’s just part of day to day life, right? ”

Tucker considered his words. “Yeah, sometimes a horse comes up lame. But not two—not my horses. C’mom.”

He strode away. Christian grabbed his shirt from the ground and headed after him.

They jumped into Tucker’s truck and sped up the ridge.

The high weeds on either side of the dirt road reminded him of Claire and the moment when he’d spotted her in the middle of the road.

His heart had surged with absolute love.

Quite the same as the sensation he felt when Tucker had returned.

He clamped a hand on Tucker's firm thigh muscle. His lover looked at him sharply, as if still deep in his anger. Then his expression grew less severe. He covered Christian's hand with his, warm and gloved.

"If Dale and Leon are fucking with my horses, it's going to be a bloodbath."

"I know," Christian said with mild amusement.

Tucker's lip quirked up reluctantly, and he squeezed Christian's hand. "I want you to take a closer look at this horse and tell me if you think the injury is the same."

"Sure. "

A minute later, they were inside the fence. Tucker stuck two fingers in his mouth and blasted a shrill whistle that brought several of the horses running toward them. Christian watched with admiration as Tucker controlled his stock with skill.

He picked out the limping mare easily among the group.

"Ease up to her now. Don't want her to spook and kick."

Christian shot him another amused look. "I know." He'd done this a time or two in the weeks Tucker was gone. He was no longer the skittish guy around the animals—tending them was like breathing now.

He walked right up to the mare, patted her nose and let her get acquainted with his scent. Then he circled around to her hind leg, which she held inches off the ground.

He dug the frog he often carried out of his back pocket.

“Lookit you. When the hell did you become a cowboy, Chris?”

He glanced up to see the appreciation in his lover’s stare—a look that made his insides knot and created a dull ache in his groin .

“Guess it was always in me.” Christian ducked his head and caught the mare’s leg. She danced a little and he had to release her. When he tried to look a second time, Tucker soothed her with a few clicks, and she let him bend her leg up to look at her hoof.

It was cleaned out—something Tucker had probably done yesterday after checking on her. But sure enough, there was some swelling in the same place the last horse had shown lame.

“Uh.”

Tucker neared at Christian’s grunt. “What is it?”

“It looks the same. Think they’re stepping in a hole somewhere around here?”

“Dunno. Let’s walk the property and see what we find.” Tucker took off, and Christian let the horse go with a pat and a soothing word of thanks.

They crisscrossed the pasture, gazes to the ground, looking for rodent holes or a rain washout. When Christian spotted the earth churned up near the fence, he gave a shout.

Tucker came at a jog. For a minute, Christian could hardly breathe. The hard roll of muscles reminded him too much of the way Tucker felt moving inside him. His cock twitched to life.

“What’d ya find?” Tucker stopped inches from him. Too close. It was impossible for Christian to stop himself from hooking a hand around Tucker’s nape and hauling his mouth to his.

Their lips met briefly but hard. Desperation rode just below the surface, but they both stifled it. There was work to do.

Christian released him and pointed. “See that?”

Tucker moved closer to the spot where a deep rivet had been cut into the ground. He crouched and plowed his fingers through the patch. “What do you think caused that?”

Christian drew near, and when he spotted the rough cuts, he knew what they were up against.

That bloodbath.

“I’ve been shoveling dirt for many years. I’d say that was made by a man.”

Tucker swore. He launched to his feet so fast, Christian rocked back on his heels. “You sayin’ someone trespassed on my land and dug up this patch? A piece of ground the horses traverse all the time to get to the water trough?”

“Looks like it.” It was cut in such a way that a horse’s leg would twist. Whoever had dug this knew what they were doing.

“Fuck me,” Tucker ground out. He doffed his hat and raked his fingers over his shorter hair. The outline of his skull was more apparent now after his haircut, but Christian wished he’d had a chance to feel those longer strands under his hands before he’d cut it.

He shook himself. “What do we do now?”

“Not you. Me.” Tucker whirled on a heel and headed back to the truck.

“Wait, man. You aren’t cutting me out of this. If there’s a fight, I’m damn well going to stand at your side.”

Tucker slowed. Pivoted to face him. Was he remembering his fistfight at The Hellion? He still bore the cut and Christian’s eye was at its peak of bruised splendor, a myriad of black, blue and green.

“We stand together,” Christian said.

Tucker waited for him to catch up, then he hooked Christian around the nape the same way he’d done minutes before. The fever in his eyes ignited a fire in Christian. Lust surged to the surface, prickling on his skin like the faint sheen of perspiration.

“I hope you’re up for a vigilante watch tonight.” Tucker stared at his mouth until Christian thought he’d lose his fucking mind.

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He gripped his shoulder and pulled Tucker more tightly against him. Right now he could think of nothing better than sitting in a field with Tucker, watching for intruders. Except maybe bringing Claire along.

“I’m there,” Christian said.

Tucker skimmed his mouth over Christian’s. The rough mash of lips and tangle of tongues ended too damn quickly. He released him and started toward the truck—all ranch business again. Over his shoulder he tossed, ““Kay then. Bring the condoms.”

* * * * *

Letty had been feeling overly tired this morning, and it worried the hell out of Claire. Her aunt was no spring chicken, so every cough and flu sent a panic through her .

She slid the old Buick crookedly into a parking spot in front of the drugstore, thoughts of stockpiling cold medicines bright in her mind. Sure, Letty hadn’t so much as wheezed or sniffled, but one couldn’t be too cautious.

At dawn, Claire had found her heavy-eyed aunt at the stove, flipping pancakes, and insisted she return to bed. Then she’d assumed the flipping. Setting thick stacks of cakes in front of her men had given her a warm feeling.

Tucker had dug in with enthusiasm and grunts of appreciation, while Christian wielded his fork more cautiously. He had eaten every bite though.

She climbed out of the car and approached the storefront. At this time of morning, the

streets were filled with foot traffic. Tourists and hunters in for the upcoming season and some of the regular townspeople milled the sidewalks.

A young girl with all the curves and swagger of a Wyoming rodeo queen bounced up to the drugstore. There was an awkward moment where they reached the door at the same time.

Claire stepped back, aware of the girl's polished appearance and expensive outfit. Her gleaming high-end cowgirl boots stretched over golden, tanned calves, making Claire look like she had toothpicks stuffed into boots stolen off a homeless cowboy.

The girl passed in front of her without so much as a smile or thank you that Claire held the door. Perfume-scented air trailed behind.

Claire hung back a second to allow a laughing woman with luxurious dark hair and two rugged cowboys to tumble out of the drugstore.

The way they clung so close to each other reminded Claire of what she had with Tucker and Christian.

When one cowboy leaned in and planted a smooch on the woman's cheek, the other said, "Hey, she's still mine during the day, remember? "

"That deal's been off for months."

Shaking her head and smiling, Claire entered the building.

Inside, Claire made a beeline for the cold meds.

On the way to the back of the store, she passed an older couple that frequented the diner.

Just making eye contact forced her to stop and listen to them talk about their son who was overseas in the military and how he'd been injured.

That morphed into five minutes of political talk, which Claire couldn't care less about.

Finally, she wished them a good day and headed to the medicine aisle. There, smack in the way, was Marcella Evans, the craft shop lady.

Bracing herself for an onslaught of gossip sometimes more disturbing than what people told Claire from their own lips, she plastered a smile on her face and eased past her.

"Morning, Claire, honey. Haven't seen you or Letty in the shop for a bit. Not since you gathered all of those supplies for what was it...?" She pressed a finger to her lips in thought. "Oh yes, the alpaca."

Out of the corner of her eye, Claire caught a jerk of movement. In the main aisle, the rodeo queen's head had snapped up. She stopped in her tracks.

"What was it you were making for the alpaca again, dear?"

Claire darted a glance at the girl, who was listening intently, a crinkle between her perfectly sculpted brows. "Uh...just some ornaments for her to wear to the fair. "

"Oh yes, that's it. You plan to show it yourself?"

At that, the rodeo queen drifted into the medicine aisle. Three of them in the small space made Claire want to spin and flee.

She planted her heels. "Yes, I entered the paperwork yesterday."

“Do you have a picture of the items you made for the alpaca?” Marcella asked, leaning in and fogging the air with a cloud of wintergreen mints. “I like to see what my customers make with the supplies they buy.”

“What?” Claire grew aware that the rodeo queen was staring. She wasn’t even pretending not to eavesdrop on their conversation by looking at anal suppositories or nicotine gum.

“A picture?”

“Oh yeah, I have a picture on my phone.” Claire dug in the back pocket of her worn jeans and produced her phone. After flipping through some photos, she held up the device for Marcella to see a shot of Boom Boom bedazzled in ankle cuffs and a rhinestone head wrap.

“That’s Boomerang,” the rodeo queen exclaimed in a breathy whisper .

Claire gaped at her. “What? How do you know?”

If this girl was one of Tucker’s conquests...

No, she didn’t even look eighteen. He wouldn’t dally with an underage girl.

Then again, maybe the rodeo queen wasn’t as young as Claire suspected. Shit, now she just felt old, worn and put away wet. I thought I couldn’t feel any less glamorous.

“Excuse me, Marcella. I have to just...”

The older woman looked between Claire and the other girl, obviously hungry for more gossip. But she gave a nod and moved off toward the shampoo.

“You must be the woman living on Tucker’s ranch.” The girl narrowed her eyes.

“I am. And you are?” She tried not to let the worry about Tucker’s previous lovers seep into her voice. She drew a deep breath.

“Darcy Langley.”

Claire felt her eyes flare with surprise. The top forty country radio station drawled in the background. “Tucker’s...?”

“Cousin. Leon’s my dad.”

Ahh. Spoiled daddy’s girl with the thousand dollar boots .

When Claire didn’t respond, Darcy snatched the phone from her hand.

Before she could get over her shock, Darcy had thumbed the screen, looking at several shots of Boom Boom and landing on one Claire had shot the previous day of Tucker, Christian and herself.

Their heads were close together and the sun was fading in the background.

Claire grabbed her phone out of Darcy’s hand. “What do you need from me exactly?”

Darcy’s lip curled. For a staggering moment, Claire could only see Darcy’s brother in that snide expression. “Boomerang is my animal. Tucker has been raising it up for me to show at the fair. Didn’t you know?”

A cold finger trailed down Claire’s spine and prodded her stomach. “What are you talking about?”

“Boomerang is mine. I’m showing her next week.”

Claire’s mind reeled. Why hadn’t Tucker told her? Hell, if she’d known she wouldn’t have gotten so attached to the beast.

And who the hell was Darcy to waltz in and take over Claire’s efforts? “No, you aren’t. ”

Darcy rocked back on her heels as if she’d been slapped. Then again, hearing the word no might be equivalent to a palm against her pretty, powdered cheek.

“Tucker and I have a deal.”

“Do you?” Claire countered. Anger rose inside her, for every time she’d remained silent and allowed people to spill their guts to her and had never given her opinion or thoughts. That was the same as being walked on for many long years.

But this rodeo queen wasn’t going to win the blue ribbon for Boom Boom.

“Listen, lady...” Darcy raked her gaze over Claire, from her shabby boots to her white shirt with the dirty hem where she’d wiped her hand before leaving the ranch, “...I don’t know who you are to Tucker exactly. But he and I are family. Family sticks together.”

She snorted. “Yeah, I know all about families that try to bully and intimidate into getting their own selfish ways.”

Darcy took a hasty step forward into Claire’s space. She resisted the urge to shove her back. Or not ...

She smacked the heel of her hand off Darcy’s shoulder. Despite looking as if she still

weighed as much as she had at birth, the girl was solid. Had some muscle. She didn't move.

But she did retaliate. Fury washed over her face. "You little bitch!" Darcy sank a hand into Claire's curls and twisted ruthlessly. The tug brought instant tears to her eyes—tears that only infuriated her.

Claire reached for Darcy's coiffed 'do and yanked the highlighted strands. Several clung to her fingers like cobwebs.

A roar of anger erupted from Darcy. She pulled so hard on Claire's hair that she was sure to sport a bald spot for months. She bit her lip against the pain and slapped Darcy across the face.

Darcy jerked on her hair, and they both toppled off balance into the suppository display. A flurry of slaps and knee jabs ensued. Claire's head spun from the craziness, but she managed to hold her own.

She got Darcy on the dirty carpet and pinned her with a knee on her toned gut. She glared down at the girl's face. If she was underage, Claire was so going to jail for assaulting a minor .

But it would all be worth it. On behalf of Tucker and Christian, for the crap both of them had put up with between Leon and Dale, Claire would show this girl who had strength.

All at once, it struck her. She loosened her hold on Darcy's hair but continued to kneel on her. The magnitude of what she could do here made her nerves spark with excitement.

"I'll strike a deal with you."

Darcy's eyes widened but still shot bullets. "What's that, you heavy cow?"

For that, Claire ground her kneecap into her belly. Darcy grunted.

"You want Boomerang."

"I have the rights to her. She's mine!"

"Well, Tucker has the rights to his land too."

Understanding flashed across the girl's features. So she's a smart one after all.

Darcy fell still. "What do you want?"

"You call off daddy and big brother and stop hassling Tucker about signing those papers and you can have the alpaca."

To anyone else in the world, using an alpaca as leverage would be laughable. But deep down, Claire was devastated. She swallowed hard.

"How am I supposed to make Daddy back off? I'm only sixteen!"

Fuck. I'm definitely going to need bail money.

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Claire slipped off Darcy's body and gained her feet. Her hair dipped into her eyes and she smoothed it back, still feeling the sharp pull on her scalp. "You seem resourceful, Darcy. Make it happen."

Darcy launched to her feet, looking almost as perfect as she had on the street and before the cat fight. "When do I get the alpaca?"

"As soon as we stop seeing your family around the ranch."

Darcy eyed her, uncertain.

Claire stuck out her hand. "Deal?"

Darcy looked at her hand as if she'd start smacking her around again.

But finally, she placed her smooth hand into Claire's.

They gave a hard shake then released. Claire scrubbed her hand over her thigh.

"If you live up to your side of the bargain, I'll deliver Boomerang—" she choked on the long name, "—to the fairgrounds and enter her in your name. "

Darcy's smile curdled the last bit of control Claire clung to. "I'll see you there. And dress her pretty. Like photo number thirty-four."

With that, the girl sashayed out of the aisle.

Claire looked up to see an employee staring at the mess they'd made. Ordinarily, Claire would apologize and pick up every box. But not today. Tears choked her.

Spinning on a heel, she ran out of the drugstore. She hopped into the Buick, praying it would start, and was halfway out of town before she realized she hadn't gotten Letty any cold medicine.

* * * * *

The sky hung heavily, studded with so many stars, it dizzied Tucker. He closed his eyes against the assault of the small pinpricks of light and sighed.

"Always loved it up here. I've sat on this ridge more than one night of my life."

Christian shifted. His arms were slung around his knees, his outline a dark blob.

But Tucker detected the faint notes of Christian's freshly showered scent.

This was the third night they'd sat up here watching for his family to come and try to sabotage the things Tucker had worked for.

While it wasn't exactly a perfect way to spend time with a person he loved, Tucker was glad to steal these moments. Although Claire had been left out.

"A good place to sit and think," Tucker went on.

"What's there to think about?" Christian asked. His playful tone plucked at the frayed edges of Tucker's nerves and smoothed them.

Still, Tucker felt like talking and Christian needed to hear it.

“After Heather was killed, I sat here a lot, raging at the forces that stole her from me. I didn’t know how to go on. What my purpose was anymore.”

“Raising horses has always been your path.” Christian’s low voice was balm.

Tucker nodded, though it was unlikely Christian noticed the slight movement in the darkness. “That’s true. Always will be. That’s why I’m so pissed off that people who share my blood would try to take that away from me in more ways than one.”

The air had dropped several degrees since he and Christian performed the evening chores. As usual, Claire had hung around them while they’d tucked the horses in for the night and put away the chickens. But tonight her eyes were especially haunting.

Or haunted?

“We’ll see that your family doesn’t take your ranch or injure more horses,” Christian said.

“They’ve never understood my drive to make something of this land,” Tucker went on.

He plucked a few blades of grass from the earth and crushed them between thumb and forefinger.

“Leon thinks hard work is defined by how much time you spend on the phone with a company willing to pay for your things. And Dale...well, he’s just a puppet.”

“What of the girl? The sister?”

Tucker pressed his lips together. “I didn’t know you knew about Darcy.”

“A bit. I hear things. Well...” he chuckled, “...Claire hears things. At the diner.”

“Yeah, about Mr. Simmons’s bunions.”

“She doesn’t like to know all of the things people tell her.

” Christian’s statement was made so quietly, offhandedly.

But the weight of it fisted Tucker’s gut.

That Claire had been forced to make small talk with people she sometimes didn’t like and made to listen to their troubles, gossip or even their fantasies, bothered him.

He’d had the funds to care for her all of this time and had been too selfish to think of it until recently.

Tenderness rose up strong in the pit of Tucker’s stomach. She didn’t have to carry platters of eggs and bacon to people to scrape up a few bucks. He had enough to keep her in furs and diamonds, even if she only wanted those things for her alpacas.

“I insisted that she quit the diner.”

Christian swung his head around to Tucker once more. In the darkness, his eyes glittered. “What are you sayin’?”

“I’ll take care of her.”

“ We’ll take care of her.”

Tucker jerked his chin down in a nod. “That’s right. We’re in this together.”

A soft puff of air left Christian. He leaned closer to Tucker, and he couldn't resist putting his arm around the man. The scents of his soap mixed with his musk, and strong desire heated Tucker.

He strummed his thumb down the hard ridges of Christian's torso. Silence dominated, but as always, it was comfortable. Christian understood when he should speak up and when to remain quiet.

Through a loud chorus of crickets around them in the grass, Tucker said, "I'm done runnin'."

Christian leaned into his side until their heads touched. "Good to hear."

"A relief to acknowledge." A smile spread over his face. If he tried, he couldn't stop the pull on the corners of his mouth. He rubbed his jaw against Christian's. Their lips were inches away. "I'm not leaving ever again—not without you and Claire in that truck with me."

"Speaking of the truck—when you gonna get those bat marks fixed?"

Tucker gave Christian's cheek a quick smooch. "I think of them as love taps."

They shared a minute of laughter. Then Christian locked his arm around Tucker and jerked him into his embrace. He allowed his lover to take control—wholeheartedly giving himself.

Christian rolled him into the grass and pressed his big body over Tucker's. As strong as Tucker, but possessing traits that he didn't. A perfect complement.

Christian brought his hips against Tucker's, pinning him completely. The thick length of his cock dug into Tucker's rapidly swelling one.

He bucked upward, rubbing. Cock to cock.

Of the few times they'd been on the lookout for trespassers on the ranch, he and Christian had only fallen into each other's arms once. Christian had submitted easily and Tucker had spent long, blissful minutes sliding in and out of his body.

But the dynamics were different tonight. A dark hunger pulsed in Christian—Tucker felt it just beneath the surface of the man's skin.

He ground his hips into Tucker's. The tang of crushed grass rose around them.

Christian's eyes loomed close. Minty breath washed across Tucker's face. Then, "Give me your mouth. "

The rough demand made Tucker as hard as the posts they'd spent erecting for the alpaca pen. He surged upward at the same moment Christian crushed his mouth down on his. The bruising collision ignited the primal instinct to grip, bite, steal this man's soul.

Christian plunged his tongue between Tucker's lips. Hot and smooth kisses followed. Then turned carnal once more. Christian locked a hand around Tucker's nape and dragged his mouth to his again and again. The sharp spikes of his five o'clock shadow only spurred Tucker to be rougher, go harder.

A low rustle sounded off to the right. At the same moment, he and Christian broke away and looked in the direction of the sound.

Tucker's heart drummed wildly against his chest from their make-out session, but he willed it to slow so he could hear better.

Christian's fingers tightened against Tucker's skin. "Someone's coming up the

ridge,” he barely breathed.

Tucker flattened his palm on Christian’s spine. For a full ten seconds, they didn’t breathe. Then very slowly, Christian rolled off. They gained their feet soundlessly .

In the grass, Tucker had laid a shotgun. Not that he’d ever shoot a man—relative or not—but he couldn’t very well just sit up here with a condom in his pocket as weapon. Besides, he might even spot a coyote on the prowl.

Tucker swept the gun into his hands and aimed it at the sky. Christian was tense at his side, a big cat ready to spring.

The grass swished around a person’s feet. Sweat ran down Tucker’s back and wet his waistband.

A voice drifted to them. “Guys?”

Christian cocked his head but Tucker knew instantly who it was. He dropped his gun and headed down the hill in a lope.

A few hundred yards below he spotted the dark shadow of Claire moving toward them. That jaw-creaking grin from earlier with Christian stretched across his face for her.

She sped up, but he caught her halfway down the slope.

“What are you doing here?” Didn’t she realize she shouldn’t be roaming the ranch alone in the dark ?

“I’m...sorry. But I wanted to be with you and Chris tonight.” She sounded uncertain.

He grabbed her and laid a kiss on her, bending her over his arm and plundering her mouth until she made squeaking noises.

“We want you too.” Christian’s voice echoed from the darkness.

He clutched both Tucker and Claire. Their heads bent together, and three tongues tangled until Claire was shaking and Tucker thought his balls would explode.

With one quick glance of the area to ensure they were alone and safe in the fields, Tucker towed them both to the ground. A flurry of activity ensued while they stripped each other—laughing and carrying on. Until they both reached under Claire’s cotton dress and found she wasn’t wearing panties.

Tucker sobered and Christian’s expression grew intense.

“Hold her. I get first taste.” Christian stretched out between her thighs and buried his mouth in her apex.

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Claire's back arched off the ground as Tucker stripped away her dress.

Then he did as he was bidden and held her down with long, tongue-fucking kisses.

Fire spread through his limbs. The cooler air kissed her damp skin and raised gooseflesh in its wake.

He trailed his fingers down her shoulders to the tight buds of her breasts.

She gasped as he closed his fingers around them. Pulled. Pinched.

The scents of her arousal drifted on the air currents, and his cock stiffened another fraction. Damn, he couldn't wait to hear her come unglued. Then he was damn well going to thrust his tongue into Christian's mouth and taste her.

Sending a glance down her body, silvery in the moonlight, he riveted his gaze to the place where Christian's wet tongue flashed. Claire's body tensed, and Tucker realized Christian had sent two fingers into her channel.

She hissed. Grabbing at Tucker, she yanked him down for a string of wild kisses. When he felt her loosen, he knew she was close. Right before she came, she always grew boneless. Then her orgasm would rush up on her and she'd be a straining kitten once more.

Her skin was silk beneath his palm. He cupped her breast, molded it to his hand. A flick of the tip and she was humming. He attuned himself to her, to Christian's movements.

A cry burst from her. Tucker swallowed it and groaned at the knowledge that her sweet cream was flooding Christian's mouth.

His lover licked her with long, smooth strokes, cleaning every drop of her come.

Claire's body pebbled with goose bumps, and her warm pants fogged the air.

Christian raised his head and eased back onto his haunches. "Cover her before she gets cold."

His cock throbbing, Tucker abandoned her mouth and breasts and knee-walked through the grass. The ticklish strands swayed against his thighs. He positioned himself at her center, staring at her lust-filled expression.

There was a tearing sound and then Christian slid a hand over Tucker's cock, stretching and fitting it with a condom in one stroke.

Tucker threw his head back at the feel of the masculine hand on his length.

For a moment, he was transported to the living room and their sessions.

Now that he had given himself, it was so much more intense .

Because his emotions were engaged with every physical inch of him.

Christian knelt to brush his lips over Claire's. She clung to him, fingertips digging into thick shoulder muscles.

Tucker closed a hand around Christian's biceps. "My turn."

They broke away. With a grin, Christian moved a foot toward Tucker. Their mouths

connected gently. Claire's sweet flavors passed to his lips, making his cock bob in the air.

Simultaneously, she and Christian touched him. Two hands, ten fingers, all playing over his shaft. She worked low, scooping his balls against his body, while a rough finger rode the underside in the way only Christian could touch him.

A roar built in his throat. If they were in the house, he'd scream the walls down. But to release a cry into the night might shake loose a star or two, and he couldn't have that.

He swallowed his sounds, eyes closed in bliss.

When Christian's hand left his cock, Claire's took over. Her nimble fingers worked him like no other. Curling, squeezing perfectly before releasing.

"Stop. Can't." His vocabulary was reduced to one-syllable sentences.

Christian fitted himself with a condom. He ran his fingers around the foil packet, and Tucker's body flexed with the idea of Christian lubing those thick fingers to slip into his body.

Claire stared up at him with want etched all over her beautiful face. Tucker could stand no more. He gripped his cock and rubbed it over her slit, bottom to top. Coating himself in her juices. At the top, he lightly chafed her button with the head.

She squirmed and mewed. He glided his cock through her folds once more, down to her soaking heat.

"Please," she gasped.

“Fuck.” Another one-word sentence but it meant surrender. With a hard nudge, he sank balls deep.

Her heat enveloped him. Her walls quivered, then contracted tightly.

“I’m...coming again,” she choked, the tiny point of her chin to the heavens, her arms thrown wide .

For an excruciating minute he thought he’d blow. Without warning, Christian drove a finger deep into his ass. Pain mingled with pleasure, but it grounded him long enough to gain control.

Tucker cradled Claire’s ass and pushed her up his shaft, then brought her back to him, sealing their bodies. She shuddered.

“She’s coming unglued,” Christian said quietly beside Tucker’s ear. “Just what we want.”

“Shit,” Tucker managed. Heat rushed up inside him as Christian withdrew his finger then plunged in again. For quivering minutes, he allowed his lover to stretch him. One finger, two and finally scissoring apart.

“Jesus, I can’t wait anymore.” Christian’s lust-roughened voice was a caress of its own.

“Do it.” Good. That’s two words.

Christian didn’t waste time. He locked his arm around Tucker and filled him in one thrust. Tucker grunted at the invasion. His ears rushed with surging blood. Claire’s body clenched him. Christian’s stuffed.

“Move,” Christian demanded .

Tucker did. Plunging deep into Claire’s primed body. Another orgasm swept her before he could think, but it served to drive his need up another notch.

Christian took him more roughly, his movements jerky and out of sync. He placed his mouth to Tucker’s ear. “So fucking tight. Want to pound into you.”

In invitation, Tucker slammed his hips back. Christian growled in response and found his rhythm. Tucker gathered Claire from the ground and held her tightly to his body as the three of them made a new music in the night.

Christian came first with a choked noise. Claire’s eyes were glassy, her lips parted as Tucker drilled into her sweetness. His heart was a goner, stretched between these two amazing lovers, and he didn’t want to be anywhere else on Earth.

“Come on me, baby,” he whispered a moment before the pressure burst in his core.

She pulsated around him as he unloaded. spurts of heat shot from him, and all of his words were suddenly unlocked.

“Love you, baby. Don’t ever leave me. Be mine and Chris’s forever.”

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The words “you’re not making me eat that” perched on Christian’s lips. Turned out Letty wasn’t sick the previous day but had just required some additional sleep. All good news, except this morning she’d been in rare form and prepared eggs and brains.

Claire had a spoonful inches from her pretty lips. He’d never seen a woman taint herself, but he was about to. “I’m never kissing you again if you put that in your...” she closed her lips around the spoon, “...mouth.”

He twisted his head away and folded his arms over his chest. “I can’t even look at you.”

She giggled and scooped up more. “It’s no different from sausage.”

“It’s fucking different, all right.”

Letty smacked him on the top of the head with the newspaper. “Language, young man. ”

“Sorry.”

Across the table from him, Tucker offered him a grin.

“What do you think goes into those cheap chili dogs you get from the Quickie Mart?” Claire asked, finishing off another bite.

“Those are all-beef franks.”

“You keep dreaming, Christian, just like I’ll fantasize that I’m twenty-eight again.” Letty took a big sip of coffee.

They all looked at her. “What would you do if you were twenty-eight again, Letty?” Claire asked.

The woman set her cup down and looked from one face to the next. “Why, I’d do what you’re doing here. I’d find me two good men to make me happy.”

Christian’s chest warmed with affection for Claire’s aunt. Not everyone would approve of their strange situation, but she only saw Claire’s happy face and accepted it.

He stole a look at his plate. The fried brains sat there, lumpy and staring at him. He could almost hear their piggy thoughts. But it couldn’t be helped .

He grabbed his fork and scooped some up. Before he could dwell on his action, he stuffed them into his mouth.

Silence weighted the air around him as three people gaped, awaiting his reaction.

He pinched his eyes shut, chewed rapid-fire and swallowed. A chorus of laughter peeled from the others. He opened his eyes and met Letty’s bright stare. If she’d ever love him, it was now.

“Good man. Now go on. I know you’re dying to drive down to that Quickie Mart.”

He hopped up from the table with an exaggerated enthusiasm that made everyone laugh again.

Giving Claire’s hair a tug, he looked into her eyes then Tucker’s.

Memories of their encounter last night filled him with renewed heat.

But before he could spring an erection, he dropped a kiss to Letty's soft puff of hair.

"Thanks for breakfast."

She reached up and patted his closely-shaven cheek. "Wait until you see what I have planned for tomorrow."

He suppressed a groan and left the house. Outside, the crisp air brought the scents of the ranch to him. Sweet grasses at the end of their season, as well as fresh hay they'd spread in the stalls yesterday.

Long before breakfast, Tucker had freed the chickens and they milled around Christian's feet like orange-red pets seeking attention. He scattered them and strode on to his truck.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement.

In a split second, he understood what he was seeing and was running full tilt.

Dale near the alpaca pen, ready to cut the wire fencing.

He caught sight of Christian bearing down on him and his eyes widened. He spun and made a break for it, but Christian was faster. He launched himself from several feet away, tackling the lanky guy to the ground.

All the breath whooshed from Dale as Christian's bigger body slammed into his. With murder pulsing red hot in his veins, Christian grabbed his arms and yanked them behind his back .

A strangled noise exited Dale, but Christian ruthlessly jerked his hands higher on his spine.

“What the fuck are you doing on this land? You think you’re going to cut our fence?”

There was just a choking noise that indicated Dale wasn’t able to fill his lungs yet.

After a minute, he managed, “Don’t get Tucker.”

“Why the hell shouldn’t I?” Christian raged in a voice that was deadly with its softness. He applied more pressure to Dale’s arm until the shoulder joint flexed. Another inch and the ball would slip from the socket.

Dale writhed. “My shoulder! Stop!”

“Why should I stop? You’re hurting our horses. Maybe you’ve hurt our alpacas. Why shouldn’t this be a shoulder for a hoof?”

Then again...why not negotiate to get what he, Claire and Tucker really wanted—for the other Langleys to leave them alone?

Keeping pressure on his arm, Christian leaned over him so Dale didn’t miss a word. “You quit trying to get Tucker to sign those papers or else I’ll open my mouth and bellow for him now. ”

Dale shook his head. “Can’t.” He panted shallowly, as if the pain were too much. Probably was.

“Can.” He plied his arm. “Say it or I call him and he’ll beat the livin’ hell outta you in addition to this multi-faceted shoulder pain.”

Dale groaned.

“No more contract. And you stay off this land.”

When Dale lay still like a slug, Christian drew an exaggerated breath as if ready to yell. “Owww! Yes, okay. Deal! Just don’t call him. Damn you, I’ve got a lot of money to call in a lawyer and sue you for pain and suffering.”

A film of red settled over Christian’s brain. With one last sharp twist, he shoved Dale’s arm and jumped up. While the man groaned in pain, Christian hauled him to his feet and gave him a push in the direction of his home.

“Get off this ranch before Tucker finds you. Because you’ll be dealing with more than a hurt shoulder.”

Dale took off at a run, cradling his limp arm to his body.

For a jaw-grinding moment, Christian watched him.

Fury warred with common sense. He could go in there and get Tucker and let him deal with the mess, or he could keep quiet and spare Dale’s life.

Yesterday when Tucker had learned that more than one horse had been injured, and most likely by his relatives, Christian had never seen such an expression on his lover’s face.

Whoever was on the receiving end of that look should be terrified for his life.

Spinning on his boot heels, he strode toward the alpaca fence. Sure enough, Dale had been about to cut the top two wires strung between posts.

With a sigh, Christian pocketed the wire cutters, got into his truck and started it.

As he drove down the driveway and toward town, he tugged his hat lower, then lower still.

Couldn't they just have some peace? After last night, he felt as if their souls had finally melded into one unit.

Drifting along in that warm sea was all he wanted.

Tucker was at his vibrant best, scarred, but ready to move on. Claire was her sweet, quirky self. And Christian—happier than he'd ever been in his life .

Now he could be possibly sued for his rash action with Dale, but with any luck Dale would stop his father from pushing for Tucker to sign.

Christian flexed his fingers around the steering wheel. Damn, he could almost feel that shoulder joint pop. Fuck, what had he been thinking?

I wasn't. Just protecting.

Something about that Dale guy disturbed him. On the surface he seemed fairly geeky, though covered in expensive clothing. But lurking in his eyes was something creepy.

Claire felt it—he knew she did.

No, he was being paranoid. Dale wasn't dangerous—just a dumbass. He played big daddy's game and was using manipulation and scare tactics to get what he wanted.

Well, either Dale would uphold his end of the bargain or he wouldn't.

Nothing for Christian to do about it. Right now he was on a mission.

First he was going to fill his truck bed with enough feed to hold off sixteen hungry alpacas.

Then he was going to flush those pig brains out of his system with a couple of chili dogs.

* * * * *

The thunder of a hundred boot heels striking the dusty wooden floor of The Hellion greeted Claire as she entered. Tucker and Christian flanked her on each side, their pine, soap and musk scents giving her strength to face the crowd.

Tonight, she just wasn't in the mood to socialize. When Christian had suggested they come out for a beer and a twirl, she'd easily given in to his smoldering look, but now she wasn't so sure.

"I don't feel like dancing..."

He'd grabbed her arm, twisted it so the soft crease faced up, then he buried his mouth in it.

Her knees went weak and her pussy burned with want as he ran his scorching tongue along the sensitive flesh that was far from an erogenous zone. But somehow, he could make it one.

So here she was, booted up, in her tiniest denim skirt and plaid shirt knotted high enough that a sliver of her torso flashed. Her men had been complimenting her and charming her panties wet the whole drive to The Hellion, but her appearance was nothing compared to theirs.

Tucker was drool-worthy in low-slung, worn jeans, a black T-shirt molded to his sculpted chest. He'd spiked his hair with gel tonight, and his lip ring only added to his dangerous appeal. Throw in his black Stetson and she would probably come just by looking at him.

And Christian...he'd amped up his regular boy-next-door look with a pair of dark jeans and a white western shirt. The sleeves were rolled up on his hard forearms, and the dark hairs lying against the white cuff did things to her insides she couldn't contemplate in public.

Christian planted a hand on her lower back even as Tucker grabbed her hand.

"Don't be shy, Claire, sweetheart." Tucker's mouth lingered at her ear.

A shiver ran straight to her pussy. God, she was going to have to let them have their way with her in a bathroom stall or something.

A brief fantasy played out in her mind, of her ankle hooked over Tucker's shoulder and Christian's hard body at her back, both men slipping deep into her body and simultaneously against each other's.

Christian snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Come on, baby. We won't make you dance until you've at least had two drinks. Speaking of..." His hand left her spine and he disappeared into the crowd around the wooden bar.

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Tucker continued to lead her into the crush. She clung to his warm, dry fingers while the beat and thunder of line dancers thudded in her chest.

They did a complete circuit of the bar and didn't find a single free seat. So Tucker found an open space against the wall by the stage. He leaned against it and pulled her back against his front, wrapping one arm around her, just under her breasts.

"Already excited, I feel." She wiggled her ass and turned her head to the side to peer at him.

His lips skimmed her ear, skated down to the lobe, which he bit sharply. Her nipples stiffened and she swallowed a moan. "I can't help it. When I'm close to you, I want to do very dirty things to you."

His words started an inferno in the pit of her belly, which only flared hotter when Christian burst out of the crowd with three cold longnecks in hand. He bootscooted across the dance floor, turning a circle in the center, then came toward them with a grin in place.

When he reached them, Tucker reached out. Instead of taking the bottle from Christian, he crunched the fabric of his shirt in his fist and tugged him close. For a breathless second, Claire was sandwiched perfectly between her men.

Christian scuffed his jaw over her cheek, teasing her with the rough hair she craved. He rocked back a few inches and passed out the beers.

She glanced around his body to see several girls on the sidelines staring at them.

Nervousness warred with her desire to just stick her tongue down Christian's throat while kneading Tucker's cock through his jeans. Just to let everyone in the joint know that they were a threesome.

But she didn't. She tipped the cold rim of the beer against her lips and drew two long swallows. The icy liquid only tightened her nipples more, which Christian ogled with a look of appreciation.

"Okay, hurry up and down that, baby. I want to dance with you."

She smiled around the mouth of the bottle. "You said two drinks before you'd make me dance."

"Yeah, well, I lied. I can't wait to get you into my arms and spinning like mad across that floor."

"Between the beer and the spinning, I'll be lucky to stay upright."

"Hell, you're a fantastic dancer. I've seen ya in action."

Tucker shifted his feet to the rhythm as a new song came on. A collective whoop from the crowd indicated it was a favorite of the house. Then suddenly, the beer was ripped from Claire's hand and she was pushed and pulled onto the floor by four hands.

Finding herself stuffed into line between Christian and Tucker, she had no choice but to dance. And yeah, Christian was right—she prided herself on her ability on the dance floor.

Her fatigue fell away, and she let down her curls. For several minutes she only knew the music and the jolts of every boot stomp on the floor. Christian and Tucker kept

pace easily.

When they twirled her off the dance floor and back against the wall, this time in Christian's arms, she collapsed into giggles.

"What's funny?" Tucker asked.

"How'd you guys learn that dance? You been practicing in the barn?"

Christian delivered a pinch to her backside that made her squeal. A slow song rang out across the bar. The lines dissolved into couples, all swaying to the love ballad.

"Go on. Take her out," Christian said.

Tucker's eyes were dark and close, his mouth tender and kissable. He chafed Claire's fingers between his and led her into the crowd.

She spiraled her arms around his neck, thinking of a few other times they'd done this very thing. That was B.C.—before Christian. Back when Tucker didn't seem to know what he wanted and was chasing a ghost.

He locked her to him and rather than pivot in a tight circle like some guys, he maneuvered her through the bodies with skill .

She rested her head on his shoulder and breathed his clean scent, happier than she'd ever been in her life.

"Fair's this weekend. Is Boom Boom all ready?"

Well, damn, she'd been happy a moment ago.

She nodded jerkily, trying not to stiffen at his question. He didn't have any clue about the deal she'd struck with Darcy—or their fight in the drugstore. That one surprised her. In a town as small as Reedy, someone was sure to witness the fight and tattle.

But no, Tucker hadn't mentioned a word to her.

He opened his mouth to say something else. Frightened that it was more about the fair and the heartbreaking idea that she wouldn't be showing Boom Boom, Claire went on tiptoe and kissed him.

The instant their lips brushed, she forgot all about it too. He tightened his hold on her, drawing her pussy against the hard steel of his erection. She rubbed wantonly, twining tongues until she thought she'd combust .

Someone touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes as Christian tapped on Tucker's. "I'm cuttin' in before you end up making her come."

Tucker's chest rumbled with laughter. "As if you won't." But he relinquished her to Christian's arms, and they swayed.

Close and slow, his thighs rubbing hers in a way that maddened her. Crazy that only a few months ago, they'd started out in love with the same man. Now they shared him, and her heart equally belonged to them.

"You look beautiful tonight," he crooned in her ear.

She shivered. "You look pretty fine yourself, cowboy."

A shit-eating grin spread across his handsome face. "Cowboy, eh?"

She eyed him with a smile. "Isn't that what you've been playing at for months, up

there on that ranch with me and Tucker?”

He dipped his head as if shy but pleased. “Yes’m. I guess I am.”

“Real cowboys eat eggs and brains.”

His grin broadened until his eyes creased at the corners. “Then I’m a real cowboy. ”

She giggled at the memory of the look on his face when that bite of brains had hit his tongue. He’d been more than disgusted, but he’d chewed and swallowed just to make Letty happy.

They all wanted to make Letty happy. Briefly, she thought of her father. He’d called once in the time since his visit to the ranch, but Claire had been out and hadn’t spoken with him. I’ll call him soon. Tomorrow.

Christian held her gaze until she felt warmth radiate throughout her body.

When he swooped in to claim her lips, she tilted her head and accepted him wholeheartedly.

Dark need coursed in her veins. Much more of this and she wouldn’t make it to the parking lot before she was begging them to touch her, to give her release.

He probed her tongue with his then pulled away reluctantly as the song ended. His grip on her fingers indicated he planned to lead her back to Tucker, but after publicly displaying her want of both men, she thought it best to cool down.

“I’m just going to the ladies’ room.”

He nodded and gave her a heart-trilling smile. With a new lightness in her step to add

to the slippery sway of her hips, she made her way to the back of The Hellion and the restrooms.

As usual, a short line of both men and women lined the hall. She plastered herself against the rough wooden wall and waited.

The line moved slowly. She didn't dare make eye contact, though, because the moment she did— bam !

“You work at the diner,” a guy said.

Fuck. Didn't even require the eye contact this time. Okay, what are you going to tell me that I don't wanna hear?

She shot him a thin-lipped smile. “Yes, I do.”

“And you're staying up at the Langley Ranch, right?”

“Uh...” No point in denying it. Everyone and his Uncle Jeb had seen her making out with both Tucker and Christian tonight.

“You know of a guy by the name of Leon?”

An icy finger trailed down her spine. “Yes,” she heard herself say, though she longed to spin on her boot heels and run away.

The man was in his late forties—close to Leon's age. “I've known Leon from way back, but recently I've been working with him.” He glanced up as a man stumbled down the hall, pushing past them to get to the restroom.

“Working with him how?”

“Look, I want to talk to you about this, but not here. Not now. How can I reach you?”

Alarm bells went off in Claire’s head. The last thing she’d ever do was pass out her contact information. “Well, I...”

“The fair. You going to the fair tomorrow? Everyone goes. It’s a big deal.”

Claire’s stomach pitched and heaved, knowing she had to make a decision about the deal she’d struck with Darcy. “Yes, I am.”

“I’ll meet you after the wood-chopping competition.” He flexed his arms when he folded them over his chest. “I’ve won two years in a row.”

“That’s nice. If you’ll just excuse me.” She pivoted on her heel and took off back to the main room.

She bounced across the floor, stopped at the bar to grab a few more beers and met her men at their place against the wall.

Christian pulled away from the wall with an intense look of want spelled all over his face.

Tucker gnawed at the piercing in his lip, as he often did when he was about to make her feel really good.

Passing them each a bottle, she leaned in seductively. “Drink ‘em down, boys. I feel like kicking up my heels.”

* * * * *

“What a piss poor day for the fair,” Tucker muttered. He pulled his hat lower to avoid

the nonstop sprinkle that was quickly turning into a soaking rain. He had two horses and an alpaca to offload from the trailer, though he'd rather go home and curl up in bed with Christian and Claire.

His boots dug into the mud. Christian joined him at the trailer, and as quickly as possible, they unloaded Boom Boom, whose event was first. The horses could comfortably hunker down in the dry trailer.

Claire got out of the truck and trudged back to the trailer too.

"You can stay in the truck till the event, sweetness. No point in letting those pretty curls get soaked." Tucker eyed her from beneath the brim of his hat. She wasn't herself today. Was she nervous about her event?

The area milled with other cowboys and ranchers unloading various animals. Letty had driven up with a friend from the ladies' guild and would use Claire's phone to text Christian when he needed to come get the jars of the tomato and applesauces she was presenting to the judges.

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Claire's head snapped up and a flush mottled her beautiful face. Tucker followed her gaze to see Darcy and Leon headed their way.

His stomach knotted as he prepared for the worst. He didn't feel like having a word match here in front of everyone. As far as he knew, only Claire and Christian knew of his money. Leon, on the other hand, flaunted it to all.

Today he wore a long drover coat against the rain, and Darcy had on a pink fringed leather jacket with rhinestones that matched.

"There's my blue ribbon winner!" Darcy grabbed the leash out of Tucker's hand and started to lead Boom Boom away.

"Hold up. What the hell do you think you're doing? "

"This is my alpaca. I'm showing her in ten minutes. We made a deal." She shot Claire a look.

Oh fuck. His gut hollowed out.

His family had gotten to Claire. What had been said or done to her? In one step, he was beside Claire and had her tucked against his side. Christian looked as befuddled as he felt. Apparently Claire had held this information close.

Tucker looked straight at Leon. "Tell me what is going on."

A snide smile spread over the man's face. If Tucker hadn't long ago learned to hate

him, he would now. It was one thing to fuck with him, but with Claire?

He glared at him.

“This is between me and Darcy,” Claire spoke up. The rain was soaking her hair to black. Water ran down her cheek.

“Get under this pavilion,” he growled, towing her across the parking area to a small stand under roof.

Typically the entire event was held under the great big Wyoming sky, but today someone had actually believed the weatherman when rain was forecasted.

Whether or not the weatherman had been threatened with a shotgun was questionable.

But in the end, some smart person had erected tents sporadically about the grounds.

Everyone followed, including Boom Boom, led by Darcy, damn her.

He looked down at Claire expectantly. Tears stood in the corners of her almond eyes. Fuck, he hadn't meant to ever see those again after he'd committed himself to her and Christian.

“I've entered Darcy in the event. She's showing Boom Boom.”

“Why?”

Claire flinched, and his heart tugged.

“Because you promised to raise this alpaca for me, and Claire is upholding your end of the bargain.”

“No.” His tone was hard. He swung his gaze between Leon and Darcy. “I don’t know what you did to change events, but it’s stopping with me. Claire is showing this animal.”

Leon stared at Tucker until he got his meaning. In that direct gaze he saw that negotiations had taken place that would keep Leon off his back in exchange for a blue ribbon for his cousin.

He shook his head hard and opened his mouth to speak.

Claire wrapped her fingers around his forearm. Her hand was chilled. She slipped the other around his neck and tugged his head down until her mouth was at his ear. “Let me do this, Tucker. It’s just a fair.”

Her whispered words created a knot of emotion in his throat.

She’d done this for him. How and when weren’t important.

A tight feeling stole over his body, and pain ricocheted around the walls of his heart.

Fuck it all, he’d dragged the people he loved into this mess, and Claire had done something selfless to get him out of it.

Except he knew by Leon’s backstabbing past that the deal only held true until the blue ribbon passed into Darcy’s hand.

He sent Christian a pointed look and released Claire. Christian took over her protection by wrapping an arm around her narrow waist.

Tucker jerked his head at his uncle to indicate they were talking. Leon stalked before him, his lanky legs eating up the muddy ground. When they stood about twenty yards

away, Tucker unloaded, and not more livestock.

Fury lay on his tongue. “What the fuck are you trying to pull?”

Leon shook his head, feigning innocence. “Your little gal attacked Darcy in the drugstore—”

“What?” He tried to picture Claire—his Claire—sucker-punching Darcy. She was the sweetest woman on earth. How...?

Images of his pocked truck flitted through his head. Yeah, she’s capable.

But why? She wouldn’t have attacked Darcy without provocation. While he’d never personally had a problem with Darcy, it was possible that Leon’s and Dale’s ways had worn off on her. A shame, really.

Tucker jabbed a finger at his uncle’s chest. “Call it off.”

Surprise flitted across his face. On the heels of that was a cunning glint in his eyes. “If an alpaca and a woman are more important, then I’m sure we can come to an arrangement.”

From his inner pocket of his coat, Leon withdrew the papers .

“Give ‘em to me.” Tucker snatched them from Leon’s hand, turned and flattened them against the wooden side of a concession stand. “Pen?”

Leon dangled one in front of Tucker’s face.

“No!” The harsh cry made him start. He looked up just in time to see Claire sprinting toward him. Mud splashed around her and her expression was fierce—with love.

She ripped the papers from his hands and tore the thick wad in two. Then she proceeded to mutilate the contract until it was confetti lying in the muddy water at their feet.

He gaped at her, aware that Christian was at his side and doing the same.

A fevered light burned in her dark eyes. “You aren’t signing that.”

The corner of his lip tugged upward. “Guess not now.”

She whirled to face Darcy, who had led Boom Boom into the rain. Snagging the leash from her hand, Claire took off with the blinged-out animal, making straight for the stage where she’d parade Boom Boom .

“Guess she’s changed her mind about allowing you to show Boom Boom,” Christian drawled in true cowboy style.

Darcy burst into a keening wail. Leon’s eyes shot bullets. And Tucker couldn’t be happier.

He ground his boot into the mess of paper and shouldered his way past his family. The alpacas were about to be shown, and only one had been that well-cared for as far as he was concerned—the one with the pink ankle cuffs and tiara.

When he and Christian took their seats in the soggy area in front of the stage, he could only see the joy radiating from the woman he loved.

* * * * *

“Hey, little gal.” The whisper from behind caused Claire to whirl.

The man from the bar who'd wanted to talk to her about Leon stood there, his plaid shirt wet from rain and sweat after the wood-chopping competition .

Claire put a bit of distance between them. "What did you need to tell me? Make it fast before my men see us talking." She cast a nervous glance left and right, but luckily Tucker and Christian were off with Letty, watching the tractor pull.

"I'm with Bradley Coal." The man shifted from boot to boot. She glanced down to see he wore simple, utilitarian cowboy boots. So he wasn't like Leon, at least as far as fashion sense went.

A long pause ensued. Finally, she met the man's gaze.

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "Look, I don't know why I'm compelled to tell you this—"

It always started this way. She steeled herself to hear a dark confession about this man's love affair with Leon or the fact that Leon had stolen his wife from him and plunged him into despair.

He continued, "There's something been bothering me for a while about that mining operation up on the Langley land."

She held her breath then released it in a slow trickle. "What's that? "

"I oversee several branches of Bradley Coal, and I see quite a bit of paperwork. See..." He searched her face as if waiting for her to pull out a badge and bust him for giving up confidential information.

She waited patiently. No better way to get a person talking.

In a rush, he spoke. “That land, some of it isn’t minable. But Leon—he rigged the maps to make it look as if it is.”

“What?” Confusion slanted her brows into a V.

“Seems that part of that land Leon owns—not Tucker, mind you—has a hold on it by the state.”

“I don’t understand.” A deep quake began in her belly. She wished she hadn’t given into Christian’s wishes and taken a bite of his corndog.

“The state claims there are ruins on that upper portion of the land. They plan to have an archeological dig. Indian ruins or dinosaur bones—I’m not sure what’s in that ground. But Leon isn’t supposed to disturb it with mining.”

And he has. A flutter took up residence in her chest. Fear or excitement? She wasn’t sure .

“So he falsified the surveyor’s maps to make it look as if the land the state wants him to keep untouched is really some distance away. In the north corner.”

The gravity of the information hit her full force. Bearing down on her until she felt as if her wooden heels would splinter. With this information, she could stop Leon once and for all. If she told on him, he’d be in for the lawsuit of his life, racking up millions in fees and fines.

For the first time ever, Claire reached out and placed her hand on the arm of the man who had told her something she didn’t want to hear. Because in the end, she needed this information to keep Tucker, Christian and her all safe and living happily on the ranch forever.

“Thank you.” She squeezed the man’s arm, a smile eating up every square inch of her face. It felt as if her forehead was even smiling.

He grinned in return, infected by her excitement though he couldn’t know why. “My pleasure. Just...” A worried look passed over his features.

She ran her finger and thumb along her lip in a zipping motion. Then backing off, she gave a final wave before making her hurried way to the tractor pull.

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Claire held her breath while the judge passed by Letty's canned wares two times...three times. Christian squeezed her hand in support.

A tremble ran through her, and he knew she was more excited that Letty might win than she had been at receiving that blue ribbon for Boom Boom.

Well, he hoped that both of his favorite women won today.

The judge licked his lips and used the small spoon to sample Letty's sauce once more. Then he swished some water around his mouth and walked five paces to another woman's sauce. He repeated his ritual.

"Jesus, just pick her already. It's the best up there," Tucker muttered, kicking at the only bit of dry earth within the fairgrounds .

Claire shot him a grin then returned her attention to the judge. The man was just abusing his power, as far as Christian was concerned. He wasn't singlehandedly choosing the next American President.

"C'mon, judge. It's obvious who the winner is!" The holler left Christian's lips before he realized he was about to do it. Guess Claire's impulsiveness has rubbed off.

Claire snapped around to stare at him and Tucker broke into hysterical laughter. Seated at the long table, her hat primly seated atop her tiny skull, Letty grinned. She and Christian's gazes met. In that instant, he knew he had her on his side and might never have to resort to eating brains again.

Well, maybe once in a while, just to keep her happy.

“And the winner is...” A long, drawn-out pause ensued. Letty squirmed. Claire was an electrical current coursing through a fence wire.

“On with it,” Tucker called.

The judge gave him a steely eye. “The winner is number fourteen, Letty Bishop. ”

Claire squealed and surged out of Christian’s hold to reach the table. Letty stood and they embraced, rocking and bouncing together.

Tucker’s gaze was riveted to the women, just as Christian’s was. “Two ribbons won. I say we take our horses and head on home.”

Shock flitted through Christian. “What? Not show your horses?”

Tucker waved a hand. “I don’t need ribbons. I can sell them for top dollar without. I know two rodeo guys who want them right now.”

An hour later, the horses and Boom Boom were tucked in the trailer, and Letty’s prize-winning tomato sauce wrapped in quilts and in the trunk of her car. Her applesauce had taken second place, which had been fine enough for her.

During the drive home, Christian’s mind whirled with the events of the day. Learning that Claire had tried to keep Leon off Tucker’s back—the same way Christian had coerced Dale—didn’t set well with him.

He didn’t want Claire involved. Keeping her in her safe world was a necessity. And Tucker was right—they had to convince her to quit working at the diner and take on the ranch full time as her job.

For long minutes, Christian thought about how he could earn more from his side business but it wasn't as if people were knocking down his door, demanding he trim their trees.

By the time he registered what he was seeing out the window, they were home.

He peered through the rain-spattered windshield, straining to understand the sight before him.

Claire slapped a hand against his thigh, leaning forward too. "Is that...?"

"Horses," Tucker growled. He floored the truck and spun up gravel. It clinked off the bottom of the metal horse trailer. In seconds, they were in front of the barn. Tucker leaped from the truck and took off running.

Horses scattered. Alpacas skittered all over the yard and one was up in the pasture, running full tilt for the tree line.

"Leon—it's gotta be." That volcanic look that had once scared Christian crossed his lover's face again. He exchanged a knowing nod with Tucker and they each grabbed one of Claire's arms .

"Hey!" She dug her heels in as they dragged her toward the house.

"Just listen to us this once, sweetheart." Christian eased his command by rubbing his thumb over the leaping vein in her wrist.

"No. I'm part of this ranch." Her voice faltered and she swung her gaze toward Tucker.

He stopped in his tracks. Water ran off the brim of his hat but his eyes beneath were

nothing but fire. Fire and love.

He leaned in and planted a hard kiss on Claire's lips. "You know you are. We're a team. But you've gotta stay inside in case there's trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Tucker started towing her toward the house again. He fished in his pocket for his keys and unlocked the door, which had never been locked before his relatives started their crap.

Christian opened the door and they bundled their fighting woman inside. "We don't know what kind of trouble yet. But you're not going to be part of it."

Tucker closed the door in her face, but not before Christian got a good look at the determined wrath on her pixie features.

"She ain't gonna stay put. She'll run out the back," Christian said.

"Probably, but hopefully her anger will keep her from thinking straight for a few minutes. Let's go." Tucker jumped off the porch steps in one bound.

Christian followed and they stormed toward the barn. One sweep of the inside told them that the horses here hadn't been tampered with. Only those in the corral and the alpacas.

"Come out, you lowlife bastard," Tucker bellowed.

"This might be a good time to tell you that I caught Dale here the other day."

"What?" Tucker spun, fists clenched and jaw locked. "Why didn't you say

anything?”

“Well, I...roughed him up a little and sent him on his way.” And tried to blackmail him as Claire did with Darcy.

Tucker seemed to sense there was more. He opened his mouth to speak, but a cracking noise from the back of the barn distracted him. Smoke and the acrid scent of gasoline drifted to Christian.

“Fuck—my horses.” The choked way Tucker ground this out sent Christian running. He hurled himself into the dim recesses of the barn. Tucker followed, and they started wildly opening stall doors and slapping thousand-pound animals to get them to run out.

Fire licked up the rear wall, very close to the place where Tucker’s favorite riding horse was kept. “I’ll get Rapid Fire,” Christian called, running.

Something whizzed past his ear. Every hair on his body stood up, but it took a moment for him to register what had happened.

Until a second shot was fired.

He jerked around to see Dale through the open rear door of the bar, a rifle at his shoulder and sights trained on Christian.

“Tucker, get down. Get out,” he roared and hurtled on toward the stalls to free the rest of the horses.

“He’s got a gun.” Tucker’s statement was really a question. Christian could only imagine the shock Tucker was feeling that his own family member would resort to this over money.

One misplaced bullet...

Claire. He frantically looked around but thankfully didn't see her. With any luck, she would remain in the house like a good girl, but it was as unlikely as talking Dale down from this skyscraper he'd built.

"Jesus, boy, what are you thinkin'?" Tucker raged. He gave Christian a fleeting look and a jerk of his head to remain out of the line of fire. Then he spun and sprinted out of the front doors.

Sneaking around the side, Christian guessed. Tucker wasn't armed though. Did he plan to disarm his cousin with nothing more than a pocketknife?

The fire was spreading. About ten more horses were trapped behind a wall of flame. The old wood went up like a dry Christmas tree.

Smoke choked him, and he coughed violently, leaning over at the waist. Another shot whizzed through the barn, from back to front. If someone walked by that door ...

"Jesus, Claire. Please don't come out of the house." He fumbled for his phone, thinking to text her, but it was too late. Her high-pitched shriek resounded from just outside the barn.

"Get in the house," Tucker roared from somewhere near the back. The bellow gave up Tucker's position and intention of sneaking around and stopping Dale.

The horses pawed at the stalls and reared, their massive bodies making the wood tremble.

I've gotta try.

Christian looked for a path to the horses through the flames. Claire appeared in the wide double doors at the front of the barn, her face wild with terror.

“Get out,” Christian called, his throat a burning hell from the smoke. She shook her head and came forward.

Another shot rang out, this time from the front of the barn.

Claire whirled, a hand to her mouth. Then suddenly Letty appeared in the entrance too, a rifle in hand.

“Shot me a trespasser. Claire, go call 911 while we get these horses out.” The older woman started into the barn, but Claire bodily removed her.

With them safe and Dale obviously injured or dead, Christian threw himself into the water trough.

Water filled his nostrils and every crevice of his jeans and shirt.

He threw off his hat with a shake of his head and made sure his hair was saturated.

Then he jumped back out of the trough and ran through the flames.

* * * * *

Panic seized Claire’s chest. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe, think, feel, register anything she was seeing.

Letty standing with her rifle like a geriatric gunslinger.

Dale crumpled on the ground, bleeding from the upper thigh.

The barn on fire and Christian inside, trying to save the remaining horses.

Crazed horses, running wild across the muddy turf to escape the smoke and fire. And alpacas roosting like chickens in every corner of the ranch yard.

Boom Boom was still in the trailer, safe and sound .

But a few important people were unaccounted for. Darcy, Leon...and Tucker.

“Call 911, Letty,” she cried as she ran past her aunt. She shoved her phone at her, knowing there was no hope for that barn. By the time the fire crews showed up, the structure would be ash.

Claire took off in a run around the barn, searching for Tucker. He should have shown his face at the sound of Letty’s gunshot, but he hadn’t, and that meant something bad.

With water in her veins and jelly knees, Claire searched through the rain for one of the men she loved.

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At that moment, she caught a flash of a horse and rider in the far corner, on the other side of the corral. The dark hat and solid form were unmistakable.

Tucker and the horse jumped the fence and headed down the driveway as if the hounds of hell chased them.

Running again? Her heart lurched.

No, leaving them to deal with a harvest or a horse injury was one thing, but abandoning her and Christian at a time like this was unthinkable .

If Tucker was running, he must be chasing. And that someone must be his uncle.

With them accounted for, she ran for the barn. The entire back wall was gone, eaten by a monster of flames. Fear made her sway on her feet. She reached out to grab something but found nothing solid.

Her whole world was a movie scene. Where was the diner, her comfortable house, hell, even her neglectful father?

She was left with fire, blood, terror and tears.

But she had the people she loved more than life.

Drawing a huge gulp of smoke-tinged air, she threw herself into the barn. The roar deafened her, but through it she felt the horses' screams. They pulsed in the atmosphere, as tangible to her as the heat.

Her curls waved wildly around her head in the air currents.

“Christian!” she tried to yell, but she couldn’t breathe.

Suddenly, a sleek body shoved her backward—a horse on its way to freedom. She lost her footing and rolled out into the rain .

Three horses, four, all ran past her. She curled onto her side to avoid getting trampled. Then a big hand clamped around her shoulder, and she was hauled up. Not to her feet, but being dragged.

She fought to get her bearings in this insanity. She was jerked against a soaking form and yanked across the yard, like a fresh kill. And the tiger doing the dragging was Christian.

Wet, blackened with soot, but alive and the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

He collapsed beside her on the ground and rolled on top of her, grinding her into the mud while alpacas and horses moved around them.

A harsh sob vibrated her chest, and it didn’t come from her. The sound mechanized her. She locked her arms around him and pulled his head to hers, raining kisses over his dirty cheeks.

“Thank God you’re okay...”

“Crazy woman...”

“You’re shaking.”

“You’re mine.” Christian crushed his lips to hers in a kiss that would have scared her

with its intensity if she hadn't already half-peed her pants.

Before she could get accustomed to his weight or the gravity of the situation, he was on his feet again. He picked her up and set her on her boots too.

"Letty? Tucker?"

"She's okay." Tucker? He was still a variable. If he was chasing down Leon, it was possible they'd be in love with a murderer.

Christian gave a hard nod. "Where is he?"

"Took off down the drive."

"North toward Leon's?"

"Probably." Her teeth clacked as her nerves finally connected to her brain and the shakes began in earnest.

Christian tugged her off her feet and into his arms and ran with her to the front of the house, where Letty still stood sentry over a writhing Dale.

Unceremoniously, Christian dumped Claire on the porch steps and stormed into the house. A moment later he came out with a blanket, which he wrapped around her shoulders .

"Letty, you and that Winchester are in charge. I'm going after Tucker."

Her aunt's fierce expression softened when she looked to Christian. "Go on with ya. I've got it covered. Police and fire department on the way."

Christian sent Claire a long look. Don't move from that spot or you will get the coarse ropes again, it said. "As long as the stars burn," he said.

She shooed him with her hand, and the blanket flapped. "Go. Hurry."

He ran to his truck and vaulted behind the wheel. All rugged man and determination.

All cowboy.

* * * * *

Tucker didn't even know if they were alive. Claire was probably running into danger, and Christian in that inferno...

He swallowed hard. Plastering himself to the horse's neck, he gave it several sharp kicks in the sides to get her up to speed.

This is what his horses were bred for—beauty and grace as well as speed.

Rodeo horses, smart horses that were good at taking commands.

Well, today Tucker needed his hard work to pay off.

The animal surged forward, eating up the ground between his ranch and his uncle's. That bastard Dale lay in the yard, bleeding, shot by an old lady with more common sense and skill than most men.

His mind cycled back to Claire and Christian. Then launched right on to Heather. If he lost them as he'd lost her, he couldn't function. He'd ride this horse until they both died from exhaustion or starvation. He just couldn't go on without both of the people he loved.

He was running on the highest octane of adrenaline, his instinct to end this whole thing once and for all consuming his every thought and guiding his decisions.

Leon had to be at home, and Tucker was damn well putting a stop to this insanity.

Money and greed had started a modern-day gunfight.

Being pinned down in his own yard by gunfire was something he couldn't have ever dreamed up.

Maybe Dale's actions hadn't been egged on by Leon, but his uncle had fed his son's hate .

He veered off the driveway and sent the horse sailing through the fields. Dips and swells, the roll of the beast's body beneath his and the sting of rain against his face grounded him.

By the time he reached the enormous, sprawling ranch house, his heart had blackened a lot more for his family.

He leaped from the horse mid-stride and gave a sharp whistle to bring the animal to a halt. Then he thundered up the front veranda, over hand-laid flagstones and past the prim landscaping. No sagging of these porch steps.

He burst through the front door, calling for Leon. His voice bounced off the perfect stucco walls and the high ceilings fashioned with chandeliers that cost more than some people's cars in these parts.

"Leon! Show your yellow face to me."

Leon stepped out of a door into a marble-floored hall. "Son of a bitch, you dare to

come into my house and make demands?”

Tucker faced his uncle, his breathing labored as he fought to restrain himself. Damn, if they could only have settled this with pistols at dawn as he’d thought long ago. “Your son’s been shot. ”

Shock overtook Leon’s craggy features, and Tucker almost felt sorry for him. “Shot? Who in the hell? Where?” In three strides, he stood in front of Tucker, fist cocked.

“Go on and throw that punch. We’ll see whose lifestyle made him stronger.” Leon pushed a pencil and counted his funds, while Tucker worked his ass off for his ranch.

Leon dropped his hand. It swung at his side as if lifeless. “Tell me my boy’s okay.”

“Ah, so there is a heart in there after all.” Tucker hitched a thumb in the pocket of his jeans. “Good to hear that one family member earns your concern.”

“Tell me, goddammit. He’s at your ranch? In the hospital? Where?”

“Dale was at my place. Set my animals free in the yard, but left the horses locked in the barn while he set fire to it.”

A sharp intake of breath. “No.”

“Seems he’s been hurting my horses too. But you knew about that. Didn’t you visit the ranch on four-wheelers with shovels on the back?”

Leon’s gaze slid away .

“Dale had a shotgun too. He fired a few shots at me and the people I love.”

His uncle's face flipped between stunned disbelief and a sneer of derision. "So you are with that man and woman on your ranch."

Tucker gave a hard nod. "Yeah, and I'd like to see the man who challenges me on that. I lost a good woman and was rewarded with a good man and another wonderful woman. Now listen, Uncle Leon..." he emphasized the words, "...call this off. I'm not signing those papers, now or ever. And—"

He was cut off by a pounding noise. Leon shoved past him and went to the front door. He yanked the heavy slab open, and Tucker took a step back.

There stood Christian, looking between them.

"Ambulance on its way. Might wanna head up to the ranch," he said to Leon.

Leon took off for his vehicle. Tucker slapped the horse's rump, and with a sharp word, sent it running for home. Then he followed Christian to his truck. They rode in loaded silence all the way back to the ranch. The scene before Tucker unhinged him .

Fire trucks, squad cars. Two ambulances. And Letty and Claire in the middle of it all.

While Leon spoke with his son on the stretcher and the medical personnel, Tucker and Christian went directly to the women. They huddled together, talking quietly. When Claire looked up, relief washed over her beautiful features.

Tucker's heart caved in a little more for this woman. How had he ever left her? Never again.

She threw herself into his arms and Christian wrapped them both in his embrace. They stood this way for several heartbeats before Leon joined them.

He poked his finger in Tucker's face. "You." His voice trembled. "If you woulda signed long ago..."

Claire stepped out of Tucker's hold. "See, there's a problem with your statement."

Christian glanced between them, fists clenched. Tucker tensed.

Leon waved Claire away. "No one wants to hear advice from a waitress."

"You should. Especially when that waitress," she growled, stepping right into Leon's space, "is a good listener. People like to talk to her. And she hears things."

Tucker's heart thudded hard. What did she know?

She plowed on. "This waitress heard that a certain set of survey maps was altered."

Leon's face paled.

"And the land Bradley Coal is mining actually is zoned by the state—preserved in wait for a special dig." She arched a perfect dark brow.

At that moment, Tucker could grab her, bend her over his arm and kiss the pink out of her cheeks.

"You're talking crazy. Just like all those people in town always said you and Letty here are," Leon said.

At that, Letty tapped him in the temple with her rifle butt. Hard.

Leon roared in pain.

Christian, his face wreathed with mirth, disarmed Letty before she could get herself in trouble.

Claire went on. “So if you don’t back off with your request for Tucker to grant you that access by signing an illegal contract, I’m sure the state would like to know about your activities.

It’s only a matter of time, anyway, before they discover that the ground they’ve ordered a no-mining zone has been dug up.

” She dropped her gaze and stared at her fingernail as if disinterested.

“Wonder what was in that ground? Ancient Indian cemetery? Dinosaur remains?”

Leon took a step back, slow and uneasy. “You don’t know anything.”

“Doesn’t she? By the look on your face, I’d say she’s spot on.”

“I talked to an executive at Bradley Coal who knows what’s going on.” She glanced back up at Leon. “So you ready to burn those contracts?”

“This isn’t over. Whoever shot my son can expect my attorney to be in touch.”

At that, Letty stepped forward. “Tell him to put away his daddy’s guns and keep his skinny ass off our property or he can expect a hole in his other leg.”

Tucker’s heart warmed as he realized what she’d said. Our property . That’s exactly what he wanted—for her and Claire and Christian to feel at home here with him .

He wrapped an arm around Claire’s waist and tugged her against his side.

She stood tall, but he felt the underlying tension in her form.

Christian flanked her other side, and they watched as Leon tucked his forked tail and headed back to his offspring, who was being loaded into the back of the ambulance.

It wasn't until the four of them were alone that Tucker released the whoop of joy and exhilaration he'd been stifling.

Christian planted a kiss on the top of Letty's head then delivered a bruising kiss to Tucker's lips. They both turned to Claire. Her pretty face was alive with happiness.

"I aim to put that look on your face every day of my life, baby," he rumbled before claiming her lips.

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With hands clapped over Christian's eyes, Claire guided him forward into the kitchen. The smells of Letty's special birthday dinner for him tickled her senses. It probably wouldn't be a mystery to him what she'd spent hours preparing for him, seeing how he was such a connoisseur.

He allowed Claire to guide him to a chair, where Tucker pressed him down.

"Okay, open your eyes." She removed her hands and slipped around the table to catch his expression.

Before him, Letty had placed a platter of the best hot dogs, toasted buns and a big bowl of homemade chili. Small bowls of cheese, condiments and onions dotted the rest of the surface.

"Surprise," Letty exclaimed, grinning .

Christian let out a whoop. "No squirrel ankle stew or waffles with chicken gravy?"

"Nope," Letty said, popping her P.

Christian stood and reached across the table to envelop the tiny woman in his embrace. Claire's heart filled with affection for him and for Tucker, who hugged her after Christian released her.

The scents of the chili dogs made Claire's stomach cramp. They all settled down to the meal with a side of potato chips and some icy beers. When they were finished, she cleared the table and Tucker presented a small stack of presents.

Christian's eyes glittered as he looked between them. "You didn't need to get me anything."

"Hush," Letty said. "Open mine first." She nudged a package that was wrapped in plain brown paper and twine.

With a grin, he grabbed it up, shook it and plied it until Letty smacked him on the arm. "Just open it."

He peeled off the paper with enough ceremony to woo Letty. When the square object fell into his hand, he stared at the cover .

"A Guide to Horses for the Smart Cowboy," he read the title of the book aloud.

"Guess that means you're a smart cowboy," Tucker said.

Christian looked so pleased, Claire couldn't help but swoop in and lip-smack his beard-roughened cheek.

Weeks had passed since the mess with Leon and Dale, and they'd all settled in to ranch life.

Claire had quit the diner, but she and Letty had planned a new venture.

After the fair, two restaurants in the area had requested Letty's special sauce be featured as part of their menus.

And she and Letty had agreed to provide it.

Tucker and Christian had been hard at work on the ranch, repairing broken fences. And a huge pile of timber was settled outside near the place they'd raise a new barn

on the old fieldstone foundation, with the help of several area ranchers.

“Thank you, Letty.” Christian’s eyes shone with affection. Letty patted his hand.

“Mine now.” Claire passed the present into his hands. It was wrapped in green foil paper and no bow. She hoped what was inside was manly enough to match the exterior .

He reached up and cupped her face with one broad palm. “Sweetheart, you’re gift enough.”

She wrinkled her nose in a way that made him chuckle. “Open it.” She hummed with nervousness.

When he unwrapped the present to reveal the navy blue velvet box within, she held her breath. Everyone was silent as he popped open the box. Inside laid a band of black leather. She’d spent hours hand-tooling it with a rugged design and fitting it with a silver buckle-type clasp.

“Whoa,” he breathed. He pulled it out and unclasped the silver. Then he wrapped the band around his wrist and stared at it. “Did you make this?”

“She did,” Tucker said with pride tingeing his deep voice.

Christian tipped his head back to look at Claire, who still hovered over his shoulder.

“Sweetness, you’re the best . Thank you so much.

” He drew her down for a lingering kiss.

The barest touch of his lips sent tendrils of heat straight to her core.

Between him and Tucker, she was always burning.

But they wouldn't have it any other way .

"Now, now," Letty scolded when their kiss extended past the time she thought proper.

Tucker gave Christian the final gift. Inside a plain white box was a gold belt buckle, as gawdy and Wyoming rancher as Claire had ever seen. Christian burst into laughter and stripped off his old belt buckle then and there to replace it with the new.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Tucker snagged it, as he was closest.

"Oh, hey, Jake."

Claire froze. Letty's eyes grew round. He'd called but Claire had never returned it.

Tucker flicked his gaze to Christian, then Claire. "Yeah, she's here. I'll let you talk to her, of course. I would never come between you and your daughter. But first there's something Christian and I want to ask you."

She groaned and buried her face in her hands. What now? The last thing she wanted was a phone battle on Christian's birthday.

"That's right," Tucker continued. "You see, Chris and I have been talkin'. Claire's a perfect woman, as you well know."

Her head snapped up .

"A wonderful listener, smart, good cook and the nicest gal we'll ever find. Seems she also has two hands." There was a pause. Then, "We both want one of them. Not in

marriage but in acknowledgment that we both love her and intend to spend the rest of our lives with her.”

There was a long silence while Tucker listened. Claire scoured her lover’s face for a hint as to what was being said. Finally, a grin spread across Tucker’s face so broad that the sun might have dropped from the sky and hit the ground in front of her.

Christian gave a whoop and shoved back his chair. He grabbed Claire and spun her around. Tucker said a hasty thanks and goodbye then shoved the phone at Letty. “Here, you talk.”

Tucker grabbed both Christian and Claire and towed them down the hall to the master bedroom. He kicked the door shut behind them even as Christian placed his rough hands over her eyes.

Excitement trilled in her belly. “What is this?”

Big male bodies prodded her from all angles, until she found herself pressed into the mattress. Someone grabbed her wrist, stretched her arm overhead, and a cool, slippery fabric was fastened around her flesh.

She hissed. The other wrist was secured the same way. The hands vanished from her eyes and she looked up to see herself bound by two red silk sashes.

“New ropes.”

“It’s not my birthday,” she protested, pussy pulsating with anticipation.

Christian gave a crooked grin that melted her to the tips of her toes, just as it had the moment he found her in the parking lot, beating the hell out of Tucker’s truck. She couldn’t exactly say she’d loved Christian at first sight, but it was damn close.

She struggled against her bonds.

“Oh, it’s your birthday. Today and every day, we will give you these presents.” Tucker ducked his head and skimmed a path up her throat to the corner of her mouth. She twisted into the kiss even as Christian began to slowly, methodically strip her.

“And this gift.” Christian bared her midsection and spent a mind-blowing minute working a trail from her navel to the lace of her panties.

She squirmed and tried to scissor him between her legs, but he resisted. When Tucker came close, she sank her teeth into his earlobe in an attempt to hold him close to her as well.

Then they each tore off their clothes and stood naked and sexy as hell before her. And she knew it would always be this way for her—accepting everything they dished out from sensual torture to backtalk about breakfast. Her world was filled with warmth and joy.

“You’re not going anywhere until you’ve come at least six times,” Tucker growled against her nipple.

She arched into the sensation.

“She’s not going anywhere ever,” Christian drawled.

“No one is running.” She gasped when Christian closed his lips over the hard pearl between her legs.

He bathed her slit from bottom to top then back down. “Nope, you can’t. Not tied up as you are.”

“I can...” she panted, “hide these scarves. ”

Tucker lifted his head and grinned. “We’ve got a rainbow of silken ropes for you, baby. Don’t fight it.”

“Never,” she whispered, and lost herself on the slippery slope to ecstasy—just where she wanted to be.

THE END

READ ON FOR A SNEAK PEEK OF HOOKING UP

“I’d tell you to kiss my ass, but then you’d fall in love and I’d never get rid of you.” Bella sashayed away from the the men lined up at the fence watching her.

The cowboy she’d just put in his place doffed his hat and held it over his heart, staggering a bit as if she’d wounded him. “You didn’t even give me a chance to prove what I got.”

“She knows whatcha got, Barns—and it’s the equivalent of that cow flop over there. Now stop harassing the lady and let her practice,” another boots-and-hat-wearin’ rodeo man called.

Bella glanced at the lineup. If she were a betting woman, she’d lay her cards on the quiet one, on the far right. The quiet ones always tried the hardest to get her in their beds. Maybe they believed that observing her would provide them with answers the others could never learn.

His folded arms rested on the top fence rail, plaid cotton bulging around his forearms. With his deep tan and that scruff of black hair on his jaw, he was pretty enough, but she wasn’t interested.

Twisting away, she gave her admirers a sway of her hips, which earned more than one hoot.

She strode across the paddock, and her horse trotted right to her.

Bella pulled a treat from her pocket and offered it to her horse named Josey Wheels.

Her horse wasn't her first barrel racing horse by far. No, this was her fifth.

As a kid, she'd started off with a slower horse that didn't turn so fast or abruptly, but through the years as her skills developed, so had her need for faster, more precise animals to compete with. Josey Wheels handled like a luxury sports car—which reflected her name.

The mare was also as much of a diva as Bella herself. The proud toss of Josey Wheels' head earned another round of whistles from the guys at the fence.

"Let's give them a show, all right, my beauty?" Bella stroked her mane for a moment before launching herself into the saddle.

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As soon as her behind hit the leather, she tuned out the racket the half dozen men made.

She drank in the cool morning air and worked her animal.

The barrels stood at intervals inside the paddock, and she took them slowly at first, giving Josey Wheels time to warm up.

An injury wouldn't be good right now, especially with a big competition tonight.

Bella looped the barrel and Josey shot toward the next. Bella flexed her abs as she leaned slightly, directing her horse. At one with her animal. Out here, she didn't let anybody mess with her mind, which was how she'd won so many shiny belt buckles, ribbons and trophies.

Several racing schools had given her the skills, but mostly Bella ran on gut instinct. At the age of seven, she'd proven herself. By twelve, she'd set her sights on the rodeo and never looked back.

For her sixteenth birthday, her parents had scraped up enough cash to buy her a truck and trailer combo of her own and sent her off to competitions by herself.

That's where her love of the open road and freedom had begun. Then she'd met Frazer, and well, things had gotten serious fast.

At least on her end.

She squashed her mental boot heel all over thoughts of Frazer and spurred Josey Wheels faster.

A slight breeze trickled over her face and slipped its fingers into her hair.

The heavy mass was pulled back, a hot, thick tail on her nape.

After Frazer, she'd gone a little crazy and taken a pair of kitchen scissors to the length.

A few hacks and she'd sported a riot of waves around her shoulders that had driven her nuts for most of a year before it grew out enough to harness in a hair-tie again. The change of appearance hadn't helped rid her mind of Frazer's shitty words that were etched deep inside her.

You're never gonna be better than me, Bella. Don't think you can do better.

How many times had she rolled those words around in her brain? She'd spoken them aloud and even written them down, but she still couldn't totally puzzle out his meaning.

At first she'd thought he meant she couldn't get a better man than him.

Then she'd spent months watching video footage of Frazer on his own horse, trying to see if he was a better rider than she was.

He was good—had even earned plenty of titles and endorsements for his prowess.

But comparing her talent to his when it came to barrel racing was like holding apples and oranges.

No, she had no damn clue what the man meant. Her final conclusion was he was

stupider than she'd first thought and couldn't string a coherent sentence together.

She pushed a breath out through her nostrils, feeling them flare. Josey Wheels snorted too, always attuned with her. She felt her horse's ribs expanding with exertion, but they weren't finished with this drill. Above all, she wanted that win tonight.

Frazer hadn't won in Henderson, Texas, but she was damn well going to.

After Texas, she was on to Alabama, Arkansas and Florida. Some women she competed against didn't travel as widely as she did, but she had nothing to tie her down.

Especially not a man.

She slowed her horse and made a few slow revolutions of the paddock before prancing down the line of guys at the fence. Their ranks had increased, and she offered them all a sassy smile, catching their gazes as she passed.

"Go out with me tonight, Bella." She might toy with a man with such a charming smile as long as he didn't expect more.

She swung back around to look at him a second time. She reined up. "You're Jeb Anderson."

His smile, slow and sugary, was exactly the type of thing she was drawn to time and again. "In the flesh," he drawled.

"I might let you buy me a drink."

He appraised her from the top of her cowgirl hat to the tips of her serviceable, not flashy, boots. She was a no-bullshit kind of girl.

“I bet you’re mighty thirsty after that run. Put up your horse and we’ll see about getting you a drink.” He shot her a grin, turned and walked away.

She watched him go—broad shoulders, rounded ass in Wrangler jeans, arms swinging freely. He was a man who knew ladies fell at his feet by the heaps. She wasn’t one of them, but she would let him buy her a drink and amuse her for a few minutes.

When she set Josey Wheels in motion again, she caught the glance of the man at the end. The quiet one. As she neared, he pushed off the fence, biceps bulging, his dark, intense stare following her.

Something stirred deep inside her. A much different feeling than what Jeb Anderson’s cocky, self-assured smile did to her.

I’m always in control, she said to herself. With all men, she held the reins—period. She’d never find herself at the mercy of some asshole like Frazer again.

Finding someone better than you is easy, you son of a bitch. They’re all better than you.

*

This bulls and barrel event would be a total bore-fest if not for one smart-mouthed and sexy-as-sin contestant. Bella Roberts had them all sporting a set of blue balls, and Carter was no exception.

He watched her ride away, as tall and graceful in the saddle as a freaking rodeo queen. She’d been intriguing him since Fort Worth a month ago, and now he reckoned she was in his blood.

Only one way to get her out. I have to have her.

Gripping those trim hips of hers and pulling her down over his cock. Sliding into her from behind while he wrapped that long, thick ponytail of hers around his fist...

He clamped down on his rampant fantasies and focused on the things he knew about her.

Today was the first day he'd seen her agree to go out with any of the cowboys, fans or rodeo workers vying for her attention.

He'd heard rumors of guys staying over in her trailer, but he scoffed them off as lies.

A woman as cool and aloof as Bella Roberts wasn't bedding every Wayne, Vince and Austin.

The only guy who'd even given her pause was that goddamn Jeb Anderson. A man like Jeb had the brains of a cowpoke. He'd never hold Bella's interest. She was too smart for him.

Besides, he was trouble. If Carter had a buck for every time he'd seen Jeb in a bar fight, he wouldn't need to earn prize money in the team roping event.

Carter shook his head, walking in the opposite direction that the feisty cowgirl had gone. He didn't make it five steps before he stopped dead.

He'd changed his mind.

He swung around and strode right after her. Dammit, he was going to get some answers.

"Bella."

She glanced up from her task of removing her horse's saddle, a wary expression in

her gray eyes. The mahogany highlights in her hair seemed to flicker like flames, echoed deep in his groin. God, he wanted her. Since Fort Worth, he'd thought of little else.

“What can I do for you, cowboy?”

“It's Carter Fallon.”

“From Team Fallon-Lopez. I know.” The honeyed way she drawled his and his partner's names kicked up his libido another notch. She didn't meet his gaze but continued brushing her horse.

He sidled closer. “How 'bout you let me buy you more than a drink.”

Was it his imagination, or had she just rolled her eyes? His ego wasn't so fragile, however. He stepped closer.

Bella's confidence was sexy as hell. Her sure, quick movements. The way she carried herself. Dayummm, she was prettier close-up. With wide-set eyes and the longest lashes he'd ever seen, one look from her was a shot straight to his heart.

When she gave him the full force of her stare, his throat closed off.

“What do you have in mind, cowboy?”

“A steak, for starters. I think you know my partner and I won the pot the last three events, and I can afford to buy you more than a measly drink like that bum Jeb Anderson.”

She blinked at him. Christ, she had freckles on the bridge of her nose and lightly spattered across each high cheekbone. Another body part, far more south this time, roused against his zipper.

Carter closed the gap between them.

“Whoa, watch it, Carter. My horse—”

He examined the black and brown mare with the white socks. “What about her?”

“She...” Bella’s lips fell open, the words dying on them. “That’s odd.”

“What is?” He caught a whiff of Bella’s sweet honeysuckle scent. His balls clenched tight and his cock swelled a little more.

“Josey Wheels doesn’t like men.”

He reached out and patted the horse’s flank. The animal didn’t budge. “She doesn’t like men or you don’t like men?”

She tossed her head back and loosed a tinkle of a laugh. If the freckles hadn’t done him in, the laugh would have. Dammit, he wasn’t leaving this barn without the promise of a date.

“Is that old rumor circulating again? What’s the pool up to now? Three hundred? Last I heard I was sleeping with Wynonna Calhoun.” She waved a hand and her horse, mirroring her actions, flicked its tail.

“Three-forty I think.”

She made a fizzing sound of mirth. “Men. Ya’ll think just because a woman doesn’t fall to her knees and beg for your attention that she’s got to be a lesbian.”

When she moved to the side, Carter blocked her with his body.

A wall of heat washed over his skin, scorching through his plaid shirt and Wranglers.

Jesus, she was going to give him third-degree burns.

His cock battered his fly, demanding to be used as roughly and long as necessary to get this little vixen out of his system.

“You’re in my way, cowboy.” Was that a hitch he heard in her breath?

“I’m right where I belong. Now about that steak dinner...” He caught the delicate point of her chin between his thumb and forefinger, gazed deep into her stormy gray eyes and lowered his mouth to hers.

The first brush of her lips sent his heart cartwheeling like an amateur falling off a bull. As her flavors permeated his head—cinnamon, honeysuckle, pure female goddess—a groan rumbled in his chest. Angling his head, he deepened the kiss.

Her quiet sigh filled his mouth. The heady sensation of falling took over, and he slid his arms around her, pulling her up against his body. Every curvy inch conformed to his muscle. So right, so perfect.

Probing the seam of her lips with his tongue, he molded her to fit his shape. Her lips parted with a gasp, and he didn’t waste a second. He plunged his tongue inside.

Honey. Pure honey-cinnamon-honeysuckle goddess. He couldn’t get enough. He hitched her against him, unapologetic for the state he was in. After all, it was her fault.

Need pulsed through his veins as he swept his tongue through her mouth. When she flipped her tongue against his, a primal roar boiled in his chest. He ran his fingers up the length of her spine and curled them around her ponytail. With a small tug, he tipped her head back and drank his fill.

Dizzy with need and the urge to possess her, he took what he wanted. And she gave

back with as much fervor. Each nipping bite, every glide of her tongue spoke volumes about Miss Bella Roberts.

First of all, the rumors were false. And second, he was pretty sure his wallet was going to be lighter this evening after he bought her a steak dinner.