



# Wright's Path: an MM age gap romance

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** "Darlin', I need you to look at me. I promise, no one is going to hurt you again. I'll make sure of it."

Wright Taylor thought he was going to die. His body hurt, he could barely see. He'd never wished for death, until his dad pushes him out of the car and leaves him in the hands of complete strangers.

Alexander "Xander" Lawson moved back to Family ranch six months ago after a breakup. He missed his family, but at thirty-five-years-old, he didn't like not having a plan further than living in the guest house on the ranch his older brother inherited.

When a wedding is interrupted in the most heartbreaking of ways, Xander jumps into action to care for the young man that is left lying in the gravel. Xander feels an immediate connection to him, but it doesn't make sense. Wright is the complete opposite of Xander's type.

It's a long road to recovery- both physically and mentally- for Wright, but he's grateful that the Lawson family is standing beside him every step of the way, especially Xander. He's everything that Wright wouldn't let himself dream of. Can he heal from what happened enough to really build a life with this man and the family that found and rescued him?

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# Page 1

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~ Wright ~

Wright looked up at the door one more time, triple checking that the lock was indeed engaged. It was a basic handle but the thumb turn was vertical, locked in place so no one could enter. Not that anyone was home. His dad was at work for three more hours. Wright had just enough time to watch a video and then start on chores and dinner. His heart was hammering in his chest but it wasn't what was on his screen doing it. He was always worried his dad would come home early. Having a locked door was less of a punishment than if his dad were to walk in and see what he was doing. What he was watching. His headphones were on the lowest volume, just enough to hear the moans of the two guys on the bed. Still, he looked at the door once more before focusing back on the screen.

He knew, deep down, that there was nothing wrong with what he was doing. It was who he was. Natural. He closed his eyes, his hand sliding with just the right pressure up and down. His thumb brushed softly over his head and his own noises matched those coming from the video. He tried to make it quick, stroking himself faster when he could feel the tell-tale signs of his orgasm building. He increased the volume from his phone, staring at the scene before him as he worked himself over. The video was one of his favorites. A basic, intimate scene between a twink and older man. It was his favorite dynamic, something he knew he could only dream of having. He didn't even have a job or a car, much less be able to go out and meet someone.

"Fuck," Wright whispered to himself. He squeezed on an upstroke, a pulse of pleasure running through his body when his hand caught against the ridge of his head. His toes curled and he could hear his own breathing over the volume. He was close. "Shit. Yes." He panted the words out with each movement of his hand. He held

himself around the base and reached with one finger to push against his rim. He wasn't brave enough to do more than tease himself. He wouldn't dare to order something to the house and he definitely couldn't keep it in his room. His dad loved to go through his things, make sure he "wasn't hiding anything". He claimed he was being a good dad. Wright had other words for it. He didn't know when he would get out of it.

Wright tensed up, pleasure coursing through his body as his orgasm hit. He made sure to take his shirt off, knowing that he had the tendency to overshoot his load. This time it hit his chest. He slumped back against the pillow and closed his eyes, letting the remnants of the feeling subside away.

An ad on the website startled him awake and he clicked his phone off and stood up. He cleaned himself off, mindful of flushing the tissues down the toilet instead of leaving them in the wastebasket in his room. He did most of the cleaning in the house, but he wouldn't risk it.

For the next hour, Wright cleaned up. The house wasn't particularly dirty, but he made sure his dad's chair in the living room was clean and the throw blanket that usually ended up on the floor was folded neatly over one arm. He cleaned off the empty plate and half-filled cup of room temperature beer from the night before. The hour after that was spent preparing dinner. There was a small radio on the kitchen counter and he flipped it on while cooking. He'd learned to cook basic meals after his mom left them when he was twelve. Tonight was Lemon and Pepper chicken with veggies.

Wright took a deep breath and turned the radio down when he saw the front door open. The house was small and a bit dated, with only two bedrooms. The main floor was a sort of upside-down L-shape, mostly open space. His bedroom was closer to the front door, where his dad's room and the bathroom were on the opposite side of the house around a short corner and hallway. He watched his dad throw his bag on

the floor and loosen the tie around his neck. Wright grabbed a fresh beer from the fridge and the same cup he'd cleaned earlier. Their dinner was already prepped on plates.

His dad barely acknowledged him when he grabbed the beer off the island and walked to the living room. The sound of the TV drowned out the soft music playing and Wright sighed, turning around to shut it off. He preferred music over TV but he wouldn't argue with his dad.

"Did you want to eat dinner there or at the table?" Wright asked. He never knew what his dad wanted. Sometimes, he wouldn't say a word to him the entire night. Others, he made him sit at the table and tell him what he did that day.

"If I wanted to eat at the table, I wouldn't be sitting here, would I?" His dad didn't even glance at him. He took a sip of his beer and then snapped his fingers. "Just bring my plate over here."

Wright gritted his teeth. He wanted to remind his dad he was his son, not a waiter. He'd done okay in school and was going to the local college to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. His high school was part of a program that gave two years tuition free as long as you continued to meet the standards. It was like a scholarship, but easier to apply for. Being over eighteen when he graduated, he didn't need his dad's help or signature for anything. It was the one good thing that came from his mom leaving him when he was twelve. He got held back that year.

"Here you go," Wright said. "I'm going to eat in my room."

"Don't want to hang out with your old man?" He practically spat the words out with a mouthful of veggies already. He didn't look at Wright. "Get your plate and sit down. We can watch the game together."

Wright waited until he was turned away from his dad to roll his eyes. He wasn't a fan of sports, not like his dad. But he wouldn't argue. He'd sit on the couch for an hour or so and then go to his room. Maybe read a book. He sat down and balanced his plate on his knees. They ate in relative silence for a few minutes before his dad finished his beer and asked Wright to get another one. Wright's plate was mostly untouched. He'd wrap it and save it for tomorrow for lunch.

"Bring me your phone too," he called while Wright was in the kitchen. His phone was in its usual spot, charging in the kitchen. His dad wouldn't allow him to keep a charger in his room because he didn't want him staying up all night. Wright was sure his dad snooped through his phone when he was asleep. He wasn't allowed to have a passcode on it. "Mine's dead and I need to check something online."

"Yes, sir." Wright grabbed his phone and a new beer and walked back to the living room. He handed both over to his dad.

It was only when his dad opened the web browser that Wright realized his mistake. He never closed the tab from the video earlier. The immediate sound of a guy screaming Fuck me harder! had all the blood draining from Wright's face.

"What the fuck is this?" His dad moved quickly, his plate crashing onto the floor. Wright had just enough time to register the few pieces of chicken scattered across the floor before his dad's hand hit the side of his face. The momentum was hard enough that Wright's head whipped to the side and he staggered two steps. He caught himself on the end table beside the sofa. "Do you think you can live here in my house and watch filth like this?"

Wright didn't know what to do. His dad hit him before. He was kind of used to that, to him 'roughing him up'. But the look in his eyes. That was new. Another slap across the same cheek hit him before he even thought to apologize. He knew nothing he said would make it better though.

“No son of mine is gay!” His dad held the phone up, still on the video, and shoved it in his face. “Is this what you do all day while I’m at work. Providing for you to live here? You just bum around and I have to come home after a long day and see something like this?”

The third slap succeeded in knocking Wright to the floor. His shoulder caught on the corner of the end table and he cried out in pain. His dad’s foot connected to his upper ribs and he curled in on himself, trying to keep him from kicking him in the stomach. He succeeded, but his dad was on a whole other level today. He was shouting, screaming something but Wright couldn’t understand it anymore. His mind was only focused on the pain throughout his body.

After what felt like an eternity, he tried to breathe again. It was painful at best. His shoulder was burning and he could feel something trickling down his back. Breathing burned, any small movement sent searing pain everywhere. He knew he was crying, but he couldn’t stop the tears if he tried.

“Get up!” His dad’s hand wrapped around his arm and Wright cried out as a new wave of pain shot through his upper arm and across his back. He could feel spit land on his face when his dad continued to shout. “Shut up! You’re going to go get in the truck and I’m taking you somewhere where they can deal with you. Set you straight.”

His dad continued mumbling while Wright struggled to walk along with him. His earlier thought about the house being small disappeared when each step caused him more pain. He was starting to see dark spots in his vision. Had he hit his head?

Before he knew it, his dad shoved him into the old pickup truck and slammed the door. Wright moved his foot just in time for the door to close, but the side of his head took the brunt force off the window. He was dizzy. His vision was swimming, blurry at best. He wiped across his cheek and saw that his finger came back red. He wasn’t even sure what was bleeding. His whole body was on fire and numb at the same time.

He couldn't understand it, but he didn't want to move.

He wasn't sure how long his dad drove for, but they were out of the city when he next looked up. He tried to keep his eyes open, to understand where they were going. He didn't get out of the city much. Didn't go anywhere except school and home, really. Sometimes the library.

"I thought you learned your lesson," his dad said. His words were going in and out. Or maybe that was Wright. He coughed and could feel something burning in his throat. "I tried to teach you to be a man and you want to watch disgusting videos and can't even stand up for yourself. You're going to learn now. I'll make sure of it."

They turned onto a dirt road. Wright had no idea where they were. He tried to focus. They couldn't have been driving long, could they? It looked like a farm of some sort. There was mostly open fields, but he spotted a few small buildings in the distance. Not that he could turn his head without searing pain shooting down his spine and his breath hitching. The truck sped past an open metal gate further down the dirt road. Wright's body swayed with the motion of the road, wincing with every small move. His dad smacked his chest and Wright lost his breath for a few seconds.

"Man up," he said. Wright continued to stare at his hands, his mind and body going numb. Everything was painful. It was all he could feel. All he heard in his mind was his own voice screaming that he needed to get away. But there was nowhere to go.

The truck screeched to a sudden stop and Wright's body shot forward, his nose connecting with the dash. His vision went black for a second. It came back just in time to hear shouting and feel someone grab his arm and twist. He was on the ground, crumpled in on himself. There was dirt flying around him and more than one set of boots much too close to him. He whimpered, curling more in on himself. He wasn't going to survive this, whatever was about to happen to him.

“Fix him,” his dad said, shoving the toe of his boot into his lower back. Wright bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out around whoever was standing over him.

“We’ll take care of him.” That was a deep voice, gruff. It sounded nothing like Wright’s dad, but he didn’t dare move his head to see who it belonged to. He just wanted the pain to end.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Xander ~

The wedding was beautiful. He'd met the two grooms before, but it wasn't until he moved back to the ranch that they became friends. William was the young Interior Design graduate with a heart of fucking gold, in Xander's opinion. He had created and designed the entire idea for Found Family Ranch. A refuge for individuals that needed a place to stay. He designed each of the tiny houses that were quickly booked as soon as they officially opened. He hadn't been around much for the building process but his older brother, Patrick, kept him in the loop. It was only a few months ago that he moved back to stay in the guest house when Brett and Wylon found their own place just inside city limits. It was easier for Wylon to commute to work since Brett wasn't on any set schedule with helping to run the FFR.

Clark stood by the makeshift altar. It was really just a small wooden stage, a few feet long, that they'd had for years. Tracy had outdone herself with the decorations and timing of the ceremony. Even outside, the flower arch and the white runner down the aisle were beautiful. The land around them was cast in a warm glow of light from the setting sun. They held most events in this field for that reason alone. The sun set just over the second pasture of the ranch. Their friend Gabe's little girl was walking down the aisle, throwing red rose petals on the runner, smiling, and twirling in her dress at all the attention.

The field was set off the side of the main house and road leading into the ranch, but not far enough that Xander missed the truck speeding down, kicking up a cloud of dust behind it. Xander turned his head toward his brother with a questioning look. He mirrored the same expression, letting Xander know that this wasn't a planned guest.

“I’ll handle it,” he whispered and stood from his chair in the back row. He knew all eyes were on him as he started to jog across the field. He passed William and a few of his friends standing behind a white sheet that had been erected to ‘hide’ him, waiting for Tracy’s call to start walking down. He only stopped long enough to tell William that whatever was going on, don’t worry about it and enjoy his wedding day. He looked amazing in the matching white tux his almost-husband was also wearing. Xander told him so and then continued back toward the house.

He picked up the pace when he realized the truck would make it to the house before he would. The field was several acres, but the wedding was closer to the house so guests didn’t have to walk through the grass and they didn’t have to use the four wheelers or horses to get to and from. He thanked his training regimen and growing up on the ranch that he wasn’t winded by the time he made it. But then his stomach nearly emptied itself when he saw the scene before him. An older man, untidy at best and a definitive beer gut, was pulling a young man out of the passenger door. The kid, couldn’t have been older than twenty, crumpled to the ground and curled in on himself. As Xander rounded the hood, he stopped short in his tracks and looked from the kid to the man.

“... -aggot living in my house. I want him fixed. Fix him!” The man pulled out his wallet and threw money on the ground at Xander’s feet. He didn’t know what was going on but was starting to piece it together. The man’s foot connected with the kid’s lower back and Xander watched his face scrunch in pain and he bit his lower lip. “That should cover the cost of whatever this camp charges.”

“We’ll take care of him,” Patrick’s voice said beside him. Xander wasn’t sure when he started following him, but he was glad his older brother was there. The man was huffing, like he was out of breath from the obvious beating he’d just given the kid. Patrick’s voice held some sort of emotion that Xander had never heard before. His brother was the kindest soul on earth, but right now his words were sharp, like he understood what this man was saying and was agreeing.

Had he heard the words the guy said just before? Or could he not see the state the kid was in? “X, take the kid and get him into the house. We’ll deal with him in a moment.”

“Good luck with him,” the man grunted. “And watch him around your phones. He likes to watch disgusting videos.”

Xander didn’t move an inch as the guy backed his truck up and sprayed gravel as he spun out and back up the dirt road. The kid was still curled, laying way too still for his liking.

“Get him inside somewhere and check him over,” Patrick said. His voice was the usual full of concern and kindness again. “I’m pretty sure the entire wedding has halted. I’m going to go back. I trust that you can handle him for a couple of hours. If he needs the hospital, call me.”

“I’ve got him,” Xander said. His brain switched from stunned to work mode. He worked as an EMT for years in the city, filling in at the local ER from time-to-time. He knew what to check for, how to carry a patient. “I’m taking him to the guest house. It’s closer. I’ll text you.”

“Once we find out who that piece of shit is, we’re sending Raegan after his ass.”

“We should just let him in the pasture with the longhorns,” Xander muttered. Yeah, he was in the business of saving people, but some people didn’t deserve it. He moved to the kid and laid a hand on his shoulder as gently as he could. He had gravel in his hair now, mixed with clumps of dirt. His nose was bleeding and there was a cut just above his left eye.

“Please don’t,” the kid said quietly. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, but he kept his eyes screwed shut. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“You’re safe,” Xander whispered. “No one is going to hurt you here, sweetheart.”

The term of endearment came naturally as Xander brushed the hair from the kid’s face. He needed to assess him, see if there was any damage deeper than the skin. He was beat bad, that much was clear. His shoulder was hot to the touch, even through his clothes. It was swelling for sure.

“I need you to open your eyes for me,” he whispered. He tried to keep his voice low and calm. His hands were shaking with rage. “I need to make sure you don’t need a hospital. Can you open your eyes?”

“I’m sorry,” he whimpered again. “I just want to go to sleep.”

“I can’t have that,” Xander said. The last thing he needed to do was go to sleep right now. If he did, Xander would be calling an ambulance. “Please, gorgeous, open your eyes for me.”

Under the dirt and red handprint on his cheek, Xander noted that the kid had a soft jawline but prominent cheekbones. His nose was a bit pointed on the tip, sloped evenly from his eyes. The perfect size for his face. It took another long minute before the kid finally opened his eyes. As much as he could, anyway. That cut, like his shoulder, was starting to swell. His good eye, though, was the color of liquid honey. Probably brown, but the still setting sun was hitting them.

“There you go.” Xander smiled. He brushed more pieces of gravel and dirt from the guy’s face. “You’re going to be okay. I’m not going to hurt you. Can you sit up?”

“It hurts.” Fresh tears started falling down his cheeks. Xander let his knees hit the ground beside him, getting to work on checking him over. He lifted his shirt just enough to see a fresh bruise forming on his ribs, also on his left side. It looked bad, but he would have to examine him closer to see if he had any broken ribs. He wanted

to get him inside first.

“Can I carry you?” Xander asked. “I want to take you inside, but you can walk if you think you’re able to.”

The kid didn’t answer. His eyes were closed again and his arms were still curled around his stomach, hands clenched into fists. Xander repeated the question and waited. He’d give him a few more seconds before he would make the choice for him. He looked around, noting that the wedding party, including the two grooms, were looking their way. Without the truck there, he was sure all they could see was Xander kneeling next to someone lying on the ground. He wasn’t sure what Patrick told them.

“I’m going to pick you up now. I promise, you’re not in trouble and I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to get you inside.” Xander continued to whisper easy words as he stood up and bent to scoop the kid into his arms. He wasn’t a small kid, but it wasn’t much of a struggle to pick him up and carry him bridal style the few yards to where he was living. The guest house was just one floor, where the bathroom with the shower in the main house was up a flight of stairs.

Xander was grateful that he hadn’t locked the door. He knew and trusted everyone at the wedding today so he didn’t see the need for it. The kid shook in his arms the whole walk to the door and inside. Xander moved to the bedroom, not sure where else to go or exactly what he was doing. His training was telling him that he should give the kid a good once over, check his vitals, ensure there was no possible internal bleeding or broken ribs. But the other side of his brain was just blind rage.

How could anyone do this to another human.

“Please,” the kid said as he opened his eyes. He started to struggle a bit and Xander had to tighten his grip to keep from dropping him. “No, please. I’m sorry. Don’t take me to the bathroom again. I’m sorry. Dad, please.”

Xander could feel tears on his own cheeks as the kid fought him but he didn't let him go. He thought he was back home and Xander didn't want him running around blindly. Not when he was hurt this bad. He tried to console him, to get him to calm down, but it wasn't working. His chest was rising and falling fast, air wheezing out of his lungs. That wasn't a good sign. He was either going into shock or having a panic attack. He finally made it to the bedroom and laid him down on the bed. Quickly, he ran to his closet and grabbed his medical bag. Out of habit, he kept one on hand. It worked for living on a ranch. He pulled the generic inhaler out and moved back to the bed.

He knelt down beside it, the kid immediately rolling away onto his right side. His back to Xander. "Darlin', I need you to look at me. I promise, no one is going to hurt you again. I'll make sure of it."

There was no response from the kid. Xander didn't want to leave him alone. He really wanted to check him over, to know the full extent of what they were dealing with. He wasn't going to make him do anything he didn't want to. That would just leave scars on the inside.

"I'm going to leave this on the bedside table," Xander said. "There's a shower behind you, towels, and everything you need in there. I'll lay out a shirt for you and see if I can find some pants that will fit. I'll leave water and a sandwich out on the kitchen counter too if you get hungry. Do you need anything else?"

Xander waited for a few seconds. He stood up and started to move toward his dresser. The room wasn't much. A king size bed with a gray comforter and three plain pillows. The bed frame and dresser were a matching distressed wood color. A mirror sat on top of the dresser, large enough that Xander could see the kid roll over while he grabbed a shirt. He saw his face for the briefest of moments before the kid buried his head into the pillows again. Xander could hear the sniffing and choked sobs.

He watched him for a few more seconds, debating if he should pull the cover over him. The bed wasn't made, he rarely made it in the last few months of living back on the ranch. There was no reason to when he was the only one sleeping in it. He'd have to wash the blanket and sheets soon, sure that there would be dirt and gravel.

"I'm sorry." The voice was low and Xander turned from the door, his hand on the handle to give him privacy. "I didn't mean to do it. I want to change. I'll do whatever you want me to."

Xander wasn't sure what he was talking about. Did he still think he was his dad? Or was he trying to say something else? Xander dropped his hand from the knob and moved slowly back to the bed. At least the kid was talking. That had to be a good sign, even if he didn't understand it.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Xander said. He sat at the foot of the bed, away from where he was lying. His back was turned to him, but he noted he looked a little more relaxed. Hopefully, at least. "We just want to make sure you're okay."

"I deserved it," the kid said. His voice was wavering, like talking was causing him pain. "I- I shouldn't have been watching those videos. They're wrong. I'm sorry."

"Hey, hey. It's okay." Xander didn't know what to do. He reached a hand out and gently brushed his finger against the kid's ankle. He was wearing an old pair of shoes that looked a size too small and shorts that had a hole beside the pocket. "Can you look at me?"

The kid jerked his leg away and then cried out in pain at the sudden movement. Xander was up on his feet immediately. His hands were hovering, unsure of where to look or what to do. He moved to the other side of the bed so he could see the kid's face. More tears were pooling in his eyes. His bottom lip was bitten raw. The handprint on his cheek was more prominent in the bedroom lighting.

“I need to look at you,” Xander said. He tried to keep his voice calm and soothing, but he wasn’t going to take no for an answer anymore. He had to see. His medical brain was reeling with all the possibilities of what could be going on. “Please, darlin’. Let me just see what that asshole did to you.”

He knew using words like that probably wasn’t best for the situation at hand, but he had no other name for the man that did this. Actually, he had a lot but they all got increasingly worse.

The kid rolled to his back, his face wincing with pain. The cut on his eye was beading with fresh blood but his nose had stopped. He looked so small and helpless in the large bed. Xander had the urge to forego examining him to just hold him and protect him for a while. Shield him from everything. He’d seen so many trauma and abuse cases in the Emergency Room and on calls, but something about this kid was pulling at him. Maybe it was seeing the abuse firsthand, the way the man so easily discarded him. No one should feel like they were worthless.

“Can I touch you?” Xander asked. “Just on your arms and chest. I want to make sure you’re okay.” The kid moved his head to face away, but there was a small nod. Xander moved slowly, giving the kid plenty of time to change his mind. He decided to talk, to hopefully keep the kid distracted. “My name is Alexander. Everyone calls me Xander, or X, for short. My brother, Patrick, and his wife Tracy, own this ranch. They’re great people.”

“Are they going to hurt me too?” The kid winced as Xander’s fingers prodded on his right side. He knew he had a large bruise on his left side. He lifted his shirt and noted a red splotchy patch just above his hip. Probably hit it on something or got hit. As bad as it looked, he was grateful it didn’t seem like anything deep.

“No,” Xander said quickly. “No one is going to hurt you here. I promise you that.”



“I’ve heard stories,” the kid said. Xander needed to stop thinking of him as ‘the kid’. He was a little on the smaller side but had to be over eighteen. “Of places like this. You can’t promise I won’t be hurt.”

Xander lifted his shirt more, bunching it up around his armpits. He’d prefer to take it off completely but wasn’t sure if that would be beneficial enough for the pain it would cause him. The bruise he’d seen earlier was the worst of his injuries. That he saw at least. It spread from his sternum, diagonally down and wrapped around toward his back. Xander saw red when he realized it was in the perfect shape of a boot print.

His words finally sank in and Xander let his hands fall to his own lap. The kid’s eyes were closed and his head was tilted away from Xander. His hands were balled into fists, his knees bent slightly. “This is not a conversion camp, sweetheart. It’s a refuge for the gay community.” It was for the whole LGBTQ+ community, but Xander was keeping his explanation simple right now.

“And I’m Leonardo DiCaprio.” The kid said it so dejectedly, Xander couldn’t even find the joke funny. “My dad would never drop me off at a refuge. He was screaming the whole way here about conversion and fixing me. I didn’t catch it all, but I’ve read the stories. I know what these places are.”

“And I’m telling you that this isn’t that place,” Xander said. He lowered his shirt back down over his stomach and reached up to brush the hair out of his face. The kid finally turned slightly to look at him. His face was battered, but he held Xander’s eyes. Xander brushed his fingers just above the cut over his eye. The kid’s eyes fluttered closed for a second before opening back up when Xander pulled his hand away. “You are safe here. If it helps, I’m gay. I had a boyfriend in the city for a couple years before we broke up. There is a wedding going on outside for two men as well. One of them is the guy that founded the Found Family Ranch. I don’t know how your dad found this place or why he thought it would be a camp, but I can assure you we are far from it. We’ve been helping kids and adults alike to get back on their feet

after leaving families or whatever situations.”

The room fell silent again. The kid closed his eyes, but kept his face turned toward Xander. He smiled, grateful that he might actually be believing him now. Knowing that he was in a safe place would be important to keep him calm. “I hate to ask this,” Xander started. He waited until his eyes were open again. They were light brown, still hints of that honey color in them. The one that was swollen was red and looked like it hurt bad. “But can you tell me if there was anything, any damage or hits, done below your waist?”

Xander didn’t want to think of this kid going through anything like that, but it wasn’t unheard of. He’d seen his dad kick him against his lower back and he wanted to check that out too. That was a sensitive area to receive any form of trauma.

“No.” His voice was low again, void of any emotion. “He kept everything to hitting and kicking.”

Xander bit his tongue to keep from saying out loud what he was thinking. He was relieved, but the damage was still uncalled for in any situation. “Can you either sit up or roll over and let me see your back? I know you’re hurting, but I want to help you.”

“Can I take a shower?”

“Are you going to be able to stand up on your own?” Xander was genuinely worried about him falling in the shower. He didn’t have a tub and there was just a tiny bench in the shower that didn’t really get much water spray to it. Neither of them spoke and Xander was sure the kid was trying to figure out if he could actually stand or not. Xander saw the way he’d immediately crumpled when he was pulled out of the truck. And those bruises and his shoulder wouldn’t be much better for weeks. He stood up and reached his hand out. “I’ll help you up and we’ll go from there, okay? I can help you get undressed at least.”

“Um, I can do that.” The kid took his hand with his right one. He kept the left arm down by his side. He could see just from looking at him that it was swollen and had to hurt. Dislocated shoulder at least. He could reset it; he had the training for it. It would hurt and there was a chance the damage was extensive enough to need surgery. He wouldn’t know until he could see it.

He finally got the kid standing up. He barely came up to Xander’s shoulder. Xander swiped his thumb under his eyes to clear away the remaining tears. The kid- guy- took a deep breath. Or tried. He stumbled and Xander caught him, but immediately adjusted his hands to wrap around his waist when he winced at his shoulder being touched.

“My shoulder hurts a lot,” he said. “And it hurts to breathe.”

“Does it feel like anything is moving or like there is any sharp poking sensations when you move?”

Xander watched as he took another breath and then took a step. He followed right beside him, his hands still on his waist. “I don’t think so. It hurts, but I don’t feel like I’m being stabbed. Just kicked repeatedly.”

He wasn’t sure if that was meant as a joke or the genuine way he felt. He decided to ignore it in favor of walking closely behind as they made their way around the bed and to the bathroom door.

Xander wanted to cut in, to help him in whatever way he could. He seemed determined to do it himself though. After a few seconds of standing just inside the bathroom, Xander leaning against the frame, he turned to look at him. All of his movements were slow, clearly trying to keep from hurting himself more. “I can’t move my arm.”

His left arm hadn't moved in the whole time he walked across the room. The shirt was rumpled, dirt clinging to it in spots. There was a tear on the back, something Xander wasn't sure was recent or not. "Can I help you get undressed?"

"I don't-" He licked his lips and his eyes fell to the floor between them. "I'm not comfortable with that. With you seeing me."

"Would you prefer a female to come in and help or I can just help with the shirt." Xander didn't move closer. If he was already uncomfortable, he didn't want to do anything to make it worse. "I'm afraid you might have a dislocated shoulder. Are you okay with me checking that? It will hurt, but I could reset it for you. Might help take some of the pain away."

"Thought you said I wouldn't be hurt here." That, Xander picked up on as an actual joke. He huffed out a breath.

"Are you naturally a smart ass or is it just the pain talking?" Xander stepped up and lifted the hem of his shirt once more. The kid kept his back turned to Xander as he worked the shirt from his good arm first. Good being a relative word. He tried to distract him by asking questions. "What's your name? Can't call you sweetheart forever."

"You also called me gorgeous," he said. His voice was nearly a whisper. Xander focused on pulling the shirt over his head. "Do you call all the guys that when they're being beaten?"

"You have a terrible sense of humor; you know that right?"

"If I don't laugh, I'm going to cry." He ducked his head down as Xander finally got the shirt over his head. "And crying hurts right now so I'm trying not to think about the fact my dad just nearly killed me. My body is also going numb and I don't think

that's a good thing. You said you were a doctor, right?"

"One thing at a time," Xander said. He moved around the kid's body, pulling the fabric down his arm instead of trying to move him. It caught under his arm and Xander saw him wince when he added pressure to the fabric. "What is your name? How old are you?"

"If I tell you, can you still call me gorgeous?" Xander's eyes met the kid's and he could tell he wanted it to come off as a joke. His lip quirked up in a smirk, but his voice betrayed him. He was serious.

"If I don't like your name, I will," Xander said jokingly back. He dropped the shirt onto the bathroom counter and started looking at his shoulder. "Can I touch?"

"My name is Wright; W-R-I-G-H-T." He tensed up when Xander touched his bare shoulder. The bruise on his ribs was getting worse and he looked at his back. There was a cut on the injured shoulder, another nasty bruise starting on his lower back. His asshole of a dad really did a number on him. "Nineteen. Shit, that hurts."

"At least we won't have to worry about needing to get you emancipated or anything," Xander said as he worked. He could feel the way his shoulder jutted out. He turned to the medicine cabinet and pulled out a bottle of painkillers. They were over the counter, but extra strength. "Can you swallow or do you need water?"

"Never had the-"

"Pills, smartass. Can you swallow pills dry or do you need a glass of water?" Xander smiled when he heard the first sound of a short chuckle. Followed by a groan.

"Fuck, it hurts to laugh. And I'm actually terrible at swallowing pills. Water is needed and I have to take one at a time."

“Stay right here and I’ll get a bottle for you,” Xander handed over the two pills to his good hand before walking out of the bathroom and through the house. The bedroom was set in the back right corner of the house. The bathroom had two entrances, one leading to the bedroom and one into the hallway. If it could be considered that. The rest of the house was open floor plan. The living room was right outside the bathroom, space to the left of that where he had a small, four-person dining table. The kitchen was to his right, the first room walked into from the front door. It was set up almost like the main house, but a smaller version and with less walls separating the rooms.

He grabbed a bottle of water and headed back to the bathroom through the hallway entrance. The shower was on the far wall, a walk-in that was spacious enough for two people. The hallway door was centered between the toilet on the right and the sink and counter on the left. That was where he found Wright again. In the same spot he told him to stay but now leaning his weight against the counter. And he was crying.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay. I’m right here. Are you hurting? What’s going on.”

“I’m sorry,” Wright said. He turned away from Xander when he set the water down on the counter. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. I just started focusing on the pain too much and what happened. I could have died today. It just hit me. I should be dead.”

“No, no. You were brought here for a reason,” Xander said. He brushed the strands of hair off the side of his face. It wasn’t really long, just hitting his eyes. He was curled in on himself, looking smaller than he already was. Xander had grown up on the ranch and then kept up an intense training during his years living in the city. Wright looked like he hadn’t stepped foot in a gym. He didn’t look weak, but Xander pictured him more into books than sports. He also looked like he maybe went without meals a few times a week. “You are stronger than you think. You were just joking with me. I need my gorgeous smartass back, please. Let’s get you fixed and cleaned up and then we can talk about all of what happened, okay? Now, take the pills with

the water and we'll get this shoulder fixed and then you can take a shower."

Over the next minute, there was a lot of swearing and shouting as Xander worked quickly to pop his shoulder back into place. Wright had more tears on his face and Xander gently wrapped him in his arms, consoling him without adding any pressure of a hug. He kept one hand on his waist and the other on the back of his head. Wright kept the good side of his forehead pressed against Xander's shoulder for several moments.

"That sucked," Wright whispered. He pulled his head back and looked up at Xander. "You suck. This sucks."

"I know it does," Xander said. He scratched lightly at his scalp before moving to brush his pointer finger lightly over the cut above his eye. "But you're going to get through this, okay? I think you need to see a doctor, but we can deal with that tomorrow. Right now, I want you to take a shower and get cleaned as much as you can. The cuts and bruises might sting, but the water pressure is gentle. Don't make it too hot, though, okay? You don't want to irritate your skin any more. I'm going to run to the main house and grab some bandages and food."

"You said there was a wedding going on, right?" Wright waited for Xander to nod before continuing. "I ruined it, didn't I? I should apologize to the people."

"You have apologized enough for things that aren't your fault, okay? Of anyone that would understand, William and Clark do. As I told you, William was the brains behind the idea for the refuge we have on the ranch. Don't worry about that right now. Just focus on getting cleaned up. I'll be back in twenty minutes but I'll leave my phone on the counter. If you need anything, open it up and call Patrick's contact, okay?"

"Okay. You sure you trust me with your phone? I know my dad warned you about it."

Xander rolled his eyes. Wright really did have a twisted sense of humor, but he would take it if it meant he wasn't crying. He'd seen it enough times; his emotions were going to be on a rollercoaster for a week at least. Maybe longer if the abuse had been ongoing. He knew that once someone was sure they had a safe space; they would typically act out before finding themselves and being who they are.

He pulled out his phone and opened his private browsing tab. He lived alone and got lonely; there was no shame in enjoying himself from time to time. Besides, he liked to read more than watch. But sometimes it worked well either way.

"This couple is personally my favorite," Xander said. He turned his screen to Wright. He saw his eyes widen and he looked up at Xander. He still had blood from his nose smeared over his lips and his eye was nearly swollen shut, but he could see the surprise on the rest of his face. Xander realized that he probably should have confirmed Wright's orientation before just showing him a video thumbnail of two guys. With the joke he'd made about swallowing, his brain just sort of assumed. But then the surprise turned into something like relief on Wright's face and the moment passed. "No matter what your dad said, you are not wrong. So, if you want to watch, watch. If you want to read, I have a tote of books sitting in the closet. Wright, look at me." He waited until his eyes were back on him. He smiled. "You are safe now."



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Wright ~

Wright stood in the shower for at least ten minutes. Xander turned the water on for him, wanting to make sure it wasn't too hot before he left. He promised to lay out a shirt and bring back some pants too. The water stung his whole body but he stayed under the spray until he got used to it. He didn't want to move too much and realized that he wouldn't be able to do more than hope the water got most of the dirt off. He'd seen himself in the mirror when Xander went to grab the water. His eye was swollen shut, he had blood smeared over his lips and chin. His ribs were colored on one side, a cut just barely visible when he twisted his body to look at the damage on his back. He looked as bad as he felt.

He tried to wash his hair, but using just one hand was difficult. He'd already exerted his shoulder enough just getting his shoes, jeans, and boxers off. A question Xander asked him came back to his mind when he tried to clean his lower body. Bending over still made him a bit dizzy. He'd ask about possibly having a concussion.

Xander had asked him if he had any abuse below the waist. His dad hit him often, yelling that he would never live up to his expectations. He loved telling Wright how successful he was at his age. How he was dating girls, sleeping around, how he'd 'scored' his mom at a house party. Wright was slacking and his dad thought that hitting him or making him take ice showers would somehow make him become popular. The truth was he never fit in at school. He focused his attention on his studies, dreaming of a future where he could be himself. Not that he was a great student, even with trying. He was average at best. As messed up as it sounded in his head, he never once thought his dad would hurt him in that way because he rambled about how it was gay for another man to be in the same room with a naked guy. Even

when he shoved him into the cold showers, he was fully clothed.

He cleared his head, knowing if he kept thinking about it he would break down crying again. Xander was still gone when he opened the bathroom door. He'd tried to tie the towel around him, but his shoulder was throbbing. The painkillers hadn't fully kicked in yet. He looked at the phone, just to see if there was a text or anything. No notifications were there, but Xander's background was of a horse in a field. There was a sunset painting the sky pink and orange.

As promised, a plain shirt was sitting folded on the dresser. He'd put it there earlier, before Wright barely said a word to him. The rest of the room was rather basic. The walls were a cream color, the floor a dark wood. The bed was a solid headboard and footboard. There were spots of individuality spread around. Like the photo hanging on the wall by the window. It was of a fence, with a cowboy hat positioned perfectly in the frame. That and the phone background, Wright wondered if he had taken the pictures himself or not. What he assumed were Xander's cologne and other products were lined up on the dresser. He liked the room and its simplicity. His room he grew up in had old carpet and gray walls. He never had a bed larger than a twin size, a metal frame to keep it off the floor. The king size bed was messy, like Xander rolled out that morning and just left it. But it looked equally inviting. He sighed when he noticed that there were smears of dirt and some gravel, even a spot of blood on the pillow and sheets. He'd offer to clean them later.

He turned back to the dresser and tried to slip the shirt over his head. He got caught in the fabric and his body protested at moving too much, stretching his arm until the pain kept him from breathing.

"Would you like some help?" Xander's voice was somewhere close by. Wright made a noise and tried to pull the shirt down. His muscles tensed and he could feel the loose towel starting to slip off his waist. "Hold on, don't move too much. I've got you."

Hands were on him, on his waist. He could feel his heartbeat racing when the towel was adjusted. It wasn't pulled away though. Just tightened so it wouldn't fall. Xander's fingers that close to an intimate part of his body was a new feeling and his heart started racing for another reason.

"Here we go," Xander whispered. He moved his hands around and tugged on the fabric until his head popped through and the shirt rested on his shoulders. "I brought bandages. Do you mind if I put them on and clean the cuts before we put the shirt all the way on? William is closest to you in size and he loaned us a pair of sweats. Also, Tracy piled you a plate of food from the reception."

"Were they mad at me?" Wright looked up at Xander. Wright only came up to his shoulder. Where he couldn't grow a single chest hair if he wanted, Xander had a short, dark beard and mustache. His skin was tanned, his eyes wrinkled around the edges. They were a soft blue, almost ocean color. His hair was shorter than Wright's, just long enough to run his fingers through. There was a peek of chest hair at the edge of the collar of his shirt. He'd changed, too. He had been wearing a button down and nice pants with a belt, but now he was in jeans and a white t-shirt. He had a tattoo of the medical logo with the snakes on his forearm and what looked like a Willow tree on his upper right arm. The shirt cut it off so he wasn't completely sure.

"Of course not," Xander said. He nodded toward the bed. He thought Xander wanted him to sit, but instead he had him stand between his legs as he sat down. He reached down and pulled items from a black bag he hadn't noticed on his initial scan of the room. "They are worried about you, but you didn't ruin a thing. If anything, you actually showed William how much his idea is helping people. You being here and him knowing you are safe is the best wedding gift he could have. His words exactly."

"I still hate that it was interrupted, though."

Xander turned his body so his back was facing him. His fingers brushed down his

spine and Wright shivered. He was sure Xander could see the goosebumps on his skin. “Your back doesn’t look as bad as I thought it would. Is it still tender here?” Wright scrunched his face in pain, but it wasn’t terrible. Not like it’d been an hour ago. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“It’s not as bad as it was,” Wright said. “I tried to clean off as much as I could, but my arm was starting to protest.”

“Do you want me to run a cloth over parts you might have missed? I’m going to need to clean the cuts anyway.”

“If you want,” Wright said. “I think it’s mostly my face. It hurt to run the water over my eye.”

They fell silent as Xander worked. He closed his eyes, letting Xander position him how he needed, turning him in a slow circle to examine his whole upper body. His fingers were gentle, but a few places he prodded had him wincing again. A large bandage was taped to his side, a beige wrap wound around his chest and back just tight enough to not fall off. Xander made sure that he could breathe easily before moving on.

Wright wasn’t used to this kind of attention. The feeling of Xander’s fingers on his skin, the way he was taking care of him. Everything about him was different to what he grew up with with his dad. When he was finally turned back to face him, still standing between his legs, Wright watched his face. His eyes were full of concentration. He worked deftly, moving to concentrate on the scratches on his arms and his lower legs past the towel he’d gotten while he was on the ground. He stood after a minute, working on his shoulder last.

“This will need to stay in a sling or something for at least a week,” Xander said, finally breaking the silence. Wright was still looking at his face. He moved Wright’s

left forearm gently to rest against his stomach and then pulled a second beige wrap out to fix it in place and wrap up around his shoulder. He couldn't move it at all but the position relieved some pressure so he wasn't complaining. Much. "I'm going to clean off your face a little more and then apply the ointment. Tell me if I'm hurting you."

Wright nodded. His headache was mostly gone now. He still felt a little dizzy, but it wasn't as bad. Xander disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a fresh cloth. Wright closed his eyes and let Xander work. He relaxed, letting himself enjoy being taken care of for another moment. He never even got close enough to another person to be touched like this, even as innocent as cleaning wounds. It was nice, being taken care of. It was so different from any touches he'd had before. He stepped back, his legs pressing against the foot of the bed.

"Did I hurt you?" Xander asked. He was looking all around Wright's face. He wasn't hurt. In fact, he was being so gentle that Wright was enjoying the sensation. A little too much.

"Um, no. Sorry. I just- Can I take a nap?" The last thing he wanted Xander to know was that his hands and the simple act of caring for him were affecting him physically.

"Can you eat first?" Xander asked. "And you'll have to sleep sitting up with your injuries. A dislocated shoulder is no joke."

"Oh, okay." He'd always been an avid stomach or side sleeper, but he'd manage. After everything that happened, he was sure he was tired enough to fall asleep anyway.

"You okay?" Xander cleaned up the mess he'd made and tossed the trash away before he passed over the clothes he brought. "William threw in a pair of boxers, promising that they were new. He said they were his honeymoon surprise so apologies in

advance if they are tight.”

Wright wanted to laugh, but a yawn caught him off guard. The movement caused his eye to throb and he raised his good arm to touch the new bandage. Xander had covered his entire eye with a white gauze so even if he could open it, he wouldn't see anything.

“If you want to get dressed, I'm going to go heat up the food. Just walk down the hallway when you're ready.”

The boxers weren't terribly tight, but they did hug him in all the right places. He adjusted himself quickly, not wanting to give himself any more reason to get harder than he was. He'd let it go down on its own and then hopefully forget about it for a while. Forever if he could. He wasn't sure he'd be able to touch himself again without seeing the look on his dad's face just before he hit him.

He pulled the sweats on and tossed the towel back into the bathroom before making his way down the hall. The floors were a dark wood throughout the house. The walls were an off-white, scattered with more photographs. The living room was just as simple as the bedroom. There was a TV on a glass shelf stand, a brown couch angled toward it in the middle of the room. A large rug covered a good section of the floor. There wasn't a lot of sunlight left, but the curtains were opened and showed the open field behind the house. Xander was standing in the kitchen. It was smaller, enough space for one or two people but not enough for a family. The appliances looked new and the countertops were light marble. The white cabinets with glass doors stood out against the dark cream walls.

“How are you feeling?” Xander asked. He had two plates in front of him, piled with delicious looking and smelling food. Wright tried to adjust the sweats to keep them firmly on his hips. They were at least a size too big, but he couldn't tighten them or roll them with just one hand. Xander seemed to sense his struggle and silently offered

to help. As much as Wright wanted to keep a distance from Xander and his hands, he didn't want to trip over the feet or have them fall completely.

"I'll be okay," Wright said honestly. He stood beside Xander and looked between him and the food. He had eaten a few of his veggies earlier, not feeling the chicken after his dad's attitude before everything that happened. "What's for dinner? What time is it?"

"It's just hitting nine," Xander said. "Have you eaten today?"

"A couple bites of my dinner before my dad flipped out." He was used to not eating all day. His dad didn't keep much in the house. Definitely not snacks.

"Well." Xander picked up their plates and motioned for them to move to the living room. "The table is a bit of a mess right now but I have some food trays we can use. I'll make sure to clean up in a little. Tracy gave us a bit of everything. There's steak, potatoes, mac and cheese, green beans, corn, carrots. She even wrapped up a few pieces of cake. Do you like chocolate?"

"Haven't had a lot of sweets in my life," Wright said honestly. He sat down on the couch and took the plates from Xander while he pulled out the folding tray tables. "But I like chocolate ice cream. I used to sneak an ice cream bar at school sometimes."

"You'll like this cake" Xander said. "We might save it tomorrow. That's the second time you've yawned and I don't want you to be awake from the sugar. I'll be checking on you periodically through the night to make sure you're good."

"I think I might have a concussion," Wright said. "Is that what you're worried about? The passenger window hit my head pretty hard when my dad shoved me into the truck and shut the door. I got dizzy and my vision kind of went out. Not to mention

when he slammed on his brakes and my head hit the dashboard.”

Xander was silent for a long time. Wright wasn't sure what he said, but he pushed his food around the plate. It all looked amazing and he felt his stomach rumble more than heard it. “I'm sorry. I should probably stop talking about it.”

“No, no. It isn't that.” Xander reached across the empty cushion between them and laid his hand on Wright's thigh. “I'm just trying to convince myself that murder is illegal. Patrick is calling the family doctor and he's going to get you in tomorrow for x-rays. You'll have to file a report and tell her and the police what happened.”

“What? A report? Is that necessary?”

Xander took his hand back and looked at Wright. Stared, a better description. “Yes, file a report for assault. You're an adult and he hurt you, Wright. Let the police know what happened. I've seen too many abuse cases that never got reported in my time. Please, don't stay silent on this.”

For some reason, hearing Xander use his name didn't feel right. He'd only been half joking about him calling him gorgeous still, but even that felt more natural than his name. He couldn't dwell on that now. His hands started shaking. He'd already relived it in bits and pieces with Xander. “Can't you just tell them what happened?”

“I can, but the further removed the report, the less likely it will go anywhere. If you don't want to, we won't force you to. You don't have to do anything you don't want to or don't like. But think about it, okay? He deserves to be thrown in jail at least.”

Wright focused on the food. It was delicious. He only wished he could cook like this. Before he realized it, the plate was mostly empty. He only had a few pieces of steak left before he set his fork down. He'd made a bit of a mess on the small table and even in his lap. It didn't help that he was left-handed and felt more comfortable using



it for just about any activity. Being able to move just his right hand sucked.

“I’m going to get an ice pack for your shoulder and then we’ll fix up the bed for you to sleep,” Xander said. He was standing and moving to the kitchen when the words registered.

“I can’t take your bed,” Wright said. He brought his own plate to the kitchen and dumped the last bites into the trash sitting by the front door.

“You’re not going to win this argument,” Xander said. He wrapped a small plastic bag of ice in a cloth and stepped toward Wright. He put the bag on his shoulder gently and the cool temperature was a relief. Without thinking, Wright lifted his other hand to lay it on top of Xander’s to hold it in place. He tilted his head to allow more space for the bag to sit on his shoulder. Xander’s hand was rough, but warm. Neither of them said a word and Wright held his breath until the older man slipped his hand out from under his own. “Let’s go set it up. I don’t think you saw the pillows, but I brought enough we could easily make it where you can sleep without putting pressure on your shoulder.”

“I’ve never been able to sleep on my back,” Wright said as they entered the bedroom. He’d been focused on the photos and then getting the shirt on because there were three extra pillows on the bed he didn’t notice when he got out of the shower. “So, I don’t know how much sleep I’ll get.”

“We can figure something out,” Xander said.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Xander ~

Wright tried to fight him about sleeping in the bed. Xander wouldn't listen to it. He also wouldn't listen to him demanding that he let him help strip the sheets and put on new ones. The kid was stubborn as hell and Xander knew he had his work cut out for him to keep him from exerting himself too much.

He'd fallen asleep on the couch more than once in the six months he lived in the guest house so he knew it wouldn't hurt him another night or so. He wasn't sure what they were going to do in the long run, but Xander didn't want to let Wright out of his sight until he was healed. And that would take a couple weeks at least. Being able to finally look closely at everything on his body, he was amazed Wright was even standing. He had to be in pain and Xander set a reminder on his phone for the next time he could give him medicine. He'd have to wake him up in the middle of the night, but he was sure Wright would be grateful.

After getting him settled to where he was half lying on his right side, his left shoulder still in a makeshift sling until he saw the doctor tomorrow, Xander went back to the living room. He kept the door cracked in case Wright called out for him in the middle of the night. His phone was vibrating on the tray table from their dinner. It was his brother.

"How's the kid?" Patrick asked in lieu of a hello.

"I just got him fixed up in my bed," Xander said. "I'm hoping he sleeps for a couple of hours, but I'm going to keep checking on him. He said he hit his head pretty hard a few times so I'm worried he has a concussion on top of his shoulder and maybe a

cracked rib.”

“Poor kid,” Patrick said. “Have you learned anything else about him? Name, or where he lived?”

Xander smiled, thinking of his little quip earlier about calling him gorgeous or sweetheart. “His name is Wright. Pat, he thought his dad was dropping him off at a conversion camp.”

“That’s what I feared,” Patrick said. “I put the pieces together when he threw the money on the ground. But he’s here now, so we’ll make it work. We’ll figure out a place for him to stay.”

“He can stay here with me,” Xander said without thinking. There was a long pause where both of them were thinking about that and how it would work. “The houses are full and your guest room has more guests than it stays empty. It makes sense. And he might joke about what happened to him, but he’s hurting and I think he’ll be more comfortable with a place that doesn’t have as much traffic in and out.”

“Can you make that work?” Patrick asked. “It’s just a one bedroom there.”

“I’m sleeping on the couch,” Xander said. “And I can always buy another mattress. It’ll just be a couple weeks until he’s healed up.”

“Let him rest tonight but bring him to the main house tomorrow morning for breakfast. William wants to meet him and Tracy has been worried too. We all are. He has an appointment at the hospital at noon.”

“I’ll see if he’s up for it,” Xander said. He loved his family and the new additions over the last few years of that family, but they could be a loud, boisterous crowd. He wasn’t sure if Wright was up for that. “I’ll call you in the morning and let you know

how he's feeling."

"Okay. Either way, I need to talk to him tomorrow. I'll see you in the morning."

Xander hung up the phone and turned on the TV, keeping the volume low. He scrolled through for a while before he found a sitcom playing reruns. It was a show he'd seen several times before, but it passed the time. He wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep tonight.

After another episode, he picked up his phone again. He kept an ear out for any noise coming from the bedroom while scrolling through social media. He started with Facebook, looking through nearly fifty accounts with the first name Wright that lived in Texas. He only had that and Instagram, but neither of them turned up anything. If Wright had an account, it was private or under another name. Which would make sense if his dad was controlling. There were a few hits, but he wasn't completely sure. A high school award that was shared on a school website, a list of people that were part of a community effort to get kids into college for free. The rest were older men or kids' parents posting.

A noise caught his attention and he clicked off his phone. He waited, listening for something. There was another noise, almost a whimper. Xander was on his feet and moving toward the bedroom within a second. He pushed open the door gently, hoping that the loose floorboard just outside the bedroom wouldn't wake him. There was a clear whimper and the lump under the blanket shifted.

Xander walked slowly into the room. He didn't want to scare Wright, but he was definitely facing something in his dream. His head moved from one side to the other, his face scrunched like he was in pain. His lips moved, pursing at first but then opening and closing like he wanted to say something. His hand that wasn't in the sling was clenched into a fist. He was still propped up, his bad arm resting against a stack of pillows. He had another pillow against his lower back and the last two

pillows situated where he could lean to the right and rest his head. He muttered something again, Xander didn't catch it, and then his eyes flew open and he was breathing really hard.

"No, no. I'm sorry." He curled in on his bad side before Xander could react and Wright cried out from the pain. Or from the memory. Maybe both. He wasn't sure.

"Shhh," Xander said. He sat on the edge of the bed. "You're safe. I'm right here. It was just a nightmare. Can you move back to sit up? You're putting too much pressure on your injuries."

"I should have remembered to close the tab," he said into the pillow. He was crying again. Xander started moving the pillows so he could get closer. "I shouldn't have been so stupid."

"Hey, no. None of that talk, okay?" Xander finally got the pillows moved and Wright looked up at him. The bruise above his eye was darkening around the bandage. It was going to get a lot worse before it started looking better. He was sure the other spots were looking just as bad. "You are not stupid. You're strong and you're going to get through this, Wright. Are you in pain anywhere?"

"My head and shoulder. I can't get comfortable like this so I keep moving around." Wright rested his head back against the headboard. He closed his eye and sighed heavily.

"Chronic side sleeper, huh?" Xander raised one leg, bending it so his foot hung off the edge of the mattress. He laid his hand on Wright's ankle, like he'd done earlier. Wright's lips quirked into a short smile before it faded from his face.

"My mom, when I was little, would always joke that even as a baby, as soon as she laid me down, I would roll onto my side. She said she'd stay up for hours watching

me sleep, making sure nothing bad happened to me.” There was a moment of silence between them. A tear slipped down his cheek. “Funny how that mindset changed when she left me with him.”

Thinking of anyone leaving Wright, especially leaving him with a man that would hurt him, broke Xander’s heart. Maybe it was the years he spent seeing the worst moments of peoples’ lives or saw firsthand how the justice system failed over and over to get victims help. Whatever it was, the dejected look on Wright’s face and how easily he dismissed himself burned something inside him. He wanted to help him. Not just physically to heal, but emotionally. To show him he’s worth something to this world, just how he is.

“Scoot over,” Xander said. He moved to the other side of the bed and moved those pillows as well. He turned down the blanket too while Wright stared at him.

“What are you doing?” Wright asked. He moved, giving Xander plenty of space in the bed.

“I’m going to stay right here and watch over you,” he said like it was obvious.

“You’ve already done enough,” Wright said. He opened his mouth to say more, but Xander interrupted him.

“I want to,” he said quietly. He kept a little space between them in case Wright wanted to sleep on his own. He reached down to grab the pillows and situate them between their bodies. “I’m going to be around you so much that you’ll get sick and tired of seeing me.”

“I doubt that will happen,” Wright said. He wasn’t sure if he meant for Xander to hear it, but something sprouted low in his heart at the words. His ex had said it, that he was tired of Xander’s tendency to take care of him. He shut down that thought

quickly. Wright was fifteen years younger than him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m fixing the pillows back for you.”

“Oh.” The word was dripping with disappointment. Xander looked up at him, stopping his movements to fix the pillows. Wright was watching his hands, avoiding him.

“Oh, what? Wright, if it makes you uncomfortable, I can go back to the living room or bring a chair in here to sleep on. I don’t want to leave you alone, though.”

“No, it doesn’t make me uncomfortable. I just-” Wright looked away, toward the bathroom door. The room was mostly dark, all the lights in the house were off. There was a small flicker of light coming through the bedroom door where he’d left the TV on when he came in. He watched Wright’s head move to look down, focusing on his lap. His right hand started picking at the bandage that was holding his shoulder and elbow in place. “I thought you were talking about laying together.”

Xander argued with himself. He could hear the disappointment in Wright’s voice. On the one hand, he wanted Wright to feel better, to help him however he could. He even thought about just holding him and comforting him earlier. But he knew he shouldn’t get too close to him. Even under the bruises and cuts, Xander could see that Wright was attractive. He was cute, in a younger way. Being thirty-five and having been in a relationship for the last three years with another guy similar in build to him, having a smaller man in his bed was different. He was torn between wanting to help him, to make him feel better, and keeping from crossing a line.

“I’m sorry. I’m going to try and get some more sleep.”

“No, no. I’m sorry.” Xander moved the pillows again, one going to the floor and the other he put behind himself. “Come here.” He would deal with his thoughts later.

Right now, he just wanted Wright to feel better.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, if that wasn’t what you meant.” Wright stayed where he was as he continued talking. “You’ve already done enough for me.”

“If you weren’t injured, I would pull you over here myself but you are. So, come here.” Xander situated himself on his pillow, propped up enough that when Wright snuggled against his side, they were both half-sitting still. Wright’s head rested against his shoulder and Xander closed his eyes. It’d been six months of living on the ranch. After the breakup, he’d been the one to move out since his name wasn’t on the lease. He’d thrown everything he had into helping with the ranch, the business side and helping to keep the new houses clean and in working condition. They were spaced out just enough to give privacy and Xander was the one that kept the grass cut low. And the one that got a snake out of the bedroom one evening.

Each night, he’d come back to this exact bed and ask himself why he kept such a large bed for one person. More than once, he thought about downsizing or finding a new place in the city again. He loved being back on the ranch and it wasn’t like he would have time to date or anything if he was working in an Emergency Room or somewhere similar.

“Are you okay?” Wright’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts. He realized he was brushing his fingers against Wright’s middle back, across his spine from side-to-side. He made sure to avoid where he knew the bruises were, the one on his side and the space on his lower back.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just get some sleep, okay? I have my alarm set to give you more pain medicine in a couple of hours.”

Xander woke up hours later to his alarm for the second time. The sky was just starting to lighten, a soft glow curling around the edges of the curtain. It was barely



six in the morning, but he was on feeding duty this morning. He would have to make his way to the barn soon to care for the horses.

He'd woken up at two in the morning with his first alarm to Wright still pressed up against him. He'd slipped a leg between his own and was drooling on his shirt. It was adorable, really. Xander's arm was wrapped around his back, resting gently against his hip. He'd barely woken up when Xander slipped out of the bed and gave him the pills and a glass of water. Instead of moving him again and waking him back up, he decided to sleep the rest of the night on the couch. He kept the door open to listen out for him, but they had both slept the entire time. Now, he needed to get up and make sure he was good before starting the day.

"Good morning, gorgeous," Xander said softly as he bent over the edge of the bed. Wright was laying on his stomach- something that Xander wasn't the surest of with his injuries but he'd probably have to just deal with. His head was buried in the pillow, still drooling, and he looked so peaceful. He wanted to let him know that he was leaving the house though. In case he woke up alone. He ran his hand through his hair, pushing it behind his ears. "Wake up, Wright."

"Sleepy," Wright mumbled. "Don't want to get up."

"You can sleep a little longer, but I have to go help with the horses. I'll be back in a little bit to get you for breakfast. I'll leave a couple pills on the counter for you when you're ready to get up. If you're hurting or feel dizzy, just walk outside, okay? I'll keep an eye out for you. My phone is in the living room too."

Wright made some type of noise but didn't move. His good eye never opened during their short interaction. Xander gave him one more brush of his hair and then turned to grab fresh clothes before walking outside. It was the beginning of June, the air was already hot. He'd have to check the forecast for the rest of the week, see if they were getting rain or not. The horses protested him being just a couple minutes late.

“I know, I’m late. Sorry, guys.” Xander got to work quickly. The barn was nice, state of the art for their business. They’d been a cattle ranch for generations, selling meat locally and across the state. Patrick was the fifth generation of their family to own the ranch. It was going strong and the additional income of the refuge only made it more stable. No pun intended.

Three of them were in the barn right now, the other two out in the pasture for them to graze. He started by taking all the buckets and baskets out of the stalls and mucking them out. He opened the doors to let them out into the paddock while he cleaned the stalls and laid fresh bedding and then replaced their food and water.

He was sweating from the heat and working by the time he was finished. He brought the horses back in to let them eat, including the ones that were out in the pasture. They easily came in with the promise of food.

“You’re a good girl, Luna.” He rubbed between her eyes as he passed. She was a Palomino, five years old. He moved to the next one, stopping to say hi as well. “Raven. Were you behaving outside last night? Of course you weren’t. The question is, did you get Willow into trouble as well or was it just you?”

“Do you always talk to them like humans?” Wright’s voice pulled him from his horse, Benito. He was a mustang, all black except for the white spot between his eyes. He turned from the horse to the sound of Wright’s voice. He was standing in the open door of the barn.

“What are you doing up and walking around?” Xander moved quickly to stand closer to Wright. His face was several different colors and he was still in the oversized shirt and sweats. He immediately leaned against Xander’s arm when he held it out. “You should be resting. I told you I would come back to get you.”

“You did?” Wright looked up at him. “I don’t remember that.”

That concerned Xander. With the injuries he sustained yesterday, memory loss was a possibility. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“You waking me up to take more pills. Then I woke up on my own this morning.”

“You were pretty out of it when I told you I was heading out,” Xander said. He wouldn’t think worst case scenarios. If he remembered waking up to take the pills, it could be nothing.

“I don’t usually sleep this late either,” Wright said. “I had to get myself up for school most days and then when I graduated, dad liked me to be up before he went to work.”

“Well, you’re going to get plenty of rest over the next couple weeks.” Xander started to walk with Wright back to the guest house. “I mean it. You have serious injuries, Wright. You need to rest until they’re better. How is your shoulder feeling?”

“It hurts, but not as much as yesterday. I think that might be the pills because I looked at the bruises in the mirror. I look terrible.”

“You’re still gorgeous, sweetheart.”

Wright looked up at Xander just as they made it to the door. “A double endearment. Must be my lucky day.”

“I’ll call you that every day if it’ll help you feel better,” Xander said. He meant it too, which was probably something he should think about. But once again, he pushed it to the back of his mind for now. “But I need to shower before we go to the main house for breakfast. You have an appointment in the city at noon to see a doctor.”

“I have to go back into the city?” Wright stopped in the kitchen and stood on his own. Xander turned around to face him. His good hand was wrapped around his stomach,

both hands curled into fists. His good eye was rounded, shocked. Scared. Xander recognized the emotion.

“Just to see the doctor,” Xander said. “She’s a good friend of ours. We won’t stop anywhere else.”

“Which... Which hospital?” Wright started to shake and Xander ignored that he was sweaty and probably smelt bad. He moved closer and wrapped Wright in his arms. He kept his hands in his usual spot, one on his waist and one on the back of his head.

“She works at Trinity, in the trauma department.”

“That’s the one by the bagel shop and near the high school, right?” The question was asked directly into his chest. “I live near there. I don’t want to see my dad again.”

“Does he work in the hospital? We can arrange for the doctor to come here.” Xander wouldn’t risk that asshole getting anywhere near Wright again. He’d only known him for twelve hours, but he would do anything to protect him.

“No, he works in an office somewhere near the college. But the house is only ten minutes from the hospital. I passed it when I took the bus to school.”

“We don’t have to go,” Xander said. “I can tell Patrick and we can reschedule or figure something out.”

“No, it’s okay. You’re going with me, right?” Wright looked up and took a step back. “I’ll be okay if you’re there.”

“Patrick is going too,” Xander said. “We’ll take you in the truck and be with you the entire time.”

“And I need to see the doctor? I don’t have money to pay for the bill.”

“Don’t worry about that, okay? We just need to know that you’re okay.” Xander rubbed his hand against his back, avoiding any hurt areas. “I’m going to take a shower and then we can go see the others. Are you okay to see everyone today?”

“I’ll have to eventually,” Wright said. He followed Xander to the bedroom and stood in the doorway while Xander grabbed fresh clothes. “Is, um, what’s his name? The grooms. Are they still here?”

“They are,” Xander said. He had a text from William himself, checking in on Wright. “They stayed here last night in the guest room of the main house. They’re heading out on their honeymoon tomorrow. William is excited to meet you. He’s worried.”

“I want to apologize to them,” he said. Xander stopped just short of the bathroom door and turned back to Wright. He dropped his hands, gearing up to give his same little speech, but Wright beat him to it. “Yeah, I know he doesn’t care. He’s just glad I’m safe. Doesn’t help the fact that I feel horrible about it.”

“We’ll meet them in a few minutes,” Xander said. “Did you want to take another shower before we go?”

“Should I?” Wright asked. “I mean, I tried to wash my hair yesterday but I couldn’t do much with one hand.”

“You’re fine just how you are,” Xander said. “I can help you wash it tonight if you want. Or get Tracy to wash it in the sink for you.”

“No.” Wright said the word quickly. Xander watched him. He took a deep breath and shook his head. “I can’t do-” He took another quick breath. “I have bad memories with my head in a sink. Can we just leave it at that, please?”

“Of course,” Xander said. “I’m sorry I brought it up. But my offer still stands. I can help you wash it later.”

“We’ll see how it goes today with the doctor, I guess.”

Xander made quick work of a shower. He toweled off and dressed in the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror while he brushed his teeth. He’d gone to the barber and had his beard trimmed nicely for the wedding. He smoothed his hand down his chest. He never thought about how much hair he had on his chest until last night. Younger men were never really what he was attracted to, but there was something about Wright. The word gorgeous had come so naturally to him. Checking him over last night and bandaging him up, he was more aware of his own body and how different they were.

“Are you almost done in there?” Wright’s voice came from the door by the hallway. “I need to use the bathroom.”

Xander pulled his shirt down over his head and reached over to open the door. He let Wright in before walking out of the room to the bedroom. He focused on making the bed while Wright was occupied. He was just setting the pillows on the bed when Wright came back in.

Each time he looked at him, rage built in his chest. He wanted to go find this guy and beat him the same way. Worse.

“Why do you look like someone just kicked your puppy?” Wright asked. He adjusted the waistband of the sweats with his good arm.

“If you were my puppy, that man would be dead yesterday.” The comment was supposed to be in his head, but of course Wright heard it. They both stared at each other, Xander’s mouth doing a fish motion as he tried to think of how he wanted to

apologize. He didn't know Wright that well to say something like that. He'd hinted at wanting to hurt his dad for what he did, but did he cross the line?

Wright's laughter and then subsequent grunting from the exertion caught him off guard. He was by his side in an instant and Wright leaned against him once more. "Oh shit, that hurt. A lot."

"Are you okay?" Xander led him to the bed and helped him sit down. He sat down beside him and hovered his hands over his body. The bandages, including the one wrapped around his shoulder were all under the shirt. Outside of his face and the slightly wheezing sound when he took a deep breath, he looked fine. He wanted to check the rest of his injuries.

"Yeah, I just need a breather." Wright laid back on the bed. The shirt was long, but his movement bunched it up and Xander could see a sliver of his skin between the shirt and waistband of the sweats. It was a deep purple to red. Wright lifted the shirt further up his chest and lifted his head to look down. Xander did the same. The bruise had grown in size and deepened in color. The bandage was wrapped around the topmost part of the bruising, but it looked painful still. Xander brushed his fingertips gently around the edges of it. "How's it looking, Doc?"

"I wasn't a doctor, actually." He continued trailing his middle finger around the bruise. He didn't want to do anything to hurt him more. "I was EMS, but I was in the Emergency Room on floater shifts helping out."

"Are you even qualified to be touching me, then?"

Xander pulled his hand back and raised his eyes to look at Wright's face. He had that same little smirk on his face and lowered the shirt back down. Xander helped him sit up, making him move slowly.

“I’m letting you get away with this now,” Xander said. “Because you’re hurt. But once you’re in the clear, you better watch your comments, smart ass.”

Wright smiled, a true genuine smile. It lit up his whole face. Xander was sure it was hurting him to do it, but it didn’t seem to bother him. “I think that’s my favorite name you’ve called me.”

“Smart ass? Why?”

Wright shrugged. Xander helped him up and they started back toward the door to head to the main house. He wanted to pick Wright up and carry him, keep him from having to walk more than he had already this morning. The guest house had a small front grassy area off the patio style porch and the gravel area where they parked all of their cars was a decent size. It was a lot of walking for him, even if he claimed he wasn’t hurting that much. They had his truck, Patrick’s, and Tracy’s SUV parked there. Wright spoke again when they started up the stairs of the porch. “I couldn’t make comments like that without the fear of getting yelled at or hit. You just roll your eyes at them where my dad probably would have hit me at least. I had to be careful of my tone and what I said around him. It’s nice to be called a smart ass and know you don’t actually mean it.”

“I would never hurt you,” Xander said. “Physically or verbally. No one here would.”

“I’m starting to realize that,” Wright said. He was still using Xander as a crutch as he moved slowly up each step.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Wright ~

Walking into the main house with Xander was both overwhelming and amazing. The first thing that caught his eye was the expansive kitchen and dining room area. The space was all open, with light wood floors and white walls. It had a homey feel to it, like a real family truly lived there. Dishes sat in the sink, there was a chopping board and knife on the island that was the only separation between the spaces. The table itself was large, with ten chairs around it. Almost half of them were taken already.

“Wright, dear.” A woman who looked in her mid- to late forties stood from the table and walked over to them. Xander’s hand was in the middle of his back, careful to avoid the spot just below that was still sore. “It’s so nice to meet you. Did you sleep well?”

“About as good as expected,” Wright said. He wasn’t sure who the woman was, but she seemed nice. Her eyes were full of worry and he could see them taking in every part of his face and looking lower. He was still wearing Xander’s shirt that was at least two sizes too big on him, and William’s sweats.

“And Alexander here has been helping you?” The way she said it was more of a warning that she better like the answer he gave or the grown man behind him would be in serious trouble. He looked up over his shoulder at Xander and smiled.

“Yeah, he’s been great. I really appreciate everything that’s been done. The food last night was delicious.”

“I’m glad the sweats fit,” another guy said. He was still taller than Wright, but he

looked closer to his age. His hair looked like he'd used his fingers to try and tame it this morning, but a few pieces were stubborn and still sticking up. "I'm William. It's nice to meet you."

He held out his right hand to shake. He couldn't wait to be able to use his other hand. Being left-handed, it felt weird not being able to move it. His hand was smooth and he squeezed Wright's gently before letting it go.

"Were the boxers okay too?"

"Oh, um, yeah. I can see why they were for your honeymoon though. They're tight on me, so I can imagine on you."

"Wait, what? You bought special underwear for me and then gave them away?" Another guy that was sitting at the table raised his arm toward William, his expression a full-on pout. William laughed and walked back over to him. Xander guided him to one of the empty chairs. Tracy sat back down next to who he assumed was Patrick.

"Don't worry, husband of mine. They came in a pack of three." William leaned over the guy's shoulder and kissed him easily. Right there, in front of everyone. Wright looked down at the table and swallowed.

"I would say get a room, but we'd still be able to hear you," Xander said as he picked up the plate in front of Wright and started putting things on it. Wright wasn't a bit fan of grits, despite growing up in the south. He kicked his foot against Xander's and shook his head to silently tell him to skip over that dish.

"It was one time and you walked into the guest house without knocking," Clark said. "That was on you."

“You called it ‘conserving water’ I do believe,” Xander said. “I’ve never heard someone have so much fun saving the planet.”

“No sex talk at my table, please,” Tracy said. But she sounded amused more than annoyed.

Everyone laughed and they all went back to eating their food. Patrick was sitting at the head of the table to Wright’s right, Tracy directly across from him. William and his husband were sitting in the two chairs next to her.

“So, Wright.” William’s husband broke the silence after a few minutes. He was trying to cut his food and eat, but it really was hard not being able to use his dominant hand. “How old are you?”

He gave up on eating for the time being. His stomach protested, grumbling just loud enough he could hear it. Xander looked over at him and tilted his head, so maybe it was a little louder than he thought. Without a word, he scooted Wright’s plate closer and started cutting the biscuit smothered in gravy and tore the bacon up in bite sized pieces for him.

“Thank you.” He turned back to look at the rest of the group. They were all watching Xander with varying levels of emotion on their faces. “Um, sorry. I’m really dominantly left-handed and not all that coordinated with my right. But to answer your question, I’m nineteen.”

“Did you grow up in the area?” William asked that question.

“Born and raised,” Wright said. He knew they were just trying to get information about him. He was willing to answer and let them know what they needed. As long as it meant he could stay with them a little longer. The fact that Patrick hadn’t batted an eye when William kissed his husband and Xander made a joke, he was grateful to be

there. "I grew up just a little ways from Trinity hospital."

"You lived near there?" Patrick finally spoke up. His voice was the one Wright recalled from yesterday, the one that told his dad they would take care of him. He'd been terrified of his voice yesterday. But now, he could see the concern etched into the lines of his face. He also didn't miss the way he used the past tense of that word. "Are you comfortable with going to the doctor today?"

"Xander already asked me that," Wright said. "I'll be okay going, as long as I have someone there with me. I don't live right next to it and my dad works closer to the college, so it should be fine."

"Is your dad at work?" Tracy asked. He turned his head slightly so he could see out of his good eye. She was looking at her husband though. "If he's not there, maybe you could stop by so Wright can get some of his things."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Xander said. "We don't know if he'll come back and he could press charges for us going inside without him there."

"But it's Wright's house too," Tracy said. She wasn't arguing it, just stating facts. "And he's going to need his things."

Not so much the clothes but waking up this morning Wright did realize that he had nothing. No toothbrush, actual brush, his phone was no doubt smashed to pieces by now. He would need things. "It's only Thursday, so he should be at work. He would usually be home by five in the evening, but sometimes he stayed out later and I wouldn't see him. I don't know what he would do since I'm not there."

"We can always drive by and see if he's there. If not, do you have a way to get in? A key, or something?" Patrick took a sip of his coffee and waited for Wright to answer.

“I don’t,” he said. “But I know I can get into my bedroom window. I wasn’t allowed to lock the door or the window.”

There was a beat of silence from everyone. Not even a fork scraping against a plate. Xander’s arm rested against the back of his chair and his fingers brushed over his good shoulder. Wright dared a glance at the rest of the table. Patrick was looking at his wife. William was smiling softly at him, pity and concern etched in the way he held himself. His husband, who Wright could not remember his name, was staring down at his food.

Wright decided to bite the bullet and give them an explanation. “My dad isn’t nice, as I’m sure you can understand. Yesterday, I was, uh, watching a video on my phone and I guess I forgot to close the tab. He saw it and did all of this.” Wright used his right hand to motion toward his face and then down his body. “I dislocated my shoulder when I fell against a table in the living room. I have bruises on my ribs and lower back as well as the masterpiece that is my face. He’s hit me before, made me stand in cold showers, submerged my head in the sink water when he didn’t think the dishes were clean enough.” Wright closed his eyes and leaned his head back, just the feeling of Xander’s arm behind him enough to help him get through saying everything. “It started after my mom left. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect he was hitting her and when she left, he turned to me. He isn’t religious or anything. I didn’t grow up going to church or mass or whatever. He spends his Sunday mornings drinking and yelling at the TV, when he’s home. He’s just mean. It wasn’t a flip that switched one day, though. It was gradual, comments and arguments at first about how I needed to man up and start doing things around the house to contribute. Then, he’d get mad when I didn’t do something right. By the time I hit high school, I was pretty good at cooking and cleaning but he’d never taught me to use outside things like the mower or weed eater, so he would get mad about that too. I’ve just been counting down until I left. I’m supposed to start at the community college in the Fall.”

He didn’t realize that he was crying until Xander moved to wrap him in a hug. He let

him hold him, needing the assurance that he was okay now. There was another hand on his shoulder and he looked to the side to see Tracy standing next to him.

“You don’t have to go back there, Wright. We can easily take you shopping for new clothes.”

“You’ve already done enough for me,” Wright said. Xander brushed his finger up and down the back of his neck and he leaned into the small touch. He looked at the other men sitting at the table. “Seriously, I appreciate everything since yesterday, but I don’t want to impose any more than I have. I can get a hotel room or something and figure it out. I should have done that when I turned eighteen.”

“Nonsense,” Xander said. “You’re injured and I’m not letting you out of my sight until the doctor clears you.”

“Clark has a bunch of clothes he was going to donate,” William said with a smile.

“And by that, he means I made him go through his clothes too to get rid of things. For someone that doesn’t wear shirts or socks in the house, I don’t understand how he accumulates so much stuff. Take a guess at how many long sleeve shirts this man owns.” Clark didn’t wait for anyone to answer. “Twenty. Twenty long sleeve shirts. We live in Texas.”

“It gets cold still!”

“Yeah, but then you’re just wearing my hoodie and ignoring the twenty, two-zero, shirts that you own.” Clark turned from William to Wright. “I made him pack up at least ten of them. We were going to donate them after the honeymoon but you’re more than welcome to go through them first.”

“I swear he loves me,” William said with a huge smile. Clark rested his forehead

against William's shoulder and they both started laughing. It lightened the mood and Wright relaxed a little more. He liked them. "But seriously, if those sweats are okay, then I'm sure my other clothes will be a better match than Xander or anyone else. We can run and get them from the house today while you're getting checked out."

"Is there anything at your house that you would need?" Patrick asked. Wright thought about it. Other than the usual hygiene stuff, which he could get new ones at the store, he wasn't sure. He had a stuffed animal that he kept on his dresser. It had been a gift from his mom when he was younger and it was one thing he had to remember her by.

"What is it?" Xander asked softly.

"Nothing," Wright said. "It's fine. I really don't need anything from there. I can just get new stuff."

"We can go out after your appointment to get some basic things for you," Tracy said. "I think Patrick has that money your dad left. It's rightfully yours."

"I'll grab it from the safe in a bit," Patrick said. "You two finish eating and then we'll get ready to leave. I'm going to go out and check on a few things around the ranch. We'll leave in about an hour."

"Xander, do you mind if I steal Wright for just a bit?" William cleared his plate and Clark took them to the sink to help Tracy clean up. They all looked like a family. Wright felt a pang in his chest at that. He hadn't had that in a long time. "Don't worry, we'll just sit out on the porch. Nothing strenuous or moving too much."

"I'll be fine," Wright said before Xander could say anything. He wasn't his keeper either way. Although, he liked the attention that Xander gave him. The way he'd cared for him last night, let him use him as a pillow and made sure he took the medicine. Offering to help him wash his hair and the gentle way he cleaned his

injuries and bandaged them. “I’m sure you can talk to your horsey friends for a while.”

“You have so much to learn if you’re going to be living on the ranch for a while,” Xander said. He finished off his plate of food and stood up. “Did you need help with that?”

It took Wright a second to realize he was offering to feed him. “Oh, no, I’m good. Thank you for cutting it up though. I truly do suck with my right hand.”

“Left-handed and refuses to sleep on his back. You’re high maintenance, you know that right?”

“But yet, you’re still offering to feed me,” Wright said with a smile. He leaned his head back and saw the way Xander rolled his eyes at the comment.

“I’ll come get you in a bit.”

Wright focused back on his plate. The food was cooled off now, but still tasted better than anything he could cook himself. He finished off the biscuit and the eggs quickly and washed it down with a glass of water. He listened to William and Clark bickering as they washed the dishes, kicking Tracy out of the kitchen to go relax since she did all the cooking. He liked them. They were funny, but he could see how much they loved each other. When he finished, he picked his plate up with his good hand and walked across the space.

“Room for one more?” Wright asked. Clark looked over and smiled as he took the plate.

“Food’s amazing here, isn’t it?” William asked, leaning around Clark to see him. “It was one of the selling points when this whole idea first came about.”



“You know that famous saying, Wright? The one about the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. William was the muse behind that. Even when we were in school, I won him over by bringing him lunch every Friday our first semester.”

“All lies,” William said. He rocked up on his tip toes to kiss Clark’s cheek. “We’re going to go sit outside for a bit. Love you.”

“Love you too, husband.”

“I hope I never get used to that,” William said with a dopey smile. It was the only way Wright knew to explain the look. “Let’s go sit outside. Do you want a jacket or anything?”

“I’m good,” Wright said. “It was pretty warm out when we walked over.”

William led him back toward the table. To the right of the table was a set of French doors. They opened inward to a grand living room. “The fireplace is real, not gas. It’s nice during the colder months. One of the houses also has a real one. I think it makes it homier.”

The fireplace was on the left wall, a large flat screen mounted above it. A sectional sofa sat facing it. It was all cloth and looked exceptionally comfortable. Xander’s couch in the guest house was nice too. He would talk to him about giving him his own bed back tonight. There were photographs of Patrick and his wife, some with kids and some with others. There was a wedding photo, also on the ranch. In the far corner to the right, there was a desk with shelves, but it was covered with trophies and ribbons instead of a computer or paper. The whole room was lit with natural light from the three large windows that spanned the wall opposite where they came in.

The door leading to the side porch was on the other side of the fireplace. It was a covered brick porch. A half wall came up to block some of the view once they sat

down in the chairs. Wright moved slowly, not wanting to bump his side or anything.

“Okay, so.” William turned in his chair to look at Wright. He had a feeling he was about to be grilled, but he wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He didn’t know William, barely even knew Xander. But he felt safe. He was safe. Their discussion about getting him clothes and if he should even risk going home made that clear. “How are you doing? Really?”

Wright took a deep breath. “Hurting,” he settled on after a few moments. “If it wasn’t for the meds, I feel like I would still be in the fetal position on the gravel.”

“And emotionally?”

Wright thought about it. He was truly grateful for where he ended up yesterday. He knew that he’d been simply surviving for years. It was a blessing and a curse to understand that he was being abused but having no way of getting out of it. He didn’t have a job or a car and now he didn’t have a phone. “I thought I was going to die yesterday. My dad’s been angry before, but I’ve kept that side of me hidden from him for years. I knew I was gay since my freshman year of high school. I wasn’t popular at all in school, spent most lunch periods in the library reading. Then, when my dad finally agreed to get me a phone, I would use it to research. To read stories about people like me, gay men. I was always careful to cover my tracks. I used Private browsing, cleared my history, never kept anything in the house. I don’t know why I didn’t this time.”

“Are you scared that he might show back up? Or you might run into him when you go into the city today?” William picked his feet up and wrapped his arms around his shins. He was watching Wright closely, but the conversation was easy. The topic was hard, but it was easy to talk to William.

“Only if I’m alone,” Wright said. “Xander has made it clear I’m not allowed to be

alone until I'm fully healed which will take a couple weeks at best."

"I know you briefed over it and I don't want you to go through it again, but I can see with your face and the way Xander was acting with you at the table says that your injuries are a bit more than what any of us can see. I only ask because FFR- Found Family Ranch- has a thing where we can help cover medical expenses. So, whatever happens and however you're hurt, I don't want you to worry about money. We're going to cover everything for you."

"I'm not part of the housing, though." Wright looked out at what he could see over the brick wall. There was a large tree that blocked most of the field behind the house. To the left, he could see the corner of the guest house. He heard birds chirping somewhere in the branches.

"You're here. You're part of our family. We're going to help you, okay? The perk of owning the business is I can make that decision."

"I've waited a long time to hear someone say that," Wright said. He could feel tears stinging his eyes. He wiped gently at his swollen eye, wincing when he touched it. It was sore and he couldn't open that eye, but he'd already taken the pain pills for this morning. He'd have to wait and see what the doctor said. He decided to let them fall as they pleased, preferring tears over the pain. "My dad liked to remind me that he was the only family I had. When he got really drunk, he liked to pull out this old rope from his grandfather. He was some sort of farmer or something. He would go on and on about how the men in his family were tough and worked hard. How I was a disappointment to him and a shameful spot in our family tree."

"I'm so sorry," William said. He put his legs back down and reached over to lay a hand on Wright's knee. "I hate that you went through all of that, but we are going to help you, okay? Now, was there anything that you needed from your house? I saw you kind of in deep thought for a moment when Patrick asked."

“It’s nothing,” Wright said. “It’s just a stuffed animal that my mom gave me when I was little. I should just let that whole part of my life go.”

“We can get your things if you want,” William said. “We have several friends in the law enforcement that will go with you. Just let me know, okay?”

“Thank you,” Wright said lowly. “I don’t know how my dad mistook this place for a conversion camp, but I’m glad he did.”

“Is that where he thought he was dropping you off?” William’s hand squeezed his knee before letting go. His hand was nowhere as large as Xander’s, the weight of it felt off. “Our website is pretty basic to keep privacy but it’s clear what we stand for.”

“I don’t know.” Wright shrugged. He shifted his weight; sitting in a metal chair was starting to irritate his back. “He didn’t say how he found it but I assume he just Googled gay camp or something on my phone and went with the first place. Or the closest so he could keep an eye on me. I don’t know if he’ll come back here to check up or if he’ll just leave me here and forget. Is it bad that I’m hoping for the latter?”

“Not at all,” William said with a smile. “I think you would relate talking to Brett. He’s basically the manager of this place. He’ll be back next week. Him and his husband were here yesterday, but they just adopted a little boy last week so he’s at home acclimating to being a dad now.”

“Is everyone here gay?”

William laughed at the question. He hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but he couldn’t take it back. He started to apologize, but William spoke first. “Patrick’s daughter is bisexual if that makes a difference. She’s very open about it and has had both boyfriends and girlfriends. She’s about to graduate high school. Super cool kid. They’ll be home from school in a few hours so you’ll meet them eventually.”

“Knock, knock.” Xander’s face appeared through the door and Wright smiled the moment he saw him. He smiled back and stepped toward him, holding out his hand. “Are you about ready to go? We’ll be taking Patrick’s truck since it’s a bit smoother drive than mine.”

Wright took his hand and nodded. He turned back to William. “It was nice talking to you. Thank you, for everything.”

“Not a problem,” William said. He stood up with them and Wright offered him an awkward side hug. He was ready to get this makeshift wrap off him. “And we’ll run to the house while you’re out to get those clothes. Do you have a preference on what you like to wear? Long sleeves, shorts, anything?”

“I’m not picky,” Wright said. “I didn’t really get a say in what was bought for me once I started growing. It was mostly thrifting store items.”

“I’ll bring you a smorgasbord of clothes then and you can pick what you like.” William looked at Xander and then back to Wright and winked. “I’m sure Xander wouldn’t mind taking you to the store to get you your own boxers and such today.”

“You’re a menace,” Xander muttered. “Let’s get going, okay?”

“I feel like there’s a story behind that,” Wright said with a smile. William laughed as they stepped back into the house.

“There is so a story behind that, but you’ll have to get him drunk before he tells you anything.”

Wright didn’t mean to, wasn’t even aware that he’d stiffened up and stopped walking until Xander’s front was pressed against his back. The sudden contact had Wright flinching and his mind kicked into the flight side of his fight-or-flight. He stepped too

quickly in reaction and tripped over his own feet. Hands reached out for him and he heard someone scream.

It was only after the noise faded and he felt his throat scratchy that he realized he'd been the one to scream. When he opened his eyes again, he was somehow on the couch. Xander was standing by the French doors and William knelt in front of him. Not touching, just watching. Worried.

"Hey, you're okay. You're safe here. Just breathe." Wright tried to focus on William's words. He closed his good eye and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, William looked to the side. At Xander. He had his hands in his pockets and looked lost.

"I'm sorry," Wright said. He took another deep breath and sat up straighter, his shoulder tingling at the stretch. His ribs were aching too at the sudden movement. He wasn't sure if he'd fallen to the couch or what, but his body hurt. Xander was by his side in an instant. "I'm sorry," Wright whispered again, this time to just Xander. "I don't know-"

"Don't worry about it," Xander said.

"I'm going to go let Patrick know you need a minute," William said, laying his hand on Xander's knee to push himself back to a standing position. His eyes moved to Wright. "I'm sorry if it was what I said. I was just giving Xan here a hard time, but I realize that it probably brought up some memories for you."

William walked out of the room, leaving them alone. Xander's fingers were brushing against the back of his neck, a movement he'd done several times since they met. It grounded Wright. He was grateful for it. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I don't know," Wright said. He looked down at his hand. His other was still tucked

under the shirt. He fiddled with the hem of it while he collected his thoughts. “What William said made me picture my dad, when he would drink and the things he’d say after a few beers.” It made sense, seeing that he had just finished telling William about it. It was an innocent joke, nothing that he should apologize for. At any other moment or circumstance, Wright probably would have carried the joke further. “Then you were right there and I got scared.”

Xander didn’t say anything and Wright didn’t look at him. He didn’t want to see judgment or pity in his eyes. After a moment, Wright felt warm lips press against the side of his head. He didn’t move, didn’t want to pull away. He wanted to stay in that moment. Even with the pain in his eye and his ribs, all he could focus on was that slight pressure against his skin.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Wright ~

One doctor's visit turned into three, spread throughout the day.

Doctor Pillar, the family friend of Patrick and Xander, took X-rays and did an overall evaluation on him. After confirming that he had two cracked ribs and prescribed some pain medication, she sent them to the other side of the hospital to see a Nephrologist. That appointment was a bit awkward because Wright didn't want Xander to leave his side, but he also had to answer questions about how it felt to use the bathroom and if anything hurt. The specialist suggested that he report any pain in his lower back that wasn't from the other injuries or if he started urinating blood.

The third doctor was for his eye. The bone around his eye socket was swollen and he had a cut on his eyelid that they hadn't seen from the bruising and swelling. The first doctor had already put three stitches in the cut on his forehead. He had a follow up in a month with each of the doctors but was to have Patrick call them on their direct lines if anything happened before then.

It was after five when they made it back to Patrick's truck. Xander stayed with him the entire time, but Patrick left for about an hour or so to get them lunch earlier. He stayed in the truck during the last visit, a business call or something he needed to take care of. Xander wrapped his arm around Wright's good side and helped him up into the truck. Even with the extra step attachment, he moved slowly and tried not to stretch his body too much. He'd been instructed not to take any other meds until he finished seeing all the doctors and to say his body was hurting was an understatement. He just wanted to lay down and not move.



“Everything good?” Patrick asked once they were settled. The truck was a newer model and had a second row to it where Wright was sitting. Xander was sitting up front, but had his upper body turned so he could see Wright sitting in the middle of the backseat.

“Just what we suspected,” Xander said. Wright wasn’t in the mood to talk. He didn’t want to be rude, but after the poking and prodding, he was ready to sleep. “He’s going to need all the rest he can get for a few weeks. They’re worried about possible kidney trauma too, so he has to watch that. I went ahead and filled his prescriptions so we’re good to go home.”

“Um.” Wright didn’t want to be a bother after they spent the entire day at the hospital with him.

“What is it?” Xander asked. All day, shuffling from one department to the other, Xander was right there with him. He walked slowly next to him when he wasn’t using the wheelchair. He sat in the chair through the awkward questions and grabbed them both a snack from the vending machine before Patrick had gotten them lunch. He’d made sure to keep a tissue on hand to wipe against his bad eye from time to time. He wouldn’t let Wright look in a mirror, not that it stopped him from doing so when he was in the bathroom himself. It was a deep purple all around, red splotches mixed in. The cut was bandaged and his eye was re-covered at the end of the visit, but he was sure the stitches only added to the gruesome look. Despite all of that, Xander looked at him with a soft smile and no hint of irritation.

“I need clothes. And things.” Wright’s voice was nearly a whisper. “I know William said he would bring some clothes by, but um, other things I still need.”

“We can stop by the store on the way home,” Patrick said. “We’ll go to the one on Forrest, so we aren’t close to your neighborhood. I’ll let the two of you go in and get what you need.”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Wright said quickly. “You’ve already done enough for me today.”

“It’s okay, Wright.” Patrick started the truck and headed out of the parking lot. “If you just want to grab the basics today, Tracy does her big shopping on Saturday mornings so she can pick up whatever else you need. And we can always order things online. Paxton is great at that.” The comment about his daughter was sarcastic and if Wright wasn’t more than aware of the pain from his injuries he would have at least chuckled at it. He’d never been able to order anything online.

“Thank you.” Wright sat back against the seat and watched as they started driving down the road. Everything was too familiar for him. He knew if he took a left up ahead and went down a few side streets he would end up at his house.

His dad’s house. He didn’t want to think of it as his place anymore.

“Are you okay, Wright?” Patrick broke the silence and pulled him from his stare into nothingness.

“Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking.” He knew if he thought about it too long, he’d start crying again. He wanted more than anything to have the memories of his dad erased from his mind.

“I’ll be right beside you,” Xander said, seeming to understand what he was thinking without him saying it. “We’ll drive through the parking lot to see if your dad’s truck is there before we even go in, okay?”

Wright hadn’t thought of that. It was a smart idea. His dad either had Wright order groceries or he’d go and grab whatever he wanted cooked for dinner that night. Wright was never allowed to go on his own to buy them, even though he did ninety percent of the cooking. He wasn’t sure what store his dad used most frequently, but

as they drove slowly up and down the rows of parked cars. He didn't see the beat-up black truck and he finally sighed. "I think we're good."

"I'm going to let you out and I'll circle back around and park over toward those trees." Patrick lifted a finger to a single row of trees set to the right of the store. It offered very little shade to the cars parked under it. "Tracy's just about got supper ready."

Wright held Xander's hand tightly when he helped him down from the truck. He could already see people looking at them, expressions ranging from pity to concern. They barely made it into the store before Xander said something. He leaned down and whispered in Wright's ear. "I feel like I should be carrying a sign saying I didn't do this."

"If anyone has a problem with it, I'll gladly tell them who really did it." Wright looked up at Xander and smiled. He'd only known him for a day, but never in his life- even before his mom left- had he been given so much attention or been cared for the way Xander had. Wright had to be careful or he was going to get used to it.

"You've already gone through it enough," Xander said softly. It was true. Between explaining what happened to the doctors and then to the officer between the first and second appointment, Wright had relived yesterday at least three times. It played a constant loop in his head each time his body hurt. Which was a lot. The trauma doctor noted that he had fractures that had healed improperly from years prior too. Wright wasn't even aware of that. He knew that sometimes his dad's hits or the way he gripped his arm a little tighter would hurt for a while after, but a whole fracture he didn't know about. It wasn't like he was seeing a doctor on the regular to begin with.

Wright hadn't been to the store in a while so he let Xander steer him toward the men's section of clothing. "Doc is going to email your records to Officer Ryland and we'll get the justice you deserve."

“Thank you.” Wright glanced back up at Xander once more with the words. He meant them too. Yesterday he thought he was going to die because of a video on his phone, thought he would be strapped down or tortured to beat the gay out of him. But now, only twenty-four hours later, he was being cared for by a family that he hoped would be around for a long while. In whatever capacity, he was forever grateful for them.

“How about we just focus on getting the things you need and we’ll go back to the ranch and get you set up in the guest house with me.”

“Patrick said he had a guest bedroom,” Wright said quickly. He didn’t want to impose on Xander any more than he already had. “I can just use-”

“The guest room is up the stairs and it’s noisy in his house. You need rest. No stairs if you can avoid them and the meds you got will probably make you sleepy or dizzy and I don’t want you on your own.”

“If you’re that obsessed with me, just tell me now.”

“I’m that worried about you,” Xander grumbled in his deep voice. His voice was naturally deep, a true southern gentleman. Wright’s voice had dropped when he hit puberty, but he kind of wished he could go through another round because his voice was still higher than most he knew. It was something his dad pointed out a lot. “Now, are you a boxers, briefs, or whities kind of guy?”

Wright looked at the selection. It was a whole row, several shelves, of different underwear. Some were in packs, others were hanging from a hook. Colorful, plain, cotton, satin, shorter, longer, tight fitting, looser. “There are so many options.”

“What do you typically wear?” Xander picked up a basic black pair. It was a pack of four, sealed in a plastic bag. Xander looked from the packaging to Wright. His eyes dropped down to his waist for a brief moment before he looked back at his eyes,

waiting for an answer. Wright tried not to read too much into that. Or the way his nose had flared slightly when he'd done it. The baseball cap he wore didn't hide the lower half of his face.

"Um." Wright tried to find his words. They needed to get going. He couldn't get caught up in whatever he was feeling toward the older man. It was just that he was being nice and helping him. There was nothing else there between them. He cleared his throat once more before talking, avoiding Xander's gaze as he looked over the options again. "Just the usual, I guess. I would just tell my dad when I needed new ones and he'd grab them. They weren't anything special."

"What size do you wear?"

"Extra large." Xander's eyes moved to him quickly, squinting in confusion. "Gotta have room for everything down there."

"I really can't tell if you're joking or not." Again, his eyes dropped down for another second.

"I am, unfortunately. It's all pretty average. I think the ones I had yesterday were medium loose fitting. These that William gave me are a bit smaller than I'd prefer."

"How about we get a few options and you can decide what you like?"

Xander pulled three packs off the shelves and dropped them in the basket. He added a pack of socks too. They walked past the women's clothing and to the health and beauty section for a new toothbrush and paste. And he would need a hairbrush. Some shampoo and conditioner, soap, a few towels. He wasn't sure what Xander and his family were willing to share. They were talking back and forth; more so Xander arguing with him that he needed to stop worrying about prices and just get what he needed or wanted.

“... free tonight. We can go back to my place and do whatever you want.” That voice immediately sent chills racing over his body. He knew it all too well and didn’t think- He didn’t know he’d be here. His brain started racing, the same it had done earlier. But this wasn’t just a joke, his dad was here. It was much too close. He rounded the corner and Wright was once again face-to-face with his dad. His abuser. He was at the end of the aisle, not paying a bit of attention beyond the blonde under his arm. His dad wasn’t a small man, but it wasn’t like Xander or Patrick. Where they had muscles from physical work, his dad was just big. Too many beers.

Before Wright could do anything, Xander crowded around him, pressing his back against the closest shelf. They were in the corner, where one shelf met the other on another wall. Xander’s entire body was hiding him, his back to the rest of the store. He was pressed as close to Wright as he could get, not letting him move to even look around him.

“Look at me, gorgeous.” Xander’s voice was low. His eyes were serious and didn’t leave Wright’s for a moment. Wright could still hear his dad’s voice, telling whoever he was with how he had a house to himself now that his deadbeat son moved out. Wright didn’t want to cry. He didn’t want to have any feelings toward the man that nearly killed him and then dropped him and left. He didn’t care about Wright so why should he care about him? “You’re okay, sweetheart. Don’t listen to him.”

Wright could feel the edge of one of the shelves pressing into his back, right where the bruising was the worst. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Xander had finally given him one of the pain pills just before they left the hospital to meet Patrick and he was grateful for it now. When he opened his eyes again, Xander had one hand caressing his cheek. He couldn’t hear his dad’s voice anymore, but neither of them moved from that spot. Wright’s breath caught in his throat at the gentle contact against the good side of his face. He continued to look up at Xander, everything around them fading. It didn’t matter.

“I think he’s gone,” Xander said lowly. Still, he didn’t move. His thumb moved to trace his jawline. “Are you okay?”

Xander shifted and Wright was suddenly fully aware that his body betrayed him. The close proximity of Xander’s body to his, the way he had immediately jumped into action to help him. The way he stared down at Wright, the brush of a calloused finger against his skin. He was hard and the sweats and thin briefs weren’t hiding much of it.

“Fuck. Xander, I’m sorry. I don’t-” Wright could feel himself on the verge of tears again. He dropped his eyes, cursing himself for being young and getting hard at the first signs of protectiveness and care someone gave him. In the middle of a department store, no less. He was every cliché he could think of at that moment. Pathetic.

“Shh,” Xander interrupted his berating of thoughts. “You’re not alone, okay? I think my jeans are just hiding it a little better.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Xander ~

Wright had the worst case of cabin fever. He was agitated, picking small fights with Xander, and trying to do everything on his own. Xander had to work on the ranch during the day and he'd usually come back to Wright either trying to clean or doing something that he shouldn't be. They'd go over the same words, Xander reminding him that he had cracked ribs and moving around wouldn't heal them any faster. Wright would complain that leaving him in the house all day to 'wither away' was cruel and unusual punishment. Xander would roll his eyes because he wasn't 'trapped'. He could go outside, walk around a few minutes at a time, sit with Tracy in the main house. He just wasn't supposed to be doing any physical activity. It was the doctor's orders and having been part of the emergency services for years, he tended to follow those orders.

Despite all of that, over the last week since Wright arrived, they ended the night with Xander holding him against his side until they both fell asleep. Xander tried to tell himself it was because he didn't want Wright to roll over and sleep on his injuries. It was a weak argument, but one he tried to keep up. He fell asleep easily with Wright's body pressed against him, the smell of his shampoo filling his nose, the sound of his deep, even breaths. Every now and then, he would shift in his sleep, pressing closer to him or moving his leg so it was between Xander's. More than once, he woke up with morning wood. He'd slip out of bed and take care of it in the bathroom as quietly as he could.

Neither of them talked about what happened in the store. Xander had recognized the guy from the day before, pushing Wright so he was completely out of view before that man even had a chance to see him. It wasn't twenty-four hours since he'd hurt



his own son and he was acting like Wright didn't even exist. He focused his attention on Wright, making sure he was okay and ignoring the part of his brain that was telling him to turn around and sock the guy one good time. Wright had been shaking, nearly crying. Xander called him gorgeous and sweetheart, hoping the endearments would make him smile. He heard the words the dickhead said, knew that Wright heard them too. He pushed further into Wright's body, his hand reaching up to brush away a stray tear. There was no space between them, passerbys would probably think they were having an intimate moment. He continued to do that, even a minute after he was sure the guy was gone. They didn't move until he called Patrick and they both escorted Wright to the registers to pay and then left. Xander didn't trust himself to be able to refrain from hitting the guy if they saw him again and he said something. Patrick could handle him while Xander took Wright to the truck. It didn't come to that, thankfully, but Wright was quiet most the night.

He'd never been attracted to smaller guys before. Maybe a hookup or two years ago, but his serious relationships had been with men similar to him in size. He didn't know what it was about Wright Taylor. There was just something. Xander worried about him, spent the hours on the ranch hoping that he was actually resting and not in pain. When they were together, he was constantly making sure he was good, that he didn't need anything. He loved every moment of it too.

"Earth to my little brother." Xander blinked and turned his head to look at the entrance of the barn. He was supposed to be brushing Luna, but her grunts and the way she bobbed her head side-to-side told him he'd stopped too long ago.

"Sorry, girl." He resumed his brushing while Patrick made his way to the grooming station. Patrick scratched between Luna's ears and then leaned against the stall wall.

"How's it going?" Patrick asked. He crossed his arms, his hat pulled low over his forehead. With the button up flannel and jeans and boots, his older brother was every bit the cliché rancher. Xander smiled to himself at that observation.

“Almost done here,” Xander said. “I’m finishing up on Luna and then I’ll feed all of them before going to clean up for supper. How was the cattle today?”

“Moody,” Patrick said with a shake of his head. “I think there’s a storm coming that we haven’t heard of yet. They always get like that when there’s a nasty one brewing.”

“Sounds about right,” Xander said. His brother didn’t say another word while he finished up on Luna and started to lead her back to her stall for the night. “What did you really come in here for, Pat?”

“How’s Wright doing? I see you two sitting on the porch most days after supper.”

“He’s stubborn as hell,” Xander said. He tried to come off as annoyed, but even he could hear the adoration in his voice. He double checked that Luna’s stall was locked and they both grabbed the stuff to feed all the horses for the night. “He keeps trying to do things on his own and then complains that he’s hurting. We end up sitting outside or on the couch watching a movie.”

“Are you sure he’s not doing it on purpose?” Patrick laughed when Xander looked over at him. He was on the other side, feeding Raven and Willow. “I’m just saying. The way you two look at each other is something else.”

“You’re reading too much into it,” Xander grumbled. He grabbed the water hose from the wall and turned it on to fill each of the buckets for the horses. “He’s hurt and I’m just trying to make sure he follows the doctors’ orders.”

“It’s okay if you’re attracted to him,” Patrick said. He was following him from stall to stall. “We got all his paperwork and filled out the forms to get him a new ID. He is nineteen. Birthday’s in August, actually, so he’s close to twenty.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Xander said. “I trust him when he says he’s over

eighteen. That isn't what this is about."

"Then what is it?" Patrick asked. Xander moved back to roll the water hose back up and hang it on the wall. "I know your past, Alexander, and you're not one to keep your feelings to yourself."

"I don't want to talk about it," Xander said. His brother was pulling the older sibling card and he knew it. He also knew that in the week since Wright showed up, he'd been acting differently. He was still doing his work, still getting things done, but he wasn't volunteering to stay out later with the ranch hands to finish a job. Of course, Patrick would notice.

"I won't push it," Patrick said. "But Wright is a nice guy. I think he's been through enough and deserves a little happiness. Mom would have loved him."

Xander didn't say anything to that. Their parents passed within a year of each other. His mom was in a car accident and seven months later, his dad passed from a heart attack. He'd been having false heart attacks- Broken Heart syndrome, the cardiologist called it- but the last one hadn't been a false alarm. His parents were the true definition of love. It had been hard losing both of them so quickly. It would be six years this winter.

He walked out of the barn and headed toward the guest house. Toward his home and where Wright was. When he walked in, though, he was met with a scene no different than the last six days and sighed.

"No, okay. Don't give me the lecture again. I have a reason for this, Alexander."

Xander stopped short and stared at Wright. He'd never used his full name before. His slight agitation turned to curiosity. "What did you do?"

Wright stopped his movements. He wasn't even wearing his sling. He claimed yesterday that his shoulder was feeling better, but Xander knew he still needed to wear it, to not put so much work on it so soon. Even if the shoulder was healed, he still had bruising and the cut to worry about. It had to make his body feel stiff.

"Tracy said that her, Patrick, and the kids were all going into town for Victor's training or something. So she wasn't cooking dinner tonight. And I know you like to shower and then eat, so I figured I could get a recipe from Tracy and make you dinner here tonight."

Xander was torn between what to do. Thank him or fuss at him. He took his hat off and hung it on a hook just beside the front door. He grabbed a paper towel from the counter and wiped his forehead off. The late June heat was kicking his ass. He started unbuttoning his shirt, letting the cool air hit his skin.

"Thank you, but you should have waited for me. I would have helped you."

"That would defeat the whole purpose of me doing something nice for you," Wright argued back.

Xander stepped forward, shucking off the overshirt. He had a white tee underneath it, but he knew it was sweaty and he really needed a shower. Wright also knew that, from experience. His happy expression fell and he started backing up slowly. "No. Alexander Lawson. Don't get near me when you smell like horse poop."

"Poop? Really? You're nineteen, Wright. You are allowed to say shit."

"I'll say a lot more if you come any closer."

While Xander was still annoyed that he had been disregarding what he was supposed to do, he also liked the thought of coming home after a day and having a meal with

just the two of them. He liked to cook himself, and his brain supplied a future moment of them working side-by-side in the kitchen.

“Ow, shit.” Those words brought Xander back to the moment. And not in the way that he jokingly wanted to hear it. Xander straightened up and moved to stand by his side.

“What happened?”

“I just bumped my hip on the counter,” Wright said. “It’s nothing. Just give me a second.”

“No, that’s it. You’re going to go lay down and I’ll take a shower and finish cooking.”

Xander held his elbow and led him down the hallway. He could see on Wright’s face that he was in more pain than he was letting on. He had a smear of something against his cheek. He was wearing the same clothes he had on last night so at least he hadn’t exerted himself with changing his clothes.

“Do you want to change? And where did you put the sling?”

Wright rolled his eyes at Xander’s questions, but he could see the slight blush on his cheeks. Xander had been helping him change in and out of his clothes, not wanting him to bend or stretch. William brought him two boxes to go through, mostly easy, comfortable clothing. He figured jeans would be too rough against his skin. Xander knew from a side conversation that they had gone out and bought a few new items to mix in, to make sure things actually fit him. They’d torn the tags off to make it look normal. Out of the underwear they bought last week, Wright preferred to wear the black briefs, similar to the ones William had given him, but not as tight. He refused to let Xander help him with that or showering but let him do the rest.

“I need to shower first,” Wright said. “I went back to sleep when you left and then spent the day reading. Time got away from me until Tracy came by with lunch and we got to talking. She told me they were leaving this evening and you don’t have a lot of food in your fridge so she brought over some items. Before you say anything, she offered to help but I told her it would be okay.”

“You are too stubborn for your own good,” Xander said. He opened the door to the bedroom and led Wright to the bed. It was made up, like no one had been laying in it the night before. Xander wasn’t sure if that was something he wanted to do or if it was drilled into him to keep things clean. He’d have to work on that, remind him that it was okay to leave a mess from time to time. “Are you still hurting?”

“A bit.” Wright lifted his good hand to rub against his opposite shoulder. He winced and Xander dropped to his knees to scoot between Wright’s knees. His hands found the hem of his shirt and lifted slowly, giving Wright time to protest. The bruises still looked fresh, hues of yellow, red, and purple mixing together. His finger glided gently across the discoloration, Wright’s sharp intake of breath giving him everything he needed to know.

“You’re in more than a bit of pain, Wright.” Xander made him stay still while he took his shirt off. He moved his arm as little as possible to slide it through the shirt. “Lay back so I can get your pants off. You need to stop pushing yourself so much. No one is expecting you to do anything until you’re healed. And you won’t heal completely if you keep ignoring the pain and me telling you so.”

“I’m sorry.” Xander was so focused on getting his pants down his legs that he didn’t realize how his voice had changed to mild irritation. Wright’s voice was watery, he almost choked on his words. When Xander looked up his nearly naked body, Wright’s head was turned away from him. His good hand was wiping against his cheek. “I just don’t like feeling like a burden.”

“Hey, hey.” Xander dropped the sweats and moved to sit on the bed next to him. He took Wright’s hand and squeezed it. He made sure to keep his voice soft again. “I’m sorry. I’m not frustrated with you. I just want you to be healthy and you not following the rules is keeping you from healing. I’m frustrated with myself mostly, that I can’t be right here with you the entire time.” Xander helped Wright sit back up and brushed his hair back from his face. His eye was healing a bit faster than the other bruises, but he still could barely open it. That in itself worried him if he was cooking or using a knife without him around. “I want you to get better and that means taking it easy and resting. How about I make you a deal? If you take this seriously and rest during the day, we’ll go for walks in the evening. I’ll show you around the ranch and we could pack some light foods and a blanket.”

“Like a picnic?” Wright looked from his lap to Xander’s eyes. His voice sounded hopeful. Xander smiled at him and nodded.

“Exactly like a picnic,” Xander said. “But only if you promise me that you’ll take it easy during the day. And you’ll let me help you with the things you need help with. I don’t want to think about you being in pain because you’re scared to ask me to help, okay?”

Wright leaned against Xander’s side and he wrapped his arm gently around his smaller frame. Wright’s head was resting against his shoulder. He couldn’t resist kissing the top of his head. He noticed white flecks in his hair, probably dried shampoo he couldn’t rinse properly out of his hair.

“Thank you for making me supper, though. It smelled great when I came in.”

“It’s not as good as Tracy cooks,” Wright mumbled.

“I bet it tastes just as good,” Xander said. “Can I ask you something and you really give it a good thought before you answer?”

Wright pulled back and looked at Xander. He had a tear stain running down his cheek and his swollen eye was wet around the edges too. He couldn't wait until he was healed; he hated seeing him hurting. That constant reminder of what the asshole had done to him. "What is it?"

"I know you've been doing your best on your own, but will you let me help you with a shower?" He'd noticed a few times when Wright got out of the showers that he still had shampoo in his hair or he'd struggle to dry his back. Xander offered to help him towel dry his hair and would do his best to get the remaining soap out without Wright noticing. Wright had long since given up the pretense that he could get dressed on his own without hurting, although he always put his boxers on himself.

"I don't know," Wright said quietly.

Xander nodded. He wouldn't push him for it. He promised him that he'd never make him do something he didn't want to do. "If you change your mind, just let me know, okay? Are you going to be okay if I take a shower really quick?"

"I'll be fine," Wright said. "And thank you. For the offer, I mean. I promise I'll do my best to rest up. I want to get better too."

"And you will," Xander said. He stood up and slipped out of his shirt. He'd been shirtless around Wright before, and most nights he slept in just a pair of pajama pants. He tossed the clothes into the hamper in the corner of his room. They'd have to do laundry this weekend. "We're going to get through this together, okay?"

Wright stood up and Xander was well aware of how different they were. Wright's body was naturally slight with a slim waist. He told Xander about being the one to do the yard work growing up, which he was sure was where some of his muscles came from. Small muscles, but still there all the same. Xander could almost wrap his hand around his arm and touch his fingers. He could see his ribs. Xander had a smattering



of hair across his chest and abdomen. It wasn't thick, but enough. A trail led below his navel and disappeared past his jeans. He wasn't ripped with abs, but keeping physical gave him a body he was proud of. Most of his muscles were in his arms and legs.

He moved his eyes away from Wright and turned to enter the bathroom. He turned the water on and stripped out of the rest of his clothes. The water felt great on his body after a long day. Patrick was right when he said the animals were acting strangely. Even the horses today were more antsy than usual. He reminded himself to check the weather report before bed.

He was soaping up his hair when there was a knock on the door. He slid the glass door open a few inches and stuck his head out to hear. "What's up?"

"Can I come in?" Wright asked. He wasn't sure which door he was standing at. His voice was just loud enough to hear.

"Of course," Xander said. "If you need to use the bathroom, just don't flush. I'll get it when I'm done."

The door leading to the hallway creaked open and Wright stood there, looking at Xander. He was still in only his briefs. Xander noted that his skin looked flush and he wasn't sure what it was from. "Um, can I take you up on that offer? I put the dinner in the oven so it'll stay warm."

"Sure," Xander said quickly. He wiped the shampoo out of his eyes. He needed to rinse it out. "Are you okay with me being naked?"

"Yeah, that's fine." Wright didn't look at him when he said that. "Is it okay if I keep mine on?"

“Whatever you want,” Xander said. “Come in whenever you’re ready.”

Xander left the sliding door slightly ajar and turned toward the water to rinse his hair. His back was to the door when Wright joined him, but he heard the door slide open and closed again. He gave Wright a couple seconds to change his mind before he turned around to face him. His hands were hugging his stomach and he looked very uncomfortable.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Xander didn’t move closer to him and kept his voice even. The water wasn’t too hot, but enough that steam was rising around them. The glass doors separating the shower from the rest of the room didn’t reach to the ceiling, but it trapped enough of the warmth in. Wright’s back was nearly pressed against the opposite wall. He looked much smaller now. “You’re safe here.”

“I want to believe that,” Wright said. Xander stepped forward slightly just to keep the water on his back, so he could see Wright clearly. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall, looking toward the ceiling. “I just keep hearing his voice in the back of my mind any time I think of... something. I know it isn’t wrong, but the bruises and pain are a constant reminder of what happened last time I took a chance to be myself.”

“Let’s just focus on the shower,” Xander said.

Wright nodded and dropped his arms. Xander held out his hand and waited for Wright to take it so he could pull him under the spray of water. He turned him around and started massaging his fingers through his hair. “Let me know if you’re uncomfortable, okay?”

“Mhmm.” Wright didn’t say anything else and Xander got to work on washing his hair. He bought his own shampoo and soap. It was a coconut and vanilla scent, as was the same brand body wash he bought. He turned them around to rinse his hair and

then repeated the process with the conditioner. “Feels good. I haven’t had anyone play with my hair before.”

“Any time,” Xander said. He smiled behind Wright, grateful that he was letting him do this. While the conditioner was setting in his hair, he grabbed the washcloth and poured a good amount of soap onto it. “I’m going to wash your body. If you’re hurting or don’t want me to touch anywhere, let me know.”

Wright nodded and Xander brushed the cloth against his good shoulder first. The cut on the back of his shoulder was healed. Just a small scab left that would only need another few days to heal. Xander was careful to change his dressings and keep everything clean over the week. The stitches on his face were dissolvable and should clear up by next week. He moved the cloth from one shoulder to the other, then down his back. He was careful around his injuries, using just his hand instead of the cloth. He kept his breathing even, but being this close to Wright had his blood pooling to the last place he wanted it. He didn’t want Wright to think he wanted something more.

“Can you turn around for me?” Xander asked when he reached the briefs. They were soaked, clinging to his skin, and leaving very little to the imagination. His ass filled out the fabric nicely. It was hard not to notice.

Wright turned around slowly. They adjusted themselves so the water was hitting Wright’s back and rinsing the suds away. Xander started the same trail again. He used his fingertips to rub his own face cleanser onto Wright’s nose and cheeks. He moved down to his shoulders, then his chest. He was careful around his ribs, knowing the cracks were toward the front. “Ow.”

Xander stopped immediately and looked up at Wright’s face. He’d been about to kneel down to clean his legs. “What’s up?”

“No, it’s fine. I just... um. I pinched my own skin a bit too hard.”

“Why would you do that?” Xander looked down to see Wright’s hand was pressed against his outer thigh. He moved his hand and saw a small red patch on his skin.

“Are you not hurting enough as it is?”

Wright looked down between them. Just like his ass, the wet fabric left nothing to the imagination again. The outline was obvious, tenting the briefs. Xander looked back up at him and smiled. “It’s okay, gorgeous. It’s natural. You don’t have to pinch yourself over it.”

“I’m embarrassed.” Wright looked up at Xander, his one good eye wide and serious. “I mean, I’ve only known you a week and you’re just trying to help me. I just- I haven’t had this type of attention on me and I don’t want you to think I’m weird or something.”

“I would never think that,” Xander said. He decided to bite the bullet and get this conversation over. They’d been skirting around it all week, whether either of them wanted to admit it or not. “Wright, I know you haven’t exactly been looking down for the last few minutes, but I’m struggling with the same thing. I don’t want you to think I’m trying to take advantage of you or coerce you into something you don’t want. But it is natural. Gorgeous isn’t just a name I call you because you like it.”

“It wouldn’t be taking advantage of me,” Wright said a little too quickly. “I mean, I know I’m not experienced, but I wouldn’t object to it.”

“Turn around and let me rinse this out of your hair.” Xander smiled at Wright and guided him to stand with his back to Xander’s front. He started massaging his scalp again, making sure his hair was clear before moving down to rinse the suds off his body. His hands snaked around Wright’s body, brushing gently up and down his skin as the water rinsed the conditioner and soap away. Xander stepped closer to him, his

front pressing against Wright. He pressed his hips forward, his hard cock pressing against his lower back. He didn't sustain any bone bruising or internal injury from where his dad kicked him. "We'll talk about it later, okay? When you're healed up. I'm not doing anything while you're still hurting."

Wright whimpered, a soft sound that escaped without his knowledge. His head was resting against Xander's chest. His right hand was pressed against the front of his boxers. "It's frustrating," he said. "I wasn't lying when I said I'm dominantly left-handed, you know that. That goes for everything I'm used to doing with my left hand."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what he meant. And he understood it. It seemed like a simple task, but Xander always used his dominant hand when he jacked off too. Using his other was fine, but it wasn't as good. Xander sighed, knowing that Wright was pushing him but going along with it. He bent down to press his lips against the shell of Wright's ear, his hands sliding down his stomach. "And have you tried to use your right hand? How did it go?"

"I haven't." Wright's voice hitched as Xander's finger dipped just below the waistband of his boxers and then disappeared altogether. "Please."

The single word was filled with begging, dragged out slightly with a breathy sigh. Xander nuzzled his nose against his neck. "Can I?"

Wright's hand moved quickly to pull the waistband of his boxers down just enough to pull himself out of the fabric. Xander was tall enough that he could look over his shoulder. He smiled, noting how eager Wright was for this. A small voice in the back of his mind was telling him that he was taking advantage of him, that he shouldn't be doing this while he was still hurt. But Wright's hand moved to his wrist and wrapped his fingers around it. He guided his hand to his dick.

“Please, Xander.” Wright let his hand go. The boxers were pressed tight against him, his cock standing straight up against his stomach. He wasn’t big, maybe five inches. He was right when he joked last week about being average. It didn’t matter to Xander as he wrapped his fingers around him and started stroking slowly. Wright’s whole body shook at the first touch. “That feels amazing.”

Xander moved his hand, using just his fingertips to stroke him. His fingers trailed the vein, up and down, pressing his thumb against his slit. Wright shivered against Xander’s body. His breathing was picking up. Xander kissed his neck as he brushed his fingers down again, dipping into his boxers to cup his balls. Wright’s hands were squeezing Xander’s thighs. He could see him shaking.

“Xander. I’m so close.” He sounded out of breath but also like he was gritting his teeth.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” Xander was genuinely concerned about that. He could see Wright breathing heavily and he wanted to make sure it wasn’t because of pain. He kissed his shoulder when Wright shook his head. Xander watched over his shoulder and sped up his movements. He alternated between jacking him off and cupping his balls. He was letting out small noises that went straight to Xander’s own length and leaking precum. He swiped his finger over the head again, collecting it and using it to make his glide easier. The water was starting to run cold; they only had a few minutes left. “Come for me, gorgeous. Let me see how pretty you look when you do.”

Wright’s whole body stiffened and he let out a high-pitched moan as he let his orgasm take over after a few more strokes. He shot up, hitting his chest. Xander was surprised at that; he wasn’t expecting him to shoot that far. A second spurt landed on Xander’s hand, washed away almost immediately by the water. He stroked him a few more times until Wright’s moan turned to a whimper when he grew sensitive.

“Oh my god,” Wright said. He turned his head to look at Xander. A smile was on his face, his good eye closer to Xander. He smiled back and kissed his temple. “That was so much better.”

“You’re telling me,” Xander said. He stepped back and looked down at himself. He was still hard, but the water was getting cold now. He’d deal with it later. He reached around and turned off the shower. Neither of them moved to get out of the shower. “I wasn’t expecting quite a show.”

Wright’s cheeks turned a beautiful shade of pink. The water had washed away the evidence, but Xander traced his finger over his chest, enjoying the embarrassment on Wright’s face for a moment. He had nothing to worry about; Xander found it impressive. “I’ve always been a bit of a shooter. When I, uh, started doing it and I got a phone, I looked it up to see if it was normal. I found a few videos and articles, but nothing that was consistent.”

“You do that every time?” Xander was impressed. He knew it probably had to do with being young, but even at his age, Xander would typically only hit above his stomach. He refrained from saying what he was thinking; how he wanted to test that theory.

“Is that not normal?” Wright seemed genuinely concerned.

“I don’t have experience with it,” Xander said. “But it’s hot. Nothing to worry about at all.”

They got out of the shower and Wright let Xander towel dry his whole body. They dressed in their night clothes, Xander opting to leave his shirt off. Wright grumbled about it but let Xander put the sling back on his shoulder. Xander made him sit down at the table while he plated their food, chopping the chicken into bite sizes for Wright before he joined him.

Their conversation flowed easily for the rest of the night. Neither of them brought up what happened in the shower and Xander was okay with that. He didn't regret it. He hoped that Wright didn't either. They settled on a movie for the night, something light-hearted that he never would have watched if it wasn't for Wright. His dad hadn't let him watch a lot of movies. They didn't have any streaming services so he couldn't watch anything while his dad was away at work. He'd mentioned how he preferred music to watching TV, but Xander had a feeling that might have been because he only had the sports channel or very limited options without cable.

"Are you about ready for bed?" Xander asked halfway through the movie. It was the second time Wright had yawned. He'd had his pain meds with his dinner and knew he'd be out sooner than later.

"It's too early," Wright said. "What time is it?"

"It's past eight," Xander said. He stood up. "Come on, gorgeous. Bedtime."



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Wright ~

Wright read a lot of books.

Like, a lot, a lot.

He felt like a Dr. Seuss character: he read inside and outside, on the couch or the bed, at the table or even on the grass. Sometimes he would take a book and read on the front porch of the main house. Tracy joined him from time-to-time, sitting silently on the glider chair and enjoying the nice weather. They had a hell of a storm over the weekend that flooded parts of the ranch. Being in the guest house with the tin roof, Xander assured him it sounded worse than it was. Regardless, Wright had curled up against Xander a little more with each crack of thunder.

It was clean up and catch up all week. Xander came to the house each night exhausted and sweaty, but he would take a shower and then they'd head over to the main house for supper. Wright hadn't joined him for another shower since the first one and they didn't talk about it.

The shower played a constant loop in his mind. Xander was a big guy compared to him, but he was always so gentle. The light touches, the teasing of his fingertips against the most sensitive part of him. His lips skimming his shoulder. It had been enough to send him over the edge in under five minutes. He wanted to do it again, but he didn't want to push Xander. It'd been a tough week, but the weather was back to a dry heat and the land was drying back up. Today was their first day that they had time to go for a walk before the sun started setting.

Despite the slow pace of his life, he was more than grateful for it. He didn't have to worry about having a clean house or a hot meal ready when Xander came home. Xander was actually happier when the bed was messy and there was a dish or two in the sink. He said it meant that Wright hadn't lifted a finger or overdone anything. Two weeks had also been the longest he'd gone without being hit or yelled at. It was boring. And he loved it.

"Honey, I'm home!" Xander's voice traveled through the house and Wright smiled to himself. He had a different greeting for each time he stepped through the door. Wright was waiting for the day when he ran out of things to say. He knew that the bedroom would be his first stop, so Wright didn't bother to get off the bed. "Hey there, gorgeous."

"Hey there yourself," Wright said as Xander started stripping out of his clothes. He looked like he was in a good mood, not his usual tired and grunting self. "Good day today?"

"We finally got the fence on the south end fixed." Xander was in nothing but his boxers now. "And the ones that Patrick sold have been loaded and taken to their destination." He moved to the edge of the bed where Wright was propped up. He had his sling on still. Technically, he was okay to get rid of it a few days ago, but Xander told him since he'd been defiant for most of the first week, he was making him wear it longer. Just to make sure he was properly healed. "And it's finally dry enough we can go on a walk tonight."

"Can't wait." Wright did his best to keep from showing how excited he was for it. He'd never been on a date before. He wasn't sure if Xander was considering this a date or not, but regardless, he'd never done anything remotely close to it. Blame him for being excited. "Go shower so we can do this."

"Want to join me?" Xander ran his hand through Wright's hair. The question was

genuine and not in any way suggestive, but Wright smiled to himself. “Or have you showered already?”

“I haven’t,” Wright said. He shifted himself to get his feet on the floor.

“Any more pain today?” Xander started walking across the room to the bathroom.

“None more than the fading bruises,” Wright answered. He finally got off the bed and set the book down on the table between the bed and wall. After a quick lunch with Tracy, he’d laid in bed hoping to finish the last few chapters of the book. Xander wasn’t kidding when he said he had a good selection hidden away. Wright had gone through four of them in the week. It was a good distraction to everything going on.

Xander turned the water on and helped Wright out of his clothes. He paused when he was down to his boxers. “What do you want to do?”

“You’ve already made me come once,” Wright said with a smirk. “Not much else new for you to see.”

Xander laughed and cupped Wright’s face in his hands. “Oh gorgeous, you have no idea what else there is I’d like to see from you.”

“What?” Wright didn’t mean for the word to come out so high pitched. Xander’s smirk turned to a laugh and he dropped his hands to help Wright out of his boxers. “Are you talking about... Like, sex? With me. You want that?”

“It’s a discussion we should have,” Xander said. “But not right now. Not until you are entirely healed. For now, let’s shower and make it quick so we can go walk.”

Wright let Xander lead him across the bathroom to the shower. The water was warm on his skin. Xander washed his body off first, giving Wright a view to enjoy for a few

minutes. He'd been so worried last time they were in this situation that he hadn't fully taken in all of Xander. He was exactly the kind of man that Wright would picture himself with, on the rare occasion he gave into his urges. Big and muscley. Protective and sweet. Great smile. Funny. Caring and gentle. He was admiring his ass when Xander turned around and he got a full view of his front then.

"Holy hell," Wright said before he could stop himself. He looked up, into Xander's eyes. "You're huge."

Laughter filled the shower space and, just like last time, Xander held his hand out for him to step closer. He was only damp at best, but the water hit his chest when Xander stepped around to stand behind him. "Like what you see?"

"I don't know," Wright said honestly. "I'm pretty sure that should be registered as a weapon."

"You are too kind, gorgeous." Xander turned him around and leaned him back so his hair was getting wet. He closed his eyes while his fingers massaged his scalp. "But you won't have to worry about that, okay? Once you're cleared by the doctor, we can talk. Until then, you're just going to have to deal with me making you feel good."

"I would joke about that being such a terrible life, but we both know that isn't true. I'll settle for it, though." Wright was joking with him, but his stomach was knotted. He really didn't have any experience when it came to sex, but he knew the gist. He watched videos. Clearly.

"As long as you're with me, you'll never have to go through anything like that again." Xander said the words with such conviction. Wright smiled as he turned him back around again. He let the silence grow between them while Xander cleaned him. He used a cloth to wash his body, still being gentle around his ribs and side. He used his bare hand around his dick, stroking him a few times, to really get him clean as

Xander whispered against his ear. It wasn't anything more than a tease and he was left half-hard when Xander turned the water off and towel dried both of them.

He could finally get himself dressed without too much pain, but he still enjoyed when Xander helped him. The added kisses along his shoulders helped. Before he knew it, he was dressed and ready to go back outside. Xander was waiting for him by the front door with a blanket draped over his arm. "I asked Tracy if she could pack us a couple of sandwiches instead of eating supper with them. I hope that's okay."

"That's fine with me," Wright said. "How far are we walking today?"

"Not that far," Xander said as they made their way over to the main house. "I was thinking we could walk around and then go up the field where William and Clark got married to watch the sunset. The sun is beautiful just over the hill when you look at the back of the property."

"Have you talked to them recently? How is their honeymoon?"

"They have another week in the Bahamas, so I say they're doing great. Brett is coming back next week. The tenants are all doing well in the houses, so he took an extra week off to be at home."

"Tracy has been showing me pictures of him, his husband, and their little boy. He's cute."

"Which one?" Xander asked with a sarcastic tone when he opened the door to the house. Tracy and Patrick were both in the kitchen, clearly in the middle of dancing to a song playing on the radio. It was an older country song, one that Wright had heard before but couldn't name immediately. "Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt the dancin'."

“Nonsense,” Tracy said. She patted her hand against Patrick’s chest and smiled at them. “Patrick was distracting me anyway. I have your basket ready to go. Let me get it.”

Patrick looked from his brother to Wright and back, a small smile on his face. Wright held back, standing at the door, while Xander moved further into the house. He loved their family, but still sometimes felt like an outsider. It wasn’t anything that they did, just his brain catching up that he was in a safe place. He’d been waiting for the other shoe to drop and each day that it didn’t, he either felt better or that sinking feeling that something big was going to hit him grew. It was always one or the other.

“Heard you’re going on your first date tonight,” Patrick said lowly beside him. Xander was looking through the basket on the table, talking to Tracy. Well out of ear shot.

“Is it a date?” Wright looked up at Patrick. He was definitely Xander’s brother. They looked so similar, same eyes and build. Their noses were both curved to the right just slightly, not quite like a broken nose, more natural. Like a genetic thing. Xander’s smile was a bit wider, though. But Patrick walked into a room and demanded everyone’s attention.

“My little brother seems to think so,” Patrick said. “Do you not want it to be? If so, you might want to tell him that up front.”

“No, I do. I, uh. I like that idea. Of dates.”

“I’m glad to hear.”

“Glad to hear what?” Xander asked, walking back up to them with a smile.

“Nothing,” Wright said. “Ready to go?”

“After you.”

They walked for about fifteen minutes. The house was plenty far enough behind and there was nothing but empty fields around them. It was amazing to see. It made Wright feel small, but also free. The weather was perfect. They didn't talk much as they walked. Wright offered to carry one of the items but Xander wouldn't let him.

“It's nice out here,” Wright said with a long sigh. He had walked around the area immediately surrounding the houses and barn numerous times, memorizing most every detail he could. But further out in the fields, there was less to look at. Not that it wasn't beautiful. The lack of buildings gave it a peaceful feeling. There were sparse trees here and there, a fence in the distance that he could barely see. Further out, there were a couple of hills where the sun was on its path to setting.

“It is.” Xander agreed. He nudged Wright's shoulder and pointed to a spot off the dirt road on the left, behind the barn. “If you look closely, there's a path here that we take with the horses to get to the big pastures back behind the main house. The whole land is about six hundred acres. Most of the cattle live on the backend of that, so never go there on your own, okay? It can be dangerous, especially if the animals aren't used to you.”

“Don't go around the giant animals that could eat me. Got it.” Xander rolled his eyes at the joke and Wright smiled.

“More like defend themselves using their horns. You do not want to get impaled on one of those.”

Fear shot through Wright's body. “Does that really happen? Why would you keep them?”

“We don't keep them,” Xander said. “We raise cattle to sell for meat. But that's a

very rare occurrence, so you don't have to worry about it, okay? They only turn violent when seriously provoked or startled. Only trained ranchers will ever deal with them so you have no worries. Most of the time, they're docile and safe enough to walk up to but again, only those that are trained will ever get close to them like that."

Xander stopped and set the basket down in the grass. Wright couldn't help but look around for any signs of animals. There was nothing. They were up on a slight hill, giving Wright an advantage and view he hadn't seen yet. The house was off in the distance, far enough away he could just see the cars parked in front. There was no way they'd be seen from where they sat on the grass.

"Hey," Xander said softly. Wright turned from the views around them to him. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted you to know to be careful around the animals here."

"No, I'm glad you did. I probably wouldn't have gone near them either way, but it's good to know if I'm going to be here for a while. I'd like to start doing something to help out once I'm back to full strength. I don't expect to live here rent or work free when everyone else does something to pitch in."

"You don't have to," Xander said. He started pulling things from the basket. He flicked his eyes to Wright when he opened his mouth to protest. "But if you're going to be stubborn about this, I'll talk to Patrick and see what he thinks. If anything, we could maybe use some help on the grounds since the summer activities are going to be ramping up soon."

Wright nodded. Tracy had really packed them a full meal. There were chicken salad sandwiches, fresh vegetables and Ranch dip, and bottles of water. Their conversation trailed from work to the book that Wright was reading. Xander recommended one for his next read. A few times, Xander had reached over and wiped the corner of his mouth off. Eating one handed was still a pain, but he was able to move his arm a little



more even in the sling. Still, he was a bit messy. Not that he minded the way Xander's thumb would brush against his lips.

The sun was hitting the horizon, casting the sky in an array of pinks, reds, and oranges. Wright moved the basket and scooted closer to Xander, cuddling up to his side. After a moment, Xander shifted them so they were laying down on the blanket, staring at the sky. It was nice.

"Thank you for this," Wright whispered. He traced his finger over his chest. "It's nice out here."

Xander dressed up a little. Instead of his usual tee and shorts or pajamas pants- depending if they were going to the main house for supper or not- he was wearing a button up over a white shirt and a nice pair of jeans with a belt. He had on his 'good' pair of boots as well, not the ones he kept on the porch to work in. Wright was in a pair of sweats and a long sleeve shirt. He'd kept two pairs of jeans from William, surprised they were his size, but his skin was still sensitive with the bruises that he didn't risk wearing them yet.

"It is," Xander said. "One night, we'll have to go out to one of the farther pastures with my truck and spend the night stargazing. The stars are beautiful 'round here."

"I don't think I've ever seen the stars," Wright said. Xander's hand snuck up the back of his neck and brushed along his scalp. Wright smiled at the touch. Ever since telling him that he'd never had someone play with his hair, Wright had fallen asleep to that exact thing each night. "My evenings were usually spent cooking dinner and then I'd go to my room by seven or eight. I wasn't allowed to go out at dark."

"We'll make it our next date," Xander said. Wright was lying against his side and could hear the rumble of his voice through his chest. The deep sound was soothing. He could easily fall asleep. He slipped his hand farther around Xander's body and

hugged him. He'd taken the sling off since they weren't doing anything more than sitting and talking. "You okay?"

Wright lifted his head and looked at Xander. He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. His Stetson hat was laying on the blanket beside them, his hair sticking up just a little from putting it on while his hair was still damp. Wright only knew that because Xander had spent a solid twenty minutes talking about the different hats, styles, and how to care for them.

His eyes were clear and deep, a shade of blue Wright had never seen before. His lips were curved in a small smile. Wright had had those lips against his hair, his temple, cheek, and even his neck. He knew they were as soft as they looked.

The moment between them grew as Wright continued to stare at Xander. He knew he was older, an age gap between them that most would question. Especially with Wright just getting out of an abusive situation and only being nineteen. But the way he felt about Xander- it was something real. He didn't have any feelings toward the other men that have helped him. Patrick was like a father he never had. William gave off the vibe of an older brother. But Xander was everything he'd dreamed about. Everything that made him feel safe and cared.

He shifted his body further up, leveling his so he was staring down at Xander. He rested his hand on the middle of Xander's chest, feeling his heart beating below his palm. Xander's hand moved from his hair to brush over his cheek. It was his go-to move and Wright leaned his head into the touch. When Xander cupped the back of his head and pulled him down, Wright closed his eyes and his stomach flipped with excitement.

The moment their lips touched was something that Wright would never forget. Xander's lips were just as soft as he knew they'd be. He moved his lips against Wright's, adding pressure to the back of his head to seal their lips together more.

Wright tilted his head to the side, parting his lips just slightly. Xander pulled back and they both breathed heavily.

“You are...” Xander’s words trailed off and Wright smiled at him. The sentiment was the same.

Xander moved again, gently pushing Wright onto his back. He went willingly, smiling when Xander shifted his body so he was now the one hovering over him. He brushed his hair back from his forehead and then dipped his head to kiss him again. This time, it was a little more heated. Wright lifted his arms to wrap around Xander’s neck; Xander moved so he was straddling one of Wright’s legs. Their bodies were intertwined with one another as they continued to kiss. Wright’s brain went on overdrive when he felt Xander’s tongue brush against the seam of his lips. He’d seen people kiss before but the experience firsthand was so much better.

He pulled back before Wright could make the decision, though. He was resting on his knees and elbow, careful not to put any of his weight on Wright’s body. He appreciated it, as much as he wished he would. Maybe in a couple weeks. They stared at each other for a second. In that moment of time, something shifted and they both initiated at the same time, tongues meeting before lips. Wright had never kissed someone before, and he was definitely letting Xander lead, but it was everything he thought it would be. He’d read about it, watched it in videos. But this? This was incredible.

“Fuck, Wright.” Xander whispered the words against his lips as he pushed his hips down against Wright’s thigh. “You are incredible, gorgeous.”

Wright didn’t have any words. He had no idea what to say. He just wanted Xander to kiss him again. He lifted his head to chase after his lips and smiled into the kiss when he succeeded. Xander continued to thrust his hips against his thigh, small grunts pouring into his mouth with each movement. Wright was harder than he’d ever been

himself. He was rocking up to meet Xander, ignoring the small pang at the motion.

That was until Xander pulled back and saw something in his expression that caused him to stop. “Shit, Wright. I’m sorry, gorgeous. I got too caught up in that kiss.”

“Don’t be,” Wright said. “It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t.” Xander shook his head and moved to sit back on his heels. Wright’s leg was still trapped between Xander’s knees. “I told you; we’ll do more when you’re healed. I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“I get and appreciate that you don’t want to hurt me,” Wright said. “But please don’t leave me like this, Xander.” To make sure he knew what he was talking about, Wright moved his left hand to his crotch, slipping his hand below the sweats and briefs. He gripped himself tight, his eyes rolling at the first contact. Xander’s eyes narrowed, focusing on where Wright’s hand was instead of his face.

Wright smiled when he heard the sound of Xander removing his belt. He watched the man kneeling above him as he undid the button of his jeans and the slide of his zipper. His boxers below were a sandy color, with a black band. He could see the head of his cock peeking over his waistband. God, he was big.

He left his jeans open and moved his hands to pull Wright’s sweats down. He pulled his boxers down just enough to free him from the fabrics. “I don’t want you to move, okay? I know you’re already feeling the pain so don’t deny it. This is meant to be a reward for you actually following the doctor’s orders this week.”

“Not much of a reward if I’m having to work so damn hard for it.”

Wright was cut off from saying more when Xander leaned down to kiss him once again. It was sloppy and they were both laughing when Xander pulled away. The

world around them was starting to get darker, but Wright didn't want to leave their little bubble here. He focused on Xander and watched as he licked his own palm before wrapping his hand around Wright's erection. He had to keep himself from rocking his hips up, knowing that Xander would stop if he did.

Xander fumbled with his free hand to pull his own underwear out of the way. Wright's body was writhing already from the pleasure and seeing Xander's cock in the open, so close to him, had him growing hard under his palm. He wasn't even sure how that was possible. "Xander."

"Yes?" Xander started stroking himself in time with the pleasure he was giving Wright. Wright reached his hand up and pulled on the front of his shirt until Xander moved closer. He was resting on his left elbow, his right hand still moving up and down Wright's length. "God, you're so beautiful."

"You are too," Wright said breathlessly. "Let me- Can I touch you?"

"No," Xander said softly. He leaned down and kissed him, sliding their tongues together until they both needed air again. "This is for you. Let me make you feel good."

Wright nodded and kept his eyes on Xander. His hand disappeared, but Wright felt the tugging sensation of his pants being pulled down to his knees. Xander pulled back and did the same to his jeans. Their size difference was something that Wright was keenly aware of whenever they dressed or undressed. He liked that Xander was bigger than him, played the clear role of protector. But his cock was massive. He had to be at least eight inches, if not more. And he was thick.

Xander covered his body once again, rubbing their cocks against each other. The friction was heavenly and Wright could hear himself whimpering with need. He was close already. "Please, Xander. Please."

“I love the way you beg for me,” Xander whispered into his ear. His hand went back around him, but this time his cock was sliding right alongside his. “Fuck. You’re so hard for me.”

“I’m so close,” Wright cried. He could feel himself shaking with need.

“Not yet, gorgeous.” Xander’s hand circled his head, collecting the bead of precum on his slit. Wright couldn’t see what he was doing, but the slide of his hand got a little easier. He was sure he was leaking like crazy, wondering if Xander was in the same state. His hand picked up speed as their breaths got quick and shallow. Wright’s mouth was set in an ‘O’ shape as his pleasure built. He curled his toes in his shoes, trying to hold off his orgasm.

A new sensation hit him. Xander had stopped moving his hand, but he continued to thrust his hips, fucking his hand alongside Wright’s cock. The friction was indescribable and Wright cried out as the first wave of his orgasm hit him. One hand gripped the blanket below them while the other still held on to Xander’s shirt.

“Damn, Wright. You really do that every time.” Xander moved to sit back on his heels again. He wrapped his hand around himself and all Wright had the energy for was to just watch as he fucked himself with his hand. Xander used his free hand to push Wright’s shirt up his chest just as he let himself go. The noises that Xander made when he came were beyond hot. He grunted, a mix of heavy breathing and half noises filled the space around them. “Fuck, fuck.” Wright’s eyes watched as Xander’s pleasure hit him and he released ropes of cum onto his skin. He ran his fingers through the mess on his stomach, a mix of both their pleasures. He looked at Xander with a bright smile.

“Best first date ever,” Wright said.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Xander ~

By the third week of Wright being in his life, Xander was fucked. Not literally, because Wright was still healing, but he couldn't get the young man out of his head. He was a thirty-five-year-old man with a career behind him, six hundred acres of land to help maintain, boring bills like insurance and rent to pay. And yet, he felt like he was twenty all over again whenever he saw Wright. Even from a distance. Patrick would just laugh at him and clap him on the shoulder, saying nothing. He didn't understand the pull this guy had on him, but he was enjoying it.

"Uncle Xander!" He turned his head at the sound of his niece, Paxton, calling out for him. He couldn't see her, but knew she'd be rounding the corner into the barn soon enough. "Ah, hey. There you are. I swear I checked in here, like, ten minutes ago."

Paxton was smiling. Her hair was in a tight ponytail with a few strands sticking out by her ears. She was wearing her typical running clothes, a loose tank top with a pair of black shorts. Her sneakers were a rainbow of colors. She'd grown up fast the last couple years he lived in the city. He came back as much as he could, since they only lived a half hour outside of the city, but there were still weeks between his visits. Between working double shifts and his boyfriend, he didn't have a lot of free time. Not like now.

"I was reorganizing the tack room," Xander said. "Your dad has been busting my ass unloading the feed today."

"Dirty mouth. Dirty mouth," Paxton chanted with a bright smile. Xander rolled his eyes and locked up the tack room before moving closer to his niece. It was a thing

made up when the kids were little. Patrick, Xander, and their friends would do their best not to cuss around the kiddos and that little chant was the main reason. Tracy had taught it to them when Paxton repeated a ‘naughty’ word in school. She’d been six. They grew out of it gradually.

“I’m sure if I go on those runs with you, I’d be chanting the same,” Xander said back jokingly. Paxton ran on the ranch twice a week, despite complaining about how much she hated doing it. Now that the school year was over, she had upped it to three times a week so she kept in shape to try out for the soccer team in college. He was proud of her.

“I plead the fifth,” Paxton said with a smile. “But not what I came here for. I had a question.”

“What’s up?”

Xander pushed his shoulders back, letting out a small grunt when it popped in several places. After they restocked the hay bales this morning, he tended to the grounds around the refuge houses. They were all still occupied. Brett said they’d be like that until the end of July and then they could talk about Wright moving into one. Xander didn’t like that idea, Wright being away from him. It was a little possessive, but he couldn’t help it.

“You and your boyfriend are going into the city tomorrow, right?”

“He’s not my boyfriend, but yes.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Paxton said mockingly. “You just live together, take care of him, go on daily evening walks, and don’t you have a date planned tonight?”

Xander opened his mouth to say something, but he realized that she was right. He



looked forward to their evening walks, going a little further each time. They'd walked to the main gate and back last night, almost an hour walk, but he'd also taken him to the small stream that ran throughout the property. Tonight, he planned on taking Wright to one of the flatter pastures in the truck, with a blanket and pillows so they could lay under the stars for a while. Maybe watch the animals grazing too. He felt bad about scaring him last week with the warning to not go out alone.

"Yeah, exactly. Anyway, would you mind if I joined you? I wanted to meet with one of the girls that's running the training camp in the Fall for the university."

"And is this just a meeting or a meeting-meeting? Because you know your parents' rules."

Patrick and Tracy were great parents, trusting their kids to make their own decisions for the most part. But they still had some rules in place, especially when it came to dating. Neither of their kids were allowed to go on a date until they met the person.

"It's just a meeting. In a very public place." Paxton held his stare. He waited for a moment, knowing what her tell was on the rare occasion that she lied. His niece and nephew were pretty cool kids, honest and hard working. They had their moments, but he was proud to be their uncle. "You can even meet her before Wright's appointment if you want."

"I'll talk to your dad about it and see what he says, but I don't have a problem with it. I don't know how long we'll be at the hospital for, but I want to take him shopping afterward as well."

"Okay, just let me know. She's going back home next week so this is the only time I can meet with her before training starts."

Paxton walked back out and toward the house while Xander went to the tack room to

finish making sure everything was where it should be. When he walked into the guest house, he was greeted with silence. His nerves immediately spiked because Wright was always making some sort of noise. Whether talking to himself, moving around, or playing music. But today, there was nothing.

“Wright?” Xander hung his hat and started walking through the house. He checked the living room, wondering if he was asleep on the couch. Nothing. The bedroom was next. He found Wright sitting on the bed, his back against the headboard. He was sitting cross legged, the blanket pooled around his waist. He was shirtless, the bruises looking almost healed by now. They looked like irritated skin more than actual bruises. The next thing that caught his attention were the tears on Wright’s cheeks. “What’s wrong?”

Wright looked up when Xander sat on the bed next to him. His eyes were red, like he’d been crying for a while. His eye was still bruised above his brow, where the stitches had been. There was a small scar left but the swelling was gone and he said he could see fine. They’d know for sure tomorrow. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“You’re crying,” Xander said, stating the obvious. He swiped his finger over Wright’s cheek and smiled softly. He knew he was sweaty and probably smelt as bad as he felt, but Wright as usual, took priority to him.

“It’s nothing. Really,” Wright said. He leaned his head into Xander’s palm. He moved his other hand and reached for something next to him. It was a book, one of Xander’s that he kept in the closet. Living in the city, he’d had quite a library, organized on shelves. Now, they sat in two totes in the closet floor since there was no bookshelf in the guest house. “I was just reading and it got to me.”

“Oh, gorgeous.” Xander wanted to hug him. He was such an innocent soul, crying over characters from a book. After everything he’d gone through, he was still full of love and empathy. He showed that to Xander every day they spent together. He was

adamant on helping out once they got the all clear from the hospital. He spent time with Tracy, learning to cook meals beyond the basics that he already knew. He met Brett and Wylon, immediately offering babysitting services if they ever wanted a night away. That was most of them because their newborn little boy was adorable. But then there were the small moments, when Wright would talk about what he'd gone through and Xander had to ask himself how someone could go through that much pain and still smile and find the good in people and situations. "I want to hug you, but I need a shower first."

"Can I join you?"

"Depends," Xander said, with a small smirk. "Are you going to actually shower?"

Wright turned his head and kissed Xander's palm. "Guess you'll have to find out."

"You're going to be the death of me, you know that right?"

"Only fair seeing that you brought the life back to me."

"You think too highly of me, gorgeous. Come on, let's start the date early then."

The contradiction of his tear-stained cheeks and the smile that lit up his face had Xander forgetting he was sweaty and gross and he pulled him in for a kiss. Wright went willingly and they stood like that in the bedroom for a minute. Xander couldn't get enough of the younger man. He didn't know what was going to happen to Wright. Afterall, he'd only been here for a month. It wasn't like Xander could just ask him to stay with him, no matter how he felt. He'd mentioned school in the Fall. He felt like he was too old for a summer fling but he couldn't stay away. He and Wright had something.

That thought struck a nerve in the back of his brain and he pulled away from Wright

with a long sigh. Wright narrowed his eyes but held on to his forearms. “What was that for?”

“Just thinking,” Xander said. He pushed the thoughts away and smiled. A genuine smile. “Nothing you need to worry about, though. Let’s get cleaned up.”

“Okay.” Wright let his hand trail down Xander’s arm until he laced their fingers together. Xander led him to the shower and without a word spoken between them, they undressed and cleaned up.

Xander redressed quickly and took the blankets and pillows out to the truck while Wright gathered the food and drinks for them for a few hours. He told Xander he and Tracy tried out a new recipe together and they were all going to have it for supper. Patrick was outside, just getting out of his own truck, when Xander walked out.

“Pulling out the big guns, I see.” The two beeps of him locking his door gave Xander a half second to think of a response. He and his brother didn’t talk about the intimate details of their lives, but they did still rely on each other. He’d been there for Patrick when he and Tracy had the kids, when their dad passed and he inherited the ranch. Patrick was there for him when his ex broke up with him, easily offered him a spot on the ranch so he didn’t have to struggle in the city.

“Am I being ridiculous?” Xander asked. He felt childish even asking, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that everything was just... He didn’t know. Maybe he was just psyching himself out. It was a habit of his in his personal life. He loved to take care of people, a big reason he became an EMT. He couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe he was just enjoying taking care of Wright, or the other way around and Wright was only attracted to him because he was the main one taking care of him.

“What do you mean?” Patrick folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the tailgate of Xander’s truck. They had plenty of blankets and pillows to lay

comfortably.

“I don’t know,” Xander admitted. He kicked at the gravel under his feet. A brief memory of Wright curled up in the gravel, bruised badly, crossed his mind and he shook his head to clear it. He looked back up at his brother. “He’s nineteen, Patrick. I’m fifteen years older than him. In my head, it feels right. But logically, I can’t help but think we’re building this bond because of how we met.”

Patrick didn’t say anything right away and Xander started to worry that he was going to agree. After a long minute, he straightened up and unfolded his arms. “You remember the night I told you I was going to propose to Tracy?”

Xander wasn’t expecting that. He nodded, hesitantly. They were high school sweethearts and made it through Tracy going to college before getting married. Xander, being five years younger than Patrick, was still in high school at the time. Patrick had come into his room and sat on the foot of his bed while he was reading a book. His senior year of high school, he’d been sucked into the romance novels. It wasn’t exactly a trait that helped to get dates, but he had plenty of book boyfriends. Patrick, however, was a nervous wreck when he showed Xander the ring he’d bought.

“I was nervous as hell. I almost didn’t go through with it. But then you reminded me of something. Do you remember what it was? You told me that it was through the little looks we gave each other. Not the heart eyes or the hung the moon and stars looks. It was the small ones, over a shared meal or when we were just sitting on the porch talking.” Patrick rested his hand on Xander’s shoulder and squeezed.

He hung his head, letting the words sink in. Hoping that Patrick was right. He was having a mild crisis, that was it. Their relationship wasn’t typical and they met under serious circumstances. It didn’t mean that what he felt wasn’t real.

“I’ll keep it simple for you. You like him. He definitely likes you. Your first little

picnic, walking thing you did? When you were looking through the basket with Tracy, I talked to Wright. It was a short talk, but he was watching you with excitement. It was more than just a crush. Lord knows I've seen that look on Paxton's face more than once. He was also nervous to call it a date and he got excited when I said it was one."

"Thanks," Xander said, a bashful tone overtaking the one word. He looked up just as Wright opened the door and stepped outside. He was wearing one of Xander's shirts, despite having a quarter of the closet and two drawers for himself. He paired it with black sweatpants and the tennis shoes that Tracy had picked up for him that first weekend when she did her grocery shopping. Wright cried when she handed them to her, telling them that he'd never had his own new pair of shoes before.

"That," Patrick said. He nodded his head between both of them. "That's the look I'm talking about. You could be in a crowded room and both of you would find each other instantly. That smile you're wearing tells me everything. You're happy, Xander. Run with it."

"I know my hair is all a mess," Wright said as soon as he was close enough to talk without raising his voice. "But you weren't there to blow dry it and I've actually never used one myself so I didn't realize there are certain ways you're supposed to--"

Xander took a step forward and cut Wright's words off with his lips. His hands came up and cupped his face, his thumbs on his temple and the rest of his fingers cradling his head. It was a moment of hesitation on Wright's end, but then he was kissing him back. He was barely aware of Patrick patting the back of his shoulder and walking away.

When they pulled away from each other, Xander kissed the top of Wright's head and pulled him into a tight hug. "Not that I'm all for this, but um, you just did that. In front of your brother. Probably in front of more than just him."

“Are you okay with that?” Xander asked. He tried not to tense up, waiting for the answer and hoping that he hadn’t just messed things up.

“I am,” Wright said. He pulled back just enough to look up at Xander. His voice sounded sure, but his expression looked a bit pensive.

“What is it?” Xander asked.

“It’s nothing,” Wright said too quickly. He smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. Xander pulled back and tilted his head, trying to read Wright’s body language and facial expression. He sighed after a moment and started twirling his finger in the hem of his shirt, something that Xander knew he did when he was nervous. He looked down at the ground between them when he spoke again. “It just kind of overwhelmed me for a second when you moved like that. Stalked toward me.” He finally looked up and met Xander’s eyes. “I know you would never hurt me, but I guess my brain is still stuck in fight-or-flight mode sometimes.”

“I’m so sorry,” Xander said immediately. He’d been so caught up in his own thoughts he didn’t think about how it would look to Wright. He held up his hands, wanting to step forward and wrap him in another hug, but hesitated.

“I don’t want you to have to think twice about it,” Wright said. He lifted his own arms and wrapped his fingers around the edges of the flannel he was wearing, tugging him closer. He pressed his face against Xander’s chest and took a deep breath. “I will always be up for you touching or kissing me, but maybe give me a quick warning or something before. I like the stalking toward the guy in the books, but in reality it’s a little scary.”

“I will,” Xander promised. “I’m sorry if I scared you, even for a second. I just- I couldn’t help it. You were talking and being all cute.” Xander smiled down at him and moved a hand to brush down some of his hair. Maybe he would want to get it cut

tomorrow. “Are you still good to go out tonight?”

“And miss spending hours alone with you in the bed of your truck?” Wright smiled and this time it lit his entire face. Xander held his eyes for a moment before he bent down to kiss him again. This one was much softer, a quick press of lips. “I’m all ready for you to woo me. Again. And again.”

Xander huffed out a breath and closed his eyes, looking up at the setting sun. They had maybe an hour before the first stars would start coming out. “You don’t get cleared until tomorrow, Wright.”

“Sounds like a promise to me.” Wright smiled and Xander knew that this was it. These feelings were beyond real. No matter how they started, he couldn’t deny the way the young man in his arms made him feel.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Wright ~

He'd been doing well since arriving at the ranch. After his initial bout of stubbornness, as Xander called it, he spent weeks letting his body heal. He would rotate between hanging out in the guest house, sitting on the porch of the main house, and talking with those that lived or worked on the ranch. He liked everyone, they were all nice. Brett was in and out, and he'd even met a couple of the people living in the houses William designed. Him and Clark had stopped back by to check on everything when they came back from their honeymoon. Both of them were tanned and so, so happy. Wright wanted that.

The one thing he hadn't done was get in the way of everyone working. He would lean against the fence and watch the horses or wave at the guys coming and going in the trucks. But he didn't walk into the barn or wander away from the immediate yards around the houses. If he wasn't walking around with Xander or driving in his truck for whatever reason, he stayed close. The last thing he wanted to do was mess something up and someone get mad at him. Or he get hurt again.

"You're all good," Doctor Pillar said once she shut the door to the room he and Xander were sitting in. "Scans are all clear, your eye has healed up nicely. You might have some scarring. But blood work looks good too." She flipped a few papers in a folder and then looked up and smiled at him. "You healed up nicely, Wright."

"That's good," Wright said with a long sigh. He felt better, knew that he was going to get the clear today. He never did have any scares with bleeding or anything. Wright looked over at Xander and smiled. He'd settled on a baseball cap today instead of his usual cowboy hat. They'd spent hours outside last night, just cuddling and talking.

Xander told him more about growing up on the ranch and helping out. He talked about his family, his parents before they passed, Patrick and Tracy and when the kids were younger. Paxton was nearly his age and hearing how she grew up with a loving family made him a bit sad. He tried not to compare them to each other, but it was hard. Everyone in the Lawson family was so supportive and accepting. Xander had taken his mind off of it by giving him his first ever blow job. He was pretty sure he could come again just thinking about the way his lips felt around him.

“Wright?” Doctor Pillar broke his line of thought.

He turned back and blinked, apologizing for the lost thought. She just smiled and Xander coughed into his hand. Wright chanced a look at him and saw him shake his head. He knew where Wright’s mind had gone.

“I was asking if you minded if Xander stepped out of the room so I could talk to you.” Her voice was calm and patient as it always was. She had long, dark hair and sharp features. Honestly, she kind of resembled Cher, in a third cousin kind of way.

“Oh, yeah, that’s fine.” Wright wasn’t sure what she needed to talk to him about without Xander there, but he felt comfortable around her so he wasn’t nervous. It was probably routine anyway. Xander stood, smiled, and promised to be just outside the room if he needed anything.

“I want to ask you a couple of questions,” she said. She sat back down in the chair and looked right at him. “They might be uncomfortable, but I need you to be honest okay?”

“Okay.”

“I know you’ve had quite a bit of trauma and while you have healed physically, I want to make sure that you’re doing okay in other areas.” She set the folder down and

moved her chair closer to Wright sitting on the crinkly paper. He shifted, not sure where these questions were going to go. “How are you feeling? Not your body, but how are you handling everything mentally?”

“It’s fine,” Wright said. His voice was barely above a whisper and he was looking down, his hands fiddling with the edge of his shirt. He was wearing his own shirt today, but he wished he was wearing Xander’s. He liked the way that it sort of swallowed him, made him feel safe. It also smelled like Xander and the detergent he used. A reminder that he wasn’t back at home with his dad anymore. “I like living on the ranch. The Lawson’s are nice.”

“They’re good people,” she said. “And you feel safe there?”

“I do.” Wright smiled and looked up from his lap. He squeezed his hands into fists. “I haven’t felt this safe in a long time. It’s been the longest I’ve gone without getting hit or someone yelling at me for messing up since I was twelve. Maybe before that.”

“Is that something you’re scared of? Someone yelling at you or getting mad?”

“I’ve talked to Xander about it a bit.” Wright recounted their short conversation yesterday before they got in the truck. The entire night, he’d made sure to move slowly, always giving Wright a chance to say no. He hadn’t, but he appreciated the concern. He appreciated that Xander listened to him so easily. Wright didn’t have much experience with someone putting his needs first. “But yeah, I guess. I can’t help but feel like this is just one big dream. Now that I’m healed up, I don’t know what’s going to happen and that makes me nervous.”

“Have you talked to Patrick or Tracy about it?”

“I was planning on it,” Wright said. “I spent a lot of years working around the house and doing things to earn my keep. I know I needed to take it easy to heal and

everything, but now I want to help out. If they even have room for me to keep staying there. I don't want to impose on their family and the houses are all rented out right now."

"You're staying with Xander right now, right? I think I remember him saying that last time you were here. Has that changed?"

His cheeks heated and he glanced toward the further wall. Away from her knowing look. "I am, still staying with him."

"Now, this leads to some questions that might be uncomfortable for you." Wright looked back at her, questioning that because he thought these were the uncomfortable questions. "I tried to locate your previous doctor and records but haven't had any luck. Do you remember the last time you saw a doctor?"

Wright thought about it. It was definitely before high school. At least six years. "I think middle school. I needed a vaccine or something but I think they did them at the school. It was right before my mom left."

"You haven't had a flu shot or anything since?" Wright could tell she was holding back the surprise at that.

"I don't get sick very often." That was probably due to the fact that he didn't go anywhere but school and home. Realization struck him that he truly hadn't been living much of a life. Just being at the Lawson's was a whole new world for him. "My dad kept over-the-counter medications stocked at the house if I got allergies or anything."

"Do you happen to remember the name of the doctor you saw when you did go?"

"I have no idea. Sorry."

“It’s all good,” she said with a smile. “I think we should schedule a time for you to come back and we’ll get you updated on everything and get you on the books for yearly checkups. If you need me for anything else you can schedule between visits.”

“Sounds good.” Wright wasn’t sure how he’d be able to afford all these visits. He knew by the way his dad grumbled when bill collectors called or sent something in the mail about an old bill.

“I have one more question before you head out. It’s going to be personal, but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t ask.”

Wright looked up at her and tilted his head just slightly. He didn’t want to go over what happened to him or his life before a month ago. He wanted to forget it all. He was still waking up from bad dreams. Not quite nightmares, but bad enough that he woke with a start, often in the middle of the night. But Xander was always right there, holding him or close enough he could feel him in the bed beside him. He would take a few deep breaths and then go back to sleep. A few times, Xander had woken up with him and pulled him closer. Just like their intimate moments on Fridays, something Wright hoped would change now that he was cleared, they didn’t really talk about it.

“Are you sexually active?”

Wright coughed, not expecting that question. She had asked him the same thing last time he was there and the answer had been no. If he answered honestly now, she would know. She would know he was messing around with Xander, wanted to do more with him.

“I’m not here to judge you, Wright. Whatever your orientation, I want you to keep safe, okay?” She crossed her legs and smiled, placing her hands on her knee. Her posture was relaxed and it eased a little of the tension in his body. “I can do testing in

the office if you ever need it. I'm also going to suggest that you talk to someone, a professional, about what you went through. Not just this last event, but the years that you were mistreated."

"I haven't actually done anything, um, all the way." He hoped she understood what he was saying. She nodded and he let out a deep breath. This was weird to talk about, but it was something that he realized he had questions about. "I want to, with, uh-" His eyes flicked toward the door and back to the doctor. She nodded and smiled, like she had already guessed. "We've done a few things. Nothing major because we were waiting for an all-clear here. And I want to. I'm just... worried, I guess?"

"About what?"

"That I won't be good? I don't know. It's stupid."

"It isn't stupid," she said quickly. "I can't offer much advice in that department outside of tests and make sure to use protection when and if you do anything. But I am going to leave you with a referral to a colleague of mine that will talk to you. A professional. She lives out of state but is a close friend and colleague of mine, so I'll send her an email to discuss online sessions with you."

"I don't even have a phone," Wright said. He hadn't thought about it in a couple weeks. It was like his entire life was gone. He didn't have a family. His mom's side of the family had never been around and his dad's family lived across the country. The most he heard from them was a once-a-year phone call to say happy holidays. He didn't have a job. Or a phone. There was nothing for him to start his life over.

"That's fine," she said. "I'll give her Xander's number, if you're okay with that."

"I guess." Wright wrung his hands in his shirt again. He would need to find a job or something. He couldn't just lay around anymore.

“Okay, good.” She stood up from her chair and moved to the door to let Xander come back in. She shut the door behind him once more but didn’t move to leave the room. “Xander, if you’re okay with it, I’m going to give your number to a colleague of mine to contact Wright.”

“That’s fine,” Xander said. He looked from her to Wright. His face was full of worry. “But I was actually going to take him after this to get one of his own. So I can send you the new number this evening.”

“What?” Wright shifted, crinkling the paper underneath him with every slight movement. “You don’t have to do that.”

Xander walked over to stand next to him and laid a hand on the back of his neck. “I want to. And you’ll need one now that you’re going to be helping out around the ranch. Everyone is required to have a phone on them in case of emergencies.”

“I’m... I’ll be working with you?”

“I’m going to let you two talk,” Doctor Pillar said. “It was nice seeing you again. I’ll send information over to you in a day or two, Wright. Call me if you need anything else.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Xander reached out his hand and shook her’s before she left the room. He turned back to Wright and stepped toward him, holding his hand out still to help him get off the table. “I talked to Patrick this morning when I got up to help with the horses. We have an event next week for the Fourth of July that he says you can help with. He’ll talk to you about it when we get back.”

They walked out of the room and down the hall to the exit. Wright shielded his eyes when they stepped out into the bright sun. It wasn’t even noon yet, but the temperature was supposed to be close to triple digits. In the next second, a hat was

put on his head, pulled low enough to block the rough glare. He looked up at Xander and smiled. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He opened the door for Wright to get in the truck. It wasn’t as big as Patrick’s truck and now that he wasn’t hurting, he could pull himself into the seat easily. The bruises were still healing, but they didn’t hurt much anymore. Sitting on the seat with Xander standing on the ground, he was just slightly taller than him now. “This is a new dynamic.”

“Me being on top?” Wright asked jokingly. Xander rolled his eyes and Wright laughed, the first real laugh this morning. Xander shifted closer, folding his arms over Wright’s knees. “So... I got the all-clear today.”

“I heard,” Xander said. He rested his chin on his hands and flicked his eyes up at Wright. It was the same look he’d given him last night. His hair was out of his face today, brushed back by his fingers and where the ballcap had been. Wright had studied his face many times, awake and asleep. Calm, tired, laughing. No matter what the expression, he enjoyed looking at him. Wright reached up and ran his hand through Xander’s hair. He was the gorgeous one. Wright was just lucky. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go for it,” Wright said easily. He started back at his forehead and trailed his fingers through his hair again. Xander closed his eyes for a moment and Wright heard a soft hum.

“Do you want to keep living in the guest house? With me?” Xander stared at him, waiting for an answer. Wright could feel the way he tensed his arms, waiting for the response. Wright smiled, but he knew what his answer was.

“I’d like to,” Wright said. “But I understand if it’s too much. I appreciate everything that you and your family have done for me.”



“You’re never too much,” Xander said, stopping him from rambling. Wright’s heart nearly skipped a beat at that. He could have just said it wasn’t too much. Instead, he said Wright wasn’t too much. It was small things like that which had Wright’s insides melting. He felt like he belonged when Xander looked at him. When he talked to him, held him. “I would like for you to stay with me. I don’t want to hold you back, though, gorgeous. If you want to go to school or find your own place, I’d understand.”

“I haven’t even thought about school in weeks,” Wright said. “I’m sure I missed a deadline or something. But yes, Xander, I would like to still live with you. If you aren’t tired of me yet.”

Xander smiled and moved his arms to snake around Wright’s waist. He pulled him closer to the edge of the seat, burying his face against his stomach. Wright smiled, laughing softly, as he wrapped his hands around the back of Xander’s head and bent forward to kiss the top of his head. They stayed like that for a solid minute before Xander pulled back and stood up straighter. He was smiling big now, the crow’s feet around his eyes evident.

“Okay, now that that is done. Let’s go get you this phone. Don’t argue with me. Then we’ll pick Paxton up and go home.”

“Home.” Wright couldn’t help but smile at the single word. He lived in a house all his life. It hadn’t been a home for a long time.

“Home,” Xander repeated and then shut the door.

When they got back after another two hours in the city, Wright had one of the newest models of smartphones, per Xander’s insistence, with all of the Lawson family contacts already in it. He didn’t have any other use for it, so he turned it off and stuck it on the dresser before walking back to the main house. Tracy was out on the porch

when they walked across the gravel parking area.

“Welcome back,” Tracy said. “Everything go well?”

“Clean bill of health,” Wright said. He didn’t mention the therapist she was recommending, hadn’t mentioned it to Xander yet either. He didn’t want to ruin the whole living together thing.

“Said that his shoulder healed nicely. Thanks to me.” Wright rolled his eyes, but warmth spread across his neck and cheeks when Xander wrapped his arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer to him.

“I don’t recall her saying those exact words,” Wright said. He waited another beat before pulling away and joining Tracy on the porch swing. Xander made himself comfortable in one of the rocking chairs. The house was nice, homey. It was two stories and the porch ran the length of the front. There were plenty of windows to let in natural light all around the house in different points of the day. Wright knew with the size of the ranch and the sheer size of the barn alone that they had money and plenty of it. Brett gave him the history of the Found Family Ranch and how it was started, where Patrick had fronted half a million for the non-profit.

“Either way, I’m glad you’re okay now.” Tracy patted his knee and smiled warmly at him. “And has Alexander here asked you what your plans are now? Living wise.”

“Contrary to popular belief, ma’am, I am old enough to handle these things.” Wright looked at Xander and then back to Tracy. She was the only person that called him by his full name. It annoyed Xander, but in a funny way. They were all close. “Yes, I did ask.”

“And I said that I would like to stay here, if it isn’t too much.” Wright helped him out. “I want to help out though, in any way I can. Contribute and all. I don’t expect to

stay here free.”

“You’ll have to talk to Patrick about that, hon. But I don’t see any problem with that. We can give Paxton more time off to train and have some time with her friends before she starts college. Did you want to keep staying in the guest house? We have one of the houses opening up in August if you want it.”

Wright shared a look with Xander and they both smiled at each other. Wright knew he was blushing again. He didn’t know how to answer that without making everything awkward and making the whole thing more than an innocent question. “Okay, okay. That look between you two just answered my question. If, for any reason, you need a break from the overbearing nice guy, just let me know.”

“I’m more than okay with overbearing nice guy,” Wright said with a smile. “Lord knows I’ve had enough of the other side of that.”

“You’re here now,” Tracy said. She wrapped her arm around him and pulled him to her side. She was wearing a flowy blouse and jeans today, her hair braided down her back. “And you’re family.”

“Alrighty!” Patrick’s voice interrupted the moment. The screen door opened and Patrick walked out with two plates, one with some sort of meat piled on it and another with kebabs. “Xander, help me with the grill will you?”

“Yes, sir.” Xander stood up and grabbed one of the plates.

“Hey, Wright. I’m assuming all good news today. If you don’t mind, I’m going to steal my little brother away for a bit.”

“By all means,” Wright said. “I think I’m going to go change out of these clothes anyway. Do you need help with anything?” He looked between Patrick and Tracy.

“No, sweetie. You go and do what you need. Supper will be ready in a few hours.”

“I’ll text you when it’s ready,” Xander said quietly when they walked down the steps side-by-side.

They parted with a short side hug and Wright welcomed the silence of the small house. His home. The place he would be sharing with Xander now. He looked at every detail. The one cabinet that he had to get Xander to rearrange because he couldn’t reach the cups on the top shelf. The fridge that held both their favorite drinks and snacks. The sink where their breakfast dishes still sat. He decided to wash them quickly and set them to dry before moving toward the bedroom to change.

He made sure to turn the phone back on and plug it in to give it a full charge. He folded his clothes when he stripped down, since he only wore them for a couple hours. He decided to lay down for a bit. It’d been a long day already and he knew there were some big conversations to have after supper.

The book he’d been reading yesterday still sat on the bedside table. He thought about it, wondering if he should chance continuing it. He wasn’t lying to Xander yesterday when he said it got to him. He ignored the trigger warnings at the beginning, thinking he’d be okay. But the main character was going through abuse similar to him and he couldn’t help but put himself in that situation again. He liked the storyline though and knew there was a happy ending. He hoped he had a happy ending after all of this.

He got comfortable, breathing deep against Xander’s pillow and closed his eyes. Now that he was alone and had time to think, his brain ramped up with the last few weeks and everything that happened. He’d had plenty of time to think over the past month, but it was different now. He no longer was healing, he was healed. He was good to go, clean bill of health. He would look back and see this as the first day of his new life.

A month ago, he had no one but his dad to talk to. A few teachers were kind to him,

even fewer of his fellow classmates. He focused on his studies and took all the classes he needed to graduate a semester early. Having been held back a grade and being over eighteen, there wasn't much the school could do to keep him coming in the last semester for extra classes. So, he'd been home on his own during the days since January. The few times he took for himself were far between and always tainted with worry that he'd be caught or yelled at for being lazy.

But now, he was living with an older man and doing things he never thought he would get to experience. And the best part of it all, his dad had no clue about any of it. He wasn't sure what was happening on that end. Xander was still in contact with the cop that took his statement, but he said there wasn't much of an update outside of the investigation is still open and they're keeping an eye on him. His life was still a mess, but today gave him one more step in the right direction.

He breathed deeper, rolling onto his stomach, and his thoughts turned to Xander himself. He replayed every moment he could with him. From the first day they met, when Wright was in so much pain he didn't even want to talk, to just last night when he cried out into the night air and emptied his load down Xander's throat. He'd been breathless and couldn't stop himself from pulling Xander back up and sealing their lips together. He could taste himself and was surprised he didn't hate it. Instead, he'd swiped his tongue against Xander's and deepened the kiss, reaching between their bodies to jack him off.

~ Wright ~

Monday morning was his first official day of working. He'd spent two hours talking to Patrick about the things he could do- yard work, cleaning, organizing- and what things he might be interested in learning. The ranch was only part of it. Patrick asked him if he wanted to go to school in the Fall, like Paxton. They discussed pay, rent, hours to work, driving lessons. His dad never wanted to spend the money for him to do the required testing to get his license. Xander was supposed to give him some lessons over the next few weeks.

They had an event for the Fourth of July in a few days. Wright was tasked with helping to clean up the field, mowing and weed eating by the fence and around the backside of the guest house. After a quick overview on the riding mower, Wright spent the morning mowing the straightest lines he could up and down the field. He went over it twice, just to make sure it looked good. It wasn't perfect. After lunch, he spent another two hours cleaning around the buildings and even cleaned out the bird bath sitting to the right of the patio of the guest house. He scrubbed it down and added fresh water to it, plucking a few wildflowers to add and let float, hopefully attracting some birds. He'd ask Tracy if he could put a bird feeder up.

The summer sun was insane and everyone made sure he kept hydrated. Before, he'd spend a few hours outside and just use the water hose instead of trekking in and out of the house and potentially make his dad angry for bringing in dirt or anything. Now, he was supplied with fresh sweet tea or ice water every hour. It was a nice change. Xander also made him wear his ball cap and reapply sunscreen twice, which wasn't much of an argument for Wright. By the time he finished, he pulled off his shirt and held the water hose above his head, letting the water cool him off.

“Damn, I could get used to seeing that.” Xander’s voice was behind him and he spun around to look at him. He wasn’t shirtless, but he’d undone all the buttons and Wright had a clear view of his chest. His skin was glistening with sweat. It should be gross, but Wright wanted him closer. He was hot. His hat was low over his forehead, casting most of his face in a shadow. Wright held the hose between them, splashing on the ground, as he openly ogled the man.

“Want to join me?”

“I’d love to,” Xander said. He grabbed each edge of his shirt and fanned himself. “I still have a little bit of stuff to do before we’re done for the day, though. The field looks amazing. You did a great job. Patrick’s impressed too.”

“Thanks.” Wright bent forward at the waist and let the water run through his hair for another second before he turned the water off and rolled the hose back up. “There wasn’t a large yard where I lived, but I got good at making sure not to miss any spots. We had a tree in the back and two bushes up front so I had to learn to weed around everything.”

Xander stepped forward and took the hat from his hand. His fingers trailed along his jaw and then down the column of his neck. Wright tilted his face up as Xander leaned down to kiss him gently. The shade from Xander’s hat covered their faces and Wright was grateful for it almost as much as the kiss. Almost.

“I hope you know that you don’t have to be perfect here,” Xander whispered against his lips.

“I know,” Wright said. Xander swiped his hair back and replaced the cap with a smile. “But I want to make a good first impression for my new boss.”

“Your new boss can stick it if he says anything bad.” Xander stepped back and held

his hand out for Wright to take. They walked hand-in-hand around to the front of the guest house. Wright had already replaced the mower and other tools in the small shed attached off the side of the barn. They had three different types of riding mowers and several more tools and yard equipment. The shed was almost as spacious as the guest house. He hadn't gone into the barn in weeks though.

"I'll be sure to tell him you said that." Wright stopped to grab his shirt where he'd hung it on a chair on the patio. He didn't like taking his shirt off around others.

"Have you met any of the horses yet?" Xander asked as they stood by the open side of the barn. During the daylight hours, it stayed open. It was built close to the house for several reasons, Patrick explained Saturday night. The main one being that wild animals like foxes typically wouldn't dare to come so close to the houses where there was human scents all around. Close being an operative word, of course, because the gravel lot that sat in the middle of the guest house, barn, and main house was large enough for Patrick and Xander's trucks, Tracy's SUV, and the workers that came and went during the day. It could easily pack ten cars with room to walk around them. The gravel crunched under Wright's new boots. Paxton had gone out with some friends and either Xander or Patrick must have asked her to get them because she came back yesterday with the pair. They were exactly his size, so he was leaning toward Xander. Of course he denied it. Like he denied the tennis shoes too.

"Not officially," Wright said. "I've watched them from a distance and in the outside section. But neither of us have been brave enough to get close, I think. I like horses, think they're beautiful creatures, but I don't have any experience with them."

"Let's change that," Xander said. "This was the last thing I needed to do today anyway. I need to pull some things out of the tack room for tomorrow and make sure we're prepared for some trail rides this weekend."

"What are all the summer activities do you do here?" Wright asked. The inside of the



barn was exquisite to say the least. It was a large, open aisle with five stalls on the right and three open stalls on the left. He wasn't sure what the ones on the left were for, never bothered to ask when he'd walk past. Two of the horses were in their stalls, but the others were outside, in the fenced area between the barn and the non-profit houses. He knew from their walks that there was only one way that led off the property to the state road, but a few trails and unmarked dirt roads led around other parts. There was a fork in the dirt road that went to either the main road or the refuge houses. It was protected by a security camera that ran constantly. There was another trail that they walked one evening that led around the acres for the horses and toward the back of the property where the animals they raised for meat and breeding lived. Xander didn't take him that far without the truck, but it was a nice walk through the fields.

The cattle roamed different parts of the land, depending on something Xander tried to explain to him with the grass and making sure they didn't destroy the land or something. Wright had only half listened to that while he'd stripped out of his clothes after a day of working. He already told himself he'd steer clear of the 'big' animals on his own.

"It's mostly just family events," Xander said. "We will rent out the field that you cleaned up today for special events for those that want a country feel. Sometimes it's locals that just need a large space, but most of the people either come from the city or up north and think it's a cute place to live."

Wright smiled at his use of the word cute. He knew that it was hard work to run a place like Family Ranch. Between keeping up the grounds, raising and herding cattle, all the work the horses required; it was a lot and that was why Wright wanted to help out however he could. He wanted to be part of that.

"They're beautiful," Wright said as they stopped by one of the stalls. The horse stuck its head over the door and Xander reached up to scratch behind its ear. It was black in

color with a white patch on its face and much taller than Wright. The nose- snout? - was eye level with him. The horse's head was taller than Xander. The height alone was intimidating in close proximity.

“We'll get them used to you before you work with them or attempt to ride. They're all pretty tame, but you want to be careful with animals as big as them. This is Benito. He's a Mustang and a sweetheart. Just watch him around mud because he has a love for it and will roll around. I ride him mostly.”

At least one of us has something to ride, Wright thought to himself. The joke was there, but Xander was already moving to grab something off the wall next to Benito's stall and he followed him toward the other end of the barn. Xander explained the layout of the barn as they went. There was a door to the left that Xander moved to. Wright tried to take everything in. The smell of the barn wasn't the prettiest, but it was still fresh. He knew that they cleaned the stalls out twice a day; mucking, Xander called it. The aisle area, and the open stalls on their left were all clean. According to Patrick, the barn had been rebuilt ten years ago. It was weathered in areas on the outside but looked new inside. The wood was Pine, giving a yellow-orange glow with the setting sun outside.

“This is the tack room,” Xander said. Wright turned back to the door they'd been walking toward. He tore his eyes from the rafters above him to the room. It wasn't large, about the size of one of the stalls they'd passed. But Wright's breath caught in his throat when he took in the contents. Xander was moving around, talking, but Wright couldn't focus on his words. There were saddles on stands, contraptions hanging on the wall. But, to the right against the side wall, were a bunch of ropes. All colors and sizes: tan, blue, red, multi-colored. Immediately, he was back in the living room with his dad. That one piece of rope, his prized possession his dad called it, laying on the mantle of the fireplace under the TV. It was a tan color, rough, frayed. It burned around his wrists and left welts on his back when it hit him.

“Wright?” a voice was right next to him. It wasn’t Xander, but Wright couldn’t tear his eyes away from that corner of the room. Couldn’t stop replaying the last time his dad hit him with that damn rope. It left cuts on his legs for days, which stung every time the fabric of his jeans rubbed against them. And he had to wear the jeans because the bruises would show if not. “Hey, are you okay? Xander-”

A hand on his shoulder finally pushed him back from the memory and he flinched away from the touch. He could feel the tears on his cheeks. Xander was standing in front of him, with a damn rope or something in his hand. Patrick was standing to his right, his hand on his shoulder. Wright looked down at the floor between the three of them.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Xander’s voice was gentle, right in front of his face. “Wright, look at me please.”

“Give him a minute,” Patrick’s voice was deep, steady. Wright took a deep breath, trying to distinguish the different smells invading his senses. The hay, that musky scent of leather. He could hear one of the horses whining, something was knocking against the wood with a solid thud. He took another deep breath before he could finally move.

He looked up to see both Patrick and Xander staring at him. For a flash, he saw his father. But he blinked rapidly and shook his head. He couldn’t find the words, but he stepped forward and knocked the thing from Xander’s hand and then wrapped his arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. Xander’s arms held him, one around his back and the other brushing fingers through his hair. Wright closed his eyes and breathed in Xander’s scent. He was sweaty but Xander’s natural scent calmed him, grounded him.

“Take him to the house and y’all get cleaned up,” Patrick was saying. Wright didn’t want to move. Not yet. “I’ll finish up here.”

“No.” Wright said. He tightened his eyes and then tilted his head back to look up at Xander and then over at Patrick. “I’m sorry. I just- We can finish here first. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Patrick said. “And I was about to help Xander with this anyway. It’s why I came in. Just go get cleaned up and we’ll talk about it when you’re ready, okay?”

Wright nodded and Xander led him out of the barn and to the guest house. He squinted against the setting sun until they were back inside. “Take your boots off here, gorgeous.”

He stopped and looked down. His body was going on autopilot, his mind reeling a mile a minute. His boots weren’t muddy, but they were grass stained and he was sure there was dirt underneath them. He and Xander had spent yesterday evening cleaning up inside, dancing and laughing together. Wright spent hours having fun, truly enjoying the most mundane tasks like dusting and wiping out the fridge. He’d never had help cleaning before. It was fun. Xander had made a joke about him being on his knees, which had Wright wiggling his eyebrows. He’d been rewarded for a good job cleaning with a body consuming orgasm before Xander tucked him to his side and they fell asleep. It’d been another blowjob and Wright wanted to return the favor, but Xander promised him they’d do something soon. He had a plan, he said.

“I’m sorry, Xander.” Wright found his voice as they walked down the hallway. Xander opened the door to the bathroom and flipped the light on. The dull whirr of the exhaust fan gave him a noise to focus on.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Xander whispered. He shrugged out of his flannel and pulled his tee over his head. Wright’s eyes scanned his bare skin. The dark hair that was just thick enough across his chest and down, disappearing past his jeans. His skin was tan, the start of a line where his shirt had been on his arms. His muscles

were large. Where Xander could nearly wrap his hand around Wright's upper arm, he wasn't sure he could even touch his hands together around Xander's. "We'll talk whenever you're ready. Do you want to shower alone? I can sit right here and wait for you."

"Not really," Wright said. He looked down at his own clothes. His hands were by his side. He couldn't get them to move. "I don't think I'll be able to do much more than stand under the water."

"I've got you," Xander said. He smiled and Wright wanted to sink into his body again. To be safe, to take that memory of his father away for good. Wright let Xander undress him, moving his limbs like a doll. He never took his eyes off Xander's face. His features were hard, his beard growing in the thickest he'd seen it since they met. He remembered the way it scratched his skin, the way he welcomed that feeling as he laid on the bed while Xander explored his body. He focused on that feeling, replacing each lash of the rope with the memory of Xander. "Come here, baby."

The shower didn't last long. Xander kept it short and sweet. He washed his hair and maneuvered him this way and that to rinse him off. Once they were out and towel dried off, Wright finally let his mind take back over and he dressed himself. He settled for a pair of shorts that looked like they were supposed to be mid-thigh length but hit his knees. He paired it with a plain blue tee, one of his own since they'd be going to the main house for supper tonight. Xander dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a red shirt that sat tight across his shoulders and chest. The smallest hint of hair peeked from the stretched collar.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Xander asked when they sat side-by-side on the bed. He was slipping a fresh pair of socks on and Wright curled his toes against the floor. "Was it something I said or did?"

"No," Wright said quickly. "It was the room. The ropes. It brought up a bad memory

for me and I think my brain just went back into shutdown mode.” Xander didn’t say anything else. He put his foot back down and gently took Wright’s hand, interlacing their fingers and lifting it to kiss the back of Wright’s hand. Wright smiled at the small gesture. He looked up into Xander’s eyes, the seriousness of his expression and the way the blue never seemed to dull. Even in the dark night, like when they’d spent hours in his truck bed, his eyes were clear and telling Wright his every thought. At least, he felt like that. “My dad had- has- this rope on display in the living room. He says it was his grandfather’s or great-grandfather’s. I don’t remember. Apparently his side of the family are farmers somewhere up north, I guess. It was an heirloom of sorts passed down through generations.”

Wright took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He focused on the feeling of Xander’s body next to him, his thumb rubbing small circles on his wrist. Doctor Pillar had already texted him with details of the therapist he wanted him to talk to. They had an initial meeting on Wednesday morning to discuss if she’d be a right fit to help him. He’d have to talk about all of this anyway.

“He liked to use it,” Wright continued. He fought to keep his voice steady, but he could feel that fear and tension, the scrapes and cuts, the reddened skin from it being wrapped around his hands. “When he was especially drunk, he would ramble on about how his family worked hard and that I was a disgrace. He would yell at me for being the reason my mom left and then get mad all over again thinking about that and he’d pull it down from its spot and hit me. Or wrap it around my wrists if I accidentally dropped or spilled something. Said if I didn’t have any hands, at least I’d have an excuse to be useless.”

Xander muttered something under his breath, a curse maybe, but Wright couldn’t understand it. He went willingly when Xander wrapped his arms around him and pulled him to sit on his lap. He did it so effortlessly; it was both welcoming and hot. His brain was in no position to think about that right now. Instead, it calmed at the closeness, the safety that Xander was giving him. What he’d been severely lacking

for his whole life. He could barely remember a time when his mom would hold him, comfort him. His dad wanted him to be a man from an early age and that meant coddling wasn't acceptable. Neither was crying.

But right now, Xander just held him tight as the tears flowed. He hated the balance he was in; knowing he was abused all those years, but not realizing how bad it really was until he had to explain it in pieces to someone who was nothing but kind to him. Yeah, being hit by a parent wasn't normal, but it was long after that first hit that he learned it. His dad called it tough love. His mom called it discipline when he raised his voice and locked him in his room for hours without food.

He wasn't sure how long they sat like that. Xander rubbed his hand in a circle on his back, whispered short words in his ear. He massaged his shoulders and the back of his neck, worked his fingertips down Wright's spine. It was all comforting.

"Thank you," Wright said with a smile. He lifted his hands to swipe his fingers over Wright's cheeks and smiled back.

"You don't have to thank me," Xander said softly. "I'll always be here for you. I'm sorry for what you've gone through, gorgeous. The more you tell me, the more I wish I could give him a dose of his own medicine."

"He isn't worth it," Wright said. He twisted, repositioning his legs so he was straddling Xander's lap with his knees on the edge of the bed. He loved how perfectly he fit against the older man. He rested his hands on Xander's shoulders and looked him directly in the eye. "I just want to focus on this. Being here. Living with you. I like this life."

"I like this life too," Xander said. His hands snaked under Wright's shirt but didn't move much beyond squeezing his hips. "But I don't want you to push this down, okay? You were in a lot of pain for a long time, Wright. You need to open up and talk

about it. Promise me that you'll take this therapy seriously." Wright had told him what the phone number was for before they'd gone to bed that night. "I love that you're healed physically, but it's going to take a lot longer to heal the wounds inside."

"Such a poet." Wright rolled his eyes. He would take it seriously. But it didn't mean he couldn't give Xander a hard time about it. He moved his arms to wrap around his neck, leaning forward just slightly so their faces were only inches apart. "I think I have some other internal wounds that you could help me with sooner than later, though."

"You had to ruin the moment, didn't you?"

Wright could feel a genuine smile cross his face and he laughed, his breath fanning over Xander's lips. They closed the distance together. Wright closed his eyes and let the feeling of Xander's lips take over all his senses. Xander's tongue teased him and he let him take the lead without complaint. His hand gripped the back of his hair and Xander tugged to reposition his head to deepen the kiss. Wright scooted forward, pushing his groin against Xander's abdomen. His hands sank lower, dipping under his shorts and squeezing Wright's ass. His hands were huge and he could feel himself growing hard at the thought of those hands on other parts of his body again. For weeks, they'd been playing this game of Don't Hurt Wright. It wasn't actually a game and he knew he needed the time to heal, but now that he had the all clear, he wanted more. He wanted all of it.

"Slow down, baby."

Xander's words were breathy and he pulled back but kept his hands firmly on each cheek. Wright realized he'd been rocking his hips back and forth, too caught up in the feelings. He looked down and saw that Xander had somehow shifted his boxers and his dick was visible and sticking straight up, still trapped in the waistband of his



shorts.

“We have to go to supper,” Wright said matter-of-factly. He looked from his erection to Xander. “You know, you really have the tendency to get me hard in the most inopportune times.”

“This is my fault?” Xander asked. He moved his hands and Wright immediately missed them. “How?”

Wright moved his hands to play with the baby hairs at Xander’s nape. “Because you’re sweet and considerate and amazing and so fucking hot all the fucking time.”

“Filthy mouth, gorgeous.” Xander stood up suddenly and Wright was tossed on his back onto the bed. After a quick breath, he laughed and Xander placed one knee on the bed and leaned over Wright to rest on his hands. He dropped his shoulders and kissed him deeply again. Wright’s hands wrapped around to the back of his shoulders, relishing in the feel of hard muscles and warm skin. “I’m not going to do anything right after you broke down crying. It’s not something I’m comfortable with. But, after supper, if you’re good mentally, we can have a little fun before bed. Sound good?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Xander ~

Wright was doing amazing for his first week officially working. Xander hadn't been too sure about what he would be able to do, but he was pleasantly surprised at the work he did on the fields. He and Tracy fixed up the space of yard between the main house and guest house as a bird sanctuary of sorts. The bird bath that had been abandoned for years was scrubbed and filled with fresh water daily. He'd also hung a new bird feeder and he had plans next week to plant new flowers and build some bird houses. While Xander woke up each morning to help with the horses, Wright would get dressed and spend a half hour making sure everything was filled and then made them breakfast so by the time he finished with the horses, he had a hot plate ready for him before he went on to his other tasks for the day. It was a nice routine and Xander was finding himself looking forward to their easy mornings. He made sure to be the one to prepare breakfast the mornings he didn't have to get up with the horses. His dad had done the same with his mom, insisting they were an equal partnership. Xander also didn't want Wright to feel like he was expecting it like his dad had.

The one thing that Xander noticed, though, was how Wright avoided the barn as much as he could. He would walk around the barn and talk to the horses in the paddock, but he avoided the tack room altogether and kept a good distance from his older brother or any of the workers if they had a rope or something similar in their hands. He'd had his consultation on Wednesday and for now, the therapist decided that they would talk twice a week. Monday before noon and Friday evenings. He used Paxton's laptop, but Xander wanted to go into the city and get him his own. He knew he didn't like having to ask for things, as much as Xander loved when he finally spoke up about what he wanted or needed.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Patrick asked. Xander shook his head, focusing back on the task at hand. He was charting a few details for the cattle, making notes of which of their calves were growing well and which were on the smaller end. They still had a few months before they were weaned but it was looking to be a successful birthing season. “How are my babies?”

“Cute as ever,” Xander said with a smile. The babies were cute, but he knew they’d either be raised for meat or further breeding. He couldn’t afford to get attached to them. “But I was just thinking about going into the city this weekend. Maybe meet up with a few friends I haven’t seen in a while. I want to get Wright a laptop so he doesn’t have to keep bothering Pax for hers.”

“That’s a smart idea,” Patrick said. “I know she doesn’t mind sharing, but I think he’d appreciate it. Everything going okay with him?”

After he froze up on Monday, Patrick had been giving him tasks that didn’t involve the barn. He and Xander talked about letting him take over keeping up with the grounds around the FFR homes. The residents were all nice and they were joining the July Fourth celebration they had for tomorrow. Two of them were the same age as Wright. As much as Xander wanted to keep him safe and locked away in their house, he knew that Wright didn’t have any friends his age. Paxton was the closest in the family, but he needed other people to talk to, to go out with and enjoy life as a young adult.

“I’m running to the butcher’s tonight to get all the meat for the cookout tomorrow. You want to tag along?”

Xander rolled his eyes. He looked over at his brother as he checked off the last item on the list and handed him the clipboard. His brother was smiling, smug as can be. “You know Friday is date night.”

“And yet he still says they aren’t together.” Patrick tried to mimic Xander’s voice, but it was horrible and they both laughed. They walked out of the overhang where the animals came for shelter and food and saddled up on their horses. It was a nice day and the grounds were dry so they took their time riding back to the main house. It was about forty minutes on horseback from the pasture where they kept the babies. Patrick continued to poke and prod, asking questions that would not be asked if anyone else was within hearing distance. They still had about fifteen minutes before the house would come in view when he finally turned semi-serious.

“What’s on the agenda for date night tonight?” Patrick asked after Xander’s second time threatening to shove him off his horse. He’d been giving him nothing but crap for random things, the typical big brother. He loved his family. They knew when to be serious, but also knew when to laugh and poke fun.

“He has an appointment so I’m going to cook dinner. I think it’s just going to be a night in since we have a long day tomorrow.”

Xander might have planned a night in, but he had ideas for how they’d pass the time. Wright was not-so-patiently waiting, dropping hints to Xander any chance he could. They would have dinner, watch a movie, and go from there. He’d made good on his promise Monday after supper with the family. He had Wright on his stomach, his tongue leaving a wet trail down his back. He’d played with his ass, kissing, rubbing, nipping. When he finally gave Wright what he was begging for, his tongue was only in him for a half minute before he came. Xander finished himself on Wright’s ass. He cleaned him off and then they went to bed.

Patrick broke the silence after another minute of riding. Xander would never get tired of the views from the ranch. He liked living in the city, having a place of his own, but the ranch would always be home for him. While he wasn’t saving lives daily here, he forgot how much he missed the physical work. “Do you remember last year with the Fourth of July celebration?”

Xander thought back to it. He'd been dating another man at the time. He was similar in build to Xander, tall, broad, muscles for days. He was a businessman through and through, loving the city. He would visit the ranch with Xander a few times a year, but he hadn't been a big fan of the animals or mud. Or fresh air, apparently. Patrick always bought fresh meat from the butcher for the celebration and would cook it all day in prep for supper during the fireworks. They didn't set the fireworks off themselves, but the neighboring ranch did. Past the other ranch, continuing away from the city lights, was the small town of Fairwind, with one main road, storefronts that needed updating, and a sense of family that cared for the residents. It was a closer drive than going into the city and had the basics that they needed. There was a farmer's market every Friday and Saturday mornings in the town square. Wright had gone with Tracy that morning and loved it.

"I'm assuming you aren't bringing this up because of how good the food was," Xander said.

"I'm not," Patrick said. "I'm talking about the fact that you spent most of the evening on the porch, instead of sitting at the table with your friends and family. You opted out of the trail ride and then ended up leaving before ten."

"I'm aware of what happened," Xander said. He'd moved back to the ranch in January, but the months before that had been strained. They'd had a fight the night before. It was one of the rare holidays that they both had off. Xander missed their party the year before, but Greg, his ex, wanted to go out to a bar with his friends. It was one of their biggest fights, with unfair words shouted between both of them. Greg said that he should come before his family since they were living together. Xander pointed out that he spent most weekends with his friends when he picked up extra shifts. It was a back and forth and eventually, Xander suggested they both do their own things. It was weeks of his ex holding it over his head that he sacrificed his time to be with Xander's family. "Why are you bringing it up?"

“This year is going to be different,” Patrick said. “I held my tongue because I could see you were working hard to keep anyone from noticing, but I could see. You weren’t yourself that day and for the months after. You never let more than a month go by without coming out to visit us and I think you went two months last summer.”

“I know,” Xander said. He stared at the space between Benito’s ears as they continued on. He didn’t like these memories coming up. Patrick was not one to go down memory lane like this, not when he knew they weren’t good memories. “I threw myself into work after that, pulling doubles a lot.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad about it,” Patrick said. “I just want you to know that I can see a difference with you since Wright arrived. You moved back here and worked your ass off, like you had something to prove. But now, you’re smiling and finishing work at a normal time. You’re sleeping better, too. Don’t even deny it. The amount of coffee that Tracy makes in the morning has been cut in half.”

“I don’t drink that much,” Xander said. His argument was only halfhearted though because he did love his coffee in the morning. But now, Wright would usually make him a cup while he got dressed.

“Sure you don’t,” Patrick said. He laughed and reached over to shove Xander’s shoulder. “What I’m saying is, I think this last month has been good. I like Wright. The whole family does.”

“It’s hard not to like him,” Xander said. “I don’t know what it is about him, but he’s great. He’s perfect.”

“He’s a hard worker,” Patrick said. “Has he talked to you about what happened Monday?”

Xander nodded. He knew his brother was leading the conversation somewhere and

this was it. It wasn't just curiosity though. He knew his brother better than that and he was genuinely concerned about it. "He did," Xander said. "His dad is a real piece of shit, Patrick. The things he did, for no reason. He had all the right in the world to be scared of the tack room. I know you talked about him working with the horses, but we might have to hold off on that."

"I'm not going to pry for details, but I need to know that he's going to be safe if he's working here. That's my only concern with whatever is going on. I can't have him out there, or near the animals, if there's a chance he's going to freeze and possibly get hurt."

"I understand," Xander said. "And that's why I'm telling you that you should hold off, for now, on any jobs that require rope. That's what freaked him out. He's working through it, though."

They didn't say anything else the rest of the way back to the barn. It was a nice day out and it was set to be the same tomorrow. He was excited for the celebration, to see some of his family that could only visit for holidays. His aunt and uncle lived on the other side of the state, manning their own farm. They focused on crops instead of cattle and had some chickens. They usually traded fresh meat between them once a year. Like Patrick, they made a good name for themselves and were second generation for ownership. His whole family worked hard and were well blessed with the lives they had.

The sight they came back to made his whole body warm and he took a minute before dismounting to watch. It was a full house, everyone outside enjoying the weather. Extra cars that he recognized as Brett and Wylon's and William and Clark's were parked side-by-side. Wylon was holding their son in his arms. He was only four months old, a child born to a mother in prison somewhere in another state. A friend of a friend knew Brett and Wylon were looking to adopt and got them in contact with the right people. Clark was sitting on the porch steps, watching as Wylon and

William cooed over the baby. Brett and Wright were sitting on the swing, their heads close together as they talked to each other. Paxton was running around in the grass with a little girl. Her laugh and high-pitched screams reached his ears from the barn.

“That’s what we do this for,” Patrick said. Xander looked over at him with a smile. He understood where Patrick was coming from. Coming back from a long day and seeing all the people, family and found family, happy and laughing. Anything was worth that. They finally dismounted and spent the few minutes getting the horses settled and in their stalls for the evening.

Xander rested his hat on the railing when he walked up the steps and toward Wright. He smiled and stood to meet Xander a few steps from the swing. “How was your day?”

“Even better now,” Xander said. Wright, without hesitation on the fact he was sweaty, wrapped his arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. “How was yours?”

“Boring and I loved it.” Wright let him go but didn’t move away from him. “I finally caught the birds using the bath after lunch. Then Brett and them came over and we’ve just been hanging out.”

“Sounds like a perfect day.” Xander smiled. “And I don’t want you to miss anything, but we have a date to get started.”

“A date?” someone behind him, maybe William, asked loudly. Xander had the pleasure of seeing Wright’s face pinken and he looked down at the porch floor. “When did this happen?”

“It’s been happening,” Paxton said. She walked up with the little girl on her hip. She looked vaguely familiar and assumed she came with Brett and Wylon. “Since, like,



day two of him being here.”

“Day two?”

“That’s being a bit dramatic,” Xander said. He had all eyes on him now. He looked at Wright, at a loss for words.

“I think it was day three.”

“You are not helping.” Xander brushed a hand through his hair and turned back to William. “It started because he was being stubborn and wouldn’t take it easy, so we compromised. We would go on walks around the ranch if he listened and took it easy and wore his sling.”

“And this turned into dates?” Clark asked that question.

“Fridays kind of turned into unofficial things,” Wright said finally. “I’m stubborn and wore him down pretty quickly.”

“Stubborn is an understatement,” Xander said. Wright punched his arm playfully. “And as much as I would love to continue being harassed by people who weren’t even born until I was in junior high, we do have to go.”

“You know you were in high school when I was born, right?” Wright said, leaving a crowd of laughter behind them.

Xander didn’t want to think about it that way. He was aware of the age gap, focused too much on it sometimes. But there was no denying whatever they had. He was falling fast and he knew it. Hoped that after tonight, Wright would understand too.

“I didn’t cross a line, did I?” Wright asked when they were in the guest house.

Xander locked the door behind him and kicked off his boots. “With the age thing?”

“No, it’s fine.” Xander turned to look at Wright. He was standing in the middle of the kitchen with his hands down by his side. “It doesn’t bother you, does it? The fact that I’m closer to forty than twenty?”

“Not at all,” Wright said quickly. He stepped toward Xander and smiled. “I actually really like it. Older men are kind of my thing when it comes to what I find attractive.”

Xander smiled. He’d told him that before, of course, but he liked hearing it. Having to remind himself that this wasn’t just a messed up situation. However they met, he knew they were building something special together. He hoped that tonight solidified that.

“Okay, so get ready for your therapy and I’m going to shower and start dinner.” Xander leaned down and kissed him quickly before turning him around and smacking his ass to get him out of the kitchen. He jolted but turned around and smirked at him.

“Do it again.”

Xander rolled his eyes and pointed toward the bedroom. His therapy only lasted for an hour. The therapist, according to Wright, was fitting him in after hours because she wanted to get started sooner than later with talking. He loved that Wright was open about it, keeping Xander in the loop. He would have respected his choice to keep it private, but he liked that he trusted him.

He was planning on making a parmesan chicken dish tonight. Wright had mentioned how he wanted to try making it, but his dad was not a fan of parmesan so he never did. They had it a couple weeks ago and Xander was sure Wright went into a food coma afterward. He would limit what he ate because the last thing he needed was him falling asleep. His shower was quick and he grabbed his clothes while Wright sat on

the bed with his earbuds in. He got dressed in the bathroom and started on dinner after. He didn't cook full meals often; living in the city and working a lot he typically just grabbed food on the way home and then moving back to the ranch, Tracy made it a point to cook enough for everyone most nights.

He was placing slices of fresh parmesan on the chicken when Wright walked into the kitchen. "It smells amazing in here," he said. He leaned against the counter and folded his arms over his chest. He looked extra soft and cuddly in a long sleeve shirt and shorts. He'd been wearing it outside, but in the privacy of their home, Xander didn't have to keep his distance. His eyes were a little red, but he was smiling. Xander finished putting the cheese on and slid the chicken back into the oven to cook a little longer.

"How did it go?" Xander wiped his hands on a dish towel before opening his arms for Wright to step closer. He acted immediately.

"It was hard," he murmured. "But I know it will be for a while. We got through a lot, talking about my mom and when she left, the anger I still have over that. But we ended the session talking about the good things. Mostly this place and how I really enjoy the work I'm doing outside."

"I'm glad it's helping," Xander whispered. "How about you go and take a shower and I'll finish up here? Should be ready in about fifteen minutes."

"I took one earlier," Wright said. "I can help you finish prepping."

"I think you would be better off prepping something else," Xander said slowly, hoping that he both understood what he meant and that he wasn't crossing a line. Wright was clear about what he wanted, but Xander still worried that he'd change his mind. Wright pulled back with eyes wide and a bright smile.

“Seriously? Tonight?”

“If you’re ready for it,” Xander said.

“It’s about fucking time,” Wright said, nearly bouncing on the balls of his feet. “I’ve been ready for this.”

“Slow down, okay?” Xander placed his hands on Wright’s shoulders and stilled him, chuckling a little. “Take a shower, clean up nicely, and we’re going to eat dinner first. And clean that mouth, too. You’re too sweet for it.”

Wright smiled but he stared up at Xander with serious eyes. “I do it because I can. I wasn’t allowed to, before. I promise I don’t do it around anyone but you. It isn’t as a way for me to appear older or anything. It just sometimes slips out.”

Xander could hear the earnestness in his voice and he felt bad. He’d meant for it to be flirty, mostly. But he could see where Wright was coming from. He was an adult, though, and Xander couldn’t actually- wouldn’t dream of it, really- control him and what he said or did. He brushed a hand through his hair and smiled. “I’m sorry, gorgeous. I didn’t mean anything by it. You can say whatever you want whenever you want. I was trying to make a joke.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“No, no. It’s all good.” Xander leaned closer until his lips were brushing the outside of his ear. He held Wright’s head with his left hand and let his right travel down his back, toward his butt. “Now why don’t you go take that shower and think of me slipping my fingers, my tongue...” Xander took a deep breath, pausing and gauging Wright’s reaction to what he was saying. The intake of breath and the way he was shaking slightly under his touch gave him all he needed. “My cock inside you all fucking night?”

Xander laughed when Wright sped out of the room and down the hall. If he'd been a cartoon, he was sure there'd be a cloud of smoke trailing him. He turned back to the last of the prep for dinner and had everything plated on the table by the time Wright came back.

"I don't think you're being obvious enough," Xander said with a laugh. He wrapped Wright in his arms and hugged him tight. His hair was still wet and he wasn't wearing anything more than one of Xander's shirts that fell mid-thigh and a pair of cheeky briefs. It was the total opposite of the jeans and button up Xander was wearing.

"I wouldn't want anything to hinder your plans for tonight," Wright said innocently. He bit his bottom lip and Xander felt just a little more for the young man. He was so earnest and sweet. Xander had to remind himself that this would be Wright's first time.

~ Wright ~

Wright tried to keep his cool during their supper. The food really was good and he told Xander more details about his day. Xander talked about the calves and how they were doing well. They were selling a few cattle next month and had a wedding that wanted to rent out the field for a summer event. They talked about the dinner and if Wright liked it, talked about different meals they'd like to try together. Xander gave him the rundown of all the family he would meet tomorrow. There were cousins, an aunt and uncle that owned a farm across the state, and some other family friends. Margaret Pillar, his doctor, would be coming with her husband and kids. Tracy's niece, the one that introduced William and Patrick in the first place, would be coming with Tracy's mom. Her older sister wouldn't be able to make it due to work. He was excited to meet everyone, but he pushed those thoughts for tomorrow.

"The food was delicious," Wright said as he finally set his fork and knife down. He finished off the glass of water as well. He was just the right amount of full, but his stomach was still flitting with small butterflies. He wasn't nervous, really. He knew he was ready for this. Had been ready and as much as he liked pushing Xander, he respected his wish to wait. He enjoyed what they had done, liked that Xander gave him something when he was good. Maybe he'd have to explore that praise kink a little more. He enjoyed it in the books Xander had.

"Do you want dessert?" Xander asked easily. He finished off his sweet tea and flicked his eyes to Wright. Wright closed his eyes for a second and then shook his head.

"Honestly, if you aren't my dessert, I'm good."

“You’re really ready for this?” Xander asked. He scooted his chair out and tapped his thighs. Wright was out of his seat in an instant and straddled Xander’s. He wrapped his arms around his neck and Xander placed his hands on Wright’s hips.

“I am.” Wright said it matter-of-factly, trying to relay how ready he was in those two words. “But only if you are, Xander. This goes both ways.”

Instead of answering, Xander smiled and sealed their lips together. The kiss was hot from the start and Wright gave Xander everything the moment he parted his lips. He moaned, shifting his hips forward to hopefully repeat their same make out session from Monday. Xander massaged his hips, then his rough hands slid down Wright’s thighs. He couldn’t help but groan as he felt his dick swell at the contact. Wright broke the kiss, but Xander just moved his lips to his jaw, down his neck. One hand left his thigh to move the collar of his shirt off his shoulder and he sucked the skin above his collarbone.

“Shit, Xander. That feels amazing.” Wright shifted his body backward, Xander’s hands on him the only thing keeping him from falling to the floor. He whimpered when Xander’s stubble scraped against his chest. His whole body was already on fire. He dropped his head back, letting Xander have full access to his neck. His lips brushed over his Adam’s apple and to the other side.

“You sure you want this, gorgeous?” Xander whispered the words as his lips trailed back up to his ear. Wright could hear him take a deep breath and then growl. The sound immediately went to his dick and he needed to be naked now.

“Yes.” The word came out more whimpering than he meant, but he didn’t care. Whatever got Xander moving. Shit, he’d even let him have him right there, sitting on his lap or with his face pressed against the table. Maybe one day.

Xander pulled the shirt off Wright’s body, dropping it to the floor next to the table

before standing up and carrying him to the bedroom. He wasn't sure how he did it and continued to kiss Wright at the same time without bumping them into every corner or wall. Wright left the bedside lamp on, giving them a soft glow of light for the night. It was still sunny outside and would be for another hour, but the curtains were closed so not much light came through.

"You are so gorgeous," Xander whispered. He set Wright down, making sure he was steady on his feet before letting him go completely. Wright turned his body to watch him move to the bedside and pull open one of the drawers. "Supplies," he said and lifted a bottle and box up in either hand. Lube and condoms.

Wright's insides twisted, but in a good way. He'd seen Xander's cock before; he wasn't sure how that was going to fit in him without the pain, but he would give it his best.

"I have a question," Xander said as he dropped the supplies on the bed by the pillows. He stepped closer to Wright and smiled. "Do you want me to go easy with you? I'm going to take my time, don't worry about that. I won't hurt you. But how much do you want tonight?"

"All of it," Wright said. He rocked onto his heels. He couldn't keep himself still if he tried. "Please. I've been waiting for this, Xander. I want whatever you'll give me. I want to make you feel as good as you've made me these last few weeks."

Xander kissed him deeply, rubbed his hand down Wright's torso and cupped his erection in his hand. His hands were warm on Wright's exposed skin and goosebumps broke out over his whole body. He needed this. He tried not to rock into his touch, but it was futile. Xander squeezed him, stroking over the fabric where he was tenting his briefs.

"Get on your knees," Xander whispered. He stepped back and dropped a pillow to the



floor for Wright to kneel on. Wright watched him as he undid his jeans and slipped the zipper down. Wright's heart was beating rapidly and he couldn't tear his eyes away from every movement the older man made. He was bursting, itching to get his hands on Xander in any way he could. He'd never given a blowjob before, but even that thought couldn't deter him from the sheer want coursing through his body to give Xander just an ounce of the pleasure he'd received. "Slow, baby. Breathe for me. Now, take me out and lick your hand."

Wright did as he was told. He made sure to keep eye contact as he sucked each of his fingers and then spit into his hand. He'd seen his fair share of videos and hoped like hell that it was as hot for Xander as it felt for Wright. Wrapping his hand around Xander's dick this time was something magical. Maybe not really, but it felt like it. It wasn't the first time he'd touched him, but he'd never been eye level while doing it before. He bit his bottom lip and looked up at Xander as his hand wrapped around his base.

"Fuck, Wright." Wright's hand was the perfect fit around his cock. His fingers just barely touched his thumb as he started stroking. Up and down, up and down. He stared, transfixed at the way Xander grew harder by the second. He licked his lips when the smallest white bead appeared on his tip. He wanted to lick, but Xander hadn't given him any more instructions. "You can taste it, baby. If you're ready for that."

Wright smiled and took a deep breath before leaning forward. He tentatively stuck his tongue out and guided Xander's cock to rest on just the tip. Wright could smell the soap they used, tasted the saltiness of his precum. He closed his eyes and repeated the motion, adding a little movement to his tongue. He looked back up at Xander when he bucked his hips and cursed under his breath. Xander was watching him, staring. It gave Wright all the permission he needed to go further.

He wrapped his lips around the head and sucked. He wasn't too sure what to do with

his tongue, so he let it do whatever felt natural. He moved his hands to grip Xander's legs, still covered with his jeans. He'd only pushed them down far enough to free himself. His gag reflex hit him suddenly and he choked, pulling back to regain his senses.

"It's okay, gorgeous." Xander moved a hand to brush through Wright's hair. "You're doing so good, baby. Getting me so hard."

"You like it?" Wright was genuinely concerned that he wasn't doing a good job.

"Baby, I wouldn't be this hard if I wasn't enjoying myself. Don't push yourself, though. I can promise you this won't be the only time we do this."

Wright nodded, but inside he was singing praises to whatever sex god there was. He didn't believe in any of that religion stuff, but he could still thank the universe for giving him this. Giving him Alexander Lawson.

He straightened his back and started again, moving a little slower this time. He couldn't get half of Xander in his mouth before he was choking, but Xander directed him to use his hand to work the rest of him. Wright swallowed around him, drool escaping at the corners of his mouth regardless. Xander growled, a low rumble of noise that interrupted the sucking noises Wright could hear his own mouth making.

"Shit, Wright. This is going to end much too soon if you do that again. Pop off, baby, and get on the bed."

Wright did as he was told. He was glad Xander was directing him. He would be overthinking everything. Xander knew what he liked and he trusted him. They would learn together, but for now, he liked that Xander was in the lead.

"On your stomach, Wright. Just like last time. If you need to stop, you tell me okay?"

Xander was talking, explaining what he was about to do in filthy, amazing detail as he undressed fully. It involved tongue, fingers, and absolute bliss. He didn't say that last part, but Wright knew it was coming. Wright smiled when Xander's body covered his, his weight pushing him slightly into the mattress. He let out a long moan when Xander started kissing down his body, leaving the same trail from Monday. He kissed the cleft of his ass, shoving his tongue without hesitation between his cheeks and to his hole.

"Oh fuck." Wright involuntarily clenched his body but relaxed it a second later. Xander's hands were on him, squeezing each globe of skin and spreading them so he could gain access to his rim. His tongue was warm, breath cool. Wright couldn't tell which he liked more in the moment. "That feels so good," he moaned out. He buried his face into the pillow he was now hugging. Xander's face was buried in his ass, the shadow of a beard adding to the sensations.

"You taste so good," Xander said loud enough for Wright to hear over the blood rushing in his ears. He was surprised he had any left with how hard his own cock was. It was trapped between him and the bed, but Xander was holding him so he couldn't rock his hips. It was a blissful torture.

Wright cried out into the pillow when Xander's tongue finally breached his hole. It was an odd sensation at first but Xander was experienced. Wright pushed the thought of him doing this with anyone else away quickly. His eyes rolled into the back of his head at the pleasure. He gripped and released the pillow's edges several times, trying to stave off the impending orgasm he could already feel.

The sound of a snap brought his attention back to the room. Xander replaced his mouth with a slicked up finger, teasing gently around his opening. "You're so beautiful, Wright. Look at your hole, already begging for me. Lift up on your knees for me."

Wright obliged and was rewarded with the tip of Xander's finger in his ass. They hadn't gone further than Xander tonguing him. His finger was thick and there was a stretch to it, but he wiggled his hips, hoping to push his finger deeper.

"So needy," Xander commented. Wright could feel his cheeks heat at that, but he couldn't stop. He wanted to feel everything. He never dreamed he'd actually have something like this. A man that was sweet and amazing and caring. Gentle, but authoritative when needed. Xander was the total package and right now, he was Wright's. He didn't want to let him go. Ever.

Wright swore he could feel every line on Xander's finger as it pushed farther into his ass. He whined when his finger disappeared, but Xander's other hand smoothed up and down his back, soothing him. He added a second finger the next time and Wright keened at the feeling. Xander worked faster after that, pumping his fingers in and out and adding a third lubed finger before he announced him ready for his cock.

"Turn around," Xander ordered. "I want to see your face when I'm inside you for the first time."

Wright was sure he would be feeling this for days, but he didn't care. He hoped for it. He watched Xander slide a condom on his cock and then he grabbed Wright's legs at the back of his knees and wrapped them around his waist. Once again, he covered Wright's slight frame with his muscular one. Every one of Wright's senses was screaming Xander! The way he looked, smelled. The sounds he made, the way he spoke to Wright. He ordered him around and praised him in the same breath. They were skin-on-skin now, their bodies pressed together. Wright parted his lips to Xander's seeking mouth. Xander sucked on his tongue, moaning, the vibrations reverberating throughout Wright's body.

"Last chance to back out, gorgeous." Xander rested his forehead against Wright's. Both of them were breathing heavily, sharing the same breath. Wright brushed his

fingertips down the side of Xander's face and smiled.

"Not a fucking chance," he said. Xander let out a breathy laugh and trailed kisses down his neck once more. He flicked one of Wright's nipples with his tongue before sitting back on his knees.

Xander lined himself up and Wright sucked in a sharp breath at the bite of pressure. Xander continued a string of encouraging words as he pushed himself in slowly. Wright shifted his hips several times, the pressure more than what he imagined it would be. Slowly, though, the pain of something new started to turn to a pleasurable feeling. He kept his hands above his head, fisting the pillow so he didn't hurt himself digging his nails into his palms.

"Ahh!" Wright closed his eyes and cried out, lifting his hips slightly when Xander pushed the last inch, connecting them as close as they could be.

"Just breathe," Xander whispered. His hands were massaging up and down the back of his thighs. He moved his legs, holding them up and out by the back of his knees. He was spread open, felt like he was split in half by his cock. It was overwhelming, but he couldn't think of anything else he wanted at that moment. "Take a second to adjust, but I'm going to move soon. You're so tight, baby. It's going to be a quick ride with you hugging me like this."

Wright nodded. He shifted his hips, giving an experimental pull and bit his lip to keep from being too loud. "No, baby. Let me hear all your noises. It's just us. Be as loud as you want." Xander reached up and tugged his lip from between his teeth. Wright tilted his head back with the movement. Xander pulled back to their previous position and pushed back in.

"Fuck, that feels amazing."

“You’re good?” Xander pulled his hips back slightly and pushed back in. The feeling was indescribable and Wright moved a hand to wrap around his own cock as Xander moved more fluidly.

Wright stared at Xander, not wanting to blink even once and miss any moment of this. Xander did the same. He traced Xander’s body with his eyes, every muscle and line, each flex as he pushed deeper into Wright. The way his lips formed the praises he gave Wright. After a minute, he dropped his legs and bent over, sealing their lips together once again. The angle change had Wright seeing stars.

He moved his hand from his own dick and wrapped his limbs around Xander, holding him close. Xander’s hands snaked below him, curling around his shoulders to hold him in place as he added power and speed to his thrusts. The panting, warm breaths in his ear, the way he could feel the strength in Xander’s body, his body stretching around his large cock.

“Fuck, I’m coming. I’m coming!” Wright didn’t have much warning before his own cock was releasing rope after rope of cum, the mess smearing between their bodies while Xander continued to thrust in and out of his body. His orgasm seemed to last forever with Xander rocking into him, hitting his prostate over and over, overstimulating him. But he continued to take it, wanting Xander to finish more than anything.

“Shit, Wright. You feel amazing. Fuck, fuck.” Xander’s words were punctuated with each thrust of his hips. Wright was finally coming down from his high when Xander pulled out of him completely and ripped the condom off. He stroked himself a few times before he tossed his head back and came on Wright’s stomach, mixing their cum together. Xander had a mess on his own stomach and Wright wanted to swipe his fingers through it, to lick him clean.

Xander dropped to his side. The room was hot, Wright could feel the sweat on his

hairline and chest. The only sounds in the room were their heavy breathing. Still, Wright went easily when Xander pulled him closer. They laid on their sides, kissing languidly for however long. Wright had no sense of time anymore.

He'd just had sex. Real sex, for the first time. Not only that; he'd given his first blowjob and it hadn't been humiliating. It was so, so hot. He could feel his cock twitch just at the thought of doing all of that again.

"The joys of being young," Xander said with a smile. His hand trailed from Wright's hip to his ass, his finger prodding at his entrance. His eyes fluttered when Xander pressed two fingers into him and he rocked his hips back, wanting him to go deeper. "You'll have to wait for me to catch up, baby."

"Mmm." Wright closed his eyes and let the sensation of his fingers scissoring, finding his prostate, take over once again. He wanted to keep riding that high. It was amazing. "You feel so good, though. I never imagined it would be like that."

"You enjoyed it, then?" Xander's fingers disappeared and he rolled over to plant his feet on the floor. Wright followed him. He looked down at his body, realizing just how dirty he was. Drying cum was not a pretty feeling. "God, you look wrecked, gorgeous."

He winced slightly at the pain in his backside, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. He laid back down and started stroking his dick, watching Xander stand and walk toward the bathroom. There was the sound of running water for a minute. He came back a moment later with a wash cloth. He was still completely naked, his thighs on full display, cock hanging between them. Wright felt his whole body heat as he realized he'd had that in his mouth. And his ass. He wanted to get better.

Xander cleaned him off and helped him up to his feet. He was half hard but ignored it to follow Xander into the kitchen. He handed him a bottle of water and made him

drink at least half of it. It was a bit strange, both of them standing naked in the kitchen. There weren't many windows, and all of them were covered so no one could see them.

"Are you okay?" Xander's voice brought him out of his head. He smiled and nodded.

"I'm good," Wright said. "I'm just thinking about how easy this is. How normal and safe I feel after all of it."

"I'm glad you feel safe," Xander said. He finished off his water and held out his hand for Wright. Their bodies melted together and Wright closed his eyes to listen to Xander's heartbeat.



~ Wright ~

Wright woke up the next morning and stretched his body, groaning at the soreness of everything. He smiled and welcomed it because it meant that last night hadn't been just the best dream in the world. He was still naked, too. And so was Xander, if the bulge against him was anything to go by. He turned around in Xander's arms to see he was fast asleep. Wright couldn't wrap his head around the fact that this man, with a whole life he lived before, chose him. He had nothing to his name, nothing real that he could offer him. But he still chose him. He'd never been chosen before.

"Good morning," Xander half grumbled when his eyes fluttered open. The room was still dark but Wright was only inches away from his face and could see his blue eyes clearly. He smiled and shifted forward to kiss him, morning breath be damned. "Hmm. Great morning."

"It's still early," Wright whispered. He laid his head back on the pillow and they stayed like that, looking at each other.

"I'll need to get up soon and start helping Patrick with setting up." Xander brushed his fingers through Wright's hair and smiled at him. Wright's breath caught in his throat. He couldn't believe how amazing his life was now.

"How long is soon?" Wright asked. He pressed his body to Xander's. With their heads being even on the pillow, Xander's cock was pressed between his thighs and his own was pressed against Xander's stomach.

"No, baby. I would love to, but we have so much to do today and I already went

harder than I planned last night. Not to mention someone demanded a third round before he'd go to sleep."

Wright pouted, sticking his bottom lip out dramatically. Xander rolled his eyes and turned onto his back, breaking the contact between them. "I didn't think you went too far. I think it was the perfect amount of farness."

Xander held his arm out, intending for Wright to cuddle up to him, but instead he moved to plop himself down on top of him, crossing his arms over his chest and resting his chin on his hands. Their legs tangled together and Wright brushed his toes against Xander's shin. The room was warm enough that the blanket pooling at their waists wasn't an issue. Xander's hands rubbed circles over his skin, the back of his shoulders, his spine, his ass.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," Xander said. "How are you feeling?"

"Amazing," Wright said honestly. "For a second, when I woke up, I was worried that everything was just a really good dream and I was going to wake up and none of it had happened."

"Hmm." Xander's fingers found the sensitive spot above his hips and tickled him. "Does this feel like you're dreaming?"

Wright shouted and laughed, started wiggling to get away from Xander. But he had a sure grip on him and soon enough, he was laughing so hard he could barely breathe. Xander gave him a break after a few seconds and Wright rolled off him onto his back and panted, catching his breath. "That wasn't fair."

Xander's face appeared in his eyesight and he tried to glare at him, but the smile diminished any mean look. It was Xander's turn to laugh. "I don't know how you manage to look both fucking adorable and insanely hot at the same time, but I love

it.”

Wright’s eyes widened just slightly at the use of that word. He said it, but Wright’s brain wasn’t distinguishing the difference. He didn’t hear that word a lot growing up. As much as he didn’t want to be that guy that mistook what someone said, he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t trust himself to say anything and the silence between them grew. Started to get awkward.

“What’s wrong?” Xander asked. He sat up, letting the blanket finally fall to the floor. Wright sat up too, not wanting Xander to move too far and hoping he didn’t ruin the moment by acting weird.

“Nothing,” Wright said too quickly. “I just- It’s stupid.”

“Tell me, gorgeous.” Xander pulled Wright onto his lap. It was one of his favorite places on earth. He didn’t understand why just being close to Xander calmed him so much.

Wright stared at his hands in his lap. Xander’s arms were around him, holding him close to his body. He didn’t seem to care that they were naked. He saw Wright react to something he said and his first instinct was to comfort. One of the many things Wright liked about him. Did he love it about him? Love was such a strong word, something his therapist told him that he didn’t get enough of growing up. They were working through those feelings. Xander may or may not come up often when he got to talking.

“I just...” Wright took a deep breath and laid his hand on Xander’s forearm. “I’m not used to hearing that word. Love. I know you didn’t mean it as you love me, but just in general. I’m sorry if I made it weird.”

“It’s okay,” Xander said. “There are a lot of things I love about you, Wright. You’re

happy, you see the good in people even after you've been dealt a terrible hand, you're funny, your laugh is contagious, you work hard, your body is amazing. I could go on and on if you want."

"No, I'm good." Wright tilted his head back and smiled up at Xander. "I love things about you too. Like how amazing you are, how gentle you were with me while I was healing, how much you love your family."

Xander kissed him, their lips pressing together without any intent to deepen it. He rested his head against Wright's and exhaled. "We'll keep that list growing, gorgeous. Until there's nothing else to add to it."

They stood up then and walked toward the shower. Wright winced slightly when he had to actually move. He heard Xander snicker under his breath and pushed his shoulder as they entered the bathroom. "What was that for? You're the one that said it wasn't too much."

"It wasn't," Wright said. "Doesn't mean you have to laugh at me walking."

"Doesn't it, though?" Xander turned the water on and slid the door back to let it warm up. He crowded Wright against the counter and smiled at him. "Would it ruin the moment for me to add your ass to the list of things I love about you?"

Wright's mind was floating when they left the guest house and trekked to the main one. He could hear the horses and saw Patrick opening the barn door. Xander gave him a quick kiss before walking off to help him. It had taken Wright over a week to feel comfortable enough to just walk into the house without knocking. Outside of when everyone was asleep, the front door was always unlocked. Tracy stood in the kitchen, leaning against the island. She had her favorite blue robe on, the one with little daffodils embroidered on it. Her graying hair was up in a bun. She looked tired, but she smiled brightly when Wright walked in.

“Good morning, dear. You’re up early.”

“Xander said he had a lot to do today to help get ready, so figured I’d get up and offer myself as well.”

“I think the boys have it covered. They have a system when it comes to setting up for family events.” She took a long sip of her steaming coffee before continuing. Wright wasn’t much of a coffee drinker, but it was going to be a long day so he helped himself to a small cup. “Paxton could use your help, if you wanted. She’s making these little hat holder things for her aunt and uncle since she missed both of their birthdays with finals and everything. She’s already up and out on the side porch if you wanted to join her. I think she’s got one of the kids from the FFR houses with her so beware.”

“The baby or the toddler? It should be illegal for toddlers to get up this early.”

Tracy laughed and finished off her cup. “It’s the baby. Poor thing was up half the night, first time being away from her moms and all, but they really needed a break and Paxton is saving up some money for the trip her and a few friends are taking before school starts.”

Wright loved children. When he was off school and his dad was at work, he’d spend some time on their porch watching families play in the yards or the kids riding down the street on bikes. He’d never owned a bike, never learned how to ride one. It didn’t look hard, but he’d seen a few wipeouts and scraped knees. He was older than the kids and didn’t feel right going to ask them if he could try. He liked the idea of happy families, though. Seeing the kids laughing and playing gave him hope.

‘I’ll head out there once I finish this,’ Wright said. “Other than a crying baby, how was your night?”

“It was okay,” Tracy said. “I prepped a lot of the food for today last night when Patrick got back from the butcher. Oh, speaking of- how did your date with Xander go last night? He said he was going to make you dinner.”

Wright could feel his cheeks heat at the mention of last night. Tracy was watching him, waiting for an answer. She didn’t sound like she was prying, just genuine curiosity. He lifted his cup to his mouth and mumbled, “It was good.”

“I’m going to pretend like that answer was about the food.” Tracy laughed while she rinsed her cup out and set it aside to dry. “I’m glad you’re settling in well here, though. You’re going to meet a lot of the family today.”

Wright was happy for the subject change. “I’m grateful for everything all of you have done. I can’t wait to meet everyone if they’re half as nice as y’all.”

“Just watch out for Palma.” Tracy mirrored his stance against the kitchen counter. He was almost done with his coffee and thought about a second cup, but also wanted to go hang out with Paxton. He needed to return her laptop too. “She’s my mama and she will ask you a hundred questions. We’ve already given the heads up for everyone to keep their questions to a minimum, but if any of them get wind about you and Alexander, it’ll be game over. Her and Mama Lawson were a force to be reckoned with back when we were younger.”

“Good to know,” Wright said. He’d been focused on the fact that he was meeting more of the kind and loving family that the Lawson’s came from that it hadn’t crossed his mind they might ask him about his own family and past. He glanced down at the floor, thoughts racing through his head.

“What is it?” Tracy’s voice was calm and gentle. Wright looked up, trying to blink away the tears that seemed to show up unwanted way too often. He’d always been able to control his tears around his father. “Oh, honey. It’s okay. Come here.”

Tracy wrapped him in her arms. He couldn't stop the floodgates. Wright couldn't remember the last time he'd been hugged by a mom. Not even his own. Maybe a short, one armed hug after a day of work or something, but nothing comforting like this. Wright buried his face in her shoulder. She wasn't as tall as Xander or Patrick, but still had a few inches on him. He hugged her tightly. She brushed a hand through his hair and used her other to hold him just as tight across his shoulders. "It's okay, honey. I'm sorry if I brought up bad memories. Just remember you're here now and you're safe with us. You're our family and we love you."

Love.

It was the second time that morning he'd heard the word. The tears came harder. He clung to Tracy and she continued to hold him. He didn't know how to respond to that. He loved this family too. When he finally pulled away, Wright could see tears in Tracy's eyes. She cupped his face in her hands and swiped at the tears on his cheeks. "Honey, it's all going to be okay. Just give it some time. You've already come so far and we aren't going to leave you now, okay? How about you go upstairs and take a minute in the bathroom. I'll let Paxton know you'll join her."

"Thank you," Wright mumbled. He couldn't find his voice to say it any louder. He did as she suggested and splashed water on his face before walking back downstairs. Being in the house already felt natural. The living room had an entrance both in the hallway by the stairs and from the dining room. He found Paxton sitting on the porch, the baby quiet in the car seat. She was rocking her with her foot.

"She just fell asleep again so please be quiet." Paxton's voice sounded tired, but she didn't look it. With her blonde hair and blue eyes, Wright assumed she was popular. Her eyes were grayer than Xander's, but still had specks of that clear sky color. He sat in the seat next to her, the same one he'd sat in when he and William were talking that first full day he was here. "How was your date last night?"

“I already fell into that trap with your mom,” Wright said. “And I’m not spilling details about your uncle.”

“Oh please,” Paxton said and rolled her eyes. “It’s not like he didn’t spill the beans to us. Cooking you dinner and renting that movie you were talking about the other day.”

“He rented a movie?” Wright asked the question before he could think it through. Paxton slapped a hand over her own mouth, eyes wide. Wright’s cheeks, once again, went hot.

“Oh my gosh! Spill the details!” She was whisper-shouting and if Wright wasn’t wishing for a meteor to hit the ground right now, he’d find it amusing. “I mean, not like all of them because that’s my uncle and I’m not actually into picturing him without clothes. Was it good, at least?”

Wright picked his feet up and wrapped his arms around his legs. He wanted to talk about it. Not about the details, as Paxton said, but just in general. He never thought he’d have a life like this and outside of his therapist, he didn’t have anyone to talk to about things. It wasn’t like he could talk to Xander about himself. And Paxton was closest to his age, so maybe he could lean on her for support. Maybe he could reach out to William or Brett. With them being in relationships with other men, maybe they could give him advice. His therapist told him he needed to make some friends. Or try at least.

“It was good,” Wright said. He swallowed and closed his eyes. “It was my first time.”

“Wait, really? Oh god. Why do you have to tell me this when the baby is sleeping and I can’t be excited?” Wright opened his eyes to look at Paxton. She was smiling and his earlier thoughts about her being tired vanished. “My first time was awkward as hell. I guess you skipped over the awkward stage with someone that has experience.”



Wright let flashes of last night fill his mind. The way Xander took control, directed him, moved his body. It was better than any porn he'd watched. The books Xander read were a close second, but his first time had been everything he could hope for. He was getting sappy about it.

"My first real boyfriend was in ninth grade. We didn't date for long and didn't go very far, but he was my first kiss. It was literally in a janitor's closet at school."

"Seriously? I thought that only happened in books and movies." Wright twisted his fingers together but smiled. The conversation was light. He needed that right now. "Did one of you step in the mop bucket?" Wright had watched a movie where that happened one day when he was on Xander's rules of not doing anything.

"He had to go to the office and call his mom to bring him new shoes. I don't know if he actually told the office lady why, but he refused to kiss me at school again. My first kiss with a girl, now. That was something I'll remember for a long while."

Wright remembered William saying something about her being bi. The first two weeks he was here, she was still in school and after that, he'd spent a lot of time with Tracy or Xander. Most of their conversations happened over the family meals. They definitely didn't talk about this kind of thing while eating.

"I'm assuming it was good?" Wright shifted his foot and took over rocking the baby for her. She reached down and grabbed something on her other side, but Wright continued watching the sleeping baby. She was only a couple months old.

"It was at a party. We were playing that game where you spin the bottle and then go into a closet with the person and make out. Most people pretend, but I'd had a crush on the girl for a while and took my chance. We both scored to second base in that little room."

“And second base is...?” Wright was vaguely familiar with the game. He’d read it in one of the books, but the bases he didn’t understand.

“Oh, my sweet innocent child. Allow me to corrupt you.” Wright smiled and glanced over at her. She had something in her hands and was moving it in some type of pattern. She rested her hands in her lap and looked at him. “First base is kissing. Second is touching the intimate areas. Third is going down on someone. And fourth is what you did last night.”

She said that last part pointedly and Wright shook his head. “By that logic, we got to second base the second week of me being here.”

“What? No way. Damn. You’re getting more action than me right now. You need to teach me your ways of scoring an older person.”

Wright scrunched his whole face with the image that popped into his mind. “I totally just pictured you with some eighty-year-old man, all wrinkled and stuff.”

“Now you’re just being mean.” Wright looked from the baby to Paxton and smiled. His smile faded quickly when he realized what was in her hand. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing.” Wright looked back to the baby and tried to control his breathing. His therapist had given him a few breathing techniques when triggers came up. He breathed in, counted to five, and then let the air out through his mouth. He repeated it a few times but couldn’t bring himself to look back at Paxton while she held it.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Paxton’s voice was softer. She resembled her mom in that way. “Do you need me to call Xander?”

“No, I’m okay. Just- Could you put that away?” He blindly pointed toward her,

waving his finger toward where he thought her lap was. He focused all of his attention on watching the baby's chest rising and falling with her peaceful breaths. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He could see Paxton's shadow moving next to him, but he didn't look up for another couple of long and slow breaths. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know if you have the time or the degree to talk about it," Wright said dryly. He let Paxton take over the baby rocking and he brought his knees up to his chest once again. "I'm sorry, that was rude." He dropped his head to the back of the metal chair. "I just- Rope is apparently a trigger for me. My therapist explained it to me, but I don't know. It happened Monday too, when I walked into the tack room with Xander. I just froze."

"I can see how the tack room can be overwhelming," Paxton said. She mirrored Wright's posture and rested the side of her face on her knees to look at him. "I'm not going to pry into your past, but if you need someone to talk to, I'm here. We all are, but I know sometimes talking to Mom or Dad can seem a bit intimidating. And I doubt you want to talk to my little brother because he's very annoying and one time, I swear he intentionally puked in my shoes because he was jealous that I was going to a party and he couldn't go. In. My. Shoes. Wright. Mom made him use his allowance money to buy me a new pair."

Wright laughed and cringed at the same time. "I don't know if that makes me feel like I was lucky or missed out on having siblings." A small voice in the back of his brain told him that maybe if he had siblings, he wouldn't have been abused. But then, maybe his younger siblings would have been hit too and he didn't want to think about that hypothetical situation.

"It's a mix," Paxton continued. "There are times when he's actually nice to me. There was one time in middle school when I was really sick. He was still in elementary

school and he asked his teacher if the whole class could sign a get well soon card for me. I'm pretty sure his teacher thought I was dying or something, but it was sweet all the same. Mom still has it tucked away somewhere."

Paxton continued to share stories of her and her family. He recognized a few as something Xander had already told him, but from her perspective. He laughed at the differences in the stories. Paxton tended to exaggerate, where Xander left out some of the smaller details that made the story better.

"See, Xander told me that one," Wright said after she finished talking about a time when he caught her sneaking out. She'd been staying in the city overnight with him. "He told me that you tried to convince him that you were sleepwalking. Sleep-arguing, I think he said, because you kept responding to him, but didn't move from the spot he caught you by the front door."

"I wasn't always smart," Paxton said. Wright laughed. A genuine one. He winced when the baby shifted in the car seat, but she didn't wake up. The sun was getting higher in the sky now and he figured they'd been sitting there talking for over an hour. His stomach rumbling reminded him he hadn't had breakfast yet. Paxton must have heard it because she stood and stretched. "We should go raid the kitchen and see what's available. We don't usually make any food on cookout days. It's a fend-for-yourself type of thing."

"My specialty," Wright said. He didn't really mean anything by it, but he saw Paxton pause at the words. He turned around and looked at her apologetically. "I'm sorry. That just kind of slipped out. Xander says I have a twisted sense of humor."

"That's the best kind of humor, but can I say one thing while we're still alone?" She waited until Wright nodded hesitantly. He trusted the Lawson family and after their talk, he knew that Paxton wasn't going to be rude or mean with whatever she said. "I say this as someone that had a therapist for three years during high school. I wasn't

always the best person and going through figuring out who I was affected me a lot. I say all of that because I understand triggers and that they can come on suddenly. It sucks feeling like you're controlled by them. But you trust my uncle, right?"

Wright nodded, not sure where she was going with this. He was a little surprised that she'd seen a therapist for years. Her family seemed perfect. They were standing by the door, the car seat swinging gently in her hand.

"I would also talk to your therapist about it, but maybe something like exposure therapy would help you. But with someone you trust and know well. I had to face a lot of things head on to get over them. Most of mine were emotional and not a physical thing, but it might help."

Wright thought about it. His therapist had him going from the beginning with things, working slowly through his mom leaving and when the abuse started. He'd done a bit of his own research on things to help him, exposure therapy coming up a few times, but he hadn't mentioned it to anyone else. He didn't know if he was ready to face any of that.

"I'll think about it," Wright said. "I don't know how Xander could help with that, but I know having him next to me is comforting."

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Xander ~

Can you come to the bedroom when you're done working?

And bring a piece of rope?

A small one.

Please?

Sorry for all the texts.

Xander wasn't sure what he was about to walk into, but the multiple texts and the apology at the end worried him. It was Friday afternoon and he knew that Wright had therapy. He was hoping to convince Wright to go out for a real date soon. Casual dinner and a movie, or something similar, but still a date. In public. With him. His friends had been hounding him to visit too. A few of them had come to visit for the July Fourth cookout, where they met Wright.

Outside of the family that showed up earlier in the day, they kept their relationship to themselves. He'd known his friends for a long time and knew they would try too hard to include Wright with jokes. Xander wasn't sure if Wright was up for that yet. He kind of wished Wright would make some friends too. Maybe he could convince William, Clark, and Paxton to take him out for a night with people his age. As much as he wanted to keep him home and safe, he was barely twenty and needed a chance to act like it for once. He didn't want him to have any regrets.

“Wright?” Xander kicked off his shoes and locked the door behind him. He kept the small rope in his hand. It was a dark blue color and soft. They used it for the horses a lot of times to walk them around. It was the complete opposite of anything rough, like the one Wright had bad experiences with. He shoved it in his pocket, wanting to keep it out of sight until he knew what was going on.

“In the bedroom,” he called out. Xander opened the door to see Wright sitting cross-legged on the bed with his back to the headboard. The laptop was sitting on the bed in front of him. Xander could hear a woman’s voice talking but the smile on Wright’s face took all of his attention. He patted the bed next to him. “Do you have a minute to sit down and talk? I’m with my therapist, but she wanted to talk to both of us about something.”

“Of course,” Xander said quickly. “Can I change really quick? I don’t want to get the bed dirty.”

Wright opened his mouth, probably to say something dirty, but closed it quickly when he remembered they had an audience. “Yeah, that’s fine. We’re just getting started anyway. I’m going to put my ear buds in so just come back when you’re ready. Did you bring the thing?”

“I did,” Xander said. He grabbed a fresh shirt and pair of black sweats from the dresser and walked to the bathroom. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to shower too.”

“Sounds good,” Wright said with another smile. Xander was happy to see it. So far, in all his appointments, he’d ended them with red rimmed eyes. This seemed like a step in the right direction. “Okay, sorry. I’m back.”

Xander made quick work of the shower, only giving himself a minute to let the hot water massage his muscles. He’d gone out to check on the cattle and ended up working with two other guys to get one of the younger ones out of the fence. There

was a lot of sweating and cursing all around.

He towel dried his hair as much as he could and hit it with a brush before walking back into the bedroom. Wright was watching the screen, nodding slightly, when he joined him on the bed. Seeing them side-by-side in the little box at the corner of the screen made Xander realize just how different they were. Wright was small naturally, but he looked tiny in his hoodie next to Xander. It didn't help that he liked his hoodies slightly bigger. AKA, Xander's hoodies. Xander's clothes in general.

Wright took out his ear buds and the room was filled with the therapist's voice. She had red hair with nearly white roots but didn't look any older than himself. Her eyes were kind, same with the smile she wore. He could only see from her shoulders up. "Thank you for joining us today, Alexander."

"Just Xander, please ma'am. It's a pleasure to meet you." Wright snickered next to him low enough he wasn't sure his therapist could hear it.

"Such a gentleman," she said, sitting back to put her hand over her heart. Her southern accent was different from what he was used to in Texas. She sounded more like she was from Alabama. "I can see why you keep him around, Wright. Before I get to forgettin' I have a husband at home, Wright and I wanted to talk to you about something, Xander."

"I'm all ears," Xander said. He was half lying down, resting on his elbow on Wright's left side. His head was pressed against his arm as he listened to the therapist. He couldn't recall if Wright had ever told him her name. In his head, he called her Sunshine. She just had that energy.

"With Wright's permission, I wanted to share a few things..." Xander listened intently as she recounted several instances where Wright had been abused at the hands of his father. Most of them involved a rope somehow. He looked from the



screen to Wright's wrists when she mentioned a particular time he'd been tied up so tight that it left a permanent scar just below his thumb on his right hand. It wasn't a large one and he hadn't noticed it before now. "He brought up something in our last session that I think would be beneficial for him. To at least try. We won't force this and if it doesn't work today, I'm going to pull the plug on it entirely until I think he's ready." Xander nodded. While she gave off a Sunshine character vibe, she was all business right now. "Do you have what he asked you to bring?"

Xander nodded and rolled to reach over the side of the bed. He'd brought it out with him and had subtly dropped it before Wright could see. Now, he picked it up and laid it on the bed in front of them. He could hear Wright's sharp intake of breath and almost picked it back up, but he stopped him. "No, it's okay. Please, just leave it there for now."

"That's good, Wright." The therapist nodded through the screen, but she couldn't feel the strength behind Wright's grip. It was surprising. "Wright brought up what we call exposure therapy. It's not as cut and dry as surrounding yourself with something to get over being afraid of the thing, like some people think. There's a process to it and today will be step one. He's explained to me that living on the ranch, he's going to come across them often if he works with the animals. His hope is that he can be comfortable around them without freezing up or having the scary thoughts coming to mind.

"This is how you come into play, Xander. Wright trusts you." Those words hit Xander right in the heart. He looked at Wright and smiled, turning his head to kiss his arm. Wright smiled back and nodded, silently agreeing with her. "Since our sessions are done online, I can't physically be there with him and having someone he trusts during this process is key. I need you to understand that."

"Yes, Ma'am." Xander sat up a little more, adjusting the laptop so they stayed in the frame. He wrapped his arm behind Wright's waist and held him close. He could see

where this was going now. “I’ll do whatever to help him. He knows that.”

“Good, good.” She nodded and seemed to be jotting something down. When she looked back up, her smile was still there but she was also business again. “Like I said, today we’re going to start small. I would like to see Wright holding the rope. But Wright, like we discussed last time and earlier, I do not want you to push yourself okay? If you can’t do it, you need to tell both of us, okay?”

“Yes.” Wright nodded and wiped his hands on his pants. He straightened his back and nodded, visibly steeling himself for what he was about to do.

“Remind yourself as many times as you need that you are safe and this is to help you take back control over a part of your life.” She was good. It was all the things that Xander told Wright time and time again. “Now, Xander, could you adjust the laptop so I can see both of you fully and pick up the rope?”

Xander did as she asked. It was only a few feet long and he held one end in either hand. The middle part sat on the bed between them. “Wright, how are you feeling seeing it? Remember, I need constant thoughts from you in order for this to work.”

“It’s scary, but not as bad. It’s a dark blue and looks new.”

“We just got them a couple months ago,” Xander supplied helplessly.

“Wright, do you think you could reach out and grab it? Xander, don’t let go of it okay?” Xander nodded but moved his hand slightly so Wright could easily grab it. It took several long seconds, no one spoke. Xander looked at Wright’s face. He was laser focused on the rope, his hand stuck in the air between his lap and the rope. His tongue swiped over his bottom lip.

“You don’t have to do this,” Xander said softly. “But just remember I’m right here.

I'm the one holding it and you know I'll never hurt you, gorgeous. Give me the word and I'll throw it as far as I can out the window."

A crack of a smile gave Xander a bit of relief. Wright turned his head to the laptop. He focused on his therapist while his hand inched closer until his fingertips grazed the material. Xander did his best not to move it. After a few seconds, his fingers curled around it and he held it loosely in his grip.

"That's good, Wright." His therapist jotted something else down and then continued. "Do you think you could hold it on your own?"

Wright's body froze and he turned a terrified expression to Xander. "I'm- I'm not ready for that. Please don't let go."

"I won't," Xander said quickly. "You're doing so good, though. You've got this. I'll hold on as long as you need me to."

"Listen to him, Wright. He's right there with you. If you need to, move your hand so it's closer to his. Hold the rope tighter. You have all the control here. It's just yarn and... I actually don't know what's inside a rope. Xander?"

"This is a braided nylon," he explained. "It's the most common type of rope we have around the barn. It's a synthetic material."

"Keep talking," Wright mumbled. His hand tightened around the rope. Xander smiled at him.

"I use this one with Benito." He looked from Wright to the laptop. "That's my horse. I use him for work. Do you see this one end and how it's a bit frayed? Benito decided I was taking too long for his snacks while we were out for the day that he grabbed it and started chewing. Imagine playing tug-of-war with a horse his size. Patrick

wouldn't let me live it down for days.”

Wright took a deep breath and reached his other hand out so he was mirroring the way Xander was holding it. The sides of their hands were touching. Xander held it firmly, but Wright's knuckles were white and he was sure his fingernails were digging into his palms. He wasn't smiling and his breathing was deep, but he seemed fine otherwise. Xander forgot about the laptop for a moment. “Do you want me to let go?”

“No. Not yet.” He shifted his fingers, feeling the material against his skin. “Can you keep going? Just a story or something.”

“You're doing great, Wright.” Sunshine said. He really needed to get her name before they said goodbye. “You're already doing more than I was imagining for today. I want you to talk, tell me what's going through your head.”

“It's not the same as what's in my head so I think that helps.” Wright swallowed and Xander nodded. They did have that rope, but they could work up to it. He was so proud of Wright right now. “It's like a ghost effect, though. Like the leg thing with people that lose them but think it's still there? It's like I can feel it wrapped around my wrists and ankles the longer I look at it.”

Xander fought himself not to react. He still held the rope at either end, but Wright was now slowly running his hands back and forth, letting the material slide through his palms. He repeated it several times before he spoke again.

“I know it isn't going to hurt me,” Wright said like a mantra to himself. His eyes flicked up to Xander. “And I know you wouldn't hurt me. No one here would. It has no control over me.”

“Yes, Wright. Great job.” Sunshine was full on smiling now. Xander was so, so

proud of him. There would be many, many rewards coming his way. “I want to stop there today. I don’t want you to push yourself, okay. Take the weekend to relax and we’ll work more on Monday. I know that Xander, you can’t join us on Mondays, but I would like Wright to continue working on this. If at any point during the week, Wright wants to try again, I just ask that you record the session. Just like this, so I can watch it back. Wright, that means I need to hear all of your thoughts if I’m not present, okay? And Xander, I’m trusting my patient with you. Don’t let him do more than he should. Any big moves, I want to be present for.”

Wright dropped the rope and nodded. Xander slipped off the bed and motioned that he was going to let him finish up his session. He only had a few minutes left of the hour. He walked back outside with a smile, looking down at the rope as he walked back to the barn to replace it. Paxton and Victor were working on mucking the stalls. They all took turns doing it and since he had this thing with Wright, it was their night. He had tomorrow’s shifts.

“I can’t tell if that smell is from the horses or you,” Xander said as he passed Victor. “Do you ever shower, dude?”

“He slipped in one of the piles,” Paxton laughed out. “I told him those shoes weren’t good.”

Xander looked down at the shoes and shook his head. “Why are you wearing your good shoes out here? Your mom is going to muck you when she finds out.”

“I don’t know what that is supposed to mean,” he said back. He was going into the ninth grade next year and still his innocent, sweet nephew. He looked up at Xander, head slightly tilted, like he was waiting for an explanation. Xander ruffled his hair and continued toward the tack room.

“How was it?” Paxton asked, following him. “Wright told me about it yesterday

when he got the laptop from me. From the way you were smiling, I assume a good start?"

"Yeah," Xander said. "His therapist said it was better than what she hoped for. She still wants to take it slow, though. And asked that we record anything we do during the week with it."

"Sounds kinky," Paxton said.

"No. You are too young to even know what that word means. I don't want to hear it." Xander opened the tack room while she laughed behind him and got back to work. He did a quick scan to make sure everything was in its place and then shut the door. "I think I'm going to take him into the city tomorrow to get him his own laptop so you can have yours back."

"I don't mind sharing," she said with a grunt as she worked. The weather was still hot out, the sun at least two hours away from setting. "I'm just glad he's working through it in a healthy way and that he has someone that cares about him standing beside him."

Wright was walking out of the bathroom when Xander came back inside. He smiled and closed the distance quickly. Xander held out his arms and laughed when Wright all but jumped into them, wrapping his legs around his waist. "I did it."

"You did it," Xander repeated. "I'm so proud of you."

"I'm proud of me too," Wright said. He wrapped his arms around Xander's neck and hugged him tight. Xander started toward the bedroom, his hands firmly on Wright's ass. "What are you doing?"

"Showing you how proud I am of you," Xander replied easily. "We have about forty

minutes before supper is ready.”

Wright started kissing across his face, down his jaw and neck. “How ever will we pass the time?”

“I have a few ideas,” Xander whispered in his ear. Wright moaned when Xander squeezed his ass. Thankfully, the bedroom door was still open. “Only if you’re up for it, though. You just did a lot there.”

“So up for it,” Wright said. He rocked his hips, still in Xander’s arms. Xander laid him on his back and slowly extricated himself from Wright’s limbs. Wright’s eyes looked him over as he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it somewhere on the floor. “God, you’re so hot.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, gorgeous.” Xander pushed his shorts and boxers down in one move. He ran his hand down his chest, stomach, and wrapped his fingers around his dick. He knew Wright liked the hair on his chest, often ran his hands over it as he fell asleep. His cock was surrounded by a decent patch, trimmed and taken care of but still thick. Wright was all hairless, a light patch on his groin only as thick as the hair on his legs. They’d mostly taken showers together, but Xander wondered if it was natural or something he kept up. He didn’t care either way. “I’m not going to be the only one naked, baby. Strip down.”

It was almost comical how fast Wright moved after that. In a matter of seconds, his clothes were laying haphazardly on the floor with Xander’s. He was lying on his back in the middle of the mattress, his head propped up on the pillow. His body stretched out before him, Xander couldn’t help but stare at the expanse of skin. He had to touch him. Now.

“What do you want today?” Xander asked. He sank down to the mattress, lying on his side next to Wright. They moved together, pressing their bodies close so not even a

sheet of paper could pass between them. He couldn't resist kissing him deeply, seeking entrance into his mouth to taste him. Wright sucked his bottom lip before licking into his mouth again. He may not have a lot of experience, but the man knew how to kiss, that was for sure. Xander's mind was starting to go blank as the ache in his growing erection intensified. Wright seemed to be in the same boat and he rutted against Xander's body.

"I need you in me," Wright said. "I don't care which hole."

"That's the hottest fucking thing." Xander meant for the words to be a thought, but it was too late to take it back. His cock twitched at the thought of being inside Wright again. It'd only been a few days since they fucked a second time. He wanted to make sure he didn't go too hard too soon on him.

Wright rolled onto him and ground his hips into Xander's. "It'll be even hotter when I'm riding you. You can use those thigh muscles to wreck into me again and again."

"Baby," Xander groaned out. While Wright was still going through a lot and they'd just hit a milestone not half an hour ago, it seemed that he was the most calm and open during their intimate times. From the beginning, he'd pushed Xander's buttons, joked about it. Pushed not really the right word. Gently persuaded. Because if Xander looked back now, he could laugh at his past self for thinking he had any self-control when it came to the young man. He loved every moment spent with Wright.

"Don't," Wright said quickly. He pulled back just a little and stared down at Xander. "Don't go easy on me. I'll let you know if I need you to stop, okay? I'm going to grab the lube and a condom and I want you to get me ready to take that monster cock of yours."

"You are too good for my ego, Wright." Xander moved his head to follow Wright's movements. His body stretched, ridges and dips of his ribs on full display. He gained



a few pounds since coming to the ranch. He hadn't been skin and bones, but he could tell that having someone else cook for him for a change was doing good for him. Xander ran his hands over Wright's body as he moved back to straddle Xander's body. His legs were spread wide, his knees on either side of Xander's hips. The difference in their sizes was still baffling to him. He had no idea what Wright saw in him, but he was damn happy with it. "Kiss me. I need my lips on you, baby."

"Fingers, ass, kiss." Wright barely got the words out before his lips were on Xander's. He got the message though; he wanted Xander to open him up while they kissed. It was hard to concentrate enough to blindly pour the lube on his hand and it got a bit messy, sure that a few drops fell to Wright's back.

He swiped his tongue against Wright's while his finger teased around his rim. He was tight, but his hole sucked his finger in greedily. Wright started moving his hips back and forth immediately. He broke the kiss and laid his palms flat on Xander's chest, pushing himself up so Xander had a clear view of his torso and the tip of his cock. He added a second finger and watched as Wright's face twisted, his mouth hung open. If he wasn't muttering a soft string of curses and requests for more, Xander would have been concerned.

"Fuck," Xander muttered. He wasn't subtle as he bucked his hips to get Wright to move just a bit and he grabbed his own dick, squeezing the base to keep himself from coming at the sight alone. Wright looked down at him with a knowing smirk. Xander was breathing hard and he didn't dare to let go of himself until he was sure he could get through the rest of prepping him without finishing. "You are a damn wet dream, Wright."

"Did you almost come just from watching me?"

"Knowing that it was my fingers in your ass that had you looking so blissed out, yeah."

“Can’t be having that,” Wright said with a smirk. “Here, maybe this will help.”

Xander was at a loss for words when Wright changed the direction he was facing. He was on his hands and knees, his ass resting on Xander’s chest now. He wiggled his hips. “Shit. This is not helping.”

“Then get a move on,” Wright said. He almost sounded annoyed that Xander wasn’t touching him. If Xander had any self-control, he’d drag it out. But not today. He tried to regain some composure and grabbed Wright’s hips, pushing him to the side and moving to cover his back with his body. Wright went willingly, albeit with a small squeal from the movement, lying on his stomach, trapped between the mattress and Xander. The room filled with carefree giggles and Xander knew he was in love with him. “Not what I had in mind.”

“You’re a little tease, gorgeous.” Xander’s hand trailed down his side and found his hole. From his mishap earlier, there was still plenty of lube. He pushed his finger in all the way and smiled when Wright moaned and bit his bottom lip. “Can’t talk now, huh?”

Xander added a second finger, eyes fluttering at how tight he was. He curled his fingers and found Wright’s prostate, smiling to himself and kissing the back of Wright’s neck when he cried out with pleasure. He pumped his fingers in and out, increasing the speed, sometimes hitting his prostate and sometimes intentionally missing it. Wright was panting below him, his hands were gripping the blanket at the foot of the bed.

“Not so tough now, are you?” Xander meant it as a joke, but he felt the way Wright’s body tensed. And not in an orgasm-about-to-hit kind of way.

“No. Don’t- Fuck, please don’t say that again. Not like this.”

Xander didn't have to ask any follow up questions about what he meant. It must have been something his dad said once. He didn't want to ruin the moment, to have him think of anything but Xander and this moment. He pulled his fingers out and turned him to his back. He loved how easy Wright let him control his body, manipulate him into whatever position he wanted. Xander's feet were under the pillow as he buried his face against Wright's groin. He licked, sucked on his thighs, nipped at his hip.

~ Wright ~

Wright's thoughts were solely back on Xander and the way he was fucking his tongue in and out of his ass. His finger alongside it, he was being stretched open in the best of ways. That short phrase had threatened to bring back a slew of memories, all the times his dad told him he was worthless, not strong enough. But then Xander had flipped him over like it was nothing and had his mouth on him in less time than it took him to take a full breath and the thoughts were gone again. He was here, with Xander. The man he trusted and found hot as fuck. The man that apparently loved to have his tongue on every inch of his body. Not that Wright was complaining. Knowing that Wright could have a man as muscley and hot as Xander throating him gave him a sense of power.

"Xander." The word was a plea on his lips. He tried to buck his hips up, to get away from the probing digits and the warmth of his mouth. He was so close to coming already. "I think I'm more than ready."

"I'll say when you're ready," Xander said. Wright looked down the length of his body. Xander's hand was wrapped around his cock. His very normal sized length, unlike the one that he was gearing up to take. He was sweating with anticipation. "This is payback for that little comment earlier."

"It's not my fault you're a one and done man in your old age." Wright said. He squealed and twisted his hips when Xander pushed three fingers into him. He was edging him. Something that Wright loved to read about but fuck it was annoyingly good in person. He was more than ready for Xander's cock, but he wasn't going to get it if he kept up. He couldn't help it though. He was in a good mood and Xander

was surprisingly playful in bed. Wright loved the easiness of it all.

He'd been worried all week about how this therapy appointment would go. He'd talked to Paxton about it some more yesterday, just talking about if it was a good idea or not. She reminded him that if he wanted to do more than grounds work, he'd have to at least be comfortable around the ropes. It was hard, touching it willingly, but he'd done it and he'd been proud of himself. The way Xander smiled and looked at him gave him the extra boost of confidence he needed. So, he could take a little more edging if it meant they continued this playful back and forth.

"You just wait, baby." Xander removed his fingers and swiped them on the side of the bed. He moved himself back to his original position against the pillows. Wright sat up but didn't move toward him right away. He was waiting. He loved the dynamic of being bossed around. It was hot and had his cock leaking and threatening to end this way too early. "Look who is on the edge now."

"Shut up." Wright moved quickly to straddle his hips again when he held out his hand. He lifted up while Xander slipped the condom on behind him and then guided Wright to sit back a little. "Finally."

Xander swatted his ass playfully. Wright let out a long moan as the pain of his hand turned to prickles of pleasure. "Did you like that?"

"I'm not telling you," Wright said. He lowered himself onto Xander's dick and let out a moan for a whole other reason. "Oh fuck!"

It took him only a minute before he was fully seated, his ass to Xander's groin. He was so full. He placed his hand on his abdomen, sure he could feel Xander rearranging his insides already and he hadn't even moved.

"Do you want to move or me?" Xander asked. Wright looked at him and placed his

palms flat on his chest again, hoping it was answer enough for the man currently balls deep inside him. The first thrust came hard and he cried out, pleasure ripping through his body.

“Oh shiiiiit!” Wright had no control over the noises coming from his mouth as Xander showed him just how strong his legs were. His thighs were magic. He was pumping in and out of him fast, hitting his prostate again and again. Wright was taking it, feeling that bubble of pleasure growing until it threatened to burst.

“Come on, Wright.” Xander grunted the words. “Fuck, baby. I need you to come for me. I want to see you come untouched.”

Wright didn’t think about that. This entire time, he’d not once touched himself. He looked down Xander’s chest, watched as his own cock bobbed with each thrust of Xander’s hips. Drops of cum were already across Xander’s stomach. He ran his fingers through the hair on his chest and tossed his head back. Xander’s hands were on his hips, guiding him up and down, matching his thrusts. Wright was completely at his mercy and loving every second of it.

“Fuuuuuck,” Wright moaned the curse as his body tensed and then let go. Ropes of cum made a mess everywhere, the motion of Xander’s hips still bouncing his entire body up and down. The first spurt hit Xander’s chest, the second Wright’s arm, the third hit his own stomach. It was messy and hot. Xander sped up, grunting and cursing all the same. He pushed Wright’s hips down as his hips bucked up, burying himself as far as he could inside his ass. It was glorious. Amazing. The best and hottest thing Wright had ever experienced. “Oh, oh. Fuck, Wright. Goddamn, baby.”

Wright’s arms gave out and he had one remaining brain cell that told him to drop down to Xander’s side instead of on his chest. They were both breathing heavily. Both of them took a few minutes, staring at the ceiling, to regain their composure. When he could form even a single word in his head again, he rolled onto his side and

propped himself up on his elbow. His ass was absolutely sore but he welcomed it.

“That was epic,” Wright said with a wide smile. His cheeks hurt from it. “Oh my god, your legs are the best thing to ever be formed on this planet.”

“Epic?” Xander asked. He didn’t move anything but his face to look at Wright. He, however, took the opportunity to ogle. His eyes were glowing. Wright knew Xander usually shaved his beard on Thursday, but he’d skipped yesterday and it was growing nicely. His eyes trailed down to his chest, where Wright’s cum was starting to dry. It was messy, clumped in his hair, a bit of it covering his nipple. Wright reached up and swiped it away. Xander shuddered but grabbed his wrist and guided his finger to his lips. Wright’s mouth dropped open as he watched Xander suck it off of his fingers. His dick twitched with renewed interest already. “Epic,” Xander whispered sarcastically.

Wright rolled his eyes but leaned in to kiss him. It was slow and deep, exactly what he needed and wanted rolled into one. He loved it, loved everything about the moment. They were interrupted with Wright’s phone pinging. “Oh shit. How long have we been in here?”

“I don’t know,” Xander said. They both got up and Wright reached for his phone on the bedside table. It was almost six.

“We have, like, two minutes to get to the house for supper. That was Paxton texting.”

“We could just skip and I’ll make us something,” Xander offered. Wright would take him up on that if Tracy hadn’t told him they were having her famous mashed potatoes and corn on the cob tonight. The way she cooked homemade potatoes was literally a gift. “You want Tracy’s food, don’t you?”

“I appreciate the offer,” Wright said as he pulled his pants up. He eyed his arm,

where the cum was dried now. He looked over at Xander, who just smirked and turned to walk into the bathroom. Wright followed him and they cleaned their skin before finding new shirts and heading out to the rest of the family. They shared a bashful look before Xander opened the door and the usual chatter and clinking of dishes welcomed them.

Wright was on his second helping of mashed potatoes when Paxton said his name excitedly out of the blue. He raised his eyebrows and froze with the fork in his mouth. Xander laughed beside him and Wright nudged him when he relaxed again.

“Sorry,” Paxton said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I was just going to say, William and Clark are planning on dragging Brett and Wylon out for a club night next weekend. Would you want to join? Please say yes so I can join them too and not be the odd one out.”

“Oh.” Wright swallowed the potatoes, sighing inwardly at the perfect ratio of spices and butter. And by perfect, he meant a shit load of butter. He could only dream of cooking as well as Tracy. “Um, I don’t know.”

“You should do it,” Xander cut in. Wright looked over at him and tilted his head slightly in confusion. He was really quick to say that. Was he getting tired of Wright already?

“Why?” Wright asked. He tightened his grip on his fork and tried to keep his tone even. He tried to settle his thoughts before they could run wild.

“Because, gorgeous.” Xander brushed his hair off the side of his face with his knuckles. “You’re going to be twenty in a couple weeks and you’ve never had the chance to actually be a teenager, have you? Go out. Have fun. Dance with friends.”

Wright’s first instinct was to say he didn’t have any friends. He never talked to



classmates outside of school, rarely talked to them in school unless he had to for a project or something. But he realized that that wasn't the truth anymore. He and Paxton could talk for hours if they had the time. He'd met a few of the people that were living in the houses and they got along. The two moms were older than him by at least six years, but there was another living in one of the single room homes. He was trans, running from home, but making a name for himself in the social media world. He was funny and planned on moving out at the end of the month and moving to New York to live with a cousin that he didn't know he had until recently. Then there was William and Clark, even Brett and Wylon. He'd only met Wylon twice, but Brett stopped by a couple times a week just to check on everything or give Patrick some paperwork. They would catch up, look at pictures and videos of baby Paul, and then Brett would ask him how he was doing. He understood having an abusive parent. He'd gone no contact with his family and where Wright didn't miss his dad, Brett missed his sister and mother. William got his number and texted him periodically. Sometimes he'd just send him gifs, ask how he was, see if he needed anything. He was really a great guy.

"You have to come," Paxton nearly whined. "I don't want to be the odd one out with two couples. They'll probably end up sharing stories about being responsible and stuff. Plus, they can drink and I can't. Please, please go with me."

"You deserve to have some fun, Wright." Tracy smiled and nodded at him. "You've been working hard. You both can have the weekend off and just have fun."

"Are you sure?" Wright looked around the table. First at Patrick, who nodded. Tracy smiled. Paxton was on her phone texting someone, probably William. Victor was concentrating on a book he was reading. He loved that Tracy and Patrick didn't control their kids to sit at the table and force them to talk or anything. They typically joined into the conversation when they could. Victor would quip with a funny story or comment here and there, but mostly he seemed to prefer to just watch the others or read. Wright could understand that to an extent, the people watching. He looked to

Xander last.

“Yes,” Xander said. “Wright, I don’t own you. You can do whatever you want with or without my, or any of ours, permission. You are an adult. Have fun. Just stay safe.”

“We should invite some friends over that night,” Patrick said. “Sans the family and kids. I’m thinking a bon fire in the field and a few beers.”

Wright focused on his food. He’d seen Patrick have a few beers in the evening before, when they would spend some time on the porch after supper. He hadn’t seen Xander drink, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t or doesn’t. Maybe he just didn’t drink as much as Patrick. But the way Xander laughed and they started talking about past hangouts with their friends told him that he did enjoy drinking. Wright wasn’t sure if he’d be comfortable around Xander if he was drunk.

They finished up supper and Xander and Wright offered to wash dishes since they came in late. Wright dried and stacked the dishes neatly while Xander, Tracy, and Paxton all continued their stories. Paxton was sitting on the counter and Tracy sat at the island. It was totally domestic and normal and Wright wished desperately his brain would stop ruining the moment. He tried to join in, laughing when seemed appropriate, but his mind was overfocused on his experiences with someone drinking.

By the time they made it back to their home and stripped down for bed, he knew Xander could tell something was wrong but he wasn’t pushing it. Xander had to get up to help with the horses tomorrow and make a round for the cattle but that was it. They had most of the day to relax. It was a rare Saturday. Maybe they could work on another rope thing.

“Okay,” Xander said once his arm was securely around Wright. He was cuddled up against Xander’s side. Both of them were only wearing briefs. Wright was on his right side, his leg bent up against Xander’s thigh and his hand brushing over the hair

on his chest and stomach. The lingering traces of his deodorant was noticeable only because Wright was laying with his head on his shoulder. “What’s up, baby? You’ve been quiet since supper. Do you not want to go next weekend?”

“It’s not that,” Wright said quietly. He tilted his head back to look at Xander. The angle was a bit odd, but he could see his face clearly enough. He tried to smile, but it didn’t feel real. “I’d like to go. I don’t know if I’ll fit in there or enjoy it, but you made a good point. I’ve never been able to act my age and go out and have fun. I think it would be a good experience at least.”

“Then what is it?”

Wright swallowed, trying to word his fears in his head before saying them. “Do you promise not to get mad at me if I tell you what’s bothering me?”

Xander shifted to his side, holding Wright’s hands between their bodies. His eyes were full of concern and Wright really didn’t want to have this conversation. The thing Xander said earlier, about not owning him, came to mind. He didn’t want Xander to think he needed to change who he was just because Wright was still messed up from his upbringing.

“Of course not, gorgeous. Talk to me.”

“I don’t like the idea of you drinking. Getting drunk.” Wright said. He stared at Xander’s chest, unable to look at his eyes. He shifted his legs, his knee brushing against Xander’s thigh. He played with Xander’s fingers, shifting uncomfortably. “It’s like you said, you don’t own me and I don’t own you. But- I don’t know. I just don’t like thinking about coming back to you and seeing you drunk. I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

Xander leaned forward and kissed Wright’s forehead. He wasn’t expecting that. He

closed his eyes for a moment before Xander pulled back and started talking. “First off, I don’t want you to ever feel like you can’t tell me something because you’re scared I’m going to react badly. I understand where you’re coming from, Wright, and I get it. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I haven’t actually had a drink since we met. With everything you told me, I figured being around someone that was drinking probably wouldn’t be good. Second, I might have one or two, but I’m not a big drinker. I don’t like having a hangover the next day so I don’t drink to get drunk. I spent my twenties doing that and I’ve gotten it out of my system. Finally, and you can ask Patrick and Tracy about this, but I’m a very, very loving guy when I get a good buzz. Super affectionate and cuddlier than usual.

“If we do have friends over, I might have one or two drinks with them. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to totally forget about you and ignore your healing progress. I’ll sleep in the guest room or something if you want me to. Or I’m sure Paxton would love to get y’all a hotel room for the night.”

“I appreciate it,” Wright said. “But I don’t want to spend a whole night away from you. I might make you shower if you smell like alcohol, but I don’t want this to be a relationship built around you tip toeing around me until I’m no longer messed up. I want you to have fun too.”

“Believe me, baby, I’m having all the fun I need.” Xander smiled and Wright let out a long breath. He’d been going over in his head all the ways that conversation was going to go. Most of them involved Xander actually getting mad at him and accusing him of trying to control him. “And I’m proud of you for talking about it. You may not see it, Wright, but you are getting better. When you first got here, you barely spoke and kept to yourself those first few days. Now, I have to fight you and Paxton when you gang up on me.”

Xander moved closer, pressing their bodies together. He shifted down, leveling his lips against Wright’s ear. His hand traveled down Wright’s body, squeezing him in

all the right places to make Wright consider trying for another round before they go to sleep. “Besides, I’m pretty sure you’re going to have a long night fighting off all those guys that want to dance with you. Just promise that at the end of the night when you’ve had your fun, I’m the one you come home to.”

Wright shivered at the growly nature of his voice. It was like his deep morning voice, but intentional so that southern accent was heavier. The way he said ‘home’ though. Wright was immediately on board with that.

“I’ll always come home to you as long as you want me.”

~ Xander ~

After their conversation about Wright's fears, Xander spent most of the night thinking. He knew that healing and therapy was a process. He understood that Wright had a horrible upbringing, way different than his where he came out without fear to his whole family and dated a good bit in college. He understood where Wright was coming from about the drinking. He'd been around Patrick and even Tracy with a beer in their hands in the evenings and it didn't seem to bother him. Or maybe it was because they poured them into glasses so he didn't register it as alcohol. Either way, Xander's late night thoughts had him wondering if it was scaring him because of how close they were. His dad was supposed to be someone he could trust, not be terrified of. Did he see Xander the same way? As someone that he trusts and he was scared that would be taken away with the addition of a couple drinks?

He talked to Wright when he woke up around nine, after caring for the horses. He'd been sleepy-eyed and cuddly, but they did talk. Really talk. Wright confirmed his fears about things changing if he drank and while Xander promised him that he would never hurt him, he knew he'd have to put it into practice. So, with Wright's knowledge, he enjoyed a single beer with his older brother on the porch after supper on Sunday night and then again on Wednesday. He wasn't going to push it, but he did want to show Wright that he meant all the words he said. He brushed his teeth thoroughly and then kissed his boyfriend silly and snuggled up next to him each time. One beer did absolutely nothing to him, but he wanted to prove a point. They documented the moment on Wednesday with a photo for his therapist, figuring she'd want to see that progress on top of the rope stuff too.

By Thursday, Wright seemed more open to the idea. He even sat in Xander's lap in

the rocking chair while he sipped on his drink. It was set to rain all day Friday so they all pulled extra shifts to prepare for it with getting the horses bedded and ensuring the cattle's shelters were intact and stocked. It was a long day and they had a late supper around eight-thirty. The rain was already in the air, clouds rolling in from the distance. Xander loved the rainy weather. The last storm they had was rough, but this one was supposed to be a single day thing and then pass over without much fuss.

Friday morning, as predicted, was wet. He could hear the rain hitting the tin roof above them. Wright was sleeping soundly next to him, his face squished into the pillow and his lips slightly open. He was so fucking adorable and every morning he watched him, Xander wondered how on earth he was lucky enough for him to come into his life. He was so close to saying those three words to him. The words had been repeating in his head all week, but he wasn't sure if it was the right time. Too soon, he told himself. There was no way that Wright could love him back so soon.

He leaned down and kissed his head before getting up to start their breakfast. It was Paxton and Patrick's turns to care for the horses this morning, so he could take his time. He'd still peek out and see if he could see anyone. It was already seven-thirty, so he was sure they were nearly done anyway.

He moved quietly through the house, aiming to stand outside for a minute. He flicked the coffee maker on his way, already prepped. Wright always made sure they had it ready to go. He suggested getting one with the timer so they would wake with the pot already brewed. Apparently he had that before coming to Family Ranch. The outside world was in a state of rest. The animals were up, he could see the barn door cracked and one of the horses was braving the misty rain. Everything smelt fresh, like only a good rain could do. It was one of his favorite smells.

Arms snaked around him and he jolted for only a second before relaxing and turning his head to the side to see Wright. It was a bit comical to see him hugging Xander's frame from behind. His hair was ruffled, he seemed to be wearing just a large

hoodie, bare legs on display for anyone to walk by and see, but his eyes were crinkled from a genuine smile. “Morning.”

“Good morning, beautiful.” Xander side stepped him so he could swap their positions. “You didn’t have to get up yet. Aren’t you still tired?”

“I’m good,” Wright said. “I wanted to enjoy as much time with you as I can before I’m dragged away tonight.”

“You’re going to have fun. Clark and William will keep you safe and I’m sure Paxton will provide more than enough entertainment.”

“I’ve never danced before,” Wright said. “I don’t know how it all works. I’ve seen movies and stuff, but it looks crowded and hot.”

“It’s definitely hot,” Xander muttered. He remembered the times he’d been to clubs when he was Wright’s age. He’d gone with friends at least twice a month while in school and he always had fun. Growing up in Texas, he wasn’t the only one that developed muscles working on a ranch and most of his friends had no problem hooking up with girls. He wasn’t closeted by any means, but most of the guys that asked to dance with him were what society deemed twink. Younger men with slight builds that looked good, but it wasn’t what he was interested in. Or at least, until now. His brow furrowed and he looked at Wright in a new light.

“What is that expression for?” Wright asked. He reached up and smoothed his thumb between Xander’s eyes.

“I just realized that you’re going to be hit on by a lot of older men. I’m assuming you’re going to a gay club. We definitely didn’t have those when I was younger. You’re like prime real estate for anyone with eyes.”



“Thank you?” Wright laughed and hugged Xander tightly. “But I can promise you that I won’t be interested in them. I’ll be thinking about you the entire time some random stranger is grinding up against me, sweaty, hands on my waist.”

“Okay, you better stop now. I know what you’re doing and it isn’t going to happen.”

Wright squirmed and Xander could see the smirk and glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “Maybe I’ll let them buy me drinks.”

“Non-alcoholic,” Xander warned. Wright nodded, his smile faltering for just a second. He wanted to kick himself for even mentioning it. Of course he wouldn’t be drinking. Not even because of his age.

“I wonder if I could find two guys and just sandwich between them,” Wright mused. “What do you think? I’m picturing two men, probably a couple, taller, broader, practically hiding my body from the world. Maybe they’re kissing each other while I let their bodies move against mine.”

“You are fucking wild,” Xander said. He nipped at Wright’s ear and buried his face into the side of his neck when he started giggling. “You’ve also been reading way too much because I know what book that scene came from. You are not allowed to sandwich between a couple, got it? They might think- Fuck, I’m going to have to have a full-on conversation with the others about keeping you safe, aren’t I?”

“You’re the one that pushed me to go,” Wright said. He tilted his head to give Xander more access to his neck. He wished he wasn’t wearing a hoodie, but all the same, he ground his hips against Wright’s backside. “Shit, Xander. Not out here.”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Xander whispered. He licked the spot of his neck he’d been kissing, then sucked on it with a little force. Wright didn’t move, but after a few more seconds, his body stiffened and he turned around in Xander’s arms.

“Are you seriously marking me right now?” Xander tossed his head back and laughed, loud enough to be heard over the rain picking up. There was the start of a hickey on his neck and Xander smiled smugly. “Jealous much?”

“Hard much?” Xander retorted. He looked around and then reached a hand between them and cupped Wright’s groin. He was hard. “How about we go inside and take care of this and then I’ll make us some breakfast?”

“I guess I can live with a blowjob and breakfast,” Wright said, adding a tad of dramatics to his tone that made Xander roll his eyes. He flipped the lock and crowded Wright against the fridge. Wright’s eyes went wide but then he rolled his hips into Xander and that was all the invitation he needed. “Mmm, hold on. Before we start this, can I ask you something?”

“What is it?” Xander asked. He wanted to be kissing Wright instead of more talking, but he’d at least hear him out. Maybe he could multitask, grazing his nose along his jaw.

“I have my therapy later,” Wright said. His voice was already hitching, raising an octave like it did when he was horny. “And we haven’t done anything more with ropes this week. I know- Shit. I know that was partly my doing, but could we do something today? Ugh. Xander.”

The last two words were drawn out and Xander smiled. His hands were under the hoodie, tweaking his nipples until they were hard between his fingertips. “We can do something in a bit, but right now I want you in the bedroom on the bed.”

“I was thinking- Shit, hold on Xander. I’m genuinely losing my train of thought.” Xander sighed and pulled back. His smile brightened when he saw how affected Wright was. He palmed his own cock and groaned. Wright was breathing hard and moved to take off his hoodie, leaving him standing in just his briefs. Now Xander

was the one losing his train of thought. He held his hands in front of him. Xander took in the sight and wanted nothing more than to fuck him right there against the fridge. He would gladly clean whatever mess was made. “Maybe we could combine the two?”

“What do you mean?”

Wright reached out his hands and ran them up and down Xander’s forearms. He laced their fingers together and smiled. He looked like he owned all the confidence in the world. “I mean, I really like the idea of you tying me up during sex. If you’re comfortable with it.”

Xander could honestly say it hadn’t crossed his mind once. But as soon as the words were out of Wright’s mouth, he could picture it. He could see him spread out on the bed, hands tied above him while Xander used his body whatever way he wanted. His dick was definitely on board with the idea. But he had to think realistically. He opened his mouth to say something, but Wright cut him off.

“Before you say anything, hear me out. I talked to my therapist about it Monday. Since you had to work, Paxton filled in and you know we made more progress. I can hold it on my own now. You make me feel the safest and I have fun having sex with you. My body is on fire with feelings and emotions and I think that that would help to keep me from fully focusing on having something around my wrists. It doesn’t have to be rope. I think it’s just the thought of something being tied around my wrists or ankles, binding me, that scares me so much. But if it’s you that’s in the room with me while I’m bound like that, I know that whatever comes next will be pleasurable. Not just for me, but for you.”

“Can I think about it?” Xander asked. He liked the idea, loved it really, but he didn’t want Wright to rush into anything. Maybe they could start small, outside of the bedroom. “I want to help you, but I don’t know if I’m comfortable with the thought

of it possibly giving you a bad memory of us.”

“I understand,” Wright said. If Xander looked too far into it, he thought he could detect a hint of disappointment. But like Xander stayed mindful of him, he respected Xander’s words and smiled. “So... about this blowjob?”

“Bedroom,” Xander directed. Wright smiled and led the way. Xander shook his head and scooped up the hoodie he’d discarded. He enjoyed the view of Wright’s ass in his briefs the short walk to the bed. He could feel his own cock perk up at the way his hips swayed. He knew Wright knew he was watching him and he was giving him a little show. “Can I add something else to our list?”

“What is it?” Wright was standing by the foot of the bed. He had his hands by his side, letting Xander drink in all the bare skin, his soft edges, the way his briefs were tented.

“I love how confident you’ve become in the bedroom.” Xander closed the distance and kissed him until they were both breathless. “You’re becoming more comfortable in your own body and every time we do anything, I’m amazed at how forward you are in asking for what you want. You’re also a wicked tease, Wright. And I fucking love it.” Xander swallowed. His hands were curled around Wright’s sides, holding him close to him. He stared into his eyes and smiled. His heart swooned. It was such a cliché word, but it was like a weight sitting on his chest with how much he loved the man standing before him. He was the complete opposite of what he went for in the past, but everything he wanted in a life partner. Kind, caring, hardworking. He understood Xander’s need to work hard, to care for those around him. How he sometimes needed a little time to himself to decompress. He’d give Xander a few minutes in the shower before joining him or he didn’t rush him when he took one alone.

He made Xander laugh, too. They had fun, in and out of the bedroom. Even a task as

mundane as going into the city to buy him his own laptop with the money he made working had turned into a singing competition in the car and Wright somehow convinced him to get them fast food on the way home. Wright recalled only two memories where he got to eat out in his life and Xander vowed to give him plenty more memories like that. There was also a joke about eating him out, to which Wright had gone bug eyed because the windows were down and they were sitting in the parking lot to eat.

“I love you.”

It took Xander a second to realize he said those words. Not Wright. Xander held his breath and waited. A moment passed, a second. He started to worry that maybe Wright didn't feel the same. He was young, just experiencing what it was like to be free and do what he wanted. Xander couldn't judge him on that. He'd had two serious partners over the years and a handful of hookups between. If he was just figuring himself out and-

“I love you too.” Xander had just enough time to hold his arms out for Wright to jump up and wrap his legs around Xander's body and his arms around his neck. They stared at each other for a beat. “I mean, I think I do. I don't have much experience with intimate love. Or, really, love in general. But I love this family, I love living here. It all makes me happy. And when I look at you? It's like this feeling overtakes me and I can't think of anything else but how beautiful my life has become in the last two months. I also just really, always want to have you inside me. Like every second of every day. It's inconvenient, honestly.”

“Well, after that confession, I don't think blowjobs are going to cover it this morning.” Xander dropped Wright onto the bed and he squealed but then adjusted himself so he was laying with his head on the pillows. Xander covered Wright's body with his own and kissed him hard. He kept himself propped up on his hands and his knees on either side of Wright. His cock was growing harder, twitching in the space

between their bodies, like it had its own mind to search for Wright.

“Do we have time to do more?” Wright asked. “I want to, but I don’t want a repeat of last weekend. Also, why do we always reserve Fridays for our fucks? Have you noticed that. Why can’t you just take me randomly on a Wednesday or something.”

“You’re so romantic,” Xander said. But his whole body was definitely on board with that idea. “And talk way too much.”

“You should do something about it then,” Wright said playfully. He licked his bottom lip and raised his eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

Xander dropped his head to Wright’s chest and laughed to himself. He loved this guy. And each day, Xander could see him get more comfortable and show a little more of who he really was. “We don’t have anything to do right now. The ranch hands are here today to keep an eye on things, but right now, it’s just us.”

“Good.” Wright moved his hands to Xander’s shoulders and brushed his fingers up the sides of his neck. “Now, what do you have in mind to cement these confessions of ours?”

“I love it when you wake up in a good mood,” Xander said, more to himself than for Wright to actually hear. He kissed his chest, flicking his tongue against one nipple before sucking it between his teeth. Wright’s back arched off the bed and his hands went to Xander’s hair. He opened his eyes and stared at Wright, enjoying the way his lips were parted, his cheeks pink. His whole body was starting to flush. He didn’t like going shirtless outside like Xander did some days so most of his skin was still a paler color, showing that flush even better. He got an idea and lifted his head. “I don’t want to tie you up, but we can start slow. Wrap your hands around the bottom edge of the headboard and leave them there until I say so.”

The headboard was a solid piece of wood, but there was a gap between the mattress and it where Wright could easily fit his hands to curl around it. He reacted immediately and Xander kissed him once more as a reward. "Keep them there. If you get uncomfortable for any reason, say..." Xander drew a blank at a word. He was about to just go with the red light, but Wright spoke up.

"Cowboy."

Xander tilted his head and Wright laughed. His whole body shook underneath him and the feeling was incredible. It was a wonderful sound, music to Xander's ears. He rolled his eyes though. "Cowboy? Really."

"Why not? You got that song stuck in my head the other day. Plus, I've never ridden a horse before, only you. So it fits."

"Oh my god." It was Xander's turn to laugh. "Cowboy it is. We're going to change that later, though."

"You keep thinking that." Wright wiggled his body, bringing Xander's attention back to what they were doing. He made quick work of getting Wright fully naked. Then he took his time prepping him, pushing him to the edge repeatedly, seeing how much he would take or if he'd break and move his hands. He never did. He was gasping, writhing on Xander's fingers, begging for his cock. But not once did he move his hands. Not even when Xander straddled his chest and had Wright use his mouth to get him hard again.

When Xander slipped the condom on and guided his cock to Wright's hole, he didn't waste time in going slow. He pushed in in one fluid motion. His whole body reacted. Xander's eyes traced the marks up and down his torso, the most prominent still the one on his neck. Xander had never been one for markings before. He'd never been one for a lot of things before Wright apparently.

“Oh shit, yes. Hard, Xander. Please.”

Xander obliged willingly. He pushed in more, rocking his hips back and forth while Wright took him all the way. Xander held Wright's right leg in one hand, wrapped the other around his waist. Wright's ass was resting against his thighs and he started pumping his hips fast and hard. Wright cried out but still he didn't move his hands. Xander leaned forward and kissed him hungrily, shifting his angle inside him just slightly.

“God, baby. You feel so good.” His cock was encased in pure ecstasy, the heat of Wright's body sending tingles through his body. His balls pulled tight, but he didn't want this to end yet. He slowed his movements, pausing long enough to let the rising orgasm subside. Wright grunted, shifted his own hips. Xander's hands steadied around his hips and kept him from moving. “Slow down, baby. You're going to take whatever I give you, okay?”

Xander moved one hand to wrap around Wright's cock. He was leaking, a few drops trailing down his shaft toward his groin. Xander's fingers moved from his cock to the love bite forming on his right leg. He was pumping his hips slowly, long strokes that made Wright whine needily. It wasn't enough to make him come.

“I love looking at you like this,” Xander said. His eyes met Wright's and something unleashed in his chest. “You're so different from everything I'm used to but fucking perfect at the same time.”

Wright's eyes closed and he bit his bottom lip when Xander pulled out nearly all the way and then sank back in. He wasn't moving fast, but the pressure of his rim stretched around him had his balls tightening up again. He repeated the motion, addicted to the feeling of Wright's body taking him.

“Xander.” His name on Wright's tongue sent a wave of pleasure through his body.



“Fuck, you make me feel so good every time. Please, I need to come.”

“You’ve been doing so good,” Xander said. He sped up his strokes on his cock and pumped his hips faster, making sure to press as far into him with each thrust that he could. He watched Wright struggle, his arms above his head and the way the tips of his thumbs were turning white from the strength he was using to grip the headboard. His body shifted on the bed with each thrust forward from Xander, his lips were slack and he was making beautiful noises. The sounds of their bodies connecting filled the room. Wright’s lips were open, his words a constant flow of encouragement for Xander to keep going.

“I’m. So. Close!” The last word was a yell and Xander watched in absolute amazement at Wright’s cum shooting far. It really did happen every fucking time and it was hot. His body shook below him as the first rope practically sprayed straight up toward Xander. He adjusted the angle he was holding his cock and the second rope landed across Wright’s chest, almost hitting his chin. “Oh fuck, Xander. Fuck, fuck.”

Xander stroked him a few more times, emptying his balls with more cum than he’d ever seen in a single orgasm. Xander picked up speed and rabbited his cock in and out of Wright’s hole. He could feel Wright’s body pulsing around his cock and it was all too much. He growled low in the back of his throat and pushed in, wanting to be so far inside the man he loved that he’d feel him for days.

~ Wright ~

“Idon’t know if I can do this,” Wright said as he stood in Paxton’s room. William was with them. Clark, Brett, and Wylon were all downstairs waiting for them. He looked at himself in the mirror again. He nearly didn’t recognize his reflection.

“You look great,” William said. He was wearing a tank top with a backwards cap and black jeans. He looked every bit the city boy he was and even though he was almost twenty-six, he looked like a typical frat guy in college. Paxton was wearing a pair of shorts and a bright yellow t-shirt. It made her skin look darker, her tan more prominent. She was wearing a pair of rainbow slip loafers. They looked awesome. William had brought some more clothes over for Wright to try on, knowing that he didn’t have anything more than sweats, jeans, and tees. He claimed they were his but the way they fit perfectly and looked brand new made him question it.

Paxton and William had taken it upon themselves to sort through the outfits and put something together. He was wearing a pair of jeans that flared a bit at the bottom. They felt like a size too big, but William said they were supposed to be like that and held them up with a black belt. The shirt was mesh, something that Wright never in a hundred years thought he would ever wear. It was black and when he put it on, it didn’t cover his entire stomach and he could see his nipples through it. He tugged on the shirt once more.

“Stop messing with it,” Paxton said. “You look hot. And in a sentence I never thought I would ever have to say, my uncle is going to be tearing your clothes off later.”

“If he even lets me leave in this,” Wright said jokingly. He lifted his hand to mess

with his hair, but William slapped it away. Not hard, but enough to get Wright to stop fidgeting. He'd already put some type of product in his hair.

"He doesn't get a say in how you look tonight," William said. "If it makes you uncomfortable we can go for another outfit, but honestly Wright, this outfit was made for your body type. You're going to have fun tonight. You'll be surrounded by all of us and safe. Let yourself try this out and if it ends up not being your thing, we'll know for next time. You can bring a spare outfit in the car."

"You've never been able to act your age," Paxton added. Wright continued to look at himself in the mirror but he was listening to their words. He promised himself, and Xander, that he would do his best to have fun tonight. Everything from going out to just standing here talking about outfits was a new experience for him. He wanted to embrace it all. At least for a night. Then he could come back and enjoy his new little life with Xander. He could do this. "Let go and have fun."

Wright took a deep breath and turned away from the mirror. They were an odd combination for a group. He knew that Clark and Wylon were wearing jeans and regular shirts. Brett was going a little more risqué with a white blouse mostly unbuttoned and a pair of burgundy pants that showed off everything he had. At least he wouldn't be the only one showing off skin, though his pale color was nothing compared to Brett's smooth, brown skin.

They walked downstairs and out the front door. Everyone was outside, milling around. It had been raining most of the day but finally cleared out in the last two hours. It was humid. They'd all had supper together- food that Clark and William brought over so Tracy could have a break from cooking. She grumbled a bit that she loved cooking but ultimately let 'the boys' bring something.

"Ho-ly shit." Those words had everyone's attention turning to the three of them. Wright felt like they were all staring at him. It wasn't just their group here tonight;

faces that he hadn't seen before and some he vaguely remembered from July Fourth were sitting or standing around as well. His eyes searched the people until they landed on Xander. He was sitting on the porch swing.

"Damn, Wright." That was Wylon's voice. It was deeper than any of the other guys' but not as much as Patrick or Xander's.

"Um." Wright swallowed and fought the urge to brush his hair back from his forehead. "Do you like it?"

"I know the question was directed at someone in particular in this crowd," Brett spoke up. "But I can see why Xander here is so obsessed."

"I am not obsessed," Xander grumbled. He stood up and walked the few steps across the porch to where Wright was still standing by the door. Wright noted a few confused glances sent toward Xander. They didn't tell anyone last time but Wright's brain immediately went to Xander keeping him a secret. Was he okay with his friends knowing he was dating someone so much younger than him? Paxton and William had both walked down the steps already. "You look... Wow."

"It's not too much?" Wright asked. He looked up at Xander, genuinely wanting his opinion. He knew that ultimately it was his own decision and he kind of liked it, hoped he would get more comfortable the longer he wore it. He definitely preferred his sweats or a hoodie, but at a night out every now and then he could see himself getting dressed up like this.

"Do I want you to go to a club full of strangers looking like that? No." Xander leaned down so his lips brushed Wright's ear. "But do I want you to come back so I can admire it in private? Fuck yes, baby." Xander wrapped an arm around him and for the first time since they started.. dating? Were they dating? That was a question for another night. For the first time since they got together, Xander kissed him in front of

everyone. It was more than a peck. His tongue slipped past his lips and Wright could taste the sugar from the sweet tea on his lips.

An eruption of cheers and applause sounded around them and Wright couldn't help but laugh into the kiss. They'd been touchy around the family and he'd discussed a few details with Paxton, but this was the most PDA they'd shown outside of the guest house. He hoped no one ever saw that part of their lives together.

"I would say get a room," William called out. "But we need to get going before the clubs start filling up. Let the guy go, Xander, and enjoy your boring night. We'll send pictures!"

"Be careful, okay? And text me if you need anything. I can be there in twenty minutes."

"The club is like forty minutes away," Wright pointed out.

"Yeah, but if you need me, speed limits will only be a suggestion." Xander kissed his forehead once more and then stepped back so Wright could head down the steps and to Clark and William's car. They were all riding together tonight. The car was spacious, with two rows of seats behind the driver and passenger. Wright and Paxton took the back, Brett and Wylon in the middle. Wylon had a burgundy shirt on that he realized too late matched Brett's pants. William and Clark weren't coordinated, but Wright noted how they held hands over the console most of the way into the city. There was no denying for anyone that they were together, even without the matching gold bands.

"Are you excited?" Paxton asked while Clark tried to find a parking space. The streets were lined with cars, people were walking around, some disappearing into buildings, others standing in lines on the sidewalks. They were in a part of the city that he never went so he wasn't too sure if they considered this busy or not. It was

definitely more people than Wright had ever seen before. The nasty weather most of the day didn't seem to deter people from having fun tonight.

"I'm a nervous excited," Wright admitted. "I'm still feeling like I should be back at the house helping with something."

"This night is for all of us," Wylon said, turning around in the seat to look at Wright. "But especially for you. You're young. You deserve to have some fun, Wright. And we're all here to make sure you do. Now, Xander told us you don't know how to dance."

"Oh, grab that spot babe." William cut off Wright's response and then turned in his seat to face the rest of them. "Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt. Wright, we are so going to teach you how to dance tonight."

They parked and filed out of the car. There was a line out the door and it took about a half hour for them to get in. Wright showed his ID and he and Paxton got stamps on their hands to indicate they weren't drinking tonight. Walking inside was an overwhelming experience and he was grateful for Paxton taking his hand.

Lucky Parts was crowded. The building went back further than it was wide, it seemed. The main floor was sunken down a few steps, a stage on the opposite wall of the entrance. There was a balcony that wrapped around the entire space, where even more people were dancing or leaning over the railing, watching. The bar was to the left, barely any spots open to get in and order a drink. The décor was a mix of pride flags and classic car parts. Two things that didn't seem like they would go together, but somehow the color scheme in the club made it work. The tables they passed were black and chrome, there were car logos hung on the walls, surrounded by a rainbow of colors. The music was loud and Wright had to lean in to hear Clark talking to their group.

“We’re going to walk a lap and see if we can score a table,” Clark said. “Follow us and stay close, okay? Once we get something, we’ll take turns heading to the bar for drinks.”

Wright nodded and followed William. Clark was tall enough that he led their group and people moved out of the way for him. Wright was third in their procession, Wylon and Brett brought up the rear. He tried to watch where he was going, but also wanted to see the people around them. There were a lot of guys that were shirtless. Some looked around his age, others looked older. But he didn’t see anyone that looked like Xander. None of them did anything for him. He had eyes, of course, but that was as far as it went. He did realize that while he thought he was revealing a lot just an hour ago, he was dressed rather conservatively compared to some people. He turned to look behind him at Paxton. There were plenty of other representation other than just gay men. They passed one guy, taller than him, but with the same slight build, that was wearing reflective booty shorts to show off his legs and ass, with a white sheer crop top. He had lines of neon paint on his arms and up his neck. A full face of makeup too. He looked like he was having a blast. Wright wanted to experience that. Maybe not the clothing, but the being himself and having fun. Next to him was a group of girls that were wearing a mix of orange, pink, and white.

It took ten minutes of weaving through the crowds to find a place they could claim. A group of people offered it to them, claiming they were leaving. Wylon and Clark decided to get everyone’s orders and make their way back to the bar. They were sitting on a black, leather couch with a table in front of them. William and Brett were sitting to Wright’s right and Paxton to his left. He pulled out his phone to text Xander that they made it.

“Send a pic,” Paxton said. “Come on. William, will you take one of us, please?”

Wright handed his phone over, the camera already open. Paxton held his hand and he stood up, standing awkwardly. Paxton laughed, so did William and Brett. She

adjusted his limbs, having him put one over her shoulder. “It’ll show off more of your tummy,” she whispered. “I’m sure it’ll drive him crazy.”

“It should concern me how much you are actually right about what your uncle likes,” Wright said. Xander one hundred percent did love his stomach. Loved it so much, the jeans barely hid the hickey right above his groin that he’d given him earlier that morning.

“I don’t need to know if I’m right or not,” Paxton groaned. They laughed together and William declared he had the shot. Several actually, when Wright looked back at them. He had to admit that he did look good. Unrecognizable. Happy.

“Send it to me too, please.”

“I know we’re here to have fun but while we’re waiting for our drinks, can we talk shop for a second?” Brett asked. “I heard back from that ranch up north. They said they’d be interested in talking to us about extending Found Family Ranch. They’re offering to front enough to build two houses to start.”

“Are you serious?” William’s eyes were the size of plates. Even in the dim, strobe lighting Wright could see the whites of his eyes. His phone buzzed with an incoming text and Wright tuned out their conversation to read Xander’s reply.

I’m in love with a total hottie.

Wright stared at the screen and smiled. They’d said the words only once to each other that morning, but seeing it typed out... Butterflies were going rampage through his body at the words. Xander loved him. He was in love with Xander.

“Hold on!” Brett’s hand snatched his phone and tilted it toward William. “When did this happen? We thought you were just getting close.”



“What’s going on?” Wylon asked just as Wright reached for his phone. He had a tray of drinks balancing in his hands. Brett held his phone out of arm’s length, which resulted in Wright practically in his lap to get it. Almost in William’s lap too. They were both laughing.

“Xander and Wright sitting in a tree,” William started singing. “I-N L-O-V-E.”

“That’s not how the song goes,” Clark said as he set drinks down on the table. Wright finally got his phone back and sent a few hearts before clicking his phone off and sticking it back in his front pocket. Wylon took Brett’s hand and took his seat before pulling him down to his lap. Wylon was stock, clearly strong. But Brett had the height and broad shoulders on him. It was amusing to see the larger man on Wylon’s lap, but they looked like it was a normal occurrence. “But really? That’s awesome, Wright. We give Xander shit a lot, but he’s a great guy. I’m sure those muscles come in handy.”

“Okay, let’s not forget that that is my uncle! I might joke about him, but I don’t want the details of what they do together.” Paxton took her drink, something clear and bubbly. Wright had ordered a mocktail, fruity. He was trying hard not to think about the others drinking. They didn’t know as much about his past as Xander, Patrick, and Tracy. William knew the most out of them and he’d already made sure that Wright needed to tell him if he needed a break.

They all settled down and Wright sipped his drink while they talked. Paxton pulled her phone out once more and texted someone. She was supposed to meet up with a friend or someone tonight. Wright tried to listen to the others, but the music was loud and the lights were too dim for him to attempt to read lips. He decided to people watch instead.

There were all sorts of people around them. Girls, guys, theys. Two women near them were dancing close, barely any clothes separating them. He was almost positive they

were wearing some type of pleather. Another group was standing just on the edge of the dance floor. It was like the scene Wright described to Xander earlier; two larger men with a smaller guy between them. Instead of kissing each other, though, the guys were giving all of their attention to the one in the middle. One had his lips on his and the other seemed to be kissing his neck, all while they grinded against each other.

“Wanna go dance?” Wylon asked, pulling him out of his stare. His cheeks heated, wondering if he realized that he was staring instead of just idly watching. He took another sip of his drink before answering.

“I’m good to do whatever,” Wright said. “I don’t want to embarrass y’all out there.”

“Nonsense,” William said. “You can dance with me and Clark. We’re pretty much pros at this point.”

“Do I need to tell him the story of the time you literally tripped over my feet and took out another couple on your way down? You hadn’t even had a drink yet then.” Brett laughed telling the story. William shoved his shoulder but joined the laughter. Wright smiled at the interaction. He liked the guys, although they were a little older. He stood, promising himself that he would give this a fighting chance. He’d have fun tonight. And then he’d go home to the man he loved and maybe get fucked to sleep. Or something like that. He took a shallow breath and tried to block out the smell of alcohol on the dance floor.

The music was playing something hip-hop. The perks of growing up not watching TV, he knew a lot of the songs playing. At least he could sing along and knew the tempos. He started out dancing with Paxton, but soon she had someone take her attention. Before he could feel awkward as a fifth wheel to the rest of the group, an arm snaked around his waist and he looked back to see Clark behind him.

“Having fun?” he asked, bending down to talk to him so he could hear over the

music. The dance floor was crowded, the temperature high enough from body heat alone to make him start sweating. His shoe was sticking to the floor in one spot. Wright nodded and continued to sway his hips with the music. Wylon and Brett were nearing an NSFW type of dancing. They looked like they were having fun. Something he was sure they needed due to having a baby at home. Wylon's mom was watching him this weekend. Wright had mostly been swaying back and forth, not really moving his feet. "Just go with it. Trust me, there is no way you can embarrass yourself here. People are cool."

Wright turned in Clark's hold and looked up at him. Clark's other hand rested on his hip and he let him lead him for a few seconds. The song was an older one by Kesha and had a decent beat to it. Clark smiled when he started moving a little more, still feeling a bit awkward dancing with him. But then he looked around and realized that no one was watching him. Everyone was in their own little worlds, dancing with the people they came with or they had already met.

"Get it, Wright!" William's voice was beside him on his other side. He looked to see William and Wylon sandwiching Brett in the middle. William kept a few inches between him and his best friend, but Wylon had him pressed close. The way they were watching each other while they danced was a familiar sight. It was the same way Xander looked at him most days. "Move your feet some more. Feel free to put your hands on my husband. It's hot watching him dance with someone else."

"He's totally lying," Clark said. "He gets extremely jealous when someone we don't know tries to dance with us."

"But we do know Wright. And we love Wright. So it's cool. Dance on, my friends!" William adjusted the hat on his head as the song switched to something newer. Wright didn't immediately recognize it but it was a faster pace and there was excited shouting around the club for it. The energy picked up and Wright did as William said.

“You wouldn’t believe that two years ago William was the shy one,” Clark said only loud enough for Wright to hear. “We’ve totally corrupted him and you’re next, I guess.”

He had fun after that. So much, in fact, that he didn’t pay attention to the hours slipping away. They took several breaks for water or more drinks. Wright danced with all of them. At one point, they crowded in a circle around Wright and they danced in an awkward six-way. Paxton danced with both guys and girls until her friend showed up. Wright had seen her around the ranch before, but never really spoke to her. She seemed nice enough. Wylon made sure she had her location turned on and shared with each of them before they let her wander off. She wasn’t allowed to leave the building and no drinking. She needed to check in every fifteen minutes or they were pulling the plug on her being there and calling her dad. That threat alone did the trick, not that Paxton was a deceitful person. Paxton rolled her eyes at their rules, but Wright liked that they were taking her safety seriously. It helped ease more of the anxiety low in his gut.

He was surprised to see it was already past midnight when they found a new place to sit down. It was up on the balcony, in a corner where you couldn’t see much of the dance floor. He sunk down into the seat and groaned. His feet were killing him and he was sweaty. Clark had already taken his shirt off. William ditched the hat. Brett unbuttoned his shirt fully. Wright was grateful for the mesh so he didn’t have to take his off to stay cool enough.

“So, how is your first experience so far?” William asked. It was just the two of them right now. The other three had gone down to both check on Paxton and get a last round of drinks. They wanted to walk down the street a bit to cool off, grab some late night food to sober up, and then head back to the ranch. They were going to drop Brett and Wylon off and then Clark and William were crashing in the guest room at the ranch. Paxton had offered to drive back since she hadn’t drunk. Wright didn’t feel comfortable enough to do that. Xander had taken him only a handful of times to get

him used to driving. He wasn't quite ready to drive on a main road with other civilians around.

"I'm glad I did this," Wright said honestly. "I've had a lot of fun. Thank you."

"No problem," William said. He rested a hand on Wright's leg. Him and Clark both, he noticed, were touchy people. It wasn't ever anything inappropriate or suggestive but comforting. "We needed a night out. It's been all work since we got back from the honeymoon. I love Texas and my job, but I miss when the most I had to do was walk the fifty feet from my bed to the beach each morning. We had a private beach area and I'm pretty sure I went a solid four days without ever putting so much as a sock on. There was sand in every part of my body."

Wright laughed at that. He had the tendency to just stay naked when they were in the guest house too, so he understood the joys of a clothes-less lifestyle. "I never did apologize for that. For kind of ruining your wedding."

"You didn't ruin anything," William said quickly and sternly. He seemed to sober up on the spot and sat up straighter. Wright mimicked his position. William leaned closer to him to continue talking so he didn't have to nearly shout to be heard. "I don't like how it came about, but I'm glad you showed up. We were worried about you when we saw Xander kneeling next to you after the truck sped away, but this is what we do. We help those that need it. We still don't know how your dad thought we were a camp or anything, but it was the best mistake he ever made. You're part of this family, Wright. You know that, right? Right, Wright?" William laughed at his own joke. Wright rolled his eyes. He was relaxed, learning more that alcohol didn't equal pain. For Xander, it was cuddles. Apparently for William, it was funny sayings. "You have people rooting for you that you don't even realize."

Wright wasn't sure what he meant by that, but the guys came back with drinks and Paxton. She was smiling and her hair looked mussed. "Found this one pinned against

a wall.”

“And he promptly unpinned me,” Paxton added with a grumble. But she was still smiling. “Ran some clitorference.”

“Some what?” All of them asked in near unison. They all looked at each other and then back to Paxton who was now doubled over laughing.

“Oh my god! That was the best moment of my life. You all were just the definition of gay friends.”

“Pansexual representing, here, thank you!” Wylon shouted back. “But please, explain what you just said.”

“It’s the female version of a cock block, idiots.”

“You are so not having sex on my watch,” William said, suddenly serious. “Your dad would kill me. Then feed me to the bulls or something.”

“They act like we’re virgins,” Paxton said, looking at Wright. He felt bad for her. Not in a literal sense, but in a ‘we’re younger but not innocent’ way. Granted, Wright was younger and innocent two months ago but he didn’t say that out loud. “I’ve probably had more experiences than all of you before you settled down.”

“Who says our experiences stopped after we got married?” Brett asked.

“Ah, yes. Fuck, Elijah was a wonderful weekend getaway addition.”

“He really was,” Brett said. “The way that you two worked together and did that thing with your tongues-”

“Okay, okay!” William cut in. They whole group laughed. “How about we get our stuff and head back outside and get some food. Paxton, you didn’t sneak any drinks tonight did you?”

“No, I’m good to drive still.” Paxton stood and Clark handed his keys over easily. Wright let Paxton loop her arm through his and this time, they led the way through the crowd to get outside. The night air was cooler, but not by much. There were a lot less people around. Some businesses looked like they were already closed for the night. A couple of food trucks were parked along the sidewalks, lines at just about every single one. Wright’s stomach growled at the mix of food smells in the air.

“I need food and soon,” Wright announced. He had brought enough money to pay the cover charge, a few drinks, and some food. He’d wanted to give Clark some money for gas, but Xander told him not to worry about it. Clark wouldn’t take it anyway.

“Do we want to wait in line or just go through a drive-thru on the way to drop Brett and Wylon off?”

“I want ice cream,” Clark nearly whined. “I need something to cool me off.”

“I can cool you off later, babe.” They all laughed at William’s words, but Clark reiterated that he wanted ‘ice cream, not your cream’. That got an immediate groan and Clark laughed, drawing attention to their group as they made their way down the street to the car. Wright was hungry and knew he should eat, but he was also tired. He rested his head against the cool glass when he got in the car. It was like the sounds and sights around him had fueled his body. Sitting in the much quieter car, he was crashing fast.

Clark was sitting up front with Paxton. Brett and Wylon laid down in the backseat together. It was a little comical seeing them smush into the small space together. “I’m going to use you as a pillow, Wright. I hope you’re okay with that.”

Wright nodded and William shifted himself so he was laying with his head on Wright's lap. Without thinking, Wright started carding his fingers through his hair. William hummed his approval with his eyes closed. "I think we could probably just get everyone home," Wright said. "Half of us are asleep already."

"As long as Clark doesn't fall asleep before telling me where Brett and Wylon live, I'm good to head home. I can make us some snacks when we get there."

Wright pulled his phone out to text Xander. They'd been texting back and forth. Not much, but just enough. Xander and Patrick's friends had long since left. They'd had a few drinks earlier in the night and then caught up on some baseball game. He was happy that everyone seemed to have a good time, but he was ready to get back to Xander.

You still awake? We're leaving now. Be home within two hours. Dropping B and W off first.

William was fast asleep. Small little puffs of air escaped his lips, not quite a snore but a tell-tale sign he wasn't just pretending. His phone vibrated in his hand a minute later.

Still awake. Going to regret this tomorrow. Today? Have to be up to get the animals but want to wait for you to get here. Feels weird in bed without you.

Wright typed slower than he wanted using just one hand. Aww, does my cowboy miss me that much? What about his horse? Does he also miss me?

He wasn't expecting a picture to come through as a response and he nearly smacked William in the head trying to hide his phone. Clark looked back at him and tilted his head. His eyes darted down to the phone clutched to his chest and back up, a smirk on his lips. "First dick pic?"



Wright's cheeks heated with embarrassment. "Maybe."

"Send a picture back of your lap, with William's face. He'll hate it and we'll love it."

Wright did just that. He added a little message, just to rile Xander up. Wish it was your head here instead.

He's already passed out? Tell him I'm calling all of them wimps if I can stay up later than them. Did you have fun tonight, though? It sounds like you did.

I did. I can't wait to see you again though. I can help you with the horses tomorrow morning so it isn't so hard on you.

Xander's face popped up on the screen with an incoming call. It was a picture he'd taken one evening while they were sitting on the porch together. Wright didn't want to wake any of the guys, but Clark and Paxton were talking lowly as she drove. He kept his voice to a whisper. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," Xander said. Wright closed his eyes, loving the husky growl to his voice when he was this tired. He sounded like he was fighting sleep and losing. "You don't have to help me in the morning, baby. I'll have to walk them out of the stalls and the farrier is coming tomorrow so there will be ropes involved. You can just sleep in tomorrow."

"No, it's okay. I think it'll be fine. I need to be around it." Wright pinched a small section of William's hair between his fingers as he whisper-spoke. "I want to help too."

"If you're sure," Xander said. "I don't want you to push yourself though."

"I'll be okay. I'll be with you and I do really want to keep getting better. I won't push

it too far, I promise. But tonight showed me that I've been kept from a whole world that I'm excited to experience. Working with the horses is another part of that."

"You are so amazing," Xander said. His voice sounded a little bit breathier. "You know that, right?" There was a distinct moan that came through the phone and Wright's eyes widened.

"Are you?" Xander chuckled and then let out a long, deep groan that was going to make it very awkward for William if Wright listened any longer. In a panic, he ended the call and pulled their texts back up.

I cannot listen to you get yourself off right now!!!! There is literally another man lying in my lap. I don't think he would much like MY cock being the one in his face tonight.

Xander sent back a string of emojis and then a voice memo that Wright definitely did not listen to. They pulled up to Wylon and Brett's place a few minutes later and William was all too happy to wake up and then proceed to lay on them to wake both up at once. There was grumbling and laughing mixed together until they said their goodbyes and Paxton started driving again. This time, Wright was sitting up front and Clark and William were doing who-knows-what in their own car. They'd chosen the backseat, furthest away from them.

Wright kept Paxton entertained with a recount of what she missed while she was away getting her faced sucked off. Her words. It wasn't much, but she looked just as tired as the rest of them and the last thing they needed was her falling asleep at the wheel. She'd taken a nap earlier in preparation for tonight though, something Wright wished he'd done too. But given the chance of sex with Xander or sleep, the choice was obvious. They talked about her starting college at the end of next month, Wright's birthday on August fifteenth. Paxton relayed the information that Xander's birthday was in March so he'd missed it this year.

“Can you take a right up here?” Wright asked when he realized where they were. Taking Brett and Wylon home put them in a different spot in the city. Paxton seemed to know her way around well enough without a GPS. Wright only recognized where they were when they passed the hospital. “I just want to drive by my old house and see it.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” Paxton glanced over at him.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I don’t see it as my home anymore. I just want to see it. I don’t know why.”

“Sort of closure, maybe?” Wright was startled at William’s voice. He turned his head to see William adjusting himself in the middle seat. He noted Clark was sitting in the back row still, hair messed up.

“I don’t want to know what you two just finished doing,” Wright said. William cocked one side of his mouth and winked before licking his lips. This group was definitely very open about their sexualities. Wright loved it. It would take some getting used to, but he loved being able to be himself. “But yeah, I guess that’s it. I just want to be able to drive by and see him still living there while I’m living my life now.”

“Maybe not the healthiest viewpoint in the world, but good with me.” Paxton slowed down through the neighborhood. Clark joined them and they all looked at the house when Wright pointed it out.

The yard was a bit overgrown, but not bad. Shutters were closed and there were no lights on. No car parked in the driveway either. “Is that a For Sale sign in the yard?”

~ Xander ~

“You look like shit,” Bailey said as Xander walked to the barn. She’d just pulled up in her truck when Xander was walking out of the house. Wright was taking a shower and then meeting him in the barn. He was nervous about today, didn’t want Wright to push himself so quick. He was facing his problems head on, though. Facing what he called his triggers. He was proving to Xander how ready and dedicated and strong he was. He was still worried though.

By the time they all got home last night, Xander made him a quick meal of a ham and cheese sandwich and some chips and water and they went to bed. Wright was sleepy smiles and giggles while he fought his way through several yawns to explain their night. They only got five hours of sleep but Wright had woken up with a smile and promised that he was still good on his offer from the night before.

“I feel like shit,” Xander said with a laugh. Bailey was an old family friend. Her grandpa and his were friends, same with their parents. She was older than Patrick, the big sister they never had. She was the farrier for a lot of ranches around the area and he knew she kept a busy schedule. “We all took a night off last night after making sure the animals were okay. Stayed up too late.”

“Still stayed up later than us.” Xander turned toward the porch and saw William sitting on the steps. He looked half asleep, not faring much better than Xander.

“Yeah, I really liked seeing that picture of your head in my boyfriend’s lap last night.”

“Boyfriend, huh? So, you two are official and all that?” Xander paused in the gravel and looked from William to Bailey and back. He hadn’t seen Bailey in a while, she hadn’t met Wright yet. But William knew their timeline. Neither of them had expressly said they were dating, but they loved each other. That came with being boyfriends, right? “I’m messing with you, Xander. He said the same thing last night. I don’t think he realized he was even calling you that, but he did a few times.”

Clark walked out of the house then and William stood up. They had to head back home before going to a luncheon with Clark’s dad, the Governor. Clark raised his hand to stop Xander from continuing toward the barn. Bailey was standing next to the door waiting for him. Xander met Clark at his car.

“I don’t know if Wright told you anything last night,” Clark said. “But we drove past his old house. It was late, and we didn’t stop, but the house is for sale. So I don’t know where his dad is living right now.”

Xander’s eyes widened and his mind started to race. Wright hadn’t told him that, but then again, he’d barely eaten his food and brushed his teeth before shoving his pants to the ground and falling asleep in the mesh shirt and his briefs. Xander had been the one to undo the belt after he fumbled for a minute.

“I’ll call Reagan and see if she knows anything later today,” Xander said. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“He did great last night,” William said. “He had a lot of fun and he’s funny as shit too. I’m glad he’s got you, and this place to help him. He’s come a long way.”

Xander looked back at the guest house just as the door opened and Wright stepped out bundled in a hoodie and pair of sweats. It was his go-to outfit. A vast difference from last night. “He’s definitely something. You’re not getting that mesh shirt back, though, I can promise that.”

Clark clapped him on the shoulder as William waved bye to Wright. Wright leaned into Xander's side as they watched them leave, then headed toward the barn. "You tell me-"

"I know, Xander. I promise, I'll be fine." Wright looked up at him and Xander saw nothing but earnestness in his eyes. He really did want to do this.

Xander unlocked the door and pushed it open. The smell of the hay and horses hit his nose, the scent of comfort and home for him. He loved the horses, loved working on the ranch. He knew that living in the guest house wasn't a long-term solution and he'd already lived there longer than he expected to. But he wasn't sure what they were going to do. He didn't want to leave Wright, wouldn't leave him. He knew Wright loved the ranch as much as him and didn't want to live back in the city. And with the house he grew up in for sale now, he wasn't sure what that meant as far as his dad and where he was.

With the rain yesterday and the inevitable roll in the mud that Benito did, Xander planned on giving him a bath. He was a gentle horse, playful. If Wright was comfortable with it, he'd start showing him how to bathe and care for the horses. Right now, they were going to focus on turning the horses out and cleaning the stalls. They'd go ahead and do a deep clean today, spraying the floors and disinfecting everything. Patrick had a cleaning schedule pinned to a corkboard just inside the barn door. Everyone signed off on daily cleaning.

"What do you need me to do?" Wright asked. He pushed the sleeves up on his hoodie. His hair was still damp from the shower.

"I would say just sit there and look pretty," Xander said with a smirk. "But it is just me in here today, so I'm going to put the horses outside if you want to grab the supplies. We'll need a wheelbarrow, shovel, pitchforks, and the brooms. They're all in the supply room. The door after the tack room."

“I’m going to start with Luna today,” Bailey said. “Bring her over this way and I’ll get her set up.”

Xander did as she asked while she set her things down in one of the grooming stalls. They got to work. Xander put the horses out in the paddock, leading Luna to Bailey last. Xander kept an eye on Wright as much as he could. He directed him to start with Luna’s stall, explaining the process as simply as he could. They were going to do a deep clean today which meant more work than the typical cleaning.

It was hard work for a first day, but Wright never complained once. He did take off the hoodie about a half hour into the work. Unfortunately for Xander, he was wearing a plain tee underneath. They worked side-by-side to get each stall done properly. Wright nearly toppled the wheelbarrow on his way to dump it the first time so Xander took over that job. They didn’t compost the shavings themselves, but one of the neighboring ranches with a greenhouse and garden came over to collect it from them twice a week. They kept it in large plastic containers that the neighbors provided them with. It was something new that Patrick had started over a year ago.

Bailey continued to care for the horses one at a time. She was saving Benito for last so Xander could wash him. Wright continued to work, checking with Xander that he was doing everything right. He surprised Xander with how hard and thorough he was working. And he did a great job. He scrubbed down the walls and hauled the feed and fresh hay into the buckets and hayrack. Xander laughed when Wright called out for him, only to find him struggling to reach the top of the hayrack. Xander promised he was laughing with him, not at him. But then he called him shorty for the next half hour each time he used the step ladder. He refilled the water buckets too. They would let the floors and walls dry for a bit before putting down the fresh bedding over the rubber mats.

It was close to ten when they finished the last stall. Wright leaned his back against the wall and sighed. “This is a lot more work than I thought. You do this twice a day?”

“No,” Xander said with a small chuckle. “This was a full cleaning. Figured I would just throw you in the deep end today. Typically, we would just clean out the poop and urine, refresh the food and bedding if needed. It would take a third of the time it did today. But you did great today.”

“And what’s my reward for doing such a good job?” Wright raised his eyebrows and Xander moved toward him. He kept his movements clean, remembering the last time he’d moved suddenly and Wright freaked out a little. He knew what he was suggesting, but they still had work to do. Wright only thought he was done. Xander brushed his hair back and leaned down to kiss him quickly.

“You’re going to meet Benito properly and we’re going to give him a bath.”

Wright sighed but his smile was still there. “Not the reward I was hoping for, but it’s fine.”

“We have a lot of work to finish today. What do you think I do while you’re usually out there mowing and keeping the houses cleaned up? Since the ground is all wet and you can’t do that today, I’m taking full advantage of using you.”

“Please use me however you so desire,” Wright said in a dramatic tone. He reached up to wrap his hands around the back of Xander’s neck and pulled him back in for another kiss. They stayed like that for a minute before a whistle caught their attention. Bailey was coming back in the barn with Benito. Patrick was with her too, carrying bags of food and a gallon of what Xander hoped was Tracy’s sweet tea.

“We’ll take a break and then get back to it,” Xander said. Patrick handed off the food and they moved to sit outside while Bailey finished her work.

“How did last night go?” Patrick asked. They were sitting on the porch of the guest house. Wright nodded, a small smile forming around the bite of the sandwich he



chose.

“It was fun,” Wright said. “The guys are really great. Paxton and Clark taught me how to dance, which was an experience.”

“Paxton told me that she drove by your old house.” Xander shot a look at his older brother, silently scolding him for bringing it up so quickly. But Wright just shrugged.

“It’s for sale, which was surprising, I guess. I don’t know where he would go, but I’m assuming it means he has no intention of coming back for me.”

“Are you okay with that?” Xander asked, his tone much more comforting than his brother’s. He’d been thinking of ways to talk to him about this and it wasn’t out in the open. Maybe he was being too protective, but Wright was doing so much better now. He didn’t want to risk him taking any steps back.

“I am,” Wright said. “Obviously, I didn’t want to see him again after what happened, but then the more I got to know this family and all the people that created Found Family Ranch, I don’t even consider him family anymore.”

Xander felt pride swelling in his chest. Wright had been stubborn at first, but once he realized he was safe with their family, he put in the work to get better. He didn’t have to worry about being perfect around them. He worked hard and did his jobs thoroughly. Xander was proud to be part of the Lawson family, but he was just as proud to have Wright next to him.

“I know we talked about it a while ago, but did you have any plans for when the school year started?”

“I missed the deadlines,” Wright said easily. “I don’t know if school is really for me anyway. I never was that great of a student. I really just applied to have an excuse to

get out of the house.”

“But you work hard,” Xander added. “That goes further than a grade in school with work like we do.”

“It does and if my brother would shut up with the compliments, he would see where I was going with these questions.” Xander turned his head to stare at his brother, but Wright was beside him laughing.

“I’m quite alright with the compliments,” Wright said. “What did you want to ask?”

“You know Paxton is moving out next month to live in the dorms at the university. Usually, she’s my go-to for grooming and barn work. I was watching you in here with Xander and you do work hard, Wright. It’s a quality trait. I wanted to ask if we spent the next few weeks training you and getting you comfortable with the routine, if you would want to move more to working with the horses instead of the yard work.

“William and Brett got a new application in for one of the houses and the guy comes from a farm in another state. He’s noted that he’s willing to work on the ranch in whatever capacity he can. You’ve been here longer and you are family, so I wanted to give you the choice.”

“I’d love to,” Wright said quickly. “I really enjoyed the work this morning and I promise that I am working through the issues that are still holding me back.”

“I don’t doubt that, Wright, and it’s none of my business. I just need to know that you’ll be safe and careful around the horses. If you want, I can put you on the schedule to follow Paxton and Xander for a few days this week to get you used to doing the stalls. They are pretty repetitive so it gets easy to do them with one or two people. A few of our ranch hands are heading out at the end of the summer for one reason or another, so we’re going through a bit of a shift, hiring some people, moving

others around. If you're sure, I'd love for you to be full time working with us."

"Seriously?" Wright sat up straighter. He'd been working only a few days a week so far, earning just enough to pay Xander for his phone and to put a little aside. Not that he spent the money. He had it all saved up in a box on the top shelf of their closet. Wright was too short to reach it, a thought that was funny at the time for Xander. Still was, if he was honest. He wanted to pay part of the rent that Xander paid, but he refused to let him do that. At least up until now. "I would love that. I accept. Whatever the words are to say it."

"Good. Finish up your lunch and I'll let you get back to it. I'm going to drive out to check on things with the cattle. Xander, we're planning on moving them to the next field on Monday so stock up in the morning. A few of them are being sold and loaded on Tuesday as well as that class coming for the trail ride. Then Starlin Ranch is coming by Wednesday, we have that meeting with the FFR board Thursday. It's going to be a busy week."

Xander stood with his brother and walked away from the house, far enough that Wright couldn't hear them. They ended up standing next to his truck. "You know Wright is going to put his all into those horses."

"That's the plan," Patrick said. "He really is a great guy, Xander. He's a great addition to the family and I'd like to see you two hanging around for a while. Can't have one of my best employees leaving me for the city again."

Xander rolled at the playful ribbing. He didn't want to move to the city either, but they couldn't continue with how they were. If both of them were going to be working full-time, he'd want a place that was truly their own. "If we're going to be around for a while, we can't keep living in the guest house."

"Don't worry about that right now, okay?" Patrick clapped him on the shoulder and

smiled. “Just enjoy this with him and we’ll work it all out when we need to.”

Xander eyed his big brother. He knew him well enough to understand that that tone of voice and his choice of words meant he knew something that Xander didn’t. Patrick didn’t give him a chance to interrogate further and got in the truck and started it. Bailey came out then, finished with all of the horses.

“I left your baby in the grooming stall,” she said as she loaded her things into the back of the truck.

“Hope you didn’t call him that to his face,” Xander said. “He gets offended easily.”

“He knows I think he’s a baby. He’s a good horse though. Muddy, but good.”

“That’s why he’s still there,” Xander said. “We’re about to clean him up and get them all back in for food.”

Wright joined him back in the barn. He wrapped his arm around Xander’s waist and for a moment, they just stood there together. The conversation over lunch was another step to them being together. Xander hoped that Wright was ready for that.

“You’re not having any regrets are you?” Xander asked. Wright pulled his head back and looked up at him, brows furrowing.

“What brought that on?”

“I just want to make sure,” Xander said. He turned to face Wright and took his face in his hands. Wright was young still, just living a life he wasn’t given the opportunity to. He didn’t want to be five years down the road and Wright started regretting any decisions he made when he was so young. He laid all his cards on the table. “Baby, you went from a house where you weren’t allowed to do much to here, where you’ve

spent ninety percent of your time. There's a lot out in the world that you can experience. I just want to make sure that you're sure about this. Taking on a job like this is a lot of work and it requires commitment."

"I know, Xander." Wright held on to his forearms. He smiled softly. "I know you're worried about me and I appreciate it. I love it about you, but I can make my own decisions. I love your family. I love the work. I love you. And I'd like to give us a real shot."

"I'd like to give us a real shot too." Xander leaned down and kissed him, smiling the entire time. It was more teeth than anything, but Xander didn't care. He loved this man. Wright was the one that pulled back first. His face was serious.

"If we're going to do this, I need you to trust me fully when it comes to my progress and what I can handle, though. I know you want to keep me safe and I appreciate it. I love that you take control in most everything, but this is one thing I need to lead on, okay? My healing is my process and when I say I'm ready for something, I need you to accept that."

"I can do that," Xander promised.

"Good." Wright smiled. "That being said, show me how to work with these horses. I've been admiring them for weeks and I think it's finally time to meet them all properly. I've only briefly met Benito."

Xander smiled and led him over to where Benito was waiting impatiently. He properly introduced them, giving them a minute to bond and get used to each other. Xander was pretty sure Wright's smile never left his face. As much as he loved the mud, Benito loved the water hose too. Wright won him over by holding the hose near his nose and letting him play for a few minutes while Xander got the supplies ready.

The rest of the day, Xander showed Wright how to work with the horses. They gave Benito his bath, Wright getting soaked in the process. While neither of them seemed skittish around each other, he only let Wright help wash the main part of his body, assuring him that even Paxton had to use the step ladder from time to time depending which horse she was bathing. Xander focused on his face and legs. He promised Wright that once he had more experience and both him and the horses knew each other better, he could work on them alone. It was all about building trust between them. Wright nodded and continued to do each task Xander gave him with a smile. Wright spread out the fresh bedding before they brought the horses back one at a time to groom them as well. None of the others needed a bath yet, but Xander was full of pride watching Wright give them a thorough brushing.

He was a natural. He took to the horses, wasn't scared when they towered over him. He also followed every one of Xander's directions. It was just the first day, but already Wright was comfortable with grabbing the ropes and leading the horses to where they needed to be. He had fun but stayed safe. That was all they needed to see. When Xander commented on it as he walked beside him, making sure the horses stayed calm, he just shrugged.

"I think it's because I have the control," Wright said. "I mean, a creature this big and amazing and I have the control all because of this in my hand. It's like an immediate trust between us."

"It's not quite like that, but I get where you're coming from." He continued talking, warning him that although their horses were all well-tempered and used to strangers coming and going for summer activities, they can still get spooked or react suddenly. He needed to stay aware, no matter how well he knew the horse. The weather was a bit humid, but it was definitely drying up. All of the horses were in their stalls for the evening and happily munching on fresh hay.

"I now understand why Tracy makes so much food for supper," Wright said when

they finished with the horses and barn for the day. Xander eyed him as he leaned against the doorway of the tack room. He didn't enter, but his posture seemed relaxed. It was a complete one-eighty from the first and only time he'd seen this room. He handed off the halter they'd used for Willow and didn't seem to be scared or anything. Xander reminded himself of the promise he made; he would let Wright decide what he was ready for or not. "I'm so hungry."

"You did amazing today," Xander said. He locked up and they headed to their house to clean up. "The horses like you too."

"Of course they do," Wright said. "What's not to like?"

"You know, I love how humble you are sometimes." Xander pulled his shirt off and tossed it to the basket in their room. Wright was also stripping out of his clothes. "Seriously, though, you did great. And you handled yourself well around the supplies."

"Does this mean we could revisit the little conversation we had before? About you tying me up?" The way Wright asked the question was optimistic, hopeful, but hesitant still. Xander had been hesitant to agree the first time because he didn't think Wright was ready. But like they agreed earlier, if this was going to work between them, he had to trust Wright that he knew what he wanted. He didn't miss the way Wright looked at him when he described the trust the rope held between him and the horse. Wright trusted him to not hurt him, knew he was safe to explore and take back the power he lost over the years. The thought of tying him up and using him how he wanted had gone straight to his cock, but he'd been hesitant because he didn't want him to push himself. Now, though, there was no reason they couldn't try. He'd been more than willing to keep his hands trapped the last time and that had been beyond hot.

"We can talk about it," Xander said. "But let's not have a repeat of last time. Shower

and food, then we'll come back and talk it out. Tomorrow is Sunday and outside of cleaning the stalls and turning the horses out, we can have a few hours of downtime."



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~ Wright ~

“How is everything this week?” Sunshine Megan asked. It wasn’t her real name, obviously, but Xander referred to Wright’s therapist by that name because she was always smiling. It fit her personality. No matter how hard the sessions got for Wright, she made sure it ended on a good note.

“Great,” Wright said. He was sitting in his usual spot on the bed, on Xander’s side. He was taking a shower right now and would be out for the last bit of his session. Supper was in the oven already too. Xander was making some sort of chicken lasagna for them tonight. He really was lucky with his life now. “I finally got to work alone with the horses this week. Paxton gave me the go ahead to take Willow out into the paddock on my own and it went perfectly. Then, I brushed Raven and Luna. I love all of them.”

“That’s wonderful,” Megan said. She even clapped and Wright laughed while she wrote something down. “And how are other things going? Has there been any update on where your father is?”

It’d been two weeks since he saw the For Sale sign outside his old house. They were getting into August now, the hottest month of the year. His birthday was just over a week away. Patrick said that their lawyer, Raegan, hadn’t been able to track him down yet. Wright hoped that meant he was out of the state and out of his life for good. He had a new family and he loved each of them. “Nothing new,” he said. “Patrick said they’re looking for him and there’s a warrant out for his arrest. It’s a little unsettling not knowing where he is, but I’m safe here. I know that.”

“And will you be okay if you never get that closure?” she asked. Wright thought about it. As safe as he felt, he did have a little bit of anxiety that he didn’t know where he was. He knew Xander would protect him. And he was stronger. He could fight back now. Doing the physical work he did and having more than one meal a day was making him healthier than he’d ever been. He was nowhere close to Xander, or even Paxton, but he had the confidence to take care of himself now. But he didn’t want to be constantly looking over his shoulder for years.

“I think so,” Wright said. He told her his other thoughts as well. He could hear the shower turn off. There were no secrets between him and Xander so when he stuck his head out of the bathroom to see if he was good, he kept talking and just nodded.

“I’m so proud of all the work you’ve already done,” she said. “It can take some people months to get to the point you’re at now. Are you comfortable with the rate of your progress?”

“I am,” Wright said easily. “I think it’s because of being here. I thought starting therapy, it would be hard to open up, but being surrounded by a family that loves me, it’s easier. And it’s easy to talk to you. I never imagined this is how my life would end up but I truly love the work and living here.”

“What do you think is the biggest part of your recovery and progress?” Wright tilted his head slightly, not sure what she meant by the question. Her smile was genuine when she reworded her question. “Let’s say you moved to your own apartment, still in the city. You got a job, maybe made some friends. Do you think your progress would be the same as it is now?”

“Probably not.” Wright wasn’t too sure why that was an easy answer for him. And she must have been expecting it. She gave him a soft smile.

“And why do you think that is? Is it not what you’re doing now? New place to live,

new job, friends.”

“Yeah, but here I have a family.” Wright said it like it was the most obvious answer in the world, that even his subconscious knew it. The Lawson’s were family. He continued on. “A real family. One that eats meals together and sits on the porch to enjoy the weather. They talk about their feelings and resolve disagreements with words and not their hands. Paxton and Victor know they’re allowed to make mistakes as long as they own up to it and learn their lesson for next time. Patrick doesn’t hit them or yell at them. They’ve grown up in a house of love and I’m finally getting to be a part of that. I think that’s why I’m able to throw myself into the hard stuff and face it head on, because I have Xander beside me and the rest of the family behind me. They’ve been there to catch me every time.”

“That’s beautiful, Wright. I love the mindset that you have.” Her eyes darted down while she wrote something and he waited patiently for her. It happened a few times in their sessions and he understood it. He had his own notebook where he wrote things down he needed to remember. Small things like birthdays and dates he needed but also directions and check lists to make sure he didn’t miss anything while working. When she looked back up and met his eyes through the screen, she was still smiling. “Did you have anything else you wanted to talk about today before we get to the next part?”

“I think I’m good,” Wright said. “I’m excited to work on this today. I think I’m finally ready.”

“Really?” She sounded optimistic instead of concerned. Wright loved that about her. After his talk with Xander about letting him set his own pace for his progress, he’d been more open with communicating what he wanted. They talked about it more, constantly. Xander didn’t feel comfortable with tying him up for fear that it would set him back or give him a bad memory of them together. He understood it and respected his feelings. It didn’t mean they didn’t do other things. Wright had gotten good at

keeping his hands under the pillow or holding on to the headboard. Shower sex was still his favorite. Xander would pin his hands against the wall and not release them until he was done.

“Yeah,” Wright nodded, tuning back into the conversation. “I’m good. We’ve been working toward it for weeks. I can handle the halters and leads with no problem now. And I know that we’ve talked about how it seems to be this specific kind of rope, with the roughness and color. I was talking to Patrick yesterday about the work I’ve been doing and he mentioned wanting me to start lessons on riding the horses. I just feel like I need to be totally okay with this before I start that journey. If that makes sense?”

“I don’t know much about horses myself,” she said. “But it sounds logical enough. Do you want to get Xander in and we can start?”

Half an hour later, Wright had his earbuds in and was listening to his therapist’s voice as Xander wrapped the rope around his wrist for the first time. He’d held it in his palms, had it dragged across his shoulders in other sessions. Even had it wrapped around one arm, near his elbow. But now, he was being bound with it. The memories of the rope, his dad yelling at him, complaining that he was useless were fighting to break through the encouraging words his therapist and Xander were saying. He continued to breathe deep, in through the nose and out the mouth.

“Okay, Wright. Talk to me. How do you feel?” Wright opened his eyes and stared at Xander. He shook his head, his sign for Xander to pull out the earbuds so they could both hear his therapist. Wright couldn’t bring himself to look at his wrists yet. Instead, he stared at Xander.

“You’re doing amazing, gorgeous.” Xander’s smile was big. Genuine. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Wright, remember, I need you to talk. Xander is great and all, but don’t leave me feeling like a third wheel here.”

Both he and Xander laughed at that and it relieved the tension in his shoulders. “It’s strange,” he finally said. “I mean, I’m here and I can feel the rope. These memories are trying to come back, but when I look at Xander, they go silent. It’s like... I don’t know. If I close my eyes, all I focus on is the rope. But with them open, I know that I’m safe. I know that it can’t hurt me because Xander wouldn’t hurt me.”

“I see that you haven’t looked down.” Wright was kind of hoping that she wouldn’t have noticed that, but she was a great therapist for a reason. “Can you do that or is it too much?”

“I can do it,” Wright said. Xander continued to hold his eyes. His hands moved to rest on Wright’s forearms. Out of habit, he looked down to see his hands on him. He let out a small chuckle, knowing Xander did that on purpose. Wright watched his fingers trail down his skin and glide right over the ropes around his wrists. It wasn’t as scary as he thought. In fact, it was what he’d been asking Xander to do for weeks now. “Wow.”

“Wow in a good way?” His therapist’s voice took his attention away from the ropes. He turned his head to glance at her and nodded. His eyes went back to the ropes when Xander’s thumb rubbed circles just above where it was looped around his skin. It wasn’t tight. He could slip his hands out if needed. But he didn’t need to. He was doing okay.

“Yeah,” Wright said. He looked at Xander and smiled. He chanced twisting his wrists slightly, feeling the texture of the rope brush his skin. He was doing this. He was taking back that last bit of fear his father had instilled in him. “I’m good. It scratches, but it feels like the straw we put down for the horses.”

“The straw is more annoying than these ropes once you start working with them,” Xander supplied.

“I’ll take your word on that, Xander.” Wright curled his fingers and twisted one wrist to be able to run his palm over the rope on the other. Xander’s hands were still on him. They were callused and warm, comforting. He loved the feeling of his fingers on his skin. “Wright, do you think you can take it off yourself? Don’t push yourself, but I’d like to see if you can take it off and hold it. See that you’ll never be forced to do this.”

Wright did as she asked. Xander dropped his hands and let Wright work. He took a deep breath and slipped his first hand out of the loop. He held the rope in his hand, letting it sway gently between him and Xander. There was clapping and Wright looked up at Xander first and then to his laptop. Megan was clapping. He loved how encouraging she was in such a simple way. No one had clapped for him before for doing something. Not before he came here. Paxton liked to be dramatic and dance around when he did something. Xander would usually just kiss him. But Megan clapped. Wright loved it.

“I did it,” Wright said with a smile that hurt his cheeks. He looked at Xander. “I did it.”

“You did,” Xander said. His hands rested on Wright’s knees now. They were both sitting crisscross on the bed, facing each other. “I’m so proud of you, baby.”

“We’re going to end there,” his therapist said. “Because I might live two states away, but even I can feel the tension in the room.”

Wright opened his mouth to deny, but Xander’s laugh filled the room. “She’s not wrong. But I will let you finish talking, okay? I’m going to go change this rope out for something else.”

It wasn't until Xander was out of the room and it was just him and his therapist that the words sank in. He sat up straighter and looked from the laptop to the bedroom door and back. Megan laughed this time. "Did it take you that long to get what he said?"

"Yeah, it did." Wright moved the laptop back where it was before Xander came in so it focused on just him.

"You're cute, Wright." Megan was closer to Patrick's age and sometimes it showed. She spent a couple more minutes talking about what she wanted for their next appointment and double checking that he was okay. He lifted up his wrists, taking turns to hold each in the opposite hand. There were no marks, no pain. He was good. They ended the session and Wright put his laptop away.

He couldn't see the barn from the bedroom window so he wasn't sure when Xander was coming back. But he wanted to be ready for whatever. He rushed to the bathroom and stripped out of his clothes. He'd taken a shower earlier, but this hadn't been in the plan for this evening. Xander had, as previously discussed, taken Wright on Wednesday, out of the blue. They'd barely made it to the couch before Wright was sitting on Xander's lap, back to front, spread out and being filled. The door to the hallway was open and he could smell the food. Xander must have pulled it out of the oven before walking outside.

"You took forever!" Wright's voice called out ten minutes later when he heard Xander walk inside again. He was lying on the bed already, naked and so ready. "I had enough time to go pee and clean up a bit before you got back."

Xander was laughing when he entered the bedroom. He held up two different colored ropes. They weren't the worn ones that they'd been using with the horses. "I had to dodge my brother and sister-in-law for this. They were sitting on the porch and asking what I was getting from the truck."

“I can only imagine how that conversation would have gone,” Wright said. His laugh was cut off when Xander leaned down from the side of the bed and kissed him. Xander kissed him deeply and sweetly. It was everything he could want from a person in a single kiss. He swiped his tongue over Xander’s bottom lip and then moaned when he started his favorite trail down the side of his neck. Before Wright realized, Xander was hovering over him.

“You know how proud I am of you?” Xander’s beard scratched against Wright’s skin when he nuzzled the crook of his neck and shoulder. His whole body shivered with need. “You’re so strong. So amazing. So beautiful.”

“Keep sweettalking and I might let you fuck me,” Wright said jokingly. His hands brushed down the back of Xander’s shirt, bunching up the hem to get it over his head.

“You just have a natural way with words,” Xander said with a shake of his head. “Now, are you sure you are ready for this?”

Xander sat back on his heels and held up the blue rope. It was definitely new. The brown one was lying on the bed next to him. Inanimate, not hurting him. He smiled when he realized that there wasn’t even an ounce of fear in his body or mind at the thought of what they were about to do.

Wright stretched his hands above his head and smiled. “So ready.”

Xander shifted on the mattress to where his thighs were straddling Wright’s chest. Before he could fully think through what he was doing, Wright moved his hands to Xander’s thighs. He rubbed his hands up to the waistband, keeping eye contact with the older man the entire time. It was almost comical; Xander held his hands out with the rope hanging over Wright’s head and stared down at him while Wright’s fingers moved slowly. He grabbed the band and tugged both the shorts and briefs down.



“Oh fuck,” Wright said. “If I thought you were big before, this angle is... Damn.” Wright licked his lips. He couldn’t pull the shorts and boxers down any more with Xander’s legs spread like they were, but it was enough. He brushed his finger over the head and looked back up at Xander. “I’m so ready for all of this, Xander.”

“Let me do this first,” Xander said with a small chuckle, but Wright saw how his cock twitched at his words. Wright moved his arms back up over his head and Xander positioned both of them until they were diagonally in the bed. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to watch Xander’s face or his cock. Both were equally turning him on. He wouldn’t be surprised if Xander moved and he had a puddle of cum on his skin already. “Wrap your fingers around the rope, gorgeous. You remember the safe word?”

“Cowboy,” Wright said enthusiastically. Xander rolled his eyes but Wright laughed because he knew it annoyed him that he refused to change it. Wright liked riling Xander up. Just a little. It usually ended with them in a playful fight or the one time Wright was pinned against the wall of the supply room, his legs wrapped around Xander’s waist. That had been a great day of work.

“Pull on the rope and make sure you’re comfortable with it,” Xander instructed. “I’m serious about this, Wright. I know we like to joke and have fun, but if at any point you are uncomfortable you need to tell me.”

“I will,” Wright said. He showed Xander that he was pulling on the rope. It was loose, like the last one during his therapy. He could easily slip out of it if he needed to. If he uncurled his fingers, his wrists would be free. He could tell in Xander’s tone that he was still slightly hesitant about doing this and he didn’t want to do anything to deter him. Wright knew he was ready for this. Knew that it was what he wanted.

Without warning, Xander rolled off of him completely. Wright turned his head to watch him. He finished pushing off his clothes and grabbed the lube out of the

drawer, tossing it onto the bed. Wright's nerves started coursing through his body again when a thought popped into his head. "Xander?"

He turned his head to look at Wright, a strip of condoms in his hand. "What is it?" His voice was full of concern.

"It's nothing about this." Wright lifted his arms slightly to motion about the ropes. "I just- Would you be comfortable skipping the condom? You know I'm negative and I trust you."

"Same," Xander said. "I was checked before I moved back to the ranch. But are you sure?"

"Yes, please." Wright tugged on the rope around his hands and smiled. He watched Xander pick up the other rope. They were both only two feet at most, just enough to tie a limb or two together. He took a steadying breath, smiling to reassure Xander when he eyed him closely. He moved to the bottom of the bed and wrapped a hand around one of Wright's ankles.

"I'm going to tie one foot," Xander explained. "You're going to be able to move just enough to roll on your side, but only when I tell you to. Got it?"

"Yes," Wright said. He watched in amazement as Xander lifted his leg and bent slightly to kiss his ankle. Wright never thought he'd be a foot guy, but with Xander keeping eye contact as he kissed across the top of his foot and to the outer ankle, he could get into it. Only with his man, though. "Fuck, that's hot."

"I haven't done anything," Xander said incredulously. He lowered his foot back on the mattress and slipped the rope around it, crossing the ends underneath. There was no place to tie it to the footboard, but Wright watched the top of Xander's head as he bent his knees and secured it to something. Wright felt the slight tug and it was a

moment of realization that he couldn't move his leg. It was tighter than the one around his hands, but still not too bad. "Are you good? Is that too tight?"

"No, it's fine." Wright continued to watch Xander. He stripped out of his shorts finally and all thoughts of not being able to move left his mind.

"I have one more question for you," Xander said as he walked back toward the bedside table. "Can I take a picture? Just for myself."

"That's fine," Wright said almost immediately. He watched Xander grab his phone and turn it on him. Wright wasn't sure what he looked like, but the way Xander's cock twitched gave him a good idea. To add to the photo, Wright closed his eyes and tilted his head back. He stretched his body out, arching his back. After his first picture, Wright discovered that Xander loved sending photos when they weren't together most of the day. Some were innocent, but others were a little more risqué. He loved them all equally. "I'd kind of like to see what I look like anyway."

"Fuck, baby. You're perfect, you know that?" There was a thud, like Xander had dropped his phone on the floor, and Wright opened his eyes. Xander climbed onto the mattress and covered Wright's body with his own. His hips pushed into Xander's and his cock twitched with the anticipation. Wright moved his body with him easily, both of them rutting against each other to chase whatever friction they could. It was a little awkward only being able to move one foot, but Wright made it work. "Shit, Wright. I love you so much."

"I love you too," he panted against Xander's lips. Xander kissed more of his skin and Wright definitely let out a whine. Out of frustration or horniness, he couldn't tell. He had all the good emotions running through his body. "I'm so ready for this. Please, Xander. I need this."

He may have been playing dirty, adding more moans and breaths to his words. He

knew that Xander loved when he begged. And it worked. He kissed him again, his hands trailing up Wright's arms blindly. He took both of Wright's hands in one of his. With one final look to confirm he was okay with this, Xander turned his attention from Wright's face to the rest of his body.

He moved torturously slow, kissing parts of him but ignoring the one part that was already demanding attention. Xander's lips brushed lightly over his inner thighs and his whole body lit up. Wright let out a quick yelp when his teeth scraped against the sensitive skin, his tongue lathing over the mark and up the crease next to his groin. He flexed his toes of his tied-up leg, not able to move it away or toward him. Xander was giving him just enough to tease him, keep him on edge. The feeling was incredible but infuriating. His cock was leaking, hard and red. Ready for any sort of attention.

"Xander!" Wright shouted his name when he lightly scraped his teeth against his cock. He was playing a dangerous game with the most sensitive spot of his body. Xander lifted his head to see Wright pulling at the rope around his wrists and smirked. He darted his tongue out, pressing against his slit. Wright's body lurched at the touch and Xander chuckled.

"Next time-" Xander sat up on his knees. He was straddling Wright's legs, far enough away from his cock. Wright knew his face was showing how impatient he was, but there was no chance of him complaining. Xander would just drag the teasing out longer. Xander ran his fingers up his inner thigh where he'd left a fresh mark. "I think I want to tie your feet to the bed and your hands behind your back. Make you kneel, all spread out for me, your face in the mattress muffling any noises you make."

Wright let out a strangled noise. His cock jumped and Xander swiped his pointer finger over his head to collect the bead of precum. Wright's jaw hung open and he tried to shift his hips to relieve the growing pleasure in his body. Xander smeared his finger across his own bottom lip and then licked it off.

“This is frustrating,” Wright said. He was so beyond turned on at the sight before him. Xander’s cock was just as hard. He wanted it in him, on him. Whatever. He just wanted him. “I can’t touch you.”

“This is what you wanted, baby.” Xander’s hand trailed down his own chest. Wright watched as his fingers brushed the hair on his chest, traveled down to his groin. He wrapped a hand around himself and gave Wright a sight he’ll never forget. Xander dropped his head back and stroked himself a few times, letting out a long moan while he worked himself over. “Have you had enough?”

“No,” Wright lied. He’d had enough of the teasing. But he loved it as much as he hated it. He could probably come just from watching his man pleasure himself while he couldn’t do anything. “But I won’t object to you getting on with the main event.”

Xander opened his eyes again and Wright smirked at him. He was trying to play it cool, but he wasn’t sure if it was working. Xander grabbed the lube and then directed Wright to twist his body so he was lying on his side, facing away from Xander. Xander’s hand trailed down his thigh and wrapped around the back of his knee. He rested it on Xander’s leg. The next thing Wright knew, a slicked-up finger was pushing against his hole. Not pushing in, just a light tease. Wright tried to push his hips back, to give Xander the go ahead. Xander, in turn, tsk-ed him and rested his head against Wright’s. Wright could feel his breath just under his ear. His words were just a whisper. A sultry, deep whisper that nearly had Wright orgasming before anything else could happen. “So needy, aren’t you?”

“Only for you,” Wright said honestly. “I can’t get enough of you.”

Xander kissed his jaw and then his neck and shoulder. Wright relaxed his whole body when Xander finally pressed into him. He started with one finger, then two. Within minutes, he was three fingers deep and rocking their bodies together. They were a chorus of moans and curses, the bed squeaking slightly with their combined

movements.

“Ready?” Xander asked. Wright turned his head so he could see the man giving him everything he wanted. He nodded and then bit his bottom lip when Xander’s cock slid into him. Bare. There was nothing between them as he rocked his hips again and again. “Fuck, gorgeous. You are perfect.”

“You too,” Wright panted. Xander pulled back, waited for a beat, and then pushed in deeper. Wright cried out, but not from pain.

Wright started to say something, but his words were cut off when Xander hit that wonderful bundle of nerves and he swore he was floating on a cloud. “Oh fuuuck, Xander. Yes, right there.”

Xander repeated the same motion a few times. He was overstimulated in the best way. Xander’s lips and hands were everywhere. He gripped Wright’s jaw in his hand and turned his face so he could kiss him. It was messy and damn amazing. He pulled away after a few seconds and let his hand travel down Wright’s front and wrap around his dick.

“So hard for me, gorgeous. Are you close?”

“Getting. There.” Wright panted the words out. “Fuck, I love and hate not being able to touch you or move. Harder, please. Touch me.”

“Demanding,” Xander teased him. He quickened his thrusts. Wright was sweating. Xander squeezed his cock on an upstroke, twisted his wrist over his head, and back down. All the while his cock drove into him over and over.

“Yes! Oh god, please, Xander. Right there. Don’t stop.” Wright couldn’t stop his words even if he wanted to. He couldn’t move anything but his right leg, which was

still mostly useless because of how good Xander was fucking him. All he could do was take it and enjoy it. Xander flicked his thumb over his slit and brushed his finger under the ridge of his head. He timed his strokes with his thrusts and it was sending Wright into a tailspin of pleasure. He closed his eyes and let the pleasure take over. “I’m coming! I’m- oh!”

They were moving together, bringing each other pleasure as they chased their orgasms. The room was hot, their skin sweaty, dirty. Xander rolled his hips over and over, the sounds of skin on skin mixing with Xander’s grunts. He watched himself shoot his cum over the bed. He tightened his ass with each wave, knowing that it was something Xander loved feeling. His body continued to ripple with pleasure and Xander’s thrusts faltered.

“Fuck, baby. Fuck, you’re so tight. I’m going to come, gorgeous.” Xander fucked into Wright’s body a few more times before he pressed his whole body against him. They were the most connected they could ever be.

Wright swore he could feel Xander’s cock throb inside him as he came. His mind was half out, though, and his whole body spent from his own orgasm. Xander’s hand had let go of his cock and he was just holding him tight now, pressed tightly against him. There was nothing better in the world than that moment.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:51 pm*

~Wright~

Wright fell asleep curled into Xander. He'd stayed connected with Wright for a minute after he came until his cock was soft. He pulled out slowly and Wright could feel it leaking out of him while Xander untied his leg and arms. His muscles were a little sore, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. He felt incredible. They showered together, Xander laughing and doing most of the work because Wright couldn't get his limbs to cooperate with him fully. Not that Xander was complaining. He'd put his briefs on while Xander stripped the bed. They worked together to put new sheets on. The weather was warm and they cracked the bedroom window to let the night air cool the room. It smelled like sex and he loved it. They ate in bed and then fell asleep.

Something woke him up. He wasn't sure what time it was, but he was sure it'd been a noise. The room was dark when he opened his eyes. He was still facing Xander but they'd separated in their sleep just slightly. Movement behind Xander, toward the window, caught his attention. At first he thought it was just the wind, but then he saw a face.

And he screamed.

Xander shot up, his hands moving to reach for Wright. He was sitting up, staring at the window. Sure he'd seen that. It was his dad's face in the window. Dark and shadows obscuring it, but he'd seen him.

"What is it?" Xander asked. "Wright, what's going on? Was it another nightmare?"

There was a loud thud toward the kitchen. Then shouting. Someone was in the house.



And moving fast. “Get in the closet. Now. Grab your phone and call Patrick or Tracy.”

More noises were coming, getting closer. Wright moved, but not fast enough for Xander. He threw one of their phones into the closet after him and slammed the door. Wright’s heart was racing. He didn’t want to leave Xander out there, to fight off his dad. He needed to help. But he followed what Xander said. His hands were shaking. He could hear screaming. There was a slammed door.

It took him nearly ten seconds to unlock the phone and press the button to tell the voice control to call Patrick. The phone rang three times. Then a fourth. It went to voicemail. He ended the call. There was more shouting, but Wright couldn’t understand it through all the doors. He took a deep breath and looked at the time. It was just past midnight. Paxton would still be up. He called her.

“Wright? What’s up?”

“My dad is here. Get Patrick, please. Xander went out and- I don’t know what’s going on, but they’re fighting. Please. Hurry. In the guest house.”

Wright stayed on the phone but tried to listen. There was something that sounded like glass breaking. A yell. It didn’t sound painful, but in his fear he couldn’t tell who it came from. Another thud. Cursing.

Tears streamed down his face. He needed to know what was going on.

“No, Wright. Stay where you are. Do not. Dad! Mom! Wake up!”

There was pounding and more yelling but coming through the phone. He closed his eyes and focused on the voices of the family that saved him. The bedroom door slammed open. Wright screamed, unable to control his body. He tried to make

himself as small as he could, curled up behind the tote of books and between some clothes hanging up. The closet was small. It wasn't like he was really hiding.

More voices came through. There was fighting just on the other side of the door. Wright continued to cry, trying to remember to breathe. He was barely getting any air in his lungs as the noises played around him. Xander's voice was yelling, but he could tell his dad's clearly too. All the years hearing him yell and cuss was ingrained in his mind. His phone lit up with Tracy's face this time. He didn't even realize Paxton had hung up.

He answered but didn't say anything as he put the phone to his ear. Tracy was talking immediately anyway. "Wright, sweetie. Just stay where you are, okay? Are you safe?"

"Cl- Closet." Wright barely got the word out. He screamed when the knob of the closet twisted, but then there was the sound of something being thrown against the door.

"Stay away from him!" That was Xander's voice. Loud and clear. Wright clutched the phone tighter in his hand.

"He's my boy!" his dad spat out. His voice was angry. Flashbacks came flooding back, all the times his dad was mad at him. The times he made him stay in his room while he ranted about how terrible of a son he was. Never once had his dad called him 'my boy'. It felt wrong now. "I have a right to take him back. He's cost me enough."

"Wright, honey, listen to me. We've called the police. They're on their way. Patrick and Xander won't let him get to you. Just focus on my voice."

Wright tried. But his dad was no more than five feet away from him. There was more shouting and another crash. It sounded like glass again. Maybe their lamp? A loud

bang rang out and suddenly there was silence.

Other than Wright's scream. His voice was raw already from the crying and screaming. He could hear Tracy saying something, but his brain wouldn't register. Another loud bang.

Gun shots.

As soon as his brain put together that it was a gun shot, fear rushed through his body. He stood, needing to know what had just happened. His hand was on the doorknob when it twisted. He shrunk back, wanting to defend himself if it was his dad. But it wasn't. It was Patrick.

"Wright, are you okay?"

His hair was all over the place and he was breathing heavily. He wasn't wearing a shirt. There was a cut across his shoulder, toward his chest. He was bleeding.

"Wright. Are you okay?" His eyes finally focused and he nodded. He wasn't hurt physically, but he couldn't say that for his mind. He could feel himself shutting down, the same unsettling numbness that he was used to for years living in the house with his dad.

"Where's Xander?" Wright asked when he found his voice. He couldn't see anything behind Patrick. He needed to know what happened.

"He's okay," Patrick said. "But I need you to get some clothes and let's go outside. The cops will be here soon."

"Is- Is my dad-?"

“He’s... I don’t know.” Patrick stepped back. It was then that Wright noticed the gun still held in his hand. He looked from it back to Patrick’s face. “I’m sorry, Wright, but you need to get out of the house now. Grab clothes.”

Wright turned around and looked at the closet. He grabbed one of Xander’s shirts and slipped into it. It fell to mid-thigh. He didn’t bother with shorts. When Patrick led him out of the closet, he tried to take in as much as he could. Xander’s cologne bottles were in disarray on the dresser top. The mirror was cracked. As he thought, the lamp by the bedside was on the floor and broken. The bed was shifted in a different position. He stumbled over his own feet when he spotted the blood on the floor. It was like it’d been smeared, like someone was shot and then dragged out of the room.

He found the source of it when Patrick led him out of the room. Patrick tried to fight him, but Wright had to see. Had to see with his own eyes that Xander was okay. He was kneeled over the motionless body of his father. His arms were moving fast and there were a lot of napkins and other things around him.

“Get him out of here, Pat!” Xander shouted. Wright fell back into Patrick’s body. He’d never heard Xander yell before. It was deep and scary. Something crossed Xander’s face in the dark of the hallway. His features softened just a little. But he didn’t stop working on his dad. “I’m sorry, gorgeous. Just please go with Patrick, okay? I’ll be out in a minute once the paramedics get here.”

“Is he dead?” Wright asked. He spared just a tiny glance to his dad. He couldn’t see his face from the darkness. The kitchen light was on, but with them standing between it, the shadows were too deep. Still, he could see a slightly darker spot pooling on the floor by his leg and the napkins that were drenched over his chest.

“No. Baby, please. Go outside. I’m okay.”

Wright let Patrick pull him outside then. Xander was okay. His dad... He wasn’t sure

how he felt. He'd tried to take him. This family had shot him. Patrick saved him. When they stepped outside, Tracy and Paxton were on the porch. There were red and blue lights in the distance, speeding down the dirt road that connected them to the state road.

"Oh, honey." Tracy ran down the steps and took Wright into her arms. She hugged him tightly. Her whole body was warm and he buried his face into the robe that she wore most mornings. Her fingers carded through his hair and he clung to her. His body was shaking, tears streaming down his face. He could hear her saying easy words, trying to calm him. It wasn't really working. He looked back at the guest house. Patrick had gone back in.

The cop cars and ambulance skidded to a halt behind their vehicles. Wright twisted his body so he could watch the scene unfold before him. Patrick met the paramedics at the door and they jogged into the house. The lights were on now, but he was standing at an angle he couldn't see. The cops were swarming the place, two going in with the paramedics, two standing outside the door. Another started toward them.

"There was a car parked off the road in the field," she said. Tracy's arms tightened around him. Paxton was standing by them now. He didn't even try to pull away. Paxton's hand slipped into his and she squeezed tightly. "There's another officer that stayed behind to look it over. It's a four car sedan. Dark blue. Does that sound familiar?"

"Not for us," Tracy said. He could hear the rumble of her voice through her chest. "Wright, honey. Is that one of his cars?"

"No." Wright lifted his head again when there was movement by the guest house. Xander walked out. He was wearing a shirt and shorts now and Wright noted the blood on his hands and forearms. He pulled away from Tracy and ran to him, ignoring the pang of gravel under his bare feet. The adrenaline was starting to wear

off.

He crashed into Xander's body, barely giving him time to react before he was jumping into his arms. He wrapped his arms and legs around him. Xander hesitated for only a second before he wrapped his arms around his body and held him tight. "God, I'm so sorry Wright. I forgot to lock the door earlier. I'm sorry."

Wright buried his face in his neck. He was crying all over again. He could feel Xander walking but didn't have the strength to look up again. Xander's hand rubbed circles on his back. Tracy was still talking to the female cop.

"... He called my daughter and she woke us up. My husband grabbed his gun and ran over to see what was going on. I don't know what happened, but he was in there for a few minutes before we heard the shots."

"And how many times did he fire the gun?"

"Twice," Xander answered. Wright could feel the rumble of his voice more than hear his voice. He tried to focus, needing to know what happened. "The man was in the living room when I made it out of the bedroom. He charged me with a knife, but I was able to knock it out of his hands. We fought. He socked me good in the jaw and made it into the bedroom. That was when my brother came in. I fought him away from the door, but he was gaining the upper hand. My brother charged him and the man swung. Then he kept swinging, aiming toward me since I was closest to the closet door where Wright was waiting. He fired once at his leg, but he didn't stop. He knocked me against the door and that's when Patrick fired a second time, in his shoulder.

"I directed Patrick to get Wright out safely and I dragged him out of the room and grabbed whatever I could to apply pressure to the wound. He lost consciousness, but his pulse was still there when the paramedics took over."

“Very detailed,” another person said. It was a man, by the sound of his voice. Wright was starting to get sleepy again. All of the adrenaline and fear was dissipating quickly. “And sounds like self-defense to me. He’s been in hiding since we put a warrant out for his arrest so we’re locking him to the gurney and taking him to the hospital in the city. We’ll need to take more statements, but we can do that tomorrow when its less hectic. Get everyone inside and cleaned up, okay? I’ll call Patrick tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Ryland. We appreciate the quick response.”

Wright lifted his head and looked at Xander. He had a bruise on his jaw, a cut on the corner of his lip. He moved his hand to trace lightly over the skin. “He hurt you.”

“It’s okay,” Xander said. “I would take a hundred punches to keep you from ever getting hurt again, Wright. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Wright said. He leaned forward and kissed against his lips gently. He didn’t want to hurt him.

“Go ahead and get inside,” Tracy said. “Get cleaned up. I’ll get Patrick to grab some fresh clothes for both of you. Paxton and I will make some snacks. I’m sure none of us are going to get much sleep, but at least try okay?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Wright said. He wiggled slightly to get Xander to let him down. He leaned against him heavily, though. The last thing he wanted was to be separated from the man that saved him. One of them, at least. “You have already done-”

Tracy’s eyes were shining in the moonlight around them. He reached out his hand to take hers in his. “I want to do this,” she said. “Now go, get upstairs. I don’t know if Victor is awake or not.”

“We’ll be quiet,” Xander said. “Thank you, Trace. I love you.”

“Love you too. Both of you.”

Patrick walked out of the house before they made it fully up the stairs. Xander left Wright with Paxton for a moment to turn around and hug his brother. Wright could feel fresh tears in his eyes. They were still close enough to hear him.

“Thank you, Pat. I don’t know what I would have done if you didn’t show up.”

“Don’t worry about the what-ifs now,” Patrick said. He wrapped his arms around his brother. Watching the two of them, grown burly men, hug and share their emotions so easily, reminded Wright that this was his family. These people just put their lives on the line to protect him. Without a second thought. He’d never felt more a part of something in his entire life.

They all turned to watch as the paramedics and cops exited the house with the gurney. There was an IV bag one of them was holding. The man on the gurney- he didn’t even want to think of him as his dad or father anymore- wasn’t moving. None of them moved until the doors to the ambulance were closed and all but one of the cop cars started driving away. Wright knew they needed to get some sort of formal statement or photos for a report.

Without much warning, Wright was surrounded by the four of them. Xander’s arms were around him, pressed tightly front-to-front. Paxton, Tracy, and Patrick joined. A family hug. He had a family. One that protected him and loved him, made him feel safe even in the middle of a crisis. All of these thoughts swirled in his mind. He wanted to say something as they continued to hug each other and him. But nothing seemed like enough.

“I love you all.”



~ Wright ~

\* Two Years Later \*

“Xander, what are you doing?” Wright laughed at the light touch against his skin. His arms were already tied intricately behind his back. He sat on his favorite stool in their own playroom. He had a blindfold on, only at the insistence of his boyfriend. He didn’t want to ruin the surprise he had for him for his twenty-first birthday.

Before living with the Lawson’s, Wright never really had a birthday party. Not one that was worth remembering. His mom would sometimes bring a cupcake home for him, but presents were seen as unnecessary. The past couple of years were the complete opposite. He’d been showered with attention and gifts.

His first birthday with them, he’d been surprised with his extended family. It had been out of the blue, but Xander and Patrick sat him down to give him the choice if he wanted to see them or not. It turned out that his father, the high and mighty man he portrayed, hadn’t even owned their house. The For Sale sign was because Wright’s grandparents heard what happened and effectively disowned their son. They’d been lied to for years from his dad about their family, everything from his job to how Wright was doing in school. They hadn’t known that his mom left. It wasn’t until Raegan got in touch with them to build her case against him that they learned the truth. They wanted to make up for all the lost time and offered a section of their land up north for William to expand the FFR. Wright was hesitant, but he decided to at least meet them. He hadn’t seen them since he was six. Xander stayed with him the entire time. After seeing each other face-to-face, they kept in touch. It wasn’t a lot, but it was a start, and gradually, they built a relationship.

For Christmas last year, Xander surprised him with their own home. The Starlin Ranch was selling and offered him a great deal. The couple was older and had been selling off their land bit-by-bit since they couldn't keep up with payments and work. They were grateful that Xander wanted the remaining hundred acres. It'd taken a few months for them to renovate the house to their liking. And by them, he meant William redesigned everything and Wright got to watch Xander work shirtless most evenings. They both still worked on the ranch with Patrick, but Wright would be shifting his focus come next year.

This birthday, Xander one upped his surprise. How he could up reuniting him with family that accepted him and a whole fucking house, but he did. Xander explained that they were going to start up a new program. A horse rescue. He showed Wright all the blueprints, done by another designer William knew from school that specialized in barns and commercial buildings. He'd been working with the horses for two years and had job shadowed the vets that serviced their area to learn more. He'd taken a few courses to get a certification over the last year. He was excited for this next step. They'd celebrated with the family earlier in the day and now, they were having their own personal celebration.

"Shh," Xander said. Wright jumped at the close proximity of his voice. He had to be down right next to him. Another brush of his fingertips across Wright's stomach had him shivering. The simple touch made his whole body quiver with need and Xander knew that. "I've been planning this for weeks. Just sit there and look pretty."

"Aww, you think I'm pretty?" Wright teased out. He heard something. They were in their playroom. It wasn't much, just a small shed behind the house they lived in together. Xander had spent a month fixing it up, refusing to let Wright inside. He'd claimed it was where he was storing all the construction things. Turns out, he and William- bless his soul for helping design this space knowing what it would be used for- brought everything in and did the work themselves. There were ropes hanging neatly on the walls, the white carpet thick and soft below his feet. A giant mirror took up the majority of one wall and Wright knew he was positioned to face it right now.

They had other toys in the room, but their favorite would always be the ropes.

“I think you’re gorgeous,” Xander said. “I’m going to lay something across your shoulders now.”

Wright held his breath and waited. He’d been in this situation more than once. Xander loved to tie Wright up almost as much as Wright loved being restrained now. It had taken a bit of learning, figuring out what both of them were and weren’t okay with. But they talked and stayed honest throughout all of it. Wright’s therapy twice a week helped and by the new year, he’d gone to just once a week. Now, it was once a month to keep checking in.

He loved moments like this, but he also melted every time Xander planned them a romantic date night. It was either taking the truck out onto their own land or going into the city to dance, but they’d end the night with Xander making love to him. Sweet or rough. Wright got the total package with Xander.

A soft weight rested on his shoulder and he sucked air into his lungs. His toes curled against the floor. He let the sensation of the rope take over his mind and body. He was no longer afraid of them, knowing that they had no power. The person holding it did and Wright trusted and loved that person with every ounce of his being. Xander worked silently, tying and adjusting the rope against his skin. As the minutes passed, he could feel the places where the knots sat snug against him, changing the direction of the rope to create patterns across his skin.

“You look so beautiful like this, Wright. Shit, this should be my birthday present, not yours.”

Wright wished like hell he could see himself. See Xander and watch him as he tied him up. The blindfold had been a recent endeavor of theirs. Xander joked with him that they should see if it kept Wright from coming too soon. He may or may not have come untouched just from being tied in different positions a time or two. Or three. He

blamed Xander because sometimes their sessions could take up to an hour before he was satisfied with the placement of each knot. They'd almost had an incident with needing to use the restroom once. Xander made sure he was good before they started anything now. It was an inside joke between them.

"Will I get to see?" Wright asked. He played his voice as innocently as he could. He knew Xander couldn't resist it.

"When I'm done," Xander said. His voice was in front of him now. He felt his hands brush up his thighs. Wright was totally naked. "Move your right leg and put your heel on the chair."

Wright did as directed. He felt Xander's lips brush against his inner thigh and his cock stirred with interest. He knew he'd be hard in no time. His lips parted and he let out a moan when Xander started wrapping a rope around his leg, tying his thigh to his calf. The rope wrapped all the way down to his ankle. This was going to be a new pose. He was going to be so exposed. He felt a swell of pleasure course through his body.

"Fuck, baby." Xander's hand wrapped around his cock unexpectedly. Wright relaxed into the grip. He bit his bottom lip, hoping the slight pain would take away the growing pressure in his balls. "I don't know how I got so lucky with you."

"Oh, you know." Wright panted a few breaths when Xander's hand disappeared from his cock but his lips brushed against his inner thigh of the leg not tied up. Yet. He could hope to be fully tied. "Just a bit of trauma and you showing up like my cowboy in shining denim."

Xander made him change their safe word because of how often Wright joked about him being his cowboy. He didn't want there to be any confusion. Now, their safe word was grits. Because Wright would never willingly talk about them. He still didn't understand why people liked them. They were just gross.

“I’m so glad you’re able to joke about it now,” Xander said, his tone half sarcastic. It had truly been a long road for them the last two years. After his dad tried to take him away from the Lawsons, Reagan unleashed everything she’d been building against him. There were medical records, police reports, witness testimonies. Apparently, for all the time Wright people watched from his front porch, his neighbors noticed and they were all too happy to talk about how they could hear yelling and always saw Wright doing the yard work. His dad pleaded not guilty, but a jury found him the opposite. He got thirty-five years for everything. “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

“Because I found someone that took a chance and loved me,” Wright said earnestly. They’d had this conversation time and time again, but Wright loved it. He was happy with his life now. Loved everything about it. Another rope tightened around the shin of his left leg and he was effectively tied to the stool he sat on. “I couldn’t have done any of that without you, Xander.”

“Keep sweettalking,” Xander said. His hands were on Wright’s body again. This time on his chest. He was doing something, adjusting one of the knots. Xander loved to tease and edge him. Last time they’d come out to their play room, he’d spent a full hour placing the ropes just right. It’d only taken Wright ten minutes to come once he started fucking him. “I’m almost done.”

“Already? Must be my birthday or something to not have to wait.”

Lips landed on his and he opened his mouth greedily for Xander. He pulled against the ropes his hands were tied in, but it was no use. They had to be wrapped at least two dozen times in some sort of intricate design. He’d be able to see pictures later; Xander always took pictures of him. “Will you be quiet now?”

There was something new on his skin. Kind of cold, but small. It was resting in the center of his chest. But Xander was moving on. Wright bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out as Xander wrapped something around his cock. He’d never done this before. “Is this okay?”

“Totally,” Wright said enthusiastically. “Fuck, Xander. You’ll have to make whatever you’re doing quick.”

The room fell silent after that. Xander worked and Wright tried to keep his breathing even. He couldn’t even shift his body to relieve any pressure or the energy running rampant through his body. His cock was pulled up against his body, Xander’s fingers slipping the rope under another part and tying it. Or he thought he was. He lost track of time as Xander’s hands touched him randomly. Adjusting the ropes or just touching his skin. Wright’s body was on fire. He was itching to see himself.

“Happy birthday, Wright.”

Finally the blindfold was pulled from his eyes. He blinked a few times to adjust to the light. It wasn’t a dark room, a normal light hung from the ceiling. The walls were soundproof for obvious reasons. They didn’t have a window so they could remain naked without fear of anyone stopping by and snooping, but there was a skylight that let in plenty of natural light. His eyes focused in front of him. His eyes traveled over his own reflection.

He looked amazing. Xander was truly an artist when it came to tying him up. The rope was red this time, contrasting nicely against his skin. It crossed over his chest and to his back. Three diamond shapes trailed down the middle of his body. His cock was leaking against his stomach, tied in place. The rope even wrapped around his balls. An intentional move on Xander’s part to keep him from coming too soon, no doubt.

“What do you think?” Xander asked. Wright looked away from himself to see Xander standing behind him. He was fully clothed, holding a single slice of cake on a plate above Wright’s left shoulder. “Did you look closely?”

Wright scrunched his eyebrows together and looked again. The rope, knots, his leg bent up and tied so he was on full display in the mirror. It was all beautiful and

incredibly hot. He tried to shift in the seat and something shiny caught the light and his attention. It was positioned in the middle diamond on his chest. He forgot about his reflection for a moment and bent his head down to look at his body.

A silver band was tied to his body. A ring. Xander came into his vision and knelt in front of him. He took his time untying the ring. He held it between his thumb and forefinger and looked at Wright.

“I love you, Wright. So much. I know we met under the worst of circumstances, but you have been the best thing in my life these last two years. I can’t imagine going through the rest of this life with anyone but you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” Tears blurred Wright’s vision. He shook his head, trying to get rid of them. Xander leaned forward and kissed him. “I love you so much,” he said into the kiss. “Oh my god. This is perfect.”

“I love you too, gorgeous.” Xander’s hands were on his body in an instant. He only untied his legs though, enough for him to stand up. Wright knew what was coming. “I can’t wait to call you my husband.”

“I can’t wait for you to fuck your fiancé,” Wright shot back. He let Xander turn him around and bend him over the stool. He smiled when he felt the band be slipped on his finger. He didn’t have much time to admire the feeling of it before two wet fingers plunged into his hole. Wright cried out and if it wasn’t for Xander’s hand on his shoulder holding him steady, he probably would have toppled forward off the stool.

“What was that?” Xander asked, his tone cocky. He scissored his fingers quickly, stretching Wright open so he could get to the main event. “I love seeing you like this, baby. The trust you have in me is delicious.”

Wright curled his toes and if it wasn’t for the rope acting as a cock ring, he would

have come. Xander's tongue was working alongside his fingers, opening him up. He writhed, twisted his hips, adjusted his legs to spread further. He needed his fiancé inside him now. He hung his head down, getting a partial view of Xander on his knees behind him. "Fuck, Alexander. I need you. I'll always need you."

"I'll always need you too, gorgeous. Here's to the rest of our lives."