



THE  
*Cowboy*  
AND THE  
OUTCAST



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FARTHINGDALE VALLEY — BOOK THREE

JACKIE NORTH

# BLURB FOR THE COWBOY AND THE OUTCAST

*Everywhere I go, I look for home. You are my home.*

On the run for two years from an abusive family situation, Kell searches for a safe harbor. Instead of that happening, Kell gets arrested, but, unbelievably, amidst the horrors of prison, there shines a glimmer of hope.

Marston's life is a mess. Everything he touches crumbles to dust. A second chance comes in the form of a job with the Farthingdale Valley New Start Program, except the two parolees assigned to him don't even show up, so the job is a disaster from the get-go.

Temptation appears to Marston in the form of a particular ex-con: skinny, foul-mouthed, unable to keep up with the other prison-hardened parolees. Now he's Marston's responsibility.

Marston has failed at everything else - he knows he'll fail at resisting temptation.

Can't sleep. Can't touch. Can't have. Kell and Marston are lonely, until they find each other.

Can they make love last?

*A gay m/m cowboy romance with hurt/comfort, opposites attract, emotional scars, fish out of water, and s'mores. A little sweet, a little steamy, with a guaranteed HEA.*

# THE COWBOY AND THE OUTCAST

A GAY M/M COWBOY ROMANCE

FARTHINGDALE VALLEY

BOOK THREE

JACKIE NORTH

*Jackie North*  
MM Romance Author

The Cowboy and the Outcast

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*For all those who know that love is love...  
...and to those who look to the stars.*

“Yours is the light by which my spirit’s born: – you are my  
sun, my moon, and all my stars.”

— E. E. Cummings

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# CHAPTER I

# KELL

The walls of the meeting room where Kell now faced the parole board: one white guy, one black guy, one white woman, weren't like walls in other parts of Wyoming Correctional. In most places, the walls were painted-over concrete blocks, pale yellow, pale green, pale blue. In contrast, these walls were wood paneled, but the wood was fake.

The fluorescent lights did their best to make it seem like day, but there were no windows, or maybe the old air conditioner that shuddered and shuddered while pumping out icy cold air was where the window used to be.

The vibe of the room made it feel fake. To Kell, as if the parole board wasn't actually interested in processing him for release thirty days early, that they actually meant to find fault in order to increase his ninety-day sentence to ninety years. But that was his own fear talking.

When two cops had arrested him in the Union Pacific rail yard in Cheyenne, they'd not quite known what to do with him. While he was being processed, as, evidently, riding a train without a ticket was illegal, he'd been told that due to his age and the nature of the crime, he'd be jailed for ninety days and released if and only if he promised never to hop on any train without a ticket.

Kell had agreed, readily, not even bothering to cross his fingers behind his back because, hell, he didn't owe the state of Wyoming anything, nor did he owe the rail system anything. He didn't owe anything to anyone, let alone the three people he now faced who wanted to know what Kell was

going to do upon release and how he was going to support himself.

“We understand you don’t have a high school degree and that concerns us,” said the white guy, Mr. Howell.

He wore a wrinkled tie over a wrinkled white shirt, as if he’d gotten up late to come to this meeting, or he didn’t care and had decided that Kell wasn’t worth looking nice for. That’s what Kell’s dad had always brought up in any conversation, that looking nice was so important, keeping up appearances, making an impression.

“You need to be able to make your way in the world,” said the woman, Mrs. Allwood. She had a prissy, tight mouth, and she kept blinking at Kell as if trying to bring him into focus. “You can’t do that without finishing high school.”

If anyone knew how hard it was to support himself without a high school degree, it was Kell. The last two years of his life had shown him that and what he didn’t need right now was the black guy, Mr. Webber, taking off his glasses and polishing them for the zillionth time as if Kell’s situation was so troubling he couldn’t see straight and needed to clean his glasses just to be sure he understood what was going on.

“If you are taking this as seriously as we hope, Mr. Dodson, then you should be able to fill us in. Otherwise.”

Mr. Webber paused to adjust his glasses for the two zillionth time, looking at Kell all the while like he hoped Kell would be able to produce that piece of paper that would allow the parole board at Wyoming Correctional to open its doors, hand him his stuff and his gate money, and let him walk the hell out of there.

At that point, Kell would find the nearest set of rails stretching into the distance, and he would follow them until the land sloped in such a way that would make it easier for him to jump a train to the coast. That or a nice two-lane highway where hitchhiking was not, as yet, outlawed.

Sometimes hitching was best, sometimes hopping a train. It all depended on the weather, his mood, the speed at which

he wanted to travel, and whether or not he wanted to have a conversation with another human being while doing it. Not that the parole board needed to know any of this. Kell was on his own for his transportation, and that was just fine by him.

“I am taking this seriously,” said Kell, hurrying the words when he realized that they were looking at him in utter silence, waiting for his answer with the intent and serious expressions of three preschoolers waiting to cross the street under the watchful eye of the crossing guard. In this case, the crossing guard represented the warden, who was not there, and would probably sign any recommendation of theirs without really looking at the content. “And I fucking told you already. I’ll probably get a job at McDonald’s or something.”

“And how will you get there?” asked Mr. Howell.

“I’ll walk,” said Kell with as much derision as he could possibly manage. “Duh.”

“There is a McDonalds in Torrington,” said Mr. Webber in tones that Kell knew he was meant to know were serious and concerned. “But it’s six miles from the prison.”

“So?” asked Kell, because it had never behooved him while on the road to give a shit. Or to act like he gave a shit. “I can walk six miles.”

“When you get there,” said Mr. Howell as he scratched his chest between his shirt buttons. “They’re going to want to know your job history when you apply. According to our records, you left home two years ago when you were seventeen. It was at the end of your junior year, and you’ve never had a job.”

“My parents wouldn’t let me get a job.” Kell slouched in his chair, shoving his hands into the pockets of his prison issued blue jeans, scratchy and thin at the same time. “Guess they didn’t figure that would fuck me over so bad, huh?”

This was not the response the parole board wanted from him, that was for sure. Mrs. Allwood’s face got even more tight and pinched, if that was at all possible, and Mr. Webber looked suitably grave and concerned about Kell’s predicament.

The expression on Mr. Howell's face was equally grave and dubious and on the verge of being sad, as if Kell's parole would not be granted early, perhaps maybe never, simply because he'd never had a job in high school.

His parents had always said that his education was more important than anything. They had given him a generous allowance, as well as providing him with everything he needed for school, and track and field, and science lab, everything.

Before leaving home, he'd never wanted for anything.

After he'd left home, after being honest with his parents turned out to be a shitshow, he swore he'd never go back. Which, of course, was an idea that the parole board had brought up early on. Kell's response had been suitably unsuitable, made all of their faces twitch, and then become quite stern, so Kell was sure the subject would come up again before the meeting was over.

"You don't seem to have many options, Mr. Dodson," said Mrs. Allwood. "You don't want to go home. You have no job skills, no high school degree or GED, so we're all very concerned about you and your ability to be successful on the outside."

"Yes," said Mr. Howell with a hearty nod, as if this was the very first time in this seemingly endless meeting that this particular concept had been brought up. "We're all very concerned about your potential for success."

Chewing on a hangnail on his thumb, Kell's brain was empty of alternate responses to this concern. He'd said everything he could think of in response to it, that he didn't care, that he'd get by, that he was headed to the coast and surely there were jobs there. But evidently the entire country was unsuitable for a nineteen-year-old on their own, particularly with Kell's background and history.

Kell knew very well and good that some places just didn't care what his background was. Places like backwoods bars or restaurants in small towns, or granaries, or gas stations, would take anyone for a day or so, paying them under the table. Hick diners would usually throw in a hot meal or two, and bars

always had yesterday's leftovers that they didn't mind if Kell ate. Then, a few bucks richer, his belly full of greasy food, Kell would be on his way.

Nobody had been concerned about him for the past two years, nobody ever noticed him passing through, so he wasn't really sure why they would give a shit now.

Well, the trouble had started when someone, namely a rail yard bull in Cheyenne, had noticed him and hauled him to the station manager, where the cops had been called. But that was the only time, at least until he'd entered the concrete-walled, razor wire-topped walls of Wyoming Correctional. Then there were eyes on him all the time, every minute of every shitty day.

"There is the valley program," said Mr. Webber to everybody in the room, polishing his glasses once again. "We've not talked about that with him yet."

"We already discussed it prior to this," said Mrs. Allwood with a snap and a shake of her curly and surely dyed hair. "They won't want him. He's too young. He can't go there."

Kell didn't bother to perk up and listen, because even though the idea of a valley program, whatever that was, was a new topic, it wouldn't make any difference, anyway.

The prison was crowded and the fact that he'd come up for parole after only sixty days of a ninety-day prison sentence told him, without any uncertainty whatsoever, that they wanted to be rid of him.

He was costing the taxpayers money, he was taking up one half of one jail cell, and nobody would benefit from any of it, least of all him. This parole board was very likely to stamp his papers approved, job or no job.

"We can at least tell him about it," said Mr. Howell. He smoothed his tie, taking a pause from his scratching, and straightened up, as if affronted by the idea that a mere woman would try to derail a discussion all on her own.

There were two men in the room, not including Kell, so of course they would squash the woman. He'd seen it before, in

his travels. Men liked to be in charge, to direct the conversation and the decisions, and if a woman ever got in the way, they'd squash her.

His dad was like that, had always been like that, so Kell knew all about it. Not that he was going to speak up and defend her because that had never worked in the past.

"Would you like to hear about the valley, Kelliher?" asked Mr. Webber.

"It's Kell," said Kell.

Only his parents had ever called him by his full name, Kelliher, which was a nod to some ancestor in the past who'd been a log baron or whatever.

Starting in high school, he'd asked his friends and teachers to call him Kell, and everybody had complied, probably since Kell was easier to say than Kelliher. With that new name had come a new sense of being, a new weightlessness, buoyed up by the idea that he could become whoever he wanted to be. Which had led him to making a huge mistake with his parents.

He should have known better, he really should have, especially about his dad, but the energy of it all, new name, new ideas, new identity even maybe, had made him foolishly blind to how his parents would react to the truth about their son. Their only son.

Well, fuck that. Kell couldn't trust anyone in that room to tell them whether he was interested or not, so the only response he could give would be indifference.

"Would you like to hear about the valley program, Kell?" asked Mr. Webber now.

Kell shrugged. "Whatever."

He wanted to add a smartass comment like, *It's your dime, start talking*, which he'd heard a trucker who'd given him a lift one time say, but he didn't even have enough energy for that, so he shrugged again and chewed on that hangnail on his thumb, making it bleed, a little sliver of red.

Mr. Webber made a little presentation, as if he'd been practicing it for ages, about the Farthingdale Valley New Start Program, where parolees were hired to work on a retreat that sounded like it was meant to be a kind of adult sleep-away camp for rich people.

At the end of his time in the valley, Kell would have a cell phone, money in his pocket, and real job experience, along with some kind of certificate. There might even be a chance that he could study for his GED while he was there.

All of which sounded extremely boring, because who was he going to call on a refurbished cell phone? Well, maybe he would call Bede, his cellmate, but he'd probably be the only person. The money would be good, too, but doing any kind of work in a situation that sounded more and more like a chain gang was not on any future agenda Kell cared to have.

"Only if Bede can go," he said, throwing it out there because what the hell and why not?

"Bede?" asked Mr. Howell, scratching his chest between his buttons again.

"That's Obadiah Deacon, his cellmate," said Mrs. Allwood, digging through her notes.

"The drug dealer?" asked Mr. Howell, his voice rising. When the other two members of the parole board looked at him in surprise, he pointed to the table as if announcing he was done with their shit even though the subject had only just come up. "Obadiah Deacon is a dangerous drug dealer who was up for parole not six months ago. We denied him, of course."

"I wasn't in that meeting," said Mr. Webber with a slight shake of his head as if to imply that since he, Mr. Webber, hadn't been there, the whole thing was entirely suspish.

"I expect that since Kell is Mr. Deacon's second cellmate who's been paroled that he expects he should be paroled, as well." When both men turned their heads to look at her where she sat at the end of the table, Mrs. Allwood smiled pertly. "He was sharing his cell with Ellis Bowman. You remember. He

was the drug dealer whose mother had died, only there was some issue about his parole and he went ballistic?”

Neither man appeared to know what she was talking about, so all she got in response were two pairs of wrinkled brows and a return of both men’s attention to Kell.

“I’m afraid that Mr. Deacon is not a good candidate for the valley program at this time,” said Mr. Howell. “And regardless of your involvement with the program, I am a bit concerned regarding you being in such close company with a dangerous drug dealer.”

He could tell by the tone of Mr. Howell’s voice, and the raised eyebrows of the other two, that their disapproval had to do with the reasons Bede was in jail but more importantly than that, the potentially salacious nature of the relationship between Bede and Kell. That they were fucking. That Kell was Bede’s prison bitch.

Well, they could wonder until hell froze over and Kell would never tell them.

The drug dealer in question, Obadiah “Bede” Deacon, was Kell’s one and only true friend, at least behind the walls of Wyoming Correctional, and hopefully would continue as his friend, even if they didn’t share a cell any longer. Not that the parole board ever ever *ever* needed to know how that particular friendship had come about, and why Kell valued it so highly. They could do anything they wanted to him and he would never tell them because Bede was his friend and they weren’t.

“Whatever,” said Kell, shrugging again. “I guess if you parole me, it won’t matter anyhow.”

“That’s true,” said Mrs. Allwood in what must be a desperate attempt for her to stay relevant and involved in the conversation and final decision about whether or not Kell was going to get his *approved* stamp today. “Would you like to fill out the online application?” she asked. “One of us could help you. Then you’d have a Zoom meeting with the program’s founder as soon as it can be arranged. Your parole would be guaranteed if you got accepted.”

“You’d be driven there in a van,” said Mr. Howell, as if Kell gave a fuck how he got there. “I hear it’s a lot of fun and you’d have some place to be for the entire summer.”

Kell huffed a laugh, dry and full of about as much derision as he could muster in this overly cold room during a parole hearing that was going on way too long without an end result in sight.

“Sure,” he said, because that’s what they all seemed to want to hear. “Where do I sign?”

He might as well jump through some hoops, especially if it got him out of his sentence early. Once in the program, dragging his approved parole behind him, who was to say that Kell wouldn’t light out the first chance he got? Or he could stick it out for a few days to see what he could milk from unsuspecting strangers, and then find the nearest highway, stick out his thumb, and hitch to the coast.

Where had he been headed when he’d been arrested? Some place in California, where it was warm, and the sun was shining on the bluest ocean. He did love the ocean, loved being where it was warm, and kept heading back to the beach after leaving it, when he’d thought some distant horizon might treat him better.

The parole board was standing up, gathering their laptops and paper files, as if some decision had been made while Kell had been off in his own head. Or maybe they’d taken him at his word about applying.

Kell stood up too and watched as Mrs. Allwood and Mr. Howell shuffled out of the wood paneled room. Which left him looking at Mr. Webber as they faced each other across the scarred table.

Mr. Webber’s laptop was still open and running. To his surprise, Mr. Webber crooked a finger and gestured that Kell should come around and sit next to him. Kell complied, a little dumbfounded to be sitting so close to a civilian, but Mr. Webber seemed unfazed that Kell was a criminal and only typed something quickly, then pushed the laptop toward Kell.

“You know how to use a computer, right?” asked Mr. Webber, but before Kell could say so much as *Duh*, Mr. Webber pointed to the screen. “There’s the application. It won’t take you long to fill out and meanwhile, I’ll call the ranch and see if we can get hold of Mr. Tate for you to talk to.”

“Sure.”

Kell touched the trackpad of the computer with three fingers, feeling the coolness, remembering being in school, carrying around a brand new MacBook Air, the slender edges of it brushing against his ribs as he sat in a classroom with people he’d known since he’d been in kindergarten.

All of that was behind him now and while Mr. Webber’s computer wasn’t all that new, it was nice to type on and the questions were easy, and in under fifteen minutes, he had the whole thing completed.

“He’ll be available at two o’clock,” said Mr. Webber, smiling his surprise as he held out his cell phone to Kell like a pointer. “We’ve got about twenty minutes. I’m going to get a soda. You want one?”

“Sure,” said Kell, though soda wasn’t his favorite. He’d drunk too many warm ginger ales and cokes and root beer to ever be very enthusiastic about a soda ever again. “Coke,” he said. “Or whatever.”

Astonishingly, Mr. Webber left Kell alone in the wood paneled room, though, of course, he took his laptop with him. Nobody with an ounce of sense in their heads left a prison inmate alone with anything, let alone a pretty nice laptop like that.

All Kell had to do was wait and then fumble his way through a meeting that would very likely end with Mr. Tate deciding, as everyone else in the prison system seemed to do, that Kell wasn’t worth the trouble. Because, of course, the issue of whether to release him or not release him had more to do with how much trouble it would cause Wyoming Correctional. How much paperwork. How much reshuffling of cell mates. How much money.

As to why Mr. Webber was trying to help him, Kell had no idea. At the very least, though, the parole meeting had gotten him out of laundry duty, which was a plus. And maybe the parole meeting would help him get out of prison early, which, desperation rising inside of him, he realized he very much wanted.

## CHAPTER 2

# KELL

Kell's first three days in Wyoming Correctional had been spent in solitary while they tried to figure out what to do with him. He wasn't a minor, but while there were other nineteen-year-olds in the prison, they fit into the jail's general population better than Kell did. The other nineteen-year-olds in gen pop were, evidently, hard-bitten criminals, whereas Kell was a newbie, fresh fish, had committed a misdemeanor, and was only serving ninety days.

This conversation about where he should be placed had gone on without him. The day he was assigned a cell, a cellmate, was the day the harsh realm of the prison became real, too real. He was led to his cell to dump off his stuff, then out into the yard for rec time.

The guard, without any regard to how new all of this was for Kell, explained it to him in quick, brusque tones as he unlocked several metal doors and led Kell into the main part of the prison.

*You're in here, but it's rec time now, so let's go. Let's go, hustle.* Said harshly, as if Kell had been holding up the whole system.

The yard was longer than it was square, edged on two sides by cement walls and on the other two by a chain-link fence topped with razor wire. The area was filled with milling inmates, some working out with the makeshift weights and bench presses, others hanging out by the fence, and still more in the corner where the two cement walls met.

However much Kell felt he'd just landed in some kind of prison movie, surreal and wobbly, he was glad to see the sun again and to get fresh air on his face after having been cooped up for three days.

He was used to being out in the open, used to being in constant motion, walking down a two-lane blacktop highway, his thumb out, humming tunelessly under his breath, or sitting in the corner of a boxcar that shifted and swayed beneath him while it slid along two metal rails.

On his journeys, there had been no real barriers to fresh air and sunshine. Even if it rained, or snowed, or the wind blew, all of that was preferable to being behind bars.

And yet here he was, behind a chain-link fence with a hundred guys he did not know and who might pose a threat. He'd never been in prison before, but he'd seen movies and TV shows that showed a harsh, unfair world where you might get shivved in the laundry room or raped in the library or forced to get drugs for your fellow inmates on pain of death. And that was typically on the first day, after which, more horrors awaited, and the prisoner might make it out alive but was completely transformed by his stay behind bars.

As for now, Kell intended to make the most of his time in the yard. He'd keep his wits about him for everything else that might come his way. He could brave his way through most of it, but his stomach was churning, both from the horrible breakfast he'd been served in solitary, and in anticipation of his fears coming true.

"Hey," said a voice from behind him.

Kell turned, squinting into the sun as he looked up at a guy, a head taller than him, shoulders stretching the seams of his denim shirt. He had a buzz cut, his scalp pink between the dark hairs, and behind him were two guys with the same haircut like they were all part of a boy band but didn't have any instruments.

"Hey," the guy said again, accompanying the greeting with a smile. "You new? You look new."

“I’m new,” said Kell, though a split second later he realized he maybe shouldn’t say anything about himself, only it was too late now.

“Got anybody?” the guy asked. He gestured to himself. “I’m Ryan and these are my boys, and if you don’t got anybody, I’ll step up for you.”

Kell’s mind looked at the words and at the three men, but he couldn’t make sense of the question or the statement.

“You look like you could use somebody. Ya know? I could be that somebody for somebody as pretty as you.”

Ryan moved closer, and the smile broadened, but it looked fake. As near as Kell could figure, he was being propositioned. He was also being offered protection from his own fears, both the ones he’d gleaned from TV and movies, and the other unnamed ones that lurked in the back of his head, back there where it was dark and shadows loomed.

“No, I’m okay,” said Kell.

He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets, shuffling off into a part of the yard where there weren’t any prisoners, where the gravel gave way to dirt, and that gave way to mud. Where it looked like something damp was oozing up through the ground, and his slip-on sneakers squished a little, making him slip a little.

Just the same, that was better than looking at Ryan’s pink scalp, wanting to make a joke about it, or tell him about the wonders of sunscreen. Neither would make Ryan happy, Kell had a feeling.

Looking back over his shoulder, he could see that Ryan and his boys were talking amongst themselves, so while they shot the shit, Kell moved all the way to the fence. Beyond it was a three-foot gap and another fence, also with razor wire on top of it.

He wasn’t escaping any time soon, but it appeared that his ninety-day sentence had just gotten a little more complicated than he’d anticipated.

There was nothing he could do about it now, as the buzzer rang, and all the inmates shuffled inside, getting in a long line, so Kell got in it, too.

The line turned out to lead into the dining hall, going past narrow metal boxes of silverware and a stack of plastic trays that had little indents in them. The indents were for food, and the staff behind the steamers slammed food into the indents as if each scoop was a fight against hunger and they, the main militia.

When Kell got to the end of the line, tray and silverware in hand, he looked out over the dining hall, wondering where he should sit.

In high school, at least the years he'd attended, lunchtime seating protocols were firmly entrenched. The bandies sat with bandies, the drug heads sat with drug heads, the poppy girls sat with poppy girls, and on it went.

Kell had usually sat with the track and field people, girls and guys both, though sometimes he sat with the brains, on account of his good grades, and nobody seemed to mind that. People had generally liked him in high school, but here, that was no longer a certainty.

What was a certainty was that Ryan was waving him over, like a popular kid being nice to the newbie for no reason at all.

Tightening his fingers around the edges of his tray, Kell pretended he'd not seen the wave, and looked for an empty spot. There was no way he was going to get this right, but he needed to sit somewhere, as the two guards at the wide door were eying him and a few inmates were muttering under their breath as they went past him, knocking his shoulder with theirs.

Kell sat down at the nearest table, ignored the swearing and the dirty looks, and ate his lunch. Or pretended to. It was all glop, tasteless and gray in one indent, over salted and cold in another. It was probably meant to be meatloaf and mashed potatoes, but it was like cardboard in his mouth and it was all he could do to get it down.

He missed his meals in solitary already, though at the time he'd balked at the sub sandwiches with their lettuce so wilted it was practically soup, and the mayo obviously fake. Kell had eaten better on the road, sifting through trash bins outside of grocery stores, or fast-food places, bumming money off passersby then taking that into a 7-11 for a pair of yesterday's hot dogs, which were at least hot and tasted like something.

The puddle of fruit cocktail was equally unappetizing, but everyone around him was chowing down like they were at a five-star restaurant, so Kell didn't suppose the food got any better. The inmates were eating because that's what there was to eat.

Soon, maybe Kell would be hungry enough to do the same, but for now he nibbled at the edges of his tray and gratefully drank the milk, which came in a carton and was at least cold and tasted like milk.

Over the next few days, the food did not get better. After an afternoon shelving books in a dusty, unused library, dinner was Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and more fruit cocktail.

There was a piece of buttered bread, which Kell ate, along with the milk, his stomach protesting the whole time. It wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and it wanted chocolate cake and it wanted fries with ketchup. Specifically McDonald's fries with McDonald's ketchup. None of this, none of what he wanted, was to be found anywhere.

After dinner, inmates lounged in the break room, waiting for their time in the showers. Kell did not go to the shower; he'd seen enough TV to know better. He was fine. He'd showered the night before, in his own private shower, in solitary. There was no way he was going to participate in a group shower because if looking pretty while standing in a prison yard invited an offer of protection, anything that happened in the shower was going to be worse. Way worse.

His cellmate turned out to be an older guy named Griff, grizzled and seamed, who looked like he'd been in prison so long he didn't know any other life. He also ignored Kell,

except for pointing to the top bunk and the stack of supplies waiting there. A roll of toilet paper, a bar of soap. A towel. A pair of white socks.

Kell climbed up to the top bunk, pushed all these aside and, yanking the blanket over him, pretended he was going to sleep. Except he did not sleep. Amidst the odd yelps and squeaks, and the constant hum from somewhere, he stared at the pale yellow cement blocks along the wall until his eyes were burning, and then he closed them.

The next day brought a repeat of the first, which, except for the echo of farts from the metal toilet bowl as the old guy sat on it, started out peacefully. It was when Kell arrived once more in the yard that trouble started like a house suddenly exploding into flames.

Ryan came up to him again, heading for Kell in a beeline, his two boys following close behind. The sun wasn't quite out yet from behind the clouds, so Ryan's pink scalp was a bit more subdued, but Ryan came up close to Kell, almost in his face.

"You going to be with me?" asked Ryan. "You gonna let me step up for you?"

"No." Kell shook his head, a spare back-and-forth motion because, for some reason, his body wanted to keep things tight and under control in a place where everything seemed like it could become out of control in a heartbeat. "Listen, thanks, but I don't need anything."

"You need me, newbie," said Ryan. "You just don't know it yet. Half the guys in this yard have checked you out, and most of them want to fuck you whether you want them to or not. Stick with me, and I'll make sure that doesn't happen. Stick with me and I can protect you."

"I don't need your fucking protection." Kell jerked back as Ryan's hand snapped out and slapped him.

"Don't you ever talk to me that way," said Ryan through his teeth, a snarl meant to intimidate.

Kell was intimidated, but he wasn't going to show it. He stuck out his chin, all his wise words to lie low and stay out of trouble flitting around in his head like unwanted moths who couldn't find a bright light to cling to.

"Then quit asking the question. The answer is no. It'll always be no."

That wasn't his first mistake, and it most definitely wouldn't be his last. When Ryan grabbed Kell's shirt collar and yanked him close, his heart was pounding in his chest, sweat springing up along the back of his neck, beneath his arms, along the top of his ass.

On TV it always looked as if the inmate could simply walk away from an encounter like that, that it was all just some kind of drama to attract viewers, to keep an audience riveted. But in real life, it was as scary as if the ground had suddenly dropped out from beneath him and, pinwheeling, realizing the only safe harbor was to grab hold of Ryan and say yes.

Other inmates were gathering around, circling, eyes bright, like they wanted to see blood. Of course they did. They were criminals.

Kell was a criminal too, but he'd only ever stolen so he could eat and stay warm and dry in harsh weather. He'd stolen rides on trains because it was the fastest, most direct route to wherever he was headed, but he'd never hurt anyone. Not even close.

Worst of all, the realization that he wasn't tough enough for any of this hit him, hard, and he flinched. Ryan saw it and the glimmer in his eyes told Kell that Ryan figured the battle was won. That he had his prize, and now all he had to do now was enforce his conquest. So he shook Kell and then shoved him into the dirt.

Kell's not-very-fancy slip-on sneakers slipped, and he went down hard, in an ungainly sprawl amongst comments like *Jeez, will you look at that tight ass* and, jokingly, *I'll fight you for him, Ryan*. None of which Ryan responded to. He simply hauled Kell up for a good close look, a hard grip on his chin, hot breath on his face.

“You’re mine now, newbie,” said Ryan, in a voice that he probably thought was scary and sexy at the same time.

It was scary, but not sexy, though as Kell tried to get a grip on Ryan’s wrist, to signal that Ryan shouldn’t grip him so hard, he wasn’t about to say anything. Not yes or no or fuck off. Not anything. His mouth had gotten the better of him and now he was going to pay for it.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to be yours,” said a voice from behind Kell, coming up around to be in full view, pulsing with muscles in a sudden shaft of sunshine, dark-haired, dark eyed, a tattoo of something along his neck, his eyes on Kell like he was something good to eat.

“He doesn’t want to be yours, Bede, that’s for sure.”

The response from Ryan came like a lazy feint, as if Ryan wasn’t worried that Bede could take what Ryan considered his, and all of a sudden, Kell didn’t want to be fought over like the last package of organic chicken breasts.

He tugged on Ryan’s wrist and stepped back. Unbalanced, Ryan let him go and now Kell was pinwheeling through the air—caught by Bede at the last second. Bede’s hands were warm along Kell’s ribs and let him go almost right away.

“It’s not right to force a guy,” said Bede, in a nonchalant way, like he and Ryan had this conversation more than once. Only Ryan was too stupid to remember it. Ryan lunged, and they were grappling in a heartbeat, inches away from Kell’s face, and it was all he could do to stagger out of the way.

The fight was on, dust kicking up beneath Bede and Ryan’s slip-on sneakers, fists flying, and up in the midst of this came Griff, half-balding, gray-haired, and slow.

He shook his head, and every single inmate moved out of the way.

“No,” he said. “That won’t do in my yard.”

A second later, Ryan and Bede stood apart, fists at their sides, looking at Griff with wide eyes.

“This is messy,” said Griff. “I don’t like it when things get messy, on account of it brings the guards, and they like to take measures.” Griff pointed at each of them with an arthritis-crooked finger. “When they take measures, things change. I like things just the way they are, so you two are going to have to back the fuck off. And you.” Griff pointed at Kell. “You’re going to have to choose. These two will abide by that choice, and I’ll get to go back to my wall and get my daily dose of vitamin D without having to monitor you asshats.”

“Choose?”

Kell swallowed hard. His gaze flicked from Bede to Ryan and back again.

Ryan was an asshole on the verge of looking like a skinhead. He wanted Kell. Wanted him bad, and didn’t mind using threats and force to get it.

Bede had twice the bulk that Ryan had, shoulders bursting out of a white t-shirt, his denim shirt tied around his waist because maybe he wanted to show off his bulging biceps while getting a little sun on them. His dark eyes were on Kell without any expression in them whatsoever, which was just about as scary as Ryan’s threats.

There was no way this unassuming older guy who farted when he took a dump had the attention of every guy in the yard, and, evidently, the authority to tell them to jump and their only question was how high. But it was true.

Ryan and Bede looked at each other with sharp eyes, and then turned their attention to Kell, patiently waiting, it seemed, for Kell to do as Griff had instructed so they could all go back to their regularly scheduled lives of unhampered brutality and the worst fruit cocktail Kell had ever tasted.

“C’mon, kid, I don’t want to stand here all day while you gawp,” said Ryan. “I’ll still take you on. I don’t hold no grudges.”

Kell knew better. Ryan was the type of guy to hold on to grudges until the day he died, and no amount of sweet-talk and crooked smiles were going to convince Kell of anything

different. Bede, on the other hand, had not moved a muscle, was not trying to cajole Kell into anything.

Kell knew he had to choose, or Griff would probably choose for him. So it was either red-scalped, sneering Ryan or silent, bigger-than-life Bede, who would get to do with Kell what he wanted, only Kell didn't know what that was. Fuck him face down in the mattress, probably, and while that wouldn't be pleasant, it would be a damn sight better, somehow, than saying yes to Ryan and listening to him crow to his buddies about it.

"Bede, I guess," said Kell, his breath feeling cold in his throat.

"Bede it is," said Griff, and then he gestured for one of the inmates to come closer. "Go tell Lenny to move this guy into Bede's cell so I can have my own cell back. And Bede." Griff pointed at Bede like a schoolteacher about to deliver a scolding. "When you fuck him for the first time, use a pillow to make sure he doesn't scream. Screams interrupt my sleep."

"You got it," said Bede, not taking his eyes off Griff as the inmate trotted off, going right up to one of the guards, whispering his message hurriedly.

So not only did Griff rule the yard, he was able to send someone up to a guard, passing on his message that way, rather than sully his hands and wasting his time by having to tell a guard what to do himself.

The power in those old hands probably spread a good way into the prison system, and here Kell had assumed that just because he was old and looked pretty helpless that Griff was a nobody. Lesson learned, then.

Hopefully he hadn't made the same mistake in his selection, where Ryan would turn out to be the good guy in all this, and Bede an absolute monster who would make Kell's next eighty-six days an utter living nightmare.

## CHAPTER 3

# KELL

Bede had turned out to be the surprise Kell hadn't expected. After dinner, when everybody was lounging around waiting for shower time, Kell had been escorted to his new cell, this one painted a pale green on the inside. His stuff was already on the top bunk, each item lined up like a soldier waiting for inspection.

"You coming for a shower?" asked a voice from behind him. Kell turned to see Bede reaching into his little cubby for a towel and a bar of soap. "We got a slot."

"I-I don't need one," said Kell, tightening his lips against his teeth to cover the stammer.

"You do, and we need to go now." Bede pulled down Kell's towel and soap, then cupped the back of his neck to draw him out of the cell. "Stay close," Bede said as they got in line.

The metal shower stall held ten men, it seemed, but there were only seven nozzles, so several had to share. Kell stripped in the dressing area, hanging up his clothes next to Bede's, and stuck close to the wall as he entered the stall.

He kept his eyes up, aimed only at Bede's silky smooth chest, eyeing the tattoo, trying to figure it out as he took the fastest shower of his life. Which only meant that he had to wait, naked and dripping, while Bede took a more leisurely shower, soaping up his pits and his junk and rinsing off as calmly as if he'd just gotten out of a dip in the ocean.

All of Bede was cut and hard, muscly, like he worked out all the time. And his attitude was as if he didn't care, wasn't afraid of anyone in that shower stall. Could be naked and bend over and pick up the soap any old time. As if Kell wasn't standing close enough to clasp Bede's hip and hang on for dear life until the ten minutes were up.

"Bring clean briefs next time," said Bede as they dried off and got dressed. "So you won't smell."

Nodding, Kell avoided catching Bede's gaze, that dark look Bede gave him as they got into line, and inmates headed back to the break room or their cells. Kell thought for half a second that he had the freedom to choose, only Bede's hand cupped around his neck again and directed them both back to their shared cell.

The cell door stayed open and would remain that way until lights out at nine-thirty. Until then, until darkness came, Kell would be safe from whatever Bede wanted to do with him.

Which was what? He'd find out soon enough, so he wasn't going to be a fucking idiot and ask. Just enjoy an hour or two before his asshole was ripped open.

"I like to read," said Bede.

He bent over and reached under Kell's bunk to his own, and came out with a book. When Kell looked, he could see that there was a little shelf cut into the wall, which was the benefit of the lower bunk in this particular cell. The book Bede held in his hand was a ratty paperback, like it'd been read a few times and then some. It was *The Firm* by John Grisham.

"You want one?" asked Bede, gesturing with his thumb to the shelf of books. "Help yourself."

Kell paused, hard. If he took a book, then Bede was going to want double what was owed him for rescuing Kell from Ryan, and Kell already owed him too much. So much that in addition to ass-fucking, Bede was going to expect a blow job every single night.

He had eighty-six more days in jail, so that was eighty-six blow jobs he would need to perform. And while Kell had been

imagining what a blow job would be like ever since he'd come out to his parents halfway through his junior year of high school, this was not how he pictured it going.

In his mind, the first blow job he'd give to another guy might be in the back seat of a car, with soft music playing from the car's speakers, and starlight coming through the window, giving everything a romantic air. Not this. Not this hard cement block-walled cell when the lights went out and everything was pitch dark except for the ever-present pale green emergency light in the corridor.

"Uh. No thanks," he said, his hands at his sides, his mouth as dry as a desert.

Bede shrugged, then sprawled on his bunk, opening the paperback as he adjusted his head on the thin pillow.

Without another word, or even a glance Kell's way, Bede was reading. There was no indication as to what he was going to do to Kell later, or even when he was going to do it. All Kell could do was climb onto his bunk and stare at the ceiling, his linked hands resting on his chest, where he could feel the pounding of his heart.

Now that no one was looking at him, in the small privacy the upper bunk afforded him, his body seemed to let go of all its resolve to remain strong, quivers starting in his belly, shoulders hunching as he did his best to hold on to his tears.

Bede might hear him and attack when he was weak, and Kell was just about out of every ounce of bravery he'd ever possessed.

He swiped at his eyes, wiping hot tears away with the heel of his palm, staring up at the recessed light in the ceiling for which there was no on or off switch, not that inmates had access to, at any rate.

The light would go off when the prison decided it would, at nine thirty sharp. Kell had until then to imagine how it would go. How it would hurt. How he'd feel in the morning. How nobody would care.

At nine twenty-five, the warning bell for lights out dinged, and the overhead light flickered. Taking a deep breath, the deepest he could manage, his chest feeling hollow and bruised, Kell slid down from his bunk and stood at Bede's elbow, waiting until Bede looked up at him.

Kell only had a few minutes to make a deal, an arrangement, to explain—anything so that Bede might understand and be a little gentle with him. If Kell was willing. If Kell did what Bede wanted.

“What?” asked Bede, looking up at him, closing the paperback with a snap, then putting it on his little wall shelf. “What do you want?”

Kell's mouth opened wordlessly, his breath coming in pants. Any outline for a little speech vanished into the void of darkness that seemed to be intent on swallowing him. Then it got worse, as Bede shifted out of the bottom bunk and stood up, towering over Kell, his head casting a shadow all around him.

“I'll do whatever you want,” said Kell, his voice jerking over the words, skipping with his ragged breath. “Just don't hurt me. I'm a virgin, so I've never—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop right there.”

Bede held up his hand, palm out, and seemed to be looking over Kell's head, behind him, to the narrow window in the heavy metal door where the emergency light gleamed and footsteps on cement could be heard, and the general low, ever-present din of the prison.

“Why would I hurt you?” he asked, his attention returning to Kell, his eyes dark.

“I owe you,” said Kell. “In the yard. You stood up for me. I picked you, so I owe you.”

“Oh. That.”

Kell took a step back as Bede sat on his bunk. Even when seated, his head came up to Kell's belly, and he was still big, but as he looked up at Kell, his hands rested on his thighs, his jaw worked for a moment before he shook his head.

“I don’t go for virgins, first of all,” Bede said. “Second, I’ve never forced anybody in my life. And third, Ryan is an asshole, a dyed-in-the-wool fuckwad. Together, you and me and Griff got one over on him, and that’s payment enough for me.”

“So you don’t want a blow job?” Kell’s voice broke halfway through this, confusion rippling through him. “You don’t want anything?”

With a shake of his head, Bede said, “Kid, you’re not my type.” After a long pause, Bede pointed his finger at Kell. “And I’ll say this. Never admit you’re a virgin. You’ll be safer that way. Too many guys think fucking a virgin will get them points, and you don’t want those kinds of guys being your first. Understand?”

“Yeah.” Cold rushed through his veins, followed by hot, a kind of shock overtaking him as the idea of being rescued just when things seemed their darkest settled in his brain. “But what do I owe you?”

“Just be cool,” said Bede. “Be a good cellmate. Don’t take my books without asking. Pay it forward when you can. How long are you in for, anyway?”

When Kell told him about the rail yard bull who had nabbed him, and how he had eighty-six more days to go, he saw the amusement in Bede’s dark eyes, but Bede didn’t laugh at him for getting off relatively easy when everyone around him seemed to be doing hard time. Bede only said *Stick with me, kid.*

Bede told him about how he was in for dealing drugs, and explained how you only shared personal information as a way of building trust, testing a little bit at a time before giving more. And a little about how the barter system worked, and how nobody knew how or why Griff had so much power, and that yes, the food was shitty, but pizza day came twice a week, and that was something to be thankful for.

As his prison sentence continued, Kell stuck by Bede’s side, thankful for his brutish-looking guardian angel, thankful for the break in the clouds when he stood in the yard doing his

best to get as much April sunshine as he could as he watched Bede play hoops.

Kell joined in sometimes, being a good-natured winner when he got a point, because that's what Bede did. He never whined when he got shoved to the gravel, not that Bede ever got shoved, like, ever, because Bede was there to help him up, grasping Kell's wrist and hauling him to his feet with a quick pat to his back.

Sometimes, when they were standing in line in the dining hall, Bede would clasp the back of Kell's neck and pull him close, whispering in his ear.

Sometimes Bede whispered something about the book he was reading, other times, he just leaned close, his body warmth soaking into Kell. And sometimes he told dumb knock-knock jokes, which made Kell laugh, and then everybody would look at the two of them, which had been Bede's intention. To make it look like what everybody thought was going on between them was actually going on between them. Which it was not.

Bede didn't like virgins, and he sure as hell wasn't interested in Kell's ass or any other part of him. And for that, as well, Kell was grateful.

On the day in the yard that Ryan passed a king sized Reese's Peanut Butter to Kell, Kell knew that, had this happened on his first day in the yard, he'd now be sharing a cell with Ryan, and doing Ryan's bidding. Getting fucked in the ass every night, and other unthinkable horrors. But when he brought the candy back to his cell, Bede snatched it out of his hand, and just as he was about to throw it in the trash, Kell grabbed his wrist.

"What'd you take it for?" Kell asked, reaching to get the candy back, but Bede held it over his head a good long moment before lowering it. "Those are my favorite."

"See this?" Bede asked, laying the candy in his palm. "See the little holes along the dark brown area? Look close."

Because this was Bede, Kell looked closely, blinking at what he thought he saw.

“Are those little holes?” he asked, looking up at Bede.

“If you ate this,” said Bede with utter seriousness. “You’d end up in the emergency room or, at the very least, spend an entire night on the can. Never trust anything from an enemy. Hear me?”

“Yes, I hear.”

Ryan was not nor ever would be Kell’s friend, though it sure was funny as hell the next day when Bede and Kell came to breakfast in the dining hall, and it was obvious to one and all that either Kell had a stomach made of iron or he’d not eaten the candy. Even Griff came up to Kell, and patted him on the shoulder, saying *Smart fella*, before walking off amidst his little entourage of bully boys.

Kell stayed out of Ryan’s way, and away from anyone who Ryan associated with, as best he could. He walked at Bede’s side, or even a little behind him or in front of him, living in Bede’s shadow in a way that would have irritated him had it not been what was getting him through his time behind bars.

He showered every day with Bede and slept like a baby on the bunk above Bede’s. He ate with Bede, and hung out in the yard with him when not working in the prison library, and never once did Bede act like Kell irritated him.

When Kell brought the subject up one time, Bede only shrugged and said that Kell was doing him a favor because since jailhouse scuttlebutt saw them together, he no longer had pathetic twinks coming up to him, fawning all over him, begging him to be their man, their protector.

“So why me?” asked Kell, looking up at Bede, his eyes tracing the tattoo that went from one side of Bede’s neck and down along the curve of his chest.

The tattoo, he now knew, was a geometric pattern meant to invoke a traditional Maori tattoo, but wasn’t an actual one. *That would be disrespectful*, said Bede, when he’d explained

the pattern to Kell. *But it's stylized to evoke that kind of tattoo 'cause I think they are beautiful.*

"I'm kind of a twink," he added, in case Bede needed any clarification. Kell knew that his looks, dark messy hair and green eyes, were unremarkable, and that his slender, still-growing body, whether on the road or trapped behind bars, made him vulnerable.

"Why you?" asked Bede, looking down at Kell, his head making a shadow of the overhead light that settled like a gentle cloak over Kell's shoulders. "Cause you were standing up to Ryan. Cause he hit you. Cause I hate him. And you have a backbone, which I respect. That's why."

Bede played everything close to his chest, and other than an odd remark about loving New Orleans jazz, or how often he wanted a pass to the library to exchange books, he never mentioned much about his past, which maybe was tragic, or exciting, or whatever, but Kell was never able to find out. In return, though, Bede never pried into Kell's affairs, keeping his distance like he was doing Kell a favor.

Then there was that one night when a fight had broken out in the dining hall, and all the inmates were herded to their cells, the doors locked, and the lights shut off early. From beyond the metal door, Kell could hear shouts and bangs, maybe even gunfire. From the bunk below, Bede said it was only stun guns, and smoke bombs, maybe a stun grenade.

"They just want to subdue the riot, is all," said Bede. "It's a lockdown. Probably be over by morning."

They were shut in, the clang of the door still echoing in Kell's ears. The blaring alarm was dampened by the metal door, but it was constant, like a pounding headache had expanded to encircle the entire prison.

In his upper bunk, Kell's heart thudded, and he couldn't close his eyes, couldn't catch his breath. Finally, unable to handle any more, he'd climbed down from his bunk, reaching for Bede in the darkness.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

Without a word, Bede had scooted back, making room for Kell on his bunk, tugging Kell into place so they were front to back. When the sheet and blanket and then Bede's muscled arm had settled over Kell, he'd turned and buried his head against Bede's strong chest.

The words came from deep inside, rising up in the alarm-echoed darkness. How he'd come out to his parents right after Christmas his junior year. How his dad had gone ballistic, but in a scary way. Not just shouting and complaining, but turning mean, as if having a gay son was the worst betrayal.

His mother, a gentle soul who lived only to please, had been unable to stop his dad when he withdrew permission for track and field. When he locked Kell in his room. Took away his learner's permit. Took off his sharp-edged belt and whipped Kell into a corner, blood flecking the air while his mother cried and begged his dad to stop. Whipped Kell any time he saw fit after that, week after week.

All of that horror during the spring semester of his junior year had narrowed to a point where his dad sat him down at the kitchen table and flipped a three-fold brochure in front of him. He was being sent to a conversion camp in upstate New York, a place called Serenity Sleepaway Camp, where, his dad told him, he'd get the help he needed. Get help putting his head back on straight, and leaving the gay nonsense behind him.

The day after school let out that year, and the evening of the day before the van arrived to take him to camp, Kell shoved his backpack full with everything he could think of that he might need. Then he crawled out the narrow window of the bathroom connected to his bedroom.

Shivering, he'd headed to the train tracks, where the land sloped up and the trains always went quite slowly. Slower than walking speed. And jumped aboard by grabbing the metal ladder, and finding himself a spot to hunker in as the train rumbled westward.

"You been on your own two years?" asked Bede, interrupting Kell only the once. "You got balls, kid."

Bede's arm around Kell's back tightened, a brief hug. Kell's head slumped in the crook of Bede's shoulder. He was tired of keeping it together. So tired of being alone, and fighting everything, and it was good, just for one night, to have unburdened himself of everything.

In the morning, of course, they would go on as they always had, pretending that Kell was Bede's twinkly prison bitch, and that Bede barely had a brain beneath his muscled body and twisting, Maori-style tattoos. This was their secret, a precious little flame in the chaos of his life.

When Kell got out of prison at the end of ninety days, of course, he'd have to leave Bede and his protection behind. A long road of unknowing loomed, making his breath come fast, his heart beat like a rabbit's. Making him think of ways of committing some kind of crime so the prison system would just have to keep him, and he'd be able to stay with Bede, who'd been in prison for five years and knew the ropes.

But then the parole board hearing had come and everything had changed.

## CHAPTER 4

# MARSTON

Marston knew it wasn't his fault, but when Gabe delivered the news that two ex-cons had withdrawn from the program—the two ex-cons who had been assigned to be on Marston's team—a sense of failure settled over him like a well-worn blanket.

“Then what's the point?” Marston asked Gabe. He looked at his surroundings, a green canvas tent on a wooden platform so he could pretend he was camping, and wondered again at the setup Leland had designed to make folks feel they could kick off their metaphorical shoes, unplug from the world, and just relax. The tent for each team lead was part of that, as was the rustic tone of the mess tent, the facilities—which weren't rustic at all—and the almost complete lack of cell phone service in different, unexpected places in the valley.

He didn't mention to Gabe the fact that he'd spent the evenings during his stay at the Holiday Inn in Torrington while attending training memorizing the files on Jeremy Lomax and Enrique Hicton, to the point where he would have gotten a hundred percent on any exam about them, he wanted to.

He'd not just memorized what had been in those folders, he'd *absorbed* them. He knew both men's strengths and weaknesses, knew what tasks they were most suited to. He knew not only the crimes they'd committed to be incarcerated in the first place, but why they were paroled. Knew the amount of their gate money down to the penny.

He even knew their favorite foods because he'd taken the extra step to make several phone calls to the prison, asking for

the information so he could make sure that the kitchen had those items on hand. Twinkies, frozen preferably, and chocolate Pop-Tarts, with chocolate frosting.

The valley's kitchen was now stocked with these things, but without Lomax and Hicton to eat them, they would probably go stale. So all of Marston's efforts, once again, had come to nothing.

While at twenty-nine years old, he wasn't exactly living his dream life, he still had a job to do, a good job. After all, he was pretty sure Leland Tate, who ran the Farthingale Guest ranch, would be sorely disappointed in him if he up and quit.

Not that Leland would put it like that, no. He'd still be blunt, but in a different way. He might not mention how Marston had gone a little crazy at the end of last season, drinking himself into a bleak stupor for no reason that he could remember, the memory of it was something Marston knew would take a while to overcome and erase from everybody's mind, if ever.

Luckily it had been Clay, one of the ranch's ranch hands, who'd found him, early in the morning, passed out in the tack room, where he'd gone to get away from all the movement and commotion of the Tuesday night swing dance in front of the dining hall.

Everybody had partners, everybody was having a good time, and though Marston had attempted to participate, a smile plastered on his face, he couldn't manage to insert himself anywhere. The dance and the joy of the evening had moved on without him, and he walked away into the darkness of the late summer night, knowing that nobody would want to dance with a disaster like him, let alone love him.

That's when he'd gone to his room, unearthed an elderly bottle of Bombay Sapphire, and finished it off. Then he'd driven into Farthing to get more from the bodega, come back, and tucked himself in the tack room, which always smelled amazing, leather oil and barn dust and the evocative passage of time, and kept on drinking.

Clay had done his best to get Marston on his feet, and cleaned up, partially sobered by the thermos of black coffee that Clay had fetched for him. The only thing Clay hadn't done was hide Marston's condition from Leland, mostly because Clay wasn't that kind of guy and also, a little bit, because Leland would have found out in the end, the way he always did.

Leland had a bunch of sticks up his ass, and one of those was the rule against drinking while on the job and certainly not to the point of stumbling and passing out in an ungainly position in an unlikely place to be discovered with as much dismay as if he'd been a week-old corpse.

The gasp from Clay's throat had come out like he was the heroine in a horror movie, which had made Marston want to giggle deep in his chest, but he couldn't catch his breath and ended up almost choking on his own vomit. Great way to start the morning, and his own fault entirely.

It had taken him a full day and night to sober up enough for the lecture Leland had called Marston into his small office to deliver, with the door shut, no less, which was always a bad sign as to how serious Leland felt the issue was. Or actually a good sign, a precisely correct sign that whoever was behind that closed door with Leland Tate was in deep shit trouble.

That time, one of the few times that door had been closed all summer, it had been Marston.

"Your strength is your independence," Leland had said, though Marston had been unable to focus on what had come before that during Leland's lecture, so he didn't understand why Leland was saying it.

The only thing Marston could manage to think was that he didn't want to be alone, only he didn't know how to go about rectifying that.

And no matter what Leland said about his expectations for Marston, and the conditions of his continued employment on the ranch, Marston's mind had focused on the fact that he'd never wanted to be alone, but that circumstances made sure that he always was.

Like, for very good example, the fact that his room in the staff quarters was at the end of the hall in the basement, beyond the laundry room, and the ice machine. Out of sight, out of mind.

Nobody knocked on his door wanting to borrow a pair of socks or for advice or to invite him out with the gang for a Saturday night spent at the local tavern.

If he ever expressed interest in hearing about it in the days after Saturday night, he was met with surprise that he was willing to hear about it, and, as always, that he'd even want to be invited.

"Didn't seem like your kind of thing," Brody, the ranch's head wrangler, had once said in passing.

Of course Marston would have loved to be invited, but pathetically when unmasked could not bring himself to insert his presence into the mix. So he'd end up, as always, alone again. Naturally.

Which was a dumbass way for a grown man to behave, he knew that. But the idea of taking up as little space as possible and not being a bother had been instilled in him for so long, since as long as he could remember, that he tended to vanish from everybody else's event horizon, so to speak, and his loneliness had grown.

At first, of course, he'd been thrilled to be hired by Leland Tate for the summer season. He'd be joining the team at the Comeback Ranch, which was what Farthingdale Guest Ranch was known as along the grapevine. Even in the limited circles Marston ran in, he'd heard about the time, two years prior, a guest had gone missing from the guest ranch, which the ranch into a downward spiral and the local news media into a feeding frenzy. The mystery about the missing guest deepened when he'd shown up briefly, and then disappeared again.

In spite of that, Marston wanted to work for the man who had thrown everything he had at getting the ranch back into the black, increasing staff when he could, by offering discounts when the books would allow it. Leland quickly grew a reputation for hiring only the best at the guest ranch, thus

delivering the highest, glossiest dude ranch experience to each and every guest.

To be associated with that kind of place had taken Marston from a lonesome on-the-road cowboy who was good with his hands and earnest in his desire to put in an honest day's work, to someone who was part of a highly respected team on a five-star ranch.

In the beginning, it'd been head-spinning, and he'd laughed to himself and pinched himself and felt like smiling more often than ever in his life up to that point. A sense of depression always lurked, but he kept it at bay, throwing himself into his work, his daily chores, and any tasks that Leland assigned to him on the side.

"I need the frame over the gate replaced," Leland had said one time. "Jasper's created a new iron sign, but the frame won't handle it, as the new sign is heavier than the old one. So I need a new gate frame. Can you do it for me?"

"Yes, boss," Marston had said, and set about making a new frame out of railroad ties, renting the posthole digger, buying and mixing cement. All on his own, only to find out that Leland had expected Marston to pull a few guys from their regular duties to help him.

The only part he'd needed help on was erecting the railroad ties and putting them into the newly dug holes, and even then he'd been trying to figure whether he needed to rent a crane, just to avoid bothering anyone else by asking for help.

Leland had admired the work Marston had done, then tapped Clay and Quint to help Marston finish up. Which they were happy to do.

For a day or two, Marston truly felt like part of a team. But then Clay and Quint had gone back to their regularly scheduled jobs, and Marston was on his own for the cleanup. Wood scraps in a bucket, chunks of dried cement collected. Paint properly stored in the supply shed behind the main barn.

"It's your strength," said Leland, obviously making a point that Marston had struggled to absorb. "But it's your weakness,

too. You can be trusted to complete any task with very little direction, which makes you a valuable asset. But you never ask for help, either, even when you should.”

“I’ll do better, boss,” said Marston, just about cringing beneath the weight of Leland’s stern expression. “Honest I will.”

“You will because you’re going to dry up,” said Leland. “You’ll miss the rest of the week, and all of next week, which is the last week of the season. I might be able to use you for shut-down, after which you and I will have another chat about where the best fit for you would be.”

The fact that Leland had not said anything about *whether or not you’re a good fit for the ranch*, but instead, *where* Marston would be a good fit, was almost like a promise that Leland wasn’t about to fire Marston outright. Sure, Marston could get a job on the road, following the rodeo, or signing up for a cattle drive, but he’d fallen in love with the idea of putting down roots, and other than feeling lonely most of the time, he’d been happy at the ranch.

To keep himself afloat, Marston had found a part-time job at the Chugwater granary, renting a room at the motel and thinking he’d eventually have to hoof it back to the slaughterhouse. It was a complete surprise when, after Leland had called Marston back to the ranch for shut-down, he’d pulled Marston into his office again, only this time with the door open.

“I’m setting up a new program,” Leland had said. “We’re going to develop the land south of the ranch to create a laid-back sleep-away camp for adults. Something relaxing and lush and high end, and I need you as one of my team leads.”

“Me?” Marston had asked, drawing back, incredulous.

“You’re good at giving direction and guidance,” Leland said. “As one of my ranch hands, I’ve seen you with guests when giving lessons. You’re very good at it. You’re also good with your hands and are just the person I want making signs in the valley.”

Leland's proposal was that Marston be in charge of a small team who would be dedicated to creating signage and installing those signs anywhere they were needed in the valley.

When Marston suggested that maybe those signs could be made by a sign shop, of which there were several in Cheyenne, Leland shook his head no, and then explained what he was after. Which, as usual with Leland, was not at all what Marston would expect from such a straight-laced, straightforward kind of guy.

"By doing all the signs by hand," he said, explaining in his slow and careful way, "making them unique, we'll not only impart a sense of them being handcrafted, they'll look antiqued as if the valley had been around for a century, giving the whole enterprise a sense of venerability. D'you see?"

Leland's somber attitude sometimes belied the dream-maker that lurked inside of him. He was a guy with a vision that was as wide as a Wyoming sunrise that came in streaks of gold and rose over a wild and unharnessed horizon.

Leland never ceased to surprise Marston, and he let himself be caught up in the passion of the dream.

"Sure, okay," he'd said at the time, willing to try anything to keep working for Leland Tate. Doing well at this task might currently be his last chance, but the fact that Leland was willing to give him that chance meant everything.

Only now, having spent time in his tent on Monday morning, he'd just spent going over Lomax and Hicton's folders one more time, he was being told that they weren't coming and that he had no team to lead.

"If we can move some men, we will," said Gabe, not backing down, or moving away from the wooden platform of Marston's tent, as if Marston's glower had no effect on him whatsoever.

"So I've failed before I've even begun," said Marston, the words coming out like a bark as he threw up his hands. It wasn't something he'd normally have said out loud, but, once again, he was on his own.

“The only person who thinks you’ve failed is you,” said Gabe in his level way, that reminded Marston, in that moment, quite uncomfortably, of Leland. “Like I said, we might be able to move some men, get you some parolees to work with. In the meantime, your workshop is just about set up, right? Those signs still need to be made and Leland wants you making them.”

The word *you* was said in conjunction with Gabe pointing his finger right at the center of Marston’s chest. It was as if he was being marked with all the power of Leland’s will. His intention was fully focused on Marston being the one to complete the task assigned to him, simply because Leland willed it so. Leland had a will like nobody Marston had ever met. Impossible to resist, impossible to break.

“Fine,” said Marston, giving Gabe a dismissive wave.

“The new arrival will be here this afternoon, right after lunch,” said Gabe, one foot on the ground, one foot still on the wooden platform. “Royce and I thought it might be good if everybody, team leads and parolees, were on hand to greet the new guy.”

“Just one guy?” asked Marston, puzzled. Royce was the other team lead, and while Marston had met him a few times, they’d never really associated outside of work. As for the parolees, he could count them on two hands and have four fingers left over.

“Well,” said Gabe with a small shrug. “There were three new arrivals, as we know, but now there is only one. Special case, evidently, as well.”

“How so?” asked Marston, though still dejected about his now non-existent team and not really giving two fucks about it. “Aren’t they all special?” This asked with just a touch of sarcasm.

“He’s young,” said Gabe. “Like, really young. He served sixty days of a ninety-day sentence for train hopping. They figured he’d learned his lesson and so are turning him loose, and now he’s on my team.”

That was fine by Marston because the last thing he'd want to deal with was some guy who thought hopping on a moving train was a smart thing to do.

Truth was, all criminals were missing brain matter to be dumb enough to imagine that committing crimes was the way to get through life. Even when Marston had been at his poorest, he'd never stolen so much as a stick of gum, though sometimes he'd come close to it, desperate enough to reach over the counter at the gas station and just grab every single bit of money he could out of the cash register.

He hadn't done that, of course, but the line separating him from someone who would have was sometimes very thin indeed. And going dumpster diving for a loaf of day-old bread did not count.

"Fine," said Marston, making waving motions of his hands to get Gabe to go away. "I'll be there."

"Okay, good," said Gabe, evidently not fazed by Marston's bad mood. "See you at lunch then."

"See you."

He'd have lunch with the gang, then he'd stand in the back of the group when the new parolee showed up. Then he'd go to his workshop in the woods and start making signs, so at the very least, Leland wouldn't be disappointed in him.

## CHAPTER 5

# MARSTON

Lunch had been the usual selection of luxurious, organic food, some of which Marston wondered at the cost of, like the organic carrots cooked in butter and drizzled with local honey, which always seemed over the top to him, but which tasted good.

Even after a season working the guest ranch, the food made him shake his head while part of him wondered if they were ever going to run out. And who needed *organic* hot dogs, anyway?

He ate his fair share, just the same, then went to his tent to change into a clean shirt for the valley's new arrival, hurrying to the gravel parking lot just as the white prison van pulled up in a small cloud of gravel-spit dust.

Marston stayed toward the back, since he didn't have any responsibility for the new arrival and was just there to thicken the crowd.

He was further disenchanted by the fact that this little arrival party would delay him getting to work, which, in spite of everything, he was looking forward to. Working with his hands was going to be the best part of the summer and, frankly, nothing else mattered.

Everybody was gathered at the parking lot: Gabe and his team, consisting of Blaze and Wayne, Royce and his team, Jonah, Duane, Tyson, three scary looking ex-cons who nevertheless followed Royce around, doing Royce's bidding

like giant and very obedient dogs. And Gordy. And then himself.

All eyes were on the van as the driver and the guard got out, sliding back the heavy door and gesturing inside to the occupant. Finally, the guard reached in and tugged the new arrival out, a guy, barely out of kid-hood, it looked like, his dark hair a sprawl over his forehead, clutching a beat-up backpack to his chest.

He wore standard prison issue clothes, down to those dumb slip-on sneakers Marston had seen when he'd gone to Wyoming Correctional for the two-week training session that every team lead attended. But the fact that the guy was wearing prison issued clothes meant that his own clothes hadn't been returned to him.

The backpack looked like he owned it and had carried it around for a while, so they had returned his things to him, but not his clothes. Which meant that the clothes had probably been too messed up or befouled to be worn.

So what had happened to them? Marston had no idea.

"Here you go," said the guard, holding out a clipboard. "Who wants him?"

"He's with me," said Gabe, reaching out for the clipboard. He signed it and then handed it back. "We can take it from here, Dave."

"Fine by me," said Dave. "See you fellows in a couple of weeks."

With a wave, Dave got back into the van, which sped off in another little cloud of dust. Leaving the kid standing there by himself, and in that minute, Marston had a small pang of sympathy. The kid was on his own. Didn't have any teammates either. Marston knew what that was like.

"Hey, I'm Gabe, your team lead," said Gabe, holding out his hand for the kid to shake. "You're Kelliher, right? Kelliher Dodson?"

"Kell," the kid said, looking at Gabe with enormous green eyes, clutching his backpack to his chest like he was sure

someone was going to rip it out of his hands. “Kell, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” said Gabe in his friendliest, calmest tone, because it was obvious that he could see, as well as Marston could, that Kell was scared, maybe out of his mind, a slight shake in his shoulders, the bones of his fingers standing out as he clutched that backpack.

If Kell was like this while standing in a clearing in a pretty forest, he must have been a mess in prison. Marston itched to see Kell’s folder so he could read it and figure out what was going on, but it was none of his business because Kell was on Gabe’s team.

Gabe dropped his offered hand, because Kell simply wasn’t taking it. Instead, he gestured to the little group standing in a half circle.

“I’ll show you where your tent is, but in the meantime, this is everybody. You’ll be on my team with Blaze and Wayne.” Gabe pointed the two men out. “And that’s Royce, and his team, Gordy, Jonah, Duane, and Tyson. And then there’s Marston.”

Marston lifted his chin when Gabe pointed him out and saw the flicker in Kell’s eyes as though he was trying to figure out the pattern. Team lead, team. Team lead, team. Then lone guy, no team. Well, he might get a team at some point during the summer, but today was not that day. Tomorrow didn’t look good either.

“You’ll be sharing with Wayne, so let me show you where that is.”

Gabe and his team, Kell in tow, headed off to the tent that Wayne, up until that moment, had occupied by himself, since his original tent mate, Kurt, had been expelled from the valley due to his violent nature.

Royce and his team headed off into the woods, which left Marston standing on his own for a minute, taking stock of his day, the momentum of energy created by them all standing

together suddenly dissipated. Then he headed to his workshop in the woods.

Leland had given Marston a free hand in setting the workshop up exactly how he wanted, but that was like Leland. He liked to give his employees enough rope to hang themselves. At least it had seemed that way to Marston in the beginning. Now he knew better.

The truth of it was, Leland lavished his employees if not with too much praise, then with the exact right tools to do their jobs. Thus it was that when Marston had brought Leland his sketches of his workshop, started by him and finished by Austin, the ranch's accountant, who was also an artist, Leland had held the sketches at arm's length and then nodded.

"We can expand on this," said Leland, as he handed the sketches back. "When the first season gets underway. We can get an even bigger tent to shade the area and hold arts and crafts. I like it. Order what you need, and send the invoices to Maddy."

The final result was a wide but not deep shed with doors that slid closed to keep out the rain and weather and to hold Marston's tools and paint, chisels and dust cloths, everything he might need to make signs. The shed was painted a light sage green to help it blend into the surroundings.

The wood for the signs he'd be making was going to arrive in batches, so he would only need to store it for a little while. Also on order were a jig saw and a belt sander, two pieces of equipment that would need to be covered with canvas every night, as there was simply no room in the shed. In retrospect, the shed should have been bigger, but it wasn't, and so Marston was just going to have to deal with that.

The crown jewel of Marston's workshop was the white canvas pavilion tent, ten by thirty feet, with sturdy pole, and screened cutout windows at either end and along the longest wall that could be covered if the rain kicked up. From a distance, the open-faced tent made it look like there was a little festival going on, and if Marston ordered flags, it could look like the circus was in town.

But what it meant in reality was that he could work in the shade with a cross-breeze coming through the screened openings, in the midst of a pretty forest. When he stepped out of the tent, he could see the blue lake through the trees, sparkling in the sunlight.

And, as he walked up to it along the narrow dirt path, he knew he was a lucky man to have landed such a great gig. Lucky except for the fact that he had no team to work with, but he was simply going to have to get over that.

Inside the tent were two tables. One was for planning, sawing, chiseling, anything dry. The other was for painting, so as to at least attempt to keep paint stains to a dull roar. Beneath was a wooden platform, currently covered in old paint canvas; at the end of the summer, or as needed, the canvas could be replaced, leaving the wooden platform of the tent looking like new.

Marston stepped up and went to the planning table, where Royce had left a folder beneath a large rock so it wouldn't blow away.

Had Royce been anyone else, he would have sent his list of information about what signs needed to be made to Marston's iPad. But Royce was, evidently, an old-fashioned guy, so he had made his list on a pad of paper, ripped out the sheets, and put them in a folder.

There was no way he could memorize the Latin names of things, but now Marston had what he needed in Royce's tidy, old-school cursive handwriting, listing every geological feature, every bird, every tree, every plant.

He was a marvel for detail, too, making suggestions about where the signs might be placed. There was even a little hand-drawn map, though Marston imagined he needed to get a real map and mark it up, so he could plan the distance between signs enough that guests didn't feel the place was littered with them.

Eventually, all of this would all have to be marked on an online map and recorded in a database, so they could keep track of the signs and replace them as needed. Had Leland

agreed to plastic signs, those signs wouldn't need to be replaced for fifty years, but seeing as they were going to be made of wood, with rough edges, for verisimilitude, the need for replacements would come much sooner than that.

Humming under his breath as he leaned over the planning table, Marston made mental notes, thinking he'd do all the directional signs first, as they could be used right away by everybody in the valley. Then he'd make signs for the various plants and trees and wildlife, along with signs indicating the names of any geographical points of interest, such as Guipago Ridge.

He still needed to order a couple bags of cement, and get his own posthole digger, a small one, just the right size to create a sturdy base for each sign. A bucket and trowel for mixing cement.

He already had a large dumpster on order, with the intention of keeping his area immaculate. No doubt Leland would want to come by and inspect Marston's progress, and he meant to be ready for that.

Propped up on the tall stool in front of the planning table, he studied Royce's list and then realized that because of the cursive handwriting, he couldn't make out half of the names. It was evidently important to have the Latin names along with the regular ones, and Marston was fine with that. But there was no way he was going to make any sign until he was sure of the spelling.

Tucking the list into his back pocket, he sauntered through the woods, intending to find out where Royce was, so he could ask him. And also, as he wended his way toward the mess tent, to take some mental notes as to how big each sign should be, probably starting with a basic size and then increasing or decreasing depending on the setting, plant, or geological outcropping.

Off to the side, as he passed a dense clump of trees, he heard shouting, barked words, uneven, angry, then a high cry as if someone had been caught off guard. Though it was probably none of his business, he headed that way, going up

the path between the trees toward the noise, which, he realized, was coming from tent #1, Wayne's tent.

On the wooden platform stood Wayne and Kell, and though they were a similar height, Wayne outweighed Kell by at least fifty pounds. Scattered on the platform and on the ground were the articles every new parolee was given: clothing, boots, toothpaste, washcloths.

Marston recognized the items because he'd been on the committee before the valley program had even gotten off the ground to decide what the parolees should get in their start-up kit: shirts, jeans, jacket, underwear, socks, and toiletries. It was an embarrassment of riches, in Marston's book, but simple kindness, the basics, in everybody else's view.

"Hey," said Marston just as Wayne, with both hands planted in the middle of Kell's chest, shoved him off the platform.

Marston was too slow to catch Kell, but he was there a second later, bending to check on him, helping him to his feet, a skinny kid who barely let Marston help him before skittering away, panting, shoulders rolled forward as if in an effort to make himself as small as possible.

"What's going on here?" asked Marston, though the answer was obvious.

Gabe had mentioned to Marston that Wayne once had a tent mate named Kurt. Kurt had been a mouthy, insubordinate parolee, but what had gotten him thrown out of the valley was his attempt to shove another parolee into a wood chipper.

Once his erstwhile tent mate Kurt had departed, Wayne had often crowed about how he had a tent to himself, how much he liked it. All the stuff scattered about was new, which meant that Wayne, in a very real and very personal way, had objected to Kell's presence. And though Wayne was typically an easy-going fellow, according to what Marston knew about him, Wayne had made himself quite clear about wanting to continue having a tent to himself with violence and raised fists.

Marston could not abide bullying, so even though Wayne wasn't his responsibility, and neither was Kell, nobody else was around, which meant he was the one, the only one at the moment, to step up and handle it.

"Wayne?" he asked, keeping his voice even. "Is there a problem here?"

Wayne had one chance to come clean, but of course, being an ex-con, he blew it.

"Nothing," said Wayne, puffing his chest out, giving a packet of new t-shirts a shove off the platform with his booted foot. "Kell is just moving out, is all."

"And where is he supposed to go?" Okay, Maybe Marston would give Wayne two chances.

"Blaze has got an empty cot in his tent," said Wayne, sticking his chin out now. "And there are other tents."

"The other tents aren't set up and Blaze will probably have a roommate in the coming weeks."

Taking a slow, even breath, Marston knew that wasn't the issue. Parolees could be shifted to different tents, assigned to different teams. The problem was that Wayne could have asked nicely if he could have a tent to himself, but he hadn't.

Instead, Wayne taken his frustrations out on Kell who, even now, was looking at Marston with wide eyes as if he expected the next explosion would come from him, rather than Wayne. As if Marston would naturally assume that Kell was the troublemaker.

But even before he watched Kell wipe the blood from his lip with the length of his sleeve, Marston knew better. Wayne had been throwing his weight around, and Kell had paid the price. To punish Wayne would mean making him keep Kell as a tent mate, but then Kell would pay the price again.

Maybe that wasn't Marston's decision to make, seeing as how neither man was on his team. Still, in the meanwhile, he could stop the aggression and set a tone.

“Wayne,” he said, moving close to the edge of the wooden platform. “You’re going to put every bit of this back where you found it. Understood?”

“What if I don’t want to?” demanded Wayne, sticking his chest out even further.

“Then you face the consequences,” said Marston, completely unmotivated to raise his voice even a little bit. “If you were on my team, I’d throw you out of the program this minute, but I imagine Gabe will want to have a chat with you about making better choices.”

Several emotions flitted across Wayne’s flushed face, but it would be a waste of Marston’s time to try to decipher any of them. Besides, Kell was still looking at him with wide eyes, hunched as if waiting for another blow. Not even watching as Wayne shuffled along the wooden platform and began, with huffs and puffs of exaggerated annoyance, to pick up all the things of Kell’s that he’d thrown around.

Rather, Kell’s attention was focused on Marston, like he was the nearest dangerous thing. Which felt odd, in a way, as Marston was always in the background, the local wallflower, rather than being the sharp end of a sword in need of someone’s full attention.

He didn’t quite know what to make of it.

“Do you want some ice for that jaw?” he asked, then he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder at Wayne. “We could probably give him ten minutes to figure out how he wants the rest of his summer to go, don’t you think?”

In response to this, Kell’s eyes narrowed, though whether he was reassessing his opinion of Marston or reinforcing it, it was hard to say. It was, however, gratifying that when he gestured for Kell to follow him through the woods to the first aid hut, he was followed by Kell, utterly silent at his heels the whole way.

## CHAPTER 6

# KELL

Kell followed Marston through the woods. He didn't know where he was going, didn't quite trust that the final destination wouldn't be something painful or shitty. Didn't quite believe that Marston wasn't going to haul him off and teach him a lesson to keep him in his place. But still, he was following Marston.

As to why he was doing this, only the barest realization simmered in the back of his brain, unconscious, an instinct.

The valley felt so new, so different from anywhere else he'd ever been, more like a fairy tale, a gentle wood that held sage-green tents, bits of cream-colored canvas peeking out from between the trees, like secret locations for summertime sleepovers. It couldn't be real that he got to stay in such a place for a whole summer, and of course, within an hour of his arrival, everything had turned to shit.

From the second Kell had entered the tent, Wayne had been on the defensive, sticking out his chest, and saying mean things. *You don't belong here. This is my tent. Get out.* Then he'd started pulling things from the two cardboard boxes Kell hadn't even had a chance to look at yet, and throwing them all over the place.

When Kell had protested, trying to be cool about it, stepping up quiet and confident the way he'd imagined Bede would do, that's when Wayne had started hitting him, as if Kell's not very good imitation of Bede had infuriated him beyond the point of self-control. And then when Kell had tried scurrying around to get his things back in the cardboard boxes

so maybe he could take them and just leave, Wayne had gotten more angry and it was so out of control in under a heartbeat that all Kell had wanted to do was hide under the bed or grab his backpack and simply start running. To wherever. To anywhere.

It hadn't really taken that long after the shouting had started before someone had shown up to put a stop to it. And, just like in prison, where the guards would always say it was everybody's fault and throw them all in solitary, the guy who had shown up, Marston, had looked at both Kell and Wayne with equal disdain.

This was when the seed for Kell's instinct had been planted. Though Marston's expression spoke volumes about his opinion of ex-cons, he didn't start throwing his weight around, didn't start slamming anyone against the wall.

Marston also didn't swear. Didn't raise his voice, not even a little. He just chilled the whole situation down by the tone of his voice, the fact that he made no bones about telling Gabe all about it, and then he made Wayne start cleaning up.

The only other person in Kell's world to behave like that was Bede, the king of giving nothing away, the prince of chill. Marston was a big guy, but the way he stood there made it seem like he was completely unaware of how imposing he was, broad shoulders, long muscled legs beneath crisp blue jeans.

He had a tough jaw and hard cheekbones, and the most unsmiling blue-hazel eyes Kell had ever seen. Not a guy Kell would want to meet in a dead-end alley, just like Bede, if Kell hadn't been introduced to him the way he had. In the prison yard, with Bede as his rescuer.

Marston was Kell's rescuer, as well, though as he finished up his very short warning to Wayne, a glance in Kell's direction told Kell that Marston considered him equally guilty of disturbing the peace and the only reason he wasn't being hauled across the coals for it was because, perhaps, in a single glance, Marston had considered that Kell was beneath his

notice. Not worth the time. Too insignificant to throw against the wall or lock up in solitary.

It was only the instinct that Marston was more like Bede than he was unlike him that gave Kell the courage to follow Marston through the woods, scrambling to keep up with that long, self-assured stride, tightening his chest to cover the fact that he was breathing too hard, both with a sense of growing panic, and the sharp-edged realization that coming to the valley was perhaps a mistake and he'd have been better off if he were still sharing a cell with Bede.

"This way," said Marston, quite calmly, taking a left to go around the mess tent that Gabe had pointed out to Kell earlier.

Side by side stood two wooden buildings, a small square one and a longer rectangular one. Marston took Kell to the first one, painted white with a First Aid sign over the door. The interior was painted white, including the set of glass-fronted cupboards along the wall. In the middle of the room was a small metal table and a rolling stool. Beyond that was a cushioned exam bed, and a privacy curtain pulled back and fastened to the wall.

"Hop up," said Marston.

When Kell hesitated, on the verge of protesting that he didn't need any first aid, the bones along the side of his face gave a big throb as if demanding to be noticed. Marston gestured to the exam table like he couldn't even imagine that Kell was going to disobey him.

So Kell hopped up or rather, slid up slowly, using his hands for leverage, wincing as his hip reminded him Wayne had given him a good, hard shove to the wooden platform, then stood over him like he was the boss of Kell's world, punching down as he slammed his fist into Kell's jaw.

All of this had happened so fast he'd shoved it to the side as he'd leapt to his feet to fight back, even if it was a lost cause from the very start.

"Let's take a look," said Marston, moving close, almost standing between Kell's knees, but not quite. "Where'd he get

you?”

Marston’s attention was focused on Kell’s face, his big hands gentle as he touched various spots, nodding when Kell winced and then he pulled away, like he’d seen enough and wouldn’t actually enjoy seeing Kell wince again.

“Here and here, too.” Marston nodded, the warmth of those fingers skating across Kell’s face one more time before Marston went to the cupboards and opened one of them.

“We don’t keep hard stuff here,” he said, pulling out a red and white bottle of Tylenol. “But we don’t lock it up either. All we ask is if you take something, write it on that clipboard by the door, so we can keep track.”

Kell blinked as Marston tipped up Kell’s palm and shook two white oblong tablets into it, then reached into the small, almost silent fridge below the white counter to bring out a bottle of water, which he handed to Kell.

“Take those,” he said. “Then I’m going to clean this up. It looks like only a small scratch, but better safe than sorry.”

Kell did as he was told, his dry throat more grateful for the ice cold water than he could even give voice to. Then he sat perfectly silent, the plastic water bottle balanced on his thigh as Marston tore open a pre-moistened disinfectant swab and, unsmiling, pressed it gently to places on Kell’s face that stung for a second, and then seemed extra sensitive to the cool air of the first aid hut.

“You want some ice for that jaw?” asked Marston, not looking at Kell as he threw away the swab and the wrapper. He moved back from Kell, his glance flicking over him, coming up wanting. “I’m going to get you some ice. Wait here.”

Kell could have disobeyed, could have gone back to his tent to change for dinner as Gabe had suggested, could have done any number of things.

But now that the fight with Wayne was over, at least for now, his whole body sagged, the Tylenol making the edges of him feel a little soft, the pounding of his jaw a little more

faraway, in the distance, like an annoyance that could be ignored.

And it didn't hurt to do as he was told, because it was good to sit still and not worry for a minute, taking sips of perfectly ice-cold water, and looking at the green of the woods through the open doorway.

Marston had left the door open, probably because he knew Kell wouldn't dare run off. There was no point anyway. The only place he could go was home, so a definite no there, or back to prison, but they'd been so happy to get rid of him, he knew they wouldn't take him back, even if he begged. So he was still sitting there when Marston came back with a soft towel around a plastic baggie of ice.

"Here," he said, holding it out.

Kell took it, wincing because his hand shook.

Without a word, Marston took the bottle of Tylenol from the metal table and put it away. With his back to Kell, it seemed as if he was giving Kell a minute to get himself together, but, of course, that couldn't be true.

The only person who cared when Kell got shook was Bede, only he wasn't here. Bede was a two-hour drive away, trapped behind a chain-link fence topped with razor wire.

When Marston finally turned back around, his eyes were still unsmiling, but they weren't unkind either.

"You can take the ice with you," Marston said, and when Kell didn't move, he added, "If Wayne gives you any more trouble, bring it up to your team lead. This isn't prison. You don't get points for putting up with someone else's bad behavior."

Marston motioned to the door, so Kell got off the exam table and preceded him out, holding the ice bag to his jaw.

As Kell headed back to his tent, Marston went an entirely other direction, disappearing into the thick woods, so he wasn't going to stick around and monitor what happened next. Wasn't going to be there if Wayne decided that his bad mood was something he could continue to take out on Kell.

Marston was dead wrong about what would earn Kell points and what wouldn't. It would be one thing if Marston told Gabe what had happened between Kell and Wayne. It'd be another thing entirely if Kell was the one tattling.

He might have only spent sixty days behind bars, but that and his two years on the road had taught him the hard lesson of not complaining, not whining. Not carrying tales. Nobody cared, nobody had, and nobody ever would. At least not about Kell.

He didn't want to go back to the tent until he had to, and it was probably still too early for dinner, though he didn't have a watch or a phone, so he couldn't tell for sure.

Clasping the ice cloth to his face, he let his feet carry him where they would and, following a well-worn path between the trees, found himself in what looked like a picnic area, complete with picnic tables, beyond which was a large, flat blue lake that he'd glimpsed earlier when Gabe had taken him on a quick tour.

He'd said it was called Half Moon Lake, and it really did curve around like a half moon, its edges drawn by thick stands of pine trees on the west side, and gray rocks above that. On the east side, there were tall-grassed fields and horses grazing, and then the bottom of the lake curved, disappearing behind more trees.

It was pretty, there was no doubt about that, but a little overwhelming at the same time.

He wasn't lost because the path behind him led almost straight to the first aid hut, the mess tent, and the long building where the laundry facilities were. But the sky above was so big, spreading wide from horizon to horizon, and the woods around the lake seemed so thick that he knew if he was to take a single step inside of them, he'd be swallowed alive.

When he'd been a kid, he'd gone to summer camp, of course, but there everything had been trimmed, organized, and regulated. There'd never even been any poison ivy in that camp in those long-ago days, and here there were likely to be poisonous plants and wild animals.

So he wasn't going in that direction. And he wasn't going to his tent, either. Not until he had to. Which left the option of sitting on one of the picnic tables to look at the lake. And this he did, putting his feet on one of the benches, an elbow resting on his knee while he held the ice cloth to his jaw.

Maybe this was as peaceful as it was going to get during his stay in the valley. Or maybe it would all be like this all the time. He didn't know, couldn't know. Only breathe slowly, in and out, and make his mind flatten from the rabbitly scared place it would go sometimes, looking for danger around every corner. Not trusting anyone.

On the road, when he'd been hitching or hopping trains, being on high alert had served him well, but he'd always been on his own then. In prison, it'd not worked so well because there were too many men around, men like Ryan, who would take what they wanted from Kell with force. Now, in the valley, was it going to be different yet again?

He guessed he'd have to wait and see.

## CHAPTER 7

# KELL

When the dinner bell rang, Kell almost didn't recognize it for what it was.

The ice in the plastic baggie had melted, and the cloth wrapped around it had unfolded and hung limply from it.

Across the surface of the lake, curved slices of white appeared as the wind moved across it, wind whipped as though from the motion of the sun floating behind clouds as it sank lower in the west.

What was the name of the gray ridge? Gabe had told him, but Kell couldn't remember. There'd been so much in the tour Gabe had taken him on, the names of things, the horses in the large pasture that followed the line of the lake. What his duties would be. When the bell calling them to meals would ring.

Which was now.

Kell slid off the picnic table and, bringing the now-thawed ice cloth with him, made his way back down the path that led to the main area, where the mess tent was.

There, men were already going inside the tent, wearing the kind of clothes Kell had only gotten a glimpse of inside of his cardboard boxes before Wayne had started throwing his weight around. And those soft-looking yellow boots, too.

That's what everybody was wearing, and Kell was still in his prison-issued outfit. Maybe nobody would notice or care and besides, there wasn't time to change so, stomach growling, Kell went up to the wooden platform and got in line, still holding the ice bag in one hand.

He kept his gaze forward, slightly unfocused so he wouldn't catch anyone's eye, so nobody would think he was issuing a challenge. That's what Bede had taught him in prison to help him stay out of trouble. Hopefully, it would work in the valley as well, because having gotten off to such a bad start with his tent mate, Kell needed to stay out of trouble.

"There you are."

Kell looked up to where Gabe was putting his tray of food down, smiling at Kell and waving him over. When Kell came up to him, Gabe put a quiet hand on his shoulder, drawing him to one side.

"That bruise looks like it hurts," he said.

"It isn't anything," said Kell because he didn't want Gabe or anyone to think he was a complainer or a tattletale.

Gabe shook his head. "Marston let me know what happened, and I had a hard chat with Wayne," he said. "That kind of behavior is unacceptable and it won't happen again." With a friendly smile, Gabe gave Kell a small pat and took his hand away. "Come sit here when you get your food," he said, giving Kell a once-over look, his forehead wrinkling for a quick minute before he looked away.

Obviously Kell was meant to have changed, but he hadn't, and now he stood out from all the other men who loomed tall in the line in front of him, all of them broad shouldered and long legged, boot-wearing cowboys and lumberjacks.

Once up at the steam tables, Kell grabbed a tray and a plate, utensils, and a napkin. Right away, his fingers noticed a difference in the weight of the plastic tray. It was heavier and there were no indents, there was just the tray.

In the line in front of him, everybody seemed to be taking what they wanted, and behind the steam tables were two guys wearing aprons and safety gloves, helping out as needed. Definitely different from prison that way, so Kell helped himself to meatloaf and mashed potatoes, ignored the Brussel sprouts, and grabbed the biggest piece of chocolate cake that he saw.

To his astonishment, when he turned around, tray in hand, there was an empty place right next to Gabe, who waved him over again. Kell went over, put his tray down, and slid into his seat, not catching anyone's eye, just focusing on his dinner.

The meatloaf in prison had always tasted bitter and dry, but here, there was gravy on it, and bits of butter in the mashed potatoes, still melting, like real butter would. Everybody was chowing down like it was delicious food, but it was still a surprise when Kell put the first forkful in his mouth and it tasted amazing.

He hadn't realized he'd sighed until Gabe looked at him and smiled.

"Good huh?" he asked. "All the food's good here. We'll put some weight on you yet."

There wasn't anything Kell wanted to say to that, and Bede, besides, would have advised him not to take the bait and say something like, *Fuck you* or *Fuck off* or anything like that. But the food was good, and it was hot, so he concentrated on that, rushing through the meatloaf and mashed potatoes to get to the chocolate cake, which was kind of a mistake, as the meatloaf seemed stuck in his throat.

Swallowing hard, he looked along the table. In prison, once you sat down, that was it. You didn't get to get up and wander around, or get extra napkins or even a glass of water. Here, he had no idea, so he swallowed again and pretended he didn't see that one of the guys behind the steam table was bringing out a quart of milk and putting it in front of Wayne.

The quart was made of glass, and at the top was a layer of darker yellow, set off from the rest of the milk in a way that told Kell it was real cream. His mouth watered and he swallowed again and looked away as Wayne poured himself some milk that was so fresh the cream had risen to the top.

"Hey," said a voice, level and low. "Why don't you pass some of that down here, for Kell."

Kell looked up. Sitting right across from him was Marston, and Kell had missed this fact because he'd been purposefully

not focusing on any face. Marston looked at him and didn't smile.

"This is *my* milk," said Wayne, his voice petulant. He even put a protective arm around the bottle.

"Well, you can share," said Marston, not taking his eyes from Kell. "We'll get the cooks to order extra tomorrow, but for now, you can share."

Someone pushed a glass in his direction, sliding it down the table. Marston caught it, and placed it in front of Kell, then reached as Wayne sighed and passed the glass quart of milk, now half-full, down the row of men. Hand by hand, the bottle came until it reached Marston, who poured the contents into the glass.

"You like milk?" he asked as he put the now-empty glass quart down.

He didn't smile as he asked this, as if he didn't care about the answer. But Kell nodded, overwhelmed with the rising sense that maybe the valley was different from prison. That people were generally kind. That nobody was going to put up with Wayne's crap.

Everything, every sensation and smell and sound, was all jumbled together. The only thing solid and calm was Marston's gaze, and the untranslatable expression in his blue-gold eyes, as if he didn't want to share, never wanted to share, what he was thinking.

"Yeah," said Kell.

He coughed to clear his throat and said it again, more clearly, making it casual, anything to reflect the opposite of what he felt. Which was an explosion of desire for the milk, which he'd not had in ages, and a sense of gratitude. What if people being nice wasn't a trick?

He longed to call Bede and talk it over with him, and there was a phone for that purpose, right inside the mess tent. He could call Bede, but maybe after dinner.

As for now, he took a bite of chocolate cake and a swallow of the fresh milk and closed his eyes to enjoy the sensation of

a full belly, the flavors melting on his tongue. The sense of not being hungry, of being satisfied, which hadn't happened to him in he didn't know how long.

His eyes were half closed by the time dinner was over, and it was all he could manage to do to stumble to his tent, shove the boxes aside and crawl into bed, the overhead light still burning.

Wayne didn't come back for ages, that was all Kell could figure, but when he woke up in the morning, the light was off, birds were singing in the trees through the open flaps in the tent, front and back. Wayne was already up, clumping around, getting dressed, tying on his boots. His hair was wet, like he'd gotten up earlier to take a shower.

"C'mon, new kid," said Wayne, quite breezily, as his anger at Kell's presence the day before had never happened. That or he'd gotten used to having Kell as his tent mate. Or maybe Gabe had chatted with Wayne about the way he'd acted, and now Wayne was making better choices and being friendly.

"Kell," said Kell between gritted teeth as he sat up and curled his fingers around the edge of his cot. Which, come to think of it, had been comfortable enough to make him feel like he'd slept on a cloud. "My name is Kell."

"Fine, Kell," said Wayne with a wave of both arms, as if Kell's insistence on being called by this name was outrageous, but Wayne was going to go along with it just to keep the peace. "Breakfast." He leaned down to smack Kell's thigh and then left the tent, whistling tunelessly.

Kell was still getting dressed when the breakfast bell rang so, in order not to be late, he pulled on his slip-on sneakers, which seemed skimpy and small next to his scratchy new blue jeans and snap button shirt, which hung off his shoulders and flopped around his wrists.

He was the last in line at the mess tent for the breakfast buffet and, feeling all out of sorts amidst the cheery good morning hellos and steaming cups of coffee and the jostle for some amazing-smelling bacon, he hunched his shoulders

forward and took a seat at the very end of the long table where everybody else was sitting.

After breakfast, which had been delicious but rushed, Gabe called him over.

“Where are your new boots?” he asked, looking Kell up and down. “Go put ‘em on, and if there aren’t gloves in either of your boxes, let me know and I’ll get you some. You’ll get your own hat this week, but here’s one to wear in the meantime.”

“What—?” Kell took the hat and put it on his head, feeling awkward and pleased at the same time.

It was a cowboy hat that Gabe had given him, a little sweat-smudged along the hat band, grimy along its straw edges, but it was a real cowboy hat. Making a little face as if he disliked the idea of wearing it, he straightened it on his head, and raised his chin for inspection, smiling on the inside in spite of himself.

“Nice,” said Gabe. “That shirt’s a little big, but I think you’ll grow into it. Now, go get your stuff and meet us in the parking lot, right over there.”

Gabe pointed, and then he went striding off, all business. Kell rushed to his tent and laced on the heavy, yellow boots, pleased with the denseness around his ankles and, grabbing the pair of leather work-gloves from the box, half-shoved beneath his cot the night before, he raced back to the parking lot where Gabe and Wayne and Blaze were piling into a silver four-door truck that was hauling a long, flatbed trailer.

“Why isn’t Royce’s team helping?” asked Wayne as he settled himself in the front passenger seat, the window down, his gloved hand tapping the side of the truck.

“Royce’s team is clearing a path through the willow bushes on the other side of the lake this week,” said Gabe, giving Kell a smile in greeting as Kell clambered into the back passenger seat next to Blaze, who gave Kell a chin-jerk as hello, his straw hat in his lap, his leather gloves tucked into his belt. “We

need to haul some hay so the horses in the pasture don't have reason to overgraze."

After that, it was all go, go, go. Gabe drove the truck and trailer through the compound and up a little dirt road, through the small town that Kell remembered from the day before, then headed north along a two-lane blacktopped road. Though it felt strange to be out and about, not behind bars or inside of a razor-wire topped fence, the breeze through the open windows was fresh and smelled good, the blue sky endless, stretching wide from horizon to horizon.

Inside of ten minutes, Gabe pulled off the road, and Wayne hopped out to open a sagging barbed wire gate, beyond which, beneath the warm sunshine, was an endless field of row after row of fresh, green hay bales.

"This is us," said Gabe as Wayne hopped back in. "We'll start at the far end and start loading bales. Two on the ground, throwing 'em up, and two on the flatbed, arranging. Then we'll take a break. Before we switch. Any questions?"

Everybody was shaking their heads, so Kell shook his head, and got out when Gabe pulled up the truck and turned it around at the far end of the field. The stubbled land spread out before him, seemingly forever, sloping away with miles of hay bales, all waiting to be loaded.

At first, it was easy. He was on the ground with Blaze, grabbing the sturdy twine around each hay bale with gloved hands, then throwing the bale up on top of the flatbed, where Gabe or Wayne would grab it and arrange it at the far end, tidy and in rows.

But then the hay bales were farther from the flatbed and soon Kell's shoulders strained, his arms shaking with the weight underneath the sun, which instead of being soft gold, blazed with unforgiving light. His armpits were soaked, his gloves kept slipping off, and his new boots felt like two blocks of lead.

It didn't get any better. After Gabe drove a little way into the field, with Wayne smirking as he hopped on the flatbed for the little jaunt, Blaze and Kell following behind, Kell was up

on the flatbed, grabbing hay bales as they were thrown to him, with him and Blaze stacking them high at the far end, beginning new rows as needed.

“You okay?” Wayne asked when they stopped for a break, Gabe passing around bottles of ice cold water that gave Kell brain freeze with the first sip.

“Sure,” said Kell, shrugging. Everybody else was hot and sweaty too, but they weren’t complaining. Even Wayne wasn’t complaining or hassling Kell. He just focused on the work, red-faced beneath his straw cowboy hat.

But he wasn’t okay. The short break he got as Gabe drove the load of hay bales back to the valley was too short, and then they had to unload all the bales, stack them, and cover the stack with canvas. That was the morning gone and Kell could barely eat his lunch, his arms were so tired, and he was so hot.

He made himself eat at least a little, and he drank a lot of iced tea. He didn’t look around, not even wondering, however vaguely, where Marston was. Everybody else was in the mess tent, including Royce and his team, rowdy guys with green leaves in their hair, which they plucked and threw at each other, laughing boisterously the whole time.

The afternoon was the same. Kell worked as hard as he could, but his head was pounding as he hauled and threw and carried and lifted. At one point, Gabe made them take a longer break, and they all stretched out beneath the flatbed for a quick snooze, the smell of dry dirt and sundered grasses filling Kell’s nose and lungs, a cloud of gold flecks floating in the air as his eyes fell closed as he lay in the shade.

Too soon, Blaze was shaking him awake, and too soon, he was at it again. It was only the gray draw of clouds along the horizon that stopped the work. Gabe said something about not being out in an open field in case of lightning strikes, but maybe he felt sorry for them all as well.

When they arrived back in the valley, Royce’s team was there to help unload and stack, and after dinner, Kell was too tired to call Bede.

He could only stumble to the facilities where he peed and rinsed his head beneath the faucet. Once back at his tent, he hauled himself to bed, ignoring Wayne's oddly cheerful chatter and falling asleep beneath the bright overhead light as the crickets churned beyond the tent's opening and the darkness seemed to loom.

"That's a coyote howling," Wayne was saying as Kell fell asleep.

This went on for two more long, hot days, with Kell trembling with exhaustion from head to foot each day by the time Gabe decided the dark, rumbling clouds were close enough for danger and called a halt. It was on Thursday, after dinner, that he looked at Kell, up and down in that way he had, judging everything about Kell.

"When d'you last take a shower, Kell?" he asked. "You know where the showers are, right?"

Kell shrugged, not wanting to explain it out loud. That the only time he showered was when he was in the same time slot as Bede because in prison, the showers were dangerous and echoed with slaps and shouts.

"Out loud, please," said Gabe, ever-patient.

"Sunday," he said, his voice low, not quite wincing as Gabe's eyebrows flew up. And it was easy to see that Gabe didn't understand why the delay, not in the least.

"I'll take him," said a voice, and when Kell turned, he saw it was Marston, stepping down from the wooden platform. During each dinner, he'd made sure Kell had milk to drink, a quart all for himself, but other than gesturing to the glass container to make sure Kell had seen it, he'd not said anything. Or smiled.

He wasn't smiling now, but his head was a little to the side, as if he was trying to make himself smaller, less imposing.

"Sometimes the woods are dark," Marston said now. "And it helps to have a little company."

Kell had to swallow hard. It wasn't exactly something Bede would have said, but the intention behind it was so like

Bede, and suddenly Kell missed him so much, the world was lit in amidst the darkening night, the woods all around, the clean-smelling breeze that floated around them as they stood in front of the mess tent.

An auto-light blazed from one corner of the mess tent, but it only seemed to bring into focus the dense, unknowable woods all around.

Kell had been on many a train as it shambled along through empty countryside where anything could lurk, and while he'd gotten used to it, those fears came back to him now, simply because Marston had offered to look out for him while he took a shower.

"My tent's right here," said Marston, a little gesture of his head to point the direction. "Then we can stop at your tent. Okay?"

"Thanks, Marston," said Gabe with a nod, and then he was walking off into the darkness in the direction of the lake.

"You've been missing the campfires at night," said Marston as he led the way to his tent amidst the grasses and long shadows cast by the auto-light.

"Campfires?" asked Kell.

He waited on the wooden platform in front of Marston's tent while Marston went in, turned on his light, dug around, then flicked off the light, coming out, pausing to zip up his tent. He didn't remember Gabe saying anything about campfires, but then, there'd been a lot he'd probably missed, as overwhelmed as he'd been.

"They have one almost every night," said Marston, tucking his bundle beneath his arm. "Someone tells ghost stories, or people talk. They make s'mores, too, which can be pretty good."

Marston waited for Kell outside of his tent, as Kell went in and hurriedly dug for what he'd need for a shower, realizing that he really needed to put his stuff away, like Wayne had done with his stuff. When he came out, he echoed Marston's

motions as he tucked his towel with shampoo and soap rolled inside beneath his arm.

“Do you go?” he asked as he stepped off the wooden platform into the grass.

“No,” said Marston with a quick shake of his head. “I’m not much for crowds, but—” He paused, turning to study Kell, head to toe much in the way that Gabe did, judging. But maybe he saw something different because this time there was a flicker of a smile in his eyes. “But maybe we should, after we shower. Yeah?”

“Okay,” said Kell, the weight in his chest feeling lighter than it had in days. “Okay.”

## CHAPTER 8

# MARSTON

The shower facilities were about as fancy as it got, considering they were in the middle of a deep forest. Beyond the forest was the lake and the ridge and a whole lot of sky, making the valley so amazing that Marston wasn't surprised that Leland had decided to buy it and develop it.

As far as Marston could tell, Leland wasn't trying to develop it into the ground either, leaving as many parts of it wild as he could, given that he was going to be charging four hundred dollars a night for rich folks to stay there.

Which meant that the showers matched the price point, with a smooth painted cement floor, brand new iron fixtures meant to look old, large wooden shower stalls with a dressing area and, best of all, a shower-head that made it feel like you were standing beneath a heavy rainfall. Marston had taken two showers on Sunday, just for fun, and a good long shower each night, just to take advantage of it all.

"Got your tokens?" he asked as he led the way beneath the trellis and into the shower area.

When he didn't get an answer, he turned around, thinking Kell had gotten spooked and run off. But Kell was right behind him, looking up at Marston with wide eyes, sparkling green in the soft lights that Marston flicked on.

"Tokens?" asked Kell.

"Gabe must have told you about them when he gave you your tour," said Marston. "Explained the whole one-token-per-

half-hour-of-shower deal.”

“Uh, sure.” Looking around, Kell seemed to be searching for something. Marston didn’t know what, exactly, but whatever it was that Kell thought lurked in the shadows, he was keeping his back to the sinks and sticking close to Marston’s side. “I’m sure he did. I just—forgot.”

“No problem. Like I said, I got extra.”

Marston pulled two tokens out of his jeans pocket and handed one to Kell, then showed him where the little unlocked metal box was on the wall.

“They’re free,” said Marston. “It’s just to keep track of how much hot water gets used so they know how much propane to order.”

In any other lifetime, Marston would have said that having such a system was an invitation to cheat on how many tokens were needed, or that some of the ex-cons would steal tokens, because, hello, ex-cons. But to hear Gabe tell it, the ratio of hot water usage to tokens was at ninety-nine percent.

The one percent was a token that had gone missing, probably lost in the woods somewhere. So, overall, the system worked. Except in cases like this, when Kell didn’t seem aware of the token program and now that he was, didn’t seem willing to take a shower.

Marston had chanced to overhear Gabe asking Kell about when he’d last taken a shower, and Marston had been happy to volunteer his services because he’d been thinking the same thing.

Each morning that week, Kell had come to breakfast with sleep in his eyes, his hair oil-plastered to his head. He sweated it up during the day, loading and unloading hay bales, then came to dinner looking like he’d been ridden hard and put away wet. Only the showers were right there, so there was plenty of time to take one, plenty of tokens, too. So what was the problem?

Normally Marston didn’t think he would have cared. Ex-cons were grown men, after all, and could stay filthy if they

wanted to, just as long as he had an opportunity to stay upwind of them. Which, come to think of it, didn't make him a good candidate to be a team lead on this program, but Leland had insisted on Marston partaking and so here he was.

Should he ask Kell what was going on? Or would that be too much like asking a stranger to share what scared them?

"Do you want me to stand watch while you shower?" he asked, keeping a close eye on Kell's reaction. Saw the twitch next to Kell's left eye, the withdrawal, the way his shoulders curled forward.

A wild thought occurred to him that what Kell actually wanted was for Marston to shower *with* him, which was absurd, because he absolutely wasn't going to do that. Inappropriate, not to mention completely out of line.

Then, as he banished those thoughts, he realized what it must be. In prison movies, the showers were always a dangerous place and while screenwriters probably overplayed it for the sake of drama, or maybe they didn't, showers were always where the rapes occurred, the bad inmates trying to overpower or control the good inmates, if such an oxymoron was even possible.

"Why don't you take the one furthest from the door?" he asked. "And I'll take the one closest. Okay?"

With a sigh, Kell let out all the air in his body. His thin face was traced with shadows, his unwashed hair flat against his skull, sweat marks behind his ears.

"I'll shower quick," said Marston, unrolling his towel. "Then I'll stand guard."

The flicker in Kell's green eyes told Marston what Kell had been unwilling or maybe even unable to say aloud. That prison showers had terrified him, and having Marston stand guard would be the only thing getting him through this.

Marston was tempted not to take a shower at all, and simply stand guard, but then, Kell wouldn't acclimate the way he should, and would continue being afraid. With a little bit of Marston at the Hot Gates and a little gumption from Kell, he

would get through this, and soon wouldn't be so afraid to take a shower anymore.

Going into the dressing area of the first fancy shower, Marston quickly undressed, turned the hot water on, and showered as fast as he possibly could. When he turned his shower off and dried off, the other shower was running, which was a good sign. Then, getting dressed, he hung his towel on a hook to dry for a minute, and laid out his shaving things on the high-dollar slatted wood shelf above the sink.

The mirror showed him the familiar image of his face, his steady, square features, his blond hair now darkened by the shower. His unsmiling mouth. The stern expression in his eyes that seemed to be there all the time.

Apart from his strong jaw and the muscles in his neck, he never looked at himself much. Never sought out a mirror except to shave. Didn't know what people thought when they looked at him. Didn't want to think about it much, so he reached for his can of shaving cream.

He'd never owned a fancy shaving kit, but since the money was coming in steadily, he'd considered buying one of those fancy razors, complete with shaving soap and mug and brush. For now, he had a nice packet of disposables, so he foamed up and began shaving. Slow strokes down the planes of his face, the slight, slow *rizz-rizz* sound in his ears, the tug on his skin, soothing him.

Shaving was a ritual that he savored, as much as he savored clean sheets and regular meals, a far cry from his trailer park childhood in a ratty single wide, the shouts and cursing splatting against the walls as he and his siblings curled over their microwave warped plastic bowls half full of generic cereal and expired milk.

Once in a while, his dad would spend his welfare money on a liter of Jim Beam and a flat of a dozen donuts and call it a party. Or his mom would go to the food bank and grab whatever she could, grabbing too much of what would quickly spoil, and every bag of ramen in the place, which always made

Marston wonder whether any other hungry family had gotten their fair share.

But she never took Marston or Molly or Martin with her, for some reason, preferring to go alone. And maybe Marston had an idea that her intention was to sell some of the food, because those ramen packets disappeared faster than they could be eaten, and any carton of eggs she happened to bring home were gone the next day.

If any of them complained they were hungry or that there were holes in their socks or that their teachers had sent a note home saying that one of them needed sneakers for gym class, they got smacked around hard and sometimes thrown in the narrow closet in their parents' bedroom at one end of the single wide trailer, a spooky place surely occupied by monsters waiting to pounce. Otherwise, the three of them slept together on a mattress on the floor in the other bedroom in the single wide, the end that seemed to hang dangerously over the muddy river that ran along the edge of the trailer park.

When he was ten, welfare had come by and swooped up him and his siblings, and whether it had been because the food bank had gotten wise to his mom's overeagerness at taking what she wanted, or whether the teachers at his school had filed a report, he'd never been told, like it was top secret or something.

After that had come a series of foster care situations, houses with gray, narrow hallways and badly painted rooms. Where the mattresses were flat, the blankets thin, the watered-down soup even thinner.

He'd never starved, though he'd been pretty hungry most of the time, and sometimes he'd been fostered in the same place as Molly and Martin, and they would sit on the back steps or the side steps, usually made of cement, and wonder together if their parents were ever going to come get them.

Right about the time his older siblings were long gone, vanished into the nearest big city, and Marston was graduating high school, without anybody in the audience to cheer for him, word had eventually gotten back to him. His dad had died in a

drunk driving accident, and his mom had passed away from lung cancer, chain smoking to her last days while hooked up to an oxygen machine.

As for Marston, he had drifted, like the fleecy clouds in a summer Wyoming sky. On the day he'd been aged out of foster care, he'd taken his hard-won driver's license, the old Ford Tempo he'd bought off a guy for two hundred bucks and fixed up in shop class, and headed west, to where the cowboys were. At least in his mind they were singing with the coyotes in star-speckled nights, watching over their herds of little doggies.

The truth of it was never as vivid as it had been in his dreams.

Yes, there were cowboys and cowboy hats and boots and cattle drives and bucking broncos. He had no wealthy backer to be a bronc rider, nor even knew how to get into the super secret club of pickup men.

He never wanted to be a rodeo clown. Didn't have a horse or a truck or a dog or a rifle. Could never figure out what the secret handshake was to enter that world he'd imagined in his mind. Where cowboys and ranchers worked together, raising good, dependable horses or herding cows to lush, green pastures edged by clear, cool streams of fresh water.

His reality had been following the rodeo circuit: cleaning up the animal pens, chuffing hay into feed bins, fixing leaks in water troughs. Driving eighteen wheeled trucks pulling vented trailers full of cattle destined for the feedlots to be fattened up before slaughter.

During the winters he worked in those feedlots and slaughterhouses, and some summers the only job he could get was at one of the granaries tucked along the railroad tracks, metal towers signaling their existence, and marking the memories of days gone by.

Inevitably, some old guy, or a trio of old guys, it was never an even number, would be hanging around the granary break room telling stories, shooting the shit. After which, they'd head over to the local diner and continue jawing there.

Sometimes because, he guessed, they considered Marston a good listener, they'd invite him along. His half hour lunch would turn into an hour and his boss would holler and threaten to dock his pay. But that would never happen because Marston would just work a little later to make up for it, building more muscle than his stomach could keep up with, and his boss would be happy because the old guys were happy, though why that ever mattered to his boss, he had no idea.

His life was slated to go on like this, year after year, until he either died in a drunk driving accident, coughed up a lung, or was absorbed into a big city, never to be seen or heard of again.

His dream of being a cowboy, having anything to do with horses and riding and little doggies, singing heart-aching songs beneath the moonlight, his cowboy hat tipped back to let the star-shine soak into his skin, was fast becoming a shredded thin-skinned version of itself.

Until one day. A very fateful day.

He'd gotten a job at a slaughterhouse just outside of La Grange, Wyoming, and had said yes to covering another guy's shift on a cold and snowy Saturday in late March. Getting overtime would help him save up for his own single-wide trailer, a sure sign he was following in his parents' footsteps while not to the letter, close enough to give him nightmares.

But what other option did he have? The apartments he rented were shitty and noisy and growing more expensive. At least in a trailer he'd be able to pretend he lived in a real house with real walls. A fraction of a lawn that he could water to greenness when the summer days came. A faraway dream if ever there was one.

But that day, on a Saturday he wasn't originally scheduled to work, he'd been in the noisy, smelling-a-bit-like-bleach break room, sitting catty corner from a guy he saw around sometimes, a broad-shouldered serious looking guy with solemn blue eyes.

Gabe didn't have much to say, much like Marston never had anything to say, because what was the point?

Gabe's lunch that day had been a thick Dagwood-style sandwich he'd tucked in a large plastic container. This was accompanied by a bag of BBQ potato chips, a little baggie of beef jerky, six Oreos, six chocolate chip cookies that looked homemade, a chunk of cheddar cheese, and an apple, along with a thermos of iced tea.

Sometimes Marston couldn't help staring, and sometimes, when he looked in a mirror, he could still see the hunger in his own eyes, mementos of a childhood of want and scarcity. He must have looked at Gabe with those eyes, because Gabe, without a word, had slid over the cheese, the apple and, astonishingly, the Oreos.

Marston's mouth had watered and he'd swallowed hard. He was a grown man and could afford to bring his own PB&J on wheat bread, buy a bag of plain Lays from the vending machine. Get a glass of water from the tap. He didn't need charity from anyone and wasn't about to take it now.

Then Gabe had said, quite conversationally, as if he and Marston had talked before this and maybe knew each other outside of work, "I'm always starving in the morning, so I always bring too much."

Marston had a sudden, vivid image of the broad-shouldered Gabe standing there in front of his open fridge, studying the wares, each shelf packed to capacity with cold cuts, pickles, butter, milk, cheese—everything good.

"But when I work hard, doing physical work like this, it makes me feel sleepy when I eat too much, and I can't keep up the pace I set in the morning. You see?"

This was accompanied by the unspoken, *You'll be helping me out.*

To add to the temptation of just saying yes, Gabe reached out and tugged on the baggie of Oreos, making them shake around in their small litter of black and white crumbs, and Marston imagined he could almost smell their sweetness.

Those Oreos were the best Marston had ever tasted, not that he'd tasted many, and after that, he might even be able to

say that he and Gabe were friends. Not that Gabe liked to hang out a lot, not that Gabe had a lot to say for or about himself, but that was fine with Marston.

They managed to be on the same shifts together, and would have lunch and take breaks together, with small smiles rather than words as greetings and goodbyes. And, after that day, Marston spent more of his money on groceries, making bigger lunches so Gabe wouldn't feel sorry for him anymore, skimping on either breakfast or dinner, packing on more muscle as he and Gabe worked in sync.

Then, on a day in mid-April when the grasp of winter seemed to start to loosen, Gabe had come up to him at lunchtime and, for once, he had something to say.

He told Marston about a job he had lined up, a *magic* job. The kind you wished for on a shooting star. The kind you were sure you'd never have, on a guest ranch in Wyoming.

Marston had blinked at this, a bit confused to hear this kind of talk from Gabe, a praiseful speech about the ranch, the guy who ran it, the kind of work that was available. *He runs a guest ranch so rich folk can pretend to be cowboys*, Gabe had said. *He's picky. Real picky, but my friend Jasper helped me get in, and I think I can get you in. You want in?*

Looking around the break room, clean but shabby, the pale tan linoleum worn enough to have patches all the way down to the baseboards, Marston knew he should jump on this chance. Yet the lure of the known, a single wide in a trailer park, yanked hard at his soul, the barbed hooks looped in so deep there was no pulling them out. No signing up for a job where he could work with horses, where his old dream could come true.

"I don't know how to ride," he said, ashamed to admit it. "Don't know about horses except how to load them onto a trailer and unload them again at the other end. Don't know about—" he paused, spreading his hands wide to collect his confusion. "Guests."

"They'll teach you," said Gabe, then he pointed to the scarred surface of the table. "What Leland Tate wants is good

hard workers, and that's you. But you gotta say yes fast cause the season begins in May."

"Yes," said Marston as fast as he could, jumping with both feet over a cliff's edge that led to a pit where he had no idea what would happen next.

But what happened next was a mix of things, some so good, he could hardly believe them. Of course, he'd bottomed out, the way his dad would have done, by crawling into a bottle with the intention of never coming out. Anyone else, and he would have made it to the finish line. Anyone else and they would have stepped up with nary a qualm into a life of clean sheets, and decent people, of Tuesday night line dances under the stars, and chuck wagon dinners around a campfire, and long, long, long trail rides, both with cattle and without.

It turned out Marston was a natural on the back of a horse, was the right balance of calm and attentive while working with them, took to it like he'd been raised to it, or so Leland had told him a time or two.

In the barn, his muscles and height were very much appreciated, his ability to repair wood and metal alike, second to none. And on trail rides, the very newest, most anxious city slickers were pointed out to him so he could keep an eye on them so he could instruct and guide and soothe, as needed.

He danced that summer, but could never make friends. Sat at a communal table in the dining hall with all the other cowboys and wranglers and ranch hands and blacksmiths, but could never think of a thing to say. His life had been made up of near-silence up to that point, so it was hard to change that, hard to join in and be friendly.

Gabe got swallowed into the crowd, it seemed, but that was Gabe, and Marston couldn't fault him for being easy going, easy to be with, in those circumstances. Couldn't fault him for being included when Marston was not.

Gabe deserved the good life at the guest ranch, and whatever Marston could get out of it, even if it felt like he was a beggar at a banquet, was better than anything he'd ever experienced in his entire life and then some.

The fact that Leland had been insistent on Marston being a team lead for Leland's new pet project still stirred up confusion in Marston's mind. Leland's will was absolute, though, so Marston had been unable to resist. Now here he was, in another high-dollar place, living the good life. He had everything he'd never dreamed of, and though he was a little lonely most of the time, he was grateful.

Grateful enough to take Kell under his wing for an evening so he could take a shower without succumbing to the rabbit-like scared look that Marston had clearly seen on his face.

Marston had never been as scared as Kell seemed to be, but then he'd only endured years of ho-hum foster care after a haphazard ten years under his parent's care.

Nothing truly bad had ever happened to him, and he'd managed to survive to the ripe old age of thirty-two, his limbs intact, his wits about him, a cushy summer ahead of him.

## CHAPTER 9

# MARSTON

By the time Kell came out of the shower, Marston was just finishing up his shave, which made it the fastest shower on record. Not to mention Kell had dressed hurriedly, as evidenced by the fact that his hair dripped water on his neck, and splotches of dampness made his t-shirt stick to places on his chest. His thin chest, it was easy to see, all angles and bones. In fact, he was whip-lean all over.

“You’re as skinny as a cricket,” said Marston, unable to stop himself as he wiped his chin and jaw with the edge of his towel.

Kell was looking at him, up and down, as if judging how dangerous Marston was. In any other place, Marston would have turned his back, because it was none of his business what anybody thought of him, a reaction he’d honed over the years of being judged and found wanting. Now, though, under the weight of those glistening green eyes, Marston tried a different tack.

“But, you know,” he said quite casually, even slumping a bit to lean against the sink. “Get a few more hot meals in your belly, a full night’s sleep every night, and all this fresh air? You’ll fill out in no time.”

All of this was an echo of what a counselor at one of the children’s homes he’d been assigned to one month in summertime had said to him. An idea of a life he’d never lived, but that, judging by the gleam in the counselor’s eyes, was good and necessary and right.

He'd held onto that idea for as long as he could, abandoning it years ago, at least until he'd arrived at the ranch the year before, at the beginning of the season. Now that he knew it was possible, maybe it was time to plant that seed in someone else's heart.

"This is a good place, Kell," said Marston, now quite firm. He folded his towel and tucked his things back into his somewhat ratty shaving kit. "And it sure isn't prison. It's not like being on the road, either."

He didn't know why he added that last bit, but his mind kept flashing images of it, of being always on the move, scrounging for every dollar, breaking down in the middle of nowhere and having to hoof it ten miles back up the road to the nearest garage because he simply wasn't hitchhiking material.

"Grab your towel and dry off a bit more," he said now. "We'll drop off our things and get our jackets before heading to the campfire. Sound good?"

"Okay," said Kell.

Kell followed him through the dark woods until they reached Kell's tent. There, Kell slipped out of his wet t-shirt and slid on a dry shirt, then scrambled to find his jacket.

The tent, or at least what Marston presumed was Kell's half of it, was a mess, the clothes all jumbled and half hanging out of two cardboard boxes, socks and scraps of paper on the wooden floor. In pride of place on the little white shelf was the red Swiss Army knife and absolutely nothing else.

Should he say anything? Kell wasn't on his team, wasn't really his responsibility. Or should he mention something to Gabe? Well, tomorrow was soon enough to decide about that. In the meantime, Kell had been working hard and somehow had managed not to make his way to the highlight of a great many days: the evening's campfire and s'more making.

They stopped at Marston's tent so he could drop off his things and grab his jacket, and as he slipped it on and just before he flicked off the overhead light, he saw Kell standing

on the wooden platform just outside the tent flap, watching him. Not as if he'd never seen a man put on a sherpa-lined denim jacket before, no. But just watching, absorbing the moment. Storing it away for later.

As to why he'd thought it, he had no idea, but it warmed him inside, in some way that he wasn't quite used to. Having company for an ordinary moment, the kind of moment he'd always spent alone.

He led the way through the woods, along a mostly unused path that went along a line of densely packed pine trees, through which absolutely no light showed. But as they went around the trees and into the clearing, the light from the bonfire blazed up like a pot of flickering gold had suddenly appeared.

Around the campfire was everybody in the valley, some in the Adirondack chairs, legs stretched, eyes relaxed, glazed, staring at the fire. Others stood around, chatting, and one, Marston realized, was Royce, arranging the makings for s'mores.

"Hey," said Gabe, waving them over, as if their presence wasn't a complete and utter surprise.

"Are we late?" asked Marston.

"No, you're just in time," said Gabe. "We were having trouble with the wood being a little damp, but evidently we have enough pyromaniacs around to overcome that little issue."

He smiled at his own humor, then gestured at the pile of sticks and metal skewers laid close by two bags of marshmallows, a box of graham crackers, and enough chocolate bars to cause cavities just by looking at them.

Marston walked up to the fire with a general wave at everybody, then went to sit down in one of the Adirondack chairs on the far side of the fire.

There was another chair, equidistant on the opposite side of the cheery flames, and he'd totally expected that either Kell would sit there, or stand with the others. Instead, as Royce

handed Marston a skewer, Kell was right there, settling cross-legged next to the chair where Marston was.

As Royce handed him a skewer, Kell looked up and thanked him, then looked up at Marston with wide eyes.

“This is just like summer camp,” he said.

“You ever been?” asked Marston, idly taking a packet of graham crackers and chocolate bars that Royce was handing around, placing them on the flat arm of his chair.

“Sure,” said Kell, so utterly confident in the memory, that his voice was strong, his shoulders back, such a contrast to everything else he’d said and done all week. “Every summer since I was ten up till the time I left home,” he said. “We had horseback riding, archery, swimming.” He gestured at the bonfire, his face aglow in the golden light, his eyes shining like green jewels. “This.”

The memories seemed like they were good ones, though it occurred to Marston that a kid lucky enough to go to summer camp every year was also a kid who’d probably had a pretty good home life.

Which begged the question: why had he left and taken on the rigors of being on his own at such a young age? Only Gabe knew for sure, as Gabe had Kell’s file.

To ask Kell to dig so hard into his past would probably be out of line, so Marston focused on roasting two marshmallows at the same time, two because he was a pig about it, and two because that meant the chocolate would melt faster, which was his entire goal.

He liked his marshmallows to be singed to a dark golden brown, crisp on the edges but not burnt, a fact he’d learned through trial and error when he’d worked the previous summer at the guest ranch just up the hill. And he didn’t regret following Gabe into the valley to work with parolees, no sir. Not when there were nights like this to enjoy.

By the time his marshmallows were roasted just right, he hurried to assemble his s’more with the exact right amount of chocolate till the graham cracker sandwich was bursting.

But then he saw that Kell's single marshmallow was burnt to a sad crisp, mangled and black and sliding down his skewer.

"Sad," Marston said with a private little laugh to himself. Then he broke his s'more in half and handed it to Kell. Who took it with an expression on his face as if Marston had handed him a bar of gold. "If you want to get anywhere in this world, kid," he said, putting on an accent that was meant to echo the grizzly old miner character in just about every western movie ever. "You need to learn how to roast a marshmallow."

Kell laughed, and some of the men around the campfire chuckled, and the evening felt friendlier than it had even moments ago, the highlight of which was watching Kell demolish his half of a s'more with great relish.

A bit of silence fell around the campfire as they all inhaled their s'mores. Marston quickly roasted another pair of marshmallows and shared his s'more with Kell. Who smiled up at Marston as he licked a dark smear of chocolate from his lower lip, and Marston looked the other way on instinct.

Someone, Jonah maybe, threw another log on the fire and argued good-naturedly with Royce as to whether or not the placement of the log would affect the draw of oxygen, and if indeed they wanted the fire to burst skyward and block the shine of the stars coming down from the night sky.

Eventually, they put another smaller log on the fire, and arranged it so the flames flickered halfway up, gold and blue and orange, warming Marston's knees and his hands when he held them out. Summer days might be warm, but in Wyoming, at this altitude, it got cold mighty fast when the sun went down.

"You warm enough, Kell?" he asked, tucking his chin to his chest, speaking only to Kell. Kell nodded, shrugging his jacket forward so it covered him entirely, and then he tucked his chin to his chest, in echo of Marston. His bright eyed smile was for Marston alone, and seemed, for the first time since his arrival, well pleased and content. And if that wasn't the best accomplishment, Marston didn't know what was.

Gabe pulled out his book of ghost stories, and they all settled in while he told a spooky tale about a couple who were driving on a dirt road and got stuck in the mud, and who took shelter in a nearby abandoned cabin, only to find there was an ax murderer inside.

It was eerie more than scary, then Gabe followed by telling from memory the one about the weeping woman, which Marston had heard before, last season, but which never failed to make a shiver crawl across his skin.

Next to him, Kell scooted closer until he was sitting right up against Marston's knees, his back plastered against the front of the Adirondack chair. He was so close Marston could have placed his palm on the top of Kell's dark head, and he imagined that, freshly washed, Kell's hair would be silky and cool between his fingers.

Gabe launched into another ghost story, this one about a Native American myth where a woman could shift into a deer, and who lived in forests *Like the one we are in right now*, Gabe intoned, his voice suitably low, *who lures promiscuous men into the woods and then stamp them to death with her hooves.*

As the story continued, in a perfectly creepy way, Kell looked back at Marston, the profile of his face white against the darkness beyond, tinged with gold from the fire. It was as if he was checking in. To share the scariness, to make sure it was okay that he was sitting so close, close enough that the warmth of his body through his denim jacket was soaking into Marston's knee.

Marston nodded with a jerk of his chin, letting a sudden-held breath go as Kell looked away, his gaze focused across the fire at Gabe, who'd raised his arms as the Deer Woman would just before trampling her victims to death.

Kell shifted, his arm looping around the back of Marston's calf, like he was propping himself up on his hands for a second before settling back down again. Only the arm didn't go away. It stayed where it was like a half caress, half-confident gesture

of trust and camaraderie. Which wasn't something that usually happened to Marston.

He just about froze, not sure if he wanted to twitch his leg to signal Kell to move away, or to just, quite simply, let Kell be. Let the sensations be, just as they were, a ribbon of warmth on his leg, his heart expanding to gather to itself just how much trust seemed to be in that gesture.

Maybe Kell didn't know the effect the small weight of his arm was having, or maybe Marston was blowing this all out of proportion. But he was just about gutted when Gabe pressed his hands together, a signal that the evening was over.

"Who wants to make sure the fire is properly put out?" he asked, looking around at the sleepy, fire-brightened faces as everyone stood up.

Marston stood up too, reaching down to help Kell to his feet, glad when Kell stayed close and didn't move away.

"We'll do it," he said. "Kell and I will."

The smile from Kell blazed like star shine against a dark night sky.

Marston, unreasonably pleased, and at the same time, in a quandary as to what the hell he was doing, stood there with Kell as they waved everybody off and said goodnight. The responding goodnights echoed in the chill breeze that skirted through the tops of the pine trees, a musical *shhh shhh* sound drifting down to them, encircling them.

"Do we have to put it out right away?" asked Kell, and now his whole body was alongside Marston's, but he didn't move away.

"No," said Marston. "We could sit and just watch the coals die down a bit first. How about that?"

He settled down cross-legged on the ground and patted the sand-strewn dirt next to him. Maybe he'd patted that dirt too close to his own body, but Kell plunked himself down exactly there, cross-legged, like Marston was. Their shoulders touched, and their thighs brushed, their knees knocked, and the night settled all around them, a pairing of two.

Marston reached for a pair of sticks that had gotten collected but not used to make s'mores. He handed one to Kell, then pointed it at the coals.

“Give it a poke and a stir,” he said. “And watch the sparks fly.”

Kell eagerly complied, and perhaps the memories of sleep-away camp of days gone by were rising to the surface because his expression in the dark gold and deep orange-blue of the settling embers was soft, the gaze in his eyes the soft green of faraway thoughts.

“Penny for ‘em,” Marston said in the way his dad used to say when he was mellowed by drink, before the hardcore anger inside of him would rise to the surface.

His dad would sit in his ratty recliner, the TV on low, a silence falling amidst his endless prattle about this and that fact, a smart brain melted by whiskey, Marston had always thought, and he'd pause and say, *Penny for ‘em*, as if he might, this time, be truly interested in what Marston had to say.

Marston would fall for it, as he did over and over, before realizing that the question was not for his benefit at all, but simply something his dad liked the sound of in his own ears.

But this time, he wanted to let Kell tell him what was on his mind. But then, maybe it was his own imagination that Kell hadn't had anyone else to talk to since he left home? Maybe Kell didn't need Marston to listen, but then Kell slumped a little against Marston's shoulder, as if the burden of his own thoughts had been too much to bear all this long while.

“I miss my mom,” Kell said, somewhat unexpectedly. “She didn't do anything when my dad was so mean, but when I'd go away to camp, she always made a big deal out of it. She would sew a tag with my name on it, my full name, on the inside of every stitch of clothing. And she always sent me care packages, like I might be starving, full of peanut butter cups, ‘cause she knew they were my favorite—”

He broke off from this tale, a picture window into his past that Marston felt utterly absorbed by. The idea of sleep-away camp, being in a family rich enough to afford that year after year, not to mention a mother who cared enough, who was attentive enough to send her son his favorite candy was like a dream from a movie full of laughter and love.

Except Kell had left that family some years back, it seemed, and Marston still didn't know why.

"Why'd you leave home?" he asked, but Kell shook his head, poking at the low-burning logs.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said. "Maybe later."

"Sure." Marston nodded, and gave the logs a good shove, sending the long slender one, its middle nearly burned in two, spilling into the coals below, and now all of the fire was nearly level, the coals winking dark blood red and deep gold blue in a rippling effect that made him feel a little dizzy.

"Did you leave home?" asked Kell. "When you were a kid?"

Startled, perhaps beyond his ability to answer, Marston straightened up.

Kell straightened up as well, going stiff as if he sensed that Marston was about to get angry and lash out. That wasn't the response Marston had wanted or expected at all, so he relaxed his shoulders, and put his effort into using his stick to move the coals around, darkening them even further.

"I went into foster care when I was ten," Marston said. "That was years ago, so I guess I never really had a family."

"Oh," said Kell, the simple word full of such dismay that it touched Marston's heart. Nobody ever wanted to hear his story, and yet here was this kid—scratch that—this young man, perhaps too young to see the hard side of the world, giving Marston his sympathy with both hands. "That's shitty. It sounds shitty."

"Yeah," said Marston, not wanting to share any more than he had. It was all bad anyway. Like something out of *Oliver*

*Twist*, except not as well told. “Some families suck and that’s all there is to it.”

“Mine sucks,” said Kell, a bit of force in his voice. “It didn’t always, but then it did.”

The pain of family was all Marston had ever known, but having the joy of a family and reaching in and finding it so painful that you had to leave had to be worse by miles. He’d never thought to meet someone who knew what it felt like to not really have a family, who had bits of his soul ripped out, the result an aching wound that nobody else could see but that infected you all the way through.

“That sounds rough,” said Marston, meaning it more, understanding it more than perhaps he ever thought he could. “You didn’t deserve that.”

Kell froze, looking up at Marston, a bit startled. The firelight made his eyes glitter like emeralds, and the sharp, still-young lines of his face were starkly drawn, dappled with gold, orange, and blue.

“I told them I was gay,” he said, suddenly, honesty leaping from his eyes, his expression drawn. “And then they didn’t love me anymore.”

It was a moment, sharp in the firelight, shadowed by the darkness all around. A moment where utter, heartfelt honesty could be known, deep-drawn, straight as an arrow.

Something in Marston’s heart leapt, a painful, lurching leap, as though he’d been hurled out of a pitch black place where only sadness and loneliness dwelled, and into a bright, open nothingness where anything was possible. But where, of course, there could not be any connection between himself and a newcomer to the valley, this young man who probably wanted nothing more than to do his time, finish the work, and then move on. Maybe even to return home to reconcile with his family. To continue with the life he’d left behind him years ago.

He didn’t have any platitudes for Kell, nothing like, *Oh, of course they love you, they’re your family*, because, as he well

knew, it simply wasn't true.

Real love could come from anywhere, but it seemed so scarce in his own life that he had not ever found it. And had not found it now. Could not let himself find it now in this place where his second chance at staying at the best job he'd ever had depended on him not fucking it up.

Even if he wasn't in charge of Kell, having anything with Kell, anything beyond a professional connection, would definitely fuck it up. Way up. All the way to the stars.

"That sounds rough," Kell said again, focusing his attention on the dying coals. "Looks like these are done. What d'you say we stir them down hard and put them out with dirt?"

That was the best way, as he'd been taught. Water would only churn mud, making it hard to clean out the fire pit, but cold dirt containing ashes would make it an easy task.

Easy was the key. Easy and safe and straightforward. That's the way he needed to be with Kell, so that's what he would do.

## CHAPTER 10

# MARSTON

The night was cool as Marston went back to his tent, after walking Kell through the darkness to tent #1, where Wayne was already snoring away.

Once on his own, in his own tent, Kell sat on his cot and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands in his hair. Sweat sheened on the back of his neck, and an ache pounded in his chest that he didn't know what to do with.

Loneliness was part of his life, always had been, and he'd expected nothing more than for it to continue. He'd never made friends easily, had never kept the ones he'd made.

Any lovers he'd had were fleeting impressions on his skin, a touch in the night, a greedy mouth that took more than it gave, a roadside motel room left in disarray, the bill paid in cash.

Only since he'd started his job, his *magical* job, at the guest ranch, had there ever been an indication that his life could be much, much different? Now he had professional co-workers, decent pay, the tools to do his job and, perhaps most important, but seemingly always buried beneath everything else, people who seemed to enjoy his company, with a hello in greeting, and a friendly nod in recognition.

In order to keep those friendships, he needed to not fuck everything up. Making a connection with Kell would definitely fuck everything up. Besides, he didn't even know how to start. Didn't know what to do with the ache in his heart

that pleaded with him, *Please, please, please, just try. Just this once. Just try.*

But he couldn't. Even if he suspected that Gabe and Blaze were fucking, and could see Royce and Jonah giving each other heart eyes every single moment of every single day, he knew that if he were to try something like that, it would end up in flames like a dumpster fire gone out of control.

He would end up losing his job. More importantly, he didn't want to turn Kell's life into the kind of mess he'd made of his own.

So it was hands off. Literal hands off. He had his own job anyway, and maybe more parolees would come and he'd be able to grow a team, to show Leland that he could not only keep it together on his own, he could lead other men. Hold his head high. Build job skills to make a better life for himself. There was no way he was going to drag Kell into the struggle that would be.

The night was long, scattered with sweat-skinned dreams, woken at uneven intervals by his aching heart, sheets that were tangled, a sudden cool gust that flapped at the green canvas and sent pine needles skittering down like runaway children.

In the morning when he sat up with the sleepy gold sunshine sparkling over the low slope of hill to the east, he rubbed at his eyes. One night's secrets shared in the ancient glow of a simple campfire could not make such a difference and he would not let it. He was here now. With a job to do.

The day would move on and he would ease into it. Which he did. A quick cool shower, then drying off and getting dressed, and heading to the mess tent like it was, quite simply, any other day.

When he got there, Gabe let him know there was a message from Maddy, the guest ranch's admin, that the dark cedar paint he'd ordered for the signs was currently stalled in a warehouse in Cheyenne, and that it would be easier, not to mention quicker, for Marston to pick it up than to have it re-routed.

“The keys are in the truck, and the tank is full,” said Gabe, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder. “But, I have a favor.”

“Shoot,” said Marston, very casually looking at Royce and his team as they piled into the mess tent, all in a clump, and told himself he was not looking for Kell. Plus, he was glad to be asked, glad to do Gabe a favor any day of the week.

“We want to finish up getting that hay trucked in, and if you help us out this morning, we can do that and then move on to other projects.”

“Sure,” he said, realizing a second later that would mean working with Kell.

Even though it would be only for the morning, the distraction would be too much. Or maybe it would be a test as to whether or not, after last night’s fire-lit honesty, he could hold back and keep everything to himself. The memory. The desire that jumped out from the center of his chest when Kell showed up, trailing behind Wayne, getting into line for the breakfast buffet.

“Right after breakfast?” he asked, focusing his attention on Gabe.

“Yes,” said Gabe. “We’ll have water and snacks, bring your own gloves and hat, and don’t forget sunscreen.”

Marston smiled because the ranch was like that, always focused on the safety and health of everyone who worked there, and now the valley was the same. Then he got in line behind Gabe, and piled his plate with bacon and eggs, settling himself along the long table in the middle of the tent, where everyone else was seated.

At the far end of the mess tent, plowing his way through a pile of pancakes, was Kell. He had his head down, like he was tired, like maybe he’d not slept the night before.

Marston didn’t have a chance to ask, as the morning moved apace, and after breakfast, he hurried to his tent to grab his gloves and his hat, shoving a tube of sunscreen into his front pocket.

Clay had towed a large flatbed truck down to the valley, coming in along the side road. There was a little bit of good-natured dithering as they decided who would sit up front in the truck's cab, which only held four, and who would sit in the truck bed.

“We'll squeeze Clay up front and drop him off at the ranch,” said Gabe, swirling the keyring in his hand. “You guys need to figure this out.”

“I'll sit in the back,” said Marston.

A little cool wind in his hair, a little warm sunshine on his back would help him clear his head and keep it clear. He climbed into the truck bed and settled himself in a corner.

The truck bed was clean and still fairly new, so there were no rusty edges or dings, but he knew that if the truck went over a bump that it'd be easier to steady himself in the corner.

“Me too.”

Marston looked up to see Kell climbing into the truck bed, tucking himself into the corner opposite to where Marston was.

With his knees tucked close to his chest, he looked like he was trying to make himself as small as possible, like he was worried that Marston, or someone, would kick him out and make him ride up front.

“This is fine,” Kell said as the members of Royce's team, also tapped to help finish up the job, piled in around him.

It was fine, in a way, to look at Kell with his wind-blown hair all around his face, the bright morning sunshine making his green eyes glitter, the lines of his face limned with gold. And a distraction, as well, pushing Marston right up against his own late night into early morning resolutions to stay focused on his job.

There was a sweet hopefulness in Kell's face that maybe today would be a good day, that maybe he was settling into the rhythm of the valley, which, much like the rhythm of the guest ranch, was a steady progression of work, and rest, and food and good company. It didn't get any better than that.

As the truck sped along, Kell looked small against the tallness of his fellows, less sturdy, less able for the physical labor. Which, after a blissful, wind-tossed, sunshiny hour, Marston found to be absolutely the case.

Gabe drove the flatbed to the furthest end of the field where acres and acres of stubbled field evidenced the hard work that had already happened, the green-flecked bales of hay that waited showing how much work needed to be done.

They'd easily finish loading all the hay bales in, perhaps, three trips back and forth. There were, after all, twenty-five horses currently in the pasture in the valley, and there would be more moving in and out all through the summer. After all, early mowing produced the sweetest hay.

Everybody piled out, and Gabe directed Kell and Wayne up on the truck bed, with the rest of them walking along, bending to grab the bales, and throwing them up, where Kell and Wayne would arrange them. There were more men on the ground, walking slowly between the stubbled rows, so the two on the truck bed had to hustle to keep up.

And while Wayne, red faced and sweating, his hair sticking to his forehead, could keep up, it was plain, quite plain, that Kell could not. He could lift the bales, but struggled to carry them to where they needed to go, struggled to lift to stack them.

Anywhere else, any other situation, and he might have fit right in and kept up just fine. But he was surrounded by ex-cons who had evidently used a great deal of their prison time to lift weights and throw bowling balls or whatever else it was that ex-cons did for exercise to build steel-hard muscles and elephant-sized endurance.

Marston helped out where he could, throwing the bales all the way down, closer to the stacks, rather than just at the end of the flatbed. He called for breaks when he didn't really need them and took his time climbing onto the flatbed for his turn at stacking.

From the height of the flatbed, warm in the full sunshine, glinting off its metal edges, the curved land stretched out,

sloping down to an irrigation ditch, running with snowmelt.

Jonah, standing next to him, peeled off his blue snap-button shirt, and tucked it in his waist, flexing his bare arms, muscles rippling beneath his white tank top, a blue heron standing out along his left bicep.

“Don’t worry, I got plenty of sunscreen,” said Jonah, putting up his gloved hands in a defensive position. “Royce made me layer it on.”

That particular statement confirmed everything Marston had suspected was going on between Royce and Jonah. The kind of protective care that Royce displayed all the time was obviously something Jonah responded to. And why not? Why shouldn’t he?

“Yeah, okay,” said Marston in response to Jonah’s unasked question. “You’re right.” He took off his own snap-button shirt, tucked it into his waist, and arched his neck back to feel the sun on his shoulders. “No tattoos, though,” he said, trying to make conversation for conversation’s sake, the way everybody around him seemed to do with ease.

“You could get one,” said Jonah, steadying himself as Gabe put the truck in gear and it slowly started rumbling along. “I love Mom, or something.” He made a gesture across his bare bicep, the one without the tattoo.

“Huh.”

What was he supposed to say to that? Usually, any mention of his own mom sent him skittering back into his corner, running away from the idea that he could ever talk about his own past because nobody would want to hear.

Except Kell had and his simple, heartfelt response had been like a touch of starlight had landed in Marston’s soul, doing its best to light up whatever parts of him it could.

“No mom in the picture, really.” He shrugged and just said the words before he could stop them. “Just you guys.”

“That’s a lot of people for one tattoo,” said Jonah, laughing, but not, it seemed, making fun of the lack of a mom in Marston’s life, but the idea of such a ridiculous tattoo.

Good-natured and welcoming. Which, for all of Jonah's edgy darkness, his tendency to change back into a black t-shirt and look rather scowly a lot of the time, was surprising. "But you could ask Jasper, you know. He's got a great tattooist on tap."

Jasper, the ranch's blacksmith, had no tattoos, but his partner, Ellis, did, right across the side of his neck. Something with water and stone, a pretty tattoo, he'd always thought.

"Maybe someday," was all he said, enjoying the small moment between them. "I do like your heron."

With a smile, Jonah turned back to the task of stacking hay bales, which became trickier the more bales there were, the stacks taller, the situation more wobbly.

Marston tried to keep his eye on Kell who, on the ground, was lagging behind the others, doing his job of bringing bales to the flatbed, one for everyone else's two. 'Till finally, white faced, Kell stumbled and fell.

Nobody else saw except for Marston, who, on the edge of the flatbed, winced. He was about to jump down, but Kell hauled himself to his feet, swiped at the scratch on his face, and kept on going.

There was a core of steel beneath the sweetness, then, and Marston made himself look away, focusing on stacking the last of the hay bales till the flatbed was full and the field was empty, with only row upon row of sun-drenched stubble left behind.

"That's it, guys," said Gabe, looking pleased. "We just need to unload this at the valley, and then we can break for lunch."

Piling into the truck and the truck bed, they all took their previous places, with Marston across from Kell.

As Gabe started the drive back to the valley, Kell, his arms once more around his knees, smiled at Marston like a small boy with a gap-toothed smile, having the best day of his life. Yes, there was a scratch on his face, and yes, there was hay in his hair, but it struck Marston, that smile, the feeling of joy

and intensity going right into his heart, a piercing wound, fierce and powerful.

He smiled back. Maybe he shouldn't have, but that smile arced between them, the song of the day, the melody of the valley pulling them onward as the truck raced beneath the blazing, just about noontime sun, flecks of hay in the air, the dust of earth in their boots, sweat on their necks, the wind in their hair.

It was a good day. Perhaps one of the best he'd had in ages.

## CHAPTER II

# KELL

After they secured the bales of hay beneath a tied-down tarp, lunch was piles of chicken Alfredo, garlic breadsticks, and Caesar salad, all of which Kell felt too tired to eat. But as he sat down at a place on the long table, slumped over his plate, he made himself eat.

The scratch on his face stung, but Gabe had pulled him aside and put a smear of first aid cream on it after cleaning it with a swab of disinfectant. *Leave that be and it'll heal just fine*, Gabe had said.

It was like being fussed over by his mom, who, in his mind, was still crying as his dad beat him. Her face drawn and pale as she let dad yell at him. Not saying a word as his dad had made him pack for the pray-away-the-gay camp. Maybe she really was still crying, and the idea of it made his heart ache.

Before that dreadful time, he'd been happy at home, his parents' golden boy child, living a good life that even then he knew was truly good and kind of rare.

He missed being with his track and field team, missed jostling elbows with his friends in the lunchroom. Missed the shiny floors of his high school, missed all of it. But two years later, that all would have been behind him, anyway.

He would have been in college now, maybe on a sports scholarship, showing his new coaches how fast he could run. Those muscles and that endurance had faded as he'd lived off margarine-and-sugar sandwiches, two-day-old hot dogs dug

out of a dumpster, a bag of Funyuns lifted from the shelf at the nearest Circle K.

Even in prison, he'd been so shaken to be there he'd been unable to eat, and the food had been crappy besides. Now, five days into his stay in the valley, his body, or some watchful part of him, was becoming aware that the food was not only good, it was constantly good.

And, like someone startled into surprise, his body was taking its own sweet time to realize that, to depend on it. Not to mention his whole body shook now with exhaustion, his stomach tight.

He could get used to it if the work continued to be hard; like an athlete in training, he would build up to it. And to do that, he needed to eat.

Someone placed a quart of milk in front of him, a glass quart so cold that beads of condensation formed along the rim of the glass. So newly opened, so fresh, there was a pale yellow layer of cream along the top.

Kell looked up. Marston shrugged as he pulled his arm back, as if to dismiss the effort he'd just made.

"There you go," said Marston. "You seem to enjoy it."

The shrug that followed, broad shouldered, defined by the muscles along Marston's arms, the cords along his forearms where his shirtsleeves were rolled up, seemed to suggest that, in a dutiful way, he was holding him back from what he seemed to want to say. Like he didn't want Kell to know he cared. Like he couldn't let himself.

"Thanks," said Kell in a breath. "Thank you."

He poured himself a quick half glass and drank it in two gulps, so Marston could see him drink it, see him enjoy it.

Milk in the valley was better than any milk he'd ever tasted, and yet, this particular glass, creamy and sweet and fresh, the cream coating his mouth in the best way, was the best ever. Delivered with kindness and thoughtfulness that he'd forgotten even existed.

He knew the milk would help fatten him up, keep his pants from sliding off his hips, help him keep up with the other men. So that Marston wouldn't look at him with such worry—or maybe he liked that part a little. Someone to watch over him a little.

“This is so good,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, but Marston had already turned to carry his plate to the plastic tub, already on the way to the rest of his afternoon. Which was what? What did he do all day when he wasn't helping to finish with the haying job?

Kell didn't really know. He'd spent five days in the valley, and had been focused on what was in front of him, and behind him. Working, eating, sleeping, well, collapsing, really, into bed each night.

Now, adjusting for the most part, the scraggled edges of his brain smoothing somewhat, he could look around him, in his new world, and see what else was going on. Which was him at a long table in a green canvas mess tent while the other men were clearing their places, still sitting there as he watched Marston walk away, long strides among the grass and edges of pine needles, shadows dappling his shoulders, the length of his back.

Taking a hard breath, Kell didn't quite know what to do with the memories of the morning, the warm air swirling around them as the truck raced to the fields, his booted toes inches from Marston's booted toes. The way, when they were in the fields, that he could feel Marston watching-but-not-watching him, looking out for him but letting him find his own way.

The curve of muscle along Marston's bare arms when he'd taken his shirt off. The dense thighs that, so capable and strong, moved in and out of view in front of his half-lowered eyes.

He'd taken such a blow when his parents had rejected him for coming out that, even two years on, he hardly dared give in to the impulses of his body, his own desires.

He was a virgin still and, based on Bede's recommendations, he wouldn't ever say that out loud, but the stirrings in his belly when he thought of Marston made him feel seventeen again, so young, becoming awake and aware that he liked boys over girls.

That the smells and the sights in the locker room, and his body's reaction to them, weren't just a passing fancy, or the natural stirrings based on the heightened energy after a track meet. It was him filled with wanting, the curve of a masculine shoulder turning him on more than a budding bosom or a round female hip.

Give him angles and planes, the round cheek of youth turning into manliness. Give him boyish laughter, a voice going lower, chests broadening. Give him Marston's mouth—

But of course not.

"You coming, Kell?" asked Gabe. "You need more food? The cooks haven't quite put everything away yet."

The generosity of the valley moved him, had from the first, and it did now, with Gabe making sure that Kell wasn't still hungry.

It was hard to keep up his road-hardened facade of not giving a shit, of dismissing everything anybody might say as sarcasm or lies. Hard to throw off the sixty days of shellac that prison had helped build around him, especially in the face of Gabe's concern. And maybe, perhaps, he didn't need to try.

"No, I'm good," said Kell, standing up, going over to put his plate and cutlery in the busing tub.

Gabe was right behind him, recycling the now-empty glass quart.

"Did you forget?" he was asking now. "We were going to get your cowboy boots and hat today. I'm sorry about the delay, but the haying needed to be finished so we could get all of the first mowing."

"Oh." The very handy who-gives-a-shit kind of response, so ready on his tongue, struggled with the need to cover up that yes, he had forgotten. But the thought of it now filled him

with a kind of wonder that they'd take the time and trouble to outfit him with something he didn't really need.

Back home, before he'd left, if he needed new shoes or new running gear, he got them, no questions asked. In the two years since he'd left, he'd been on his own and lonely, paying a quarter in some church's basement thrift store for a coat thick enough to take him through winter. He'd gotten along or had done without.

"I had kind of forgotten," he said now, turning, wiping his palms on his blue jeans.

"I've got the keys," said Gabe, swirling the key fob around his thumb. "You ready?"

They got in the truck, just him and Gabe, and Gabe drove them up the switchbacks and across the top of a grass-covered hill, and down to a dirt road that led into the guest ranch he'd only heard tell of.

It was like being in a fairy-tale world of lush pine trees, the wind-ruffled river that wound calmly along its banks, the large log structure that Gabe said was the dining hall and lodging for guests above. There were cabins peeking out from the pine trees, and others overlooking the river. And then Gabe turned the truck around.

"Thought you might enjoy a quick tour," said Gabe. "We're headed back to the ranch's store. Maddy will meet us there."

The name was one Kell recognized from the paperwork he'd signed, from his Zoom meeting with Leland Tate.

Maddy was in charge of a bunch of stuff, and Leland seemed to respect her a lot. Kell had made a mental note not to mess with her and, when he met her, some of the tension in his body seemed to fade. She was an older woman in blue jeans, looking quite ready to go to work at any task. She had a long gray and white braid down her back and intense blue eyes that studied Kell.

"Another long-legged one," she said with a bit of humor, her blue eyes dancing. "Come this way, Kell, and we'll get

you fixed up.”

Kell was practically the only customer in the store, which reminded him a little of some of the country stores he'd gone into to steal from during his journeys criss-crossing the country, only this one was clean, and thickly packed with high-end goods.

At the counter, looking at crisply folded bandanas, was a middle-aged couple, being attended to by a smiling clerk. Other than that, though, the store was empty, but the emptiness seemed to anticipate happy shoppers to come.

“Let's show you some hats first, Kell,” said Gabe.

Maddy was right behind him, pulling down hats, too many hats, all of them of finely woven straw, all of them with interesting hat bands and different tight weaves of straw.

As he tried on some of the hats, being obliging, he felt a little strange with two pairs of eyes focused on his every move. Then again, maybe it was a little like the day before he'd started school in the ninth grade, and his parents had taken him to the local sports store for his first pair of cleats for running, as he'd been accepted to the track and field program that only ninth graders were allowed to join.

*Make sure they fit, that they feel good, Kelliher,* his dad had said, back in the day when expressing love for his son fit the smile on his face.

As for now, a little shaken by the staring, Kell was about to say, *What the fuck do I care which hat I wear,* when he realized that when he got back to the valley, he could find Marston and show him the one he'd picked out.

“Uh, this one?” he asked as he put on a pale cream-colored hat with a hat band that had a zig-zag along the top edge, and diamonds cut along the middle.

He looked at the two of them, standing there, their smiles kind, their eyes attentive, like a pair of replacement parents.

As he looked back into the mirror he saw himself there, and it was interesting to see the difference between this reflection and the ones he'd seen when he'd been hopping

trains or hitching rides, getting let off at the corner of wherever street and nowhere lane. Where the mirrors in gas stations, usually dirty or simply polished metal, showed him what little remained in his road-weary face of the suburban kid he used to be.

Now he was changed once more, or, at the very least, changing once again, morphing into someone else. Gone were the chubby cheeks and bright eyed smiles, leaving a gaunt, somewhat thin face, a guarded expression, and certainly no smiles.

With his long hair smashed into his eyes by the hat, looked a whole lot like a young sidekick in a western movie, the character who was always told to *Go on home, now*, or who gets shot by the bad guy to show the situation was serious.

*Poor Billy*, the other characters would mourn over the thin black coffin that had been lowered into the dusty ground, while the camera dollied back for a wide view. *He done got himself kilt an' he ain't never gonna take that train to see the Pacific Ocean like he wanted to.*

The fact was that Kell had seen the Pacific Ocean, several times, in fact. The image of blue, blue waters stretching off the Oregon Coast, with no one on the tree-rimmed beach for miles, was in his memory as though it always had been. And became a flicker of images he played in his mind when the night got dark or the wind through the rumbling box car was too cold and too sharp. He'd played that little mind-movie quite often in prison, actually.

But now, that tape was being replaced with the sound of Wayne snoring in the bunk across from him. By the sound of the wind in the pine trees as they swayed above the tent, dropping their needles on the rain fly. Or the feeling of sitting in the mess tent beneath sun-warmed canvas, again green, stuffing his face with as much as he wanted till his belly was full, and there almost wasn't enough room for milk.

Milk that Marston had made Wayne share with him, that he made sure there was extra of so Kell could have a glass quart all his own.

“I like this one,” he said, and Gabe pulled out a chair and Maddy got down a pile of boot boxes from the shelves so Kell could try them on at his leisure, one by one.

There were almost too many boots to choose from, all of them of rich brown leather, some with pointed toes, others with squared-off toes, all of which felt heavy and fancy on his feet, almost too fancy for him.

There was one pair he liked the feel of especially well, as the pattern didn't shout at him and wasn't too fussy, just some scrollwork along the sides with a green inlay design, the brown leather a low sheen, like the boots were already broken in. The toe wasn't pointed either, like some of the others, but a little rounded.

He stood up in them and let the cuffs of his blue jeans fall to shimmy across the arch of the boot, reminding him of the moment he'd gone to pick out his tux for his ninth-grade prom with his mom, who stood behind him in the mirror and beamed at him.

On the other hand, since he was in a western movie now, maybe he'd be buried in these boots, and then in would walk the local sheriff, tall, long-legged, and serious, intent on finding who'd done poor Billy in.

“Those are the same boots Marston picked out,” said Maddy, touching her thumb to her lip, her tone reflective. “He's got long legs, too.”

“Oh.”

Kell sat down quickly, tugging up the hems of his jeans to take another look, a closer look, fighting with himself to find a different pair of boots so it wouldn't look like he was copying Marston. Because what would Marston think of that?

“They suit you,” said Gabe, nodding. “They're good for riding and for dancing.”

“We don't have dances in the valley,” said Maddy with a twitch of her gray braid as she looked up at Gabe. “Should we? Or should we invite them all up to the barn on Tuesday nights for line dancing?”

“You’re not serious,” said Gabe in a voice that was obviously meant to be heard by only Maddy.

Of course, she wasn’t serious because they were all criminals in the valley, except for the team leads, and not the sort that might be wanted up at the fancy guest ranch. Not the sort that would be wanted to mingle with rich people who could afford to stay there.

The rankle of it stiffened the back of Kell’s neck, his mouth tightening over a scowl as he stood up. The boots and hat, while they might fit and feel better than a coat from a church basement that cost a quarter, were still charity, pure and simple.

But Gabe was looking right at him, so he froze.

“I don’t know,” said Gabe with a little shrug. “Maybe dancing should be part of it, part of the civilizing of these guys.”

Had anybody else said that Kell needed civilizing, however true the statement, he would have punched him in the face. But this was Gabe, who’d been nice to him, and they were going back to the valley, where it was a different world than he’d been living in for two years. Hell, it was different than being at home.

“Maybe we could set something up,” said Maddy. “We should check with Leland. In the meantime, Kell, how do you like those boots? Do you want to try on some different ones?”

Maybe Maddy was the kind of person who would allow Kell to try on boots for hours or until hell froze over, however long it took. She was obviously hard working, like everyone around Kell seemed to be, so the last thing she deserved was for Kell to have a hissy fit about it.

“I’ll take these,” he said, ducking a little to touch the knee of his jeans.

“You like ‘em?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, then tried again. “Yes, ma’am, I do.”

“Boots don’t make the man,” said Gabe as they put Kell’s work boots in the boot box and some paperwork was signed at the cash register. “But those seem to suit you pretty well, I’d say.”

“Thanks,” he said, meaning it more than he thought he would.

New boots. New day. New place. New Kell. Maybe he could make a new life for himself after all.

## CHAPTER 12

# KELL

At the parking lot in the valley, Gabe told Kell he was at liberty to stomp around and break in his new boots until dinner, and that he, Gabe, was going to check on the team.

“We’ll do another campfire tonight,” said Gabe, smiling at Kell as if to smooth away his surprise. *What, again?* “They never get old,” he said, tossing the key fob on the driver’s seat of the silver truck as if he was, quite simply, not worried that anyone would steal it. And maybe, in the valley, nobody ever did. “They simply never get old.”

Kell could imagine that they did not and never would, not if they were as satisfying as the one the night before, where the smell of smoke and the flicker of starlight high above the yellow and orange flames was now planted like a picture in his brain.

He and Marston after the others had left.

Him spilling his heart out to Marston in the near-darkness. Marston’s eyes, a strange hazel-blue-and-gold, looking at him, utterly serious, not smiling but kind. Listening to Kell, waiting and patient. Saying exactly what Kell needed to hear.

There had been no platitudes, nothing like, *Of course your parents love you. Of course they want you back.* No. Instead, he’d said, *That sounds rough. You didn’t deserve that.* The truth and support all rolled into one.

There was no way another campfire session would turn out exactly the same or even similar, but if there was half a

chance, then Kell would be there in a heartbeat.

In the meantime, where was Marston? After putting the box with his work boots inside in his tent, Kell shuffled around in his new boots, enjoying the edge of the fine straw brim of his new hat, that added cool shade to his head and gave everything he looked at a border of straw.

He went to the mess tent and hung around for a minute, and then ambled out into the woods, his fingers in his pockets as he walked to the lake and then to the facilities. He went back to the mess tent, the cool breeze on his neck the whole while, but he couldn't find Marston anywhere.

Gabe had mentioned Marston worked on his own in the woods making signs, but Kell didn't know what kind of signs those were. So except for that morning, when Marston had shown up to help with the hay, it seemed he was by himself all the time.

Images of Marston on top of the flatbed, strong corded arms lifting bales of hay into place as though they weighed no more than a feather, flitted through Kell's head. The line of his neck, the press of his thighs inside hay-dusted blue jeans.

The height of him, looming over Kell as Marston stood on the edge of the flatbed truck looking down, a shower of gold flecks of hay shimmering in the sunlight like a halo around his head.

He'd sensed that Marston had been moving slowly, only he couldn't figure out why, since work was pressing, and the clouds to the west were looming. When he'd been drinking water from the cooler, Marston had turned away as he'd lifted the plastic bottle to his mouth, but then, in a quick, spare moment, he'd looked over his shoulder at Kell as if checking up on him, making sure he was drinking enough.

Kell hadn't been fussed over like that since before he'd left home. Since the Christmas before he'd stupidly outed himself to his parents.

The sense of it, of being on someone's radar, usually rankled and meant nothing but trouble, so he'd always done

his best to shiver out of the way, to *not* be noticed. Being noticed meant you were about to be harassed, told to get lost, or full-out arrested.

But to have Marston looking at him like that, as though Kell was the only one who Marston cared to watch out for, did different things to him. Bede had looked out for him, but this felt different. It soothed the edges of him, all prickly and standing straight up from being on guard, watching out for himself for two years.

On the road, danger lurked. In prison, dangers abounded. Here in the valley, it already felt safer, and when Marston screwed the top back on his plastic water bottle, and then straightened up, the chin jerk of greeting and acknowledgement, all at once, meant only for Kell, in that moment, he felt not just safe, but cared for.

How did he know? Because Marston never looked at anyone else. Never made sure of them. Never reached further for anyone else so they wouldn't have to lift the hay bales as high. Never stood by for anyone else when they climbed up on the flatbed to do their turn at stacking.

At one point, as Kell had been clambering onto the flatbed, he'd missed his grip. He would have smacked his chin right against the flat, hot metal, but Marston had been there to save him. Standing close by, Marston had moved in, a gleam of sweat along his neck, his arms reaching around Kell's chest to stop him.

"Oops, there," Marston had said, and if his hand lingered on Kell's back, it didn't mean anything.

Maybe it did, and maybe it didn't. Kell didn't know. Only that Marston had saved him from hurt, and had saved him from looking like an idiot in front of the other parolees, and that he was now mooning around the mess tent like a thirteen-year-old girl hoping to see her favorite crush. Plus, the two cooks, who had come in and were gearing up for dinner, were looking at him askance as though they suspected he was about to five-finger the silverware.

On impulse, Kell went to the makeshift office and library area at the side of the mess tent, picked up the receiver for the landline, and dialed Wyoming Correctional.

If he was lucky, Bede would be in the break room and one of the phones in the phone bank would be free.

When the operator came on, he told her who he wanted to talk to, Obadiah Deacon, and gave her the number to the landline.

“I’ll try,” she said. “He might not be in the break room.”

“Thank you,” he said, and hung up.

As he waited for the call back, he took off his hat and held it in his hands, absorbing himself in the weave of fine, cream colored straw, listening to the birds squawking outside the mess tent. Counting each draw and exhale of his breath.

Time sure did move differently in the valley. It went slower, without so much hustle and anxiety, and certainly without as much worry.

Everything in his life seemed open-ended, but for now, he was where he was. Waiting for Bede to call him. Waiting to figure out what was going on inside of him, especially when Marston would look his way, checking to make sure Kell was okay.

The phone rang. He picked up the receiver.

“This is Wyoming Correctional,” said the operator. “I have Obadiah Deacon on the line; do you accept the call?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, his breath speeding up, a sense of joy spreading through his chest like wings.

There was a click, and then Bede’s voice.

“Hey,” said Bede, in his usual, laconic way, as if nothing affected him and nothing ever would. “You called. Are you still there or did you light out?”

*There* meant in the program, and Kell nodded, clutching the phone tighter. In Bede’s mind, *lighting out* was the option

preferable to sticking around and being treated as badly as if you were still in prison.

Kell knew he could have gone first thing if he'd wanted to. But he'd been tired and soul-weary and putting up with Wayne's snoring and his initial dislike of Kell was a small price to pay for simply stopping to rest for a while.

"I'm here," said Kell. "Still here."

"How is it?" asked Bede.

"It's good," said Kell, thinking he might tell Bede about the great mattress on his cot, the terrific food, the work that wasn't too bad, although he was struggling to keep up with the pace of the other men. Bede wouldn't have that problem, for sure. "You should apply."

"It's not for the likes of me."

There was silence on the line. Kell could hear Bede's breath, could hear the rattle of something in the background. The faint click and hiss on the line because, of course, the call was being recorded.

"It could be." Kell nodded, his throat a little thick because Bede had been good to him and deserved some place better than prison. He'd been on the inside for five years, after all, and surely had done his time, so it was time he got out.

"You'd fit in better than me, that's for sure," said Kell, now. "I can barely keep up, but there's this guy—"

"A guy?" asked Bede.

"He works on a different team," said Kell, as if that was the qualifying characteristic that set Marston apart from the others.

It was, but there were other things about Marston, a swirl of sensations that seemed to refuse to be tied down but that he suddenly wanted to explain to Bede. Partly because of the idea of convincing Bede that if he applied for the program and got accepted, good things could happen to him, too, and partly with the idea that if he could explain the situation with Marston, he could understand it better himself.

“And?”

Behind this single word response was a flicker of that night, the first night he'd shared a cell with Bede, when he'd offered Bede a blow job, or whatever, in return for protection.

Bede had refused him and very carefully explained that Kell should never let on that he was a virgin. That Kell was at risk in a setting like a prison. Now, the suggestion was, perhaps, that Kell might be at risk in the valley.

It didn't feel that way to Kell, because the valley just wasn't like that.

Sure, Wayne was an ass, but he wasn't an aggressive, constantly asshole-ish kind of guy. Just sometimes. Nobody else was a jerk or an ass. And Marston certainly wasn't.

“He's nice,” said Kell now, gripping the receiver more tightly. “I mean, everybody is. It's like a dream here, really. And Marston. Well—” He paused, not knowing how to put it into words, what would happen, seem to happen, every time they encountered each other.

“You like him?” asked Bede. “Does he want to be your protector or something?”

In Bede's mind, someone like Kell would need a protector, and Bede had certainly filled that role inside of Wyoming Correctional.

“I don't know,” said Kell. “He looks out for me. Even makes sure I get fresh milk all the time. Really good milk, Bede. Not that powdered milk shit.” He paused again, and listened to Bede breathe, the clamor of an impending fight in the background because somebody wanted to use the phone and wasn't getting a chance. “Nobody needs a protector here, but if I did, he'd be the one.”

Kell blinked, startled that he'd said it out loud, voicing the thought, making it take shape, making it real.

“Not that it'd go beyond that,” said Kell, though he really had no experience in anything like this.

Coming out to his parents two years ago had been like stepping through a doorway into a vast, empty space where anything was possible and nothing was certain.

The two years that had followed had been a race to escape the fate that pursued him, which was enough days in a shitty conversion camp until he forgot he'd even thought he was gay.

There'd never been any time to even kiss a boy, or think about kissing one, or how he'd feel when he finally did. He'd been on the run so long and so hard it was as if, at that point, coming to a shrieking halt, he'd forgotten that part of himself. Hearts and flowers and love and desire.

"Not that this is the place for that," he said, doing his best to force his thoughts to a shuddering halt.

"You never know," said Bede.

"How's your new cellie?" asked Kell, ramming the conversation right back to Bede.

"Craig," said Bede with a snort. "Have you ever heard a more white collar name in your life?"

"No," said Kell with a little laugh. "What he'd do?"

"Some scheme to siphon gas at night from the gas station he worked at. He's an idiot because those fuckin' things are regulated."

"Moron."

"You got that right," said Bede. "I gotta go, but about your guy."

"Yeah?"

"Play it close until you know more. Don't pull your pants down until you know for sure."

"We're not doing that," said Kell, protesting, his voice rising. "I'm not pulling my pants down and I'm sure there's some kind of rule against it."

"Rules schmules," said Bede with some certainty. "Protect yourself first. That's all I'm saying."

Then, before Kell could say anything else, there was a click and Bede was gone.

Going back to his tent, Kell changed from his cowboy boots into his regular work boots and placed his hat on the top of his little shelf. By the time he finished putzing around and returned to the mess tent, the line for the buffet was already forming.

The smells of garlic and tomato wafted through the air. When Kell got up to the front of the line, he saw that there were three small pizza ovens and that the pizza, far from being frozen, was freshly made, flame-baked pizza, all different kinds.

His mouth watered as he helped himself to pepperoni, sausage and mushroom, and one with slices of tomato on it.

“That’s my favorite,” said a voice over his shoulder.

Kell turned and looked up at Marston, who was patiently waiting while Kell made a pig of himself.

“Margherita pizza,” he said. “And don’t forget to take some salad, too.”

In prison, Kell would have told anybody who’d made such a suggestion to fuck the hell off. But this was the valley, and besides, there was kindness in Marston’s eyes when he said this. And he didn’t seem to mind when Kell trailed after him as they sat down.

Genial dinnertime conversation ensued as they all chowed down on the amazing meal, but all Kell could think of was that while he’d been talking to Bede, he’d neglected to describe just how handsome Marston was, with those hazel-blue eyes, that strong jaw. The curl of dark blond hair beneath his ear. How strong and broad his hands were.

How dense his thighs were in those blue jeans he wore like a second skin. That long stride that ate up the ground, effortless and confident. And how quiet he was, still and watchful. And how few smiles he had for anyone other than Kell.

Gabe asked Marston something about how it was going, and this time, Kell paid attention.

“I finally figured out the right jig angle to use on the edge of the signs,” said Marston, licking a bit of cheese from his thumb. “I could do it by hand, of course, but it’s already taking longer than it ought.”

“He sounds like a picky bastard,” said Jonah, shoving half a piece of pizza into his mouth, much to Royce’s *tsk tsking* dismay.

“He is picky,” said Marston. “But he wants me to tell a story about the valley with those signs. That the signs and the valley have been here a long time, and that there’s history behind them. Hence, the signs need to look rustic and handmade.”

“So cutting first, then the edging, then carving the words?” asked Gabe.

“Right. I’ll carve, and then I’ll wood-burn the edges,” said Marston. “That’ll seal the wood a bit, help maintain the integrity of the words.”

“Where the hell are you doing any of this?” asked Jonah.

“I’ve got a workshop in the woods,” said Marston. “There’s a canopy set up a couple hundred yards beyond the fire pit.” He paused a moment while he crunched on a crust. “It’s nice there. Quiet. A breeze from the lake.”

Kell had a sudden, fierce desire to see where Marston worked. To see the canopy. To sit and watch Marston make those signs.

“Maybe you could show us sometime,” said Kell. He made himself keep Marston’s gaze when he looked up. Made himself straighten up because he meant it.

“Maybe that could be arranged,” said Gabe in an odd way as he looked at Kell, studying him. “Now, who’s up for a campfire tonight?”

Everybody raised their hands, which meant that Gabe was right about the fact that it never got old. Kell raised his hand,

and held his breath until Marston raised his, like a little kid who doesn't want to go on a field trip but who doesn't want to get left behind either.

## CHAPTER 13

# KELL

After dinner, everyone scattered, including Marston, which left Kell alone with Wayne, who seemed to trudge beside him grudgingly as they went back to their shared tent.

“So today was hat and boot day?” asked Wayne, as he stepped onto the wooden platform, unzipping the tent flap and holding it back for Kell.

“Yeah.”

“Why aren’t you wearing them?” Wayne asked.

“I thought I’d save them for good,” said Kell, thinking of the times, the many times, he’d been grateful to have saved even a single rubber band so he could secure the bag of peanut M&M’s he’d stolen for his supper.

“Now is good,” said Wayne, sounding very wise. He plonked himself down on his cot with a gusty sigh. “Show me.”

Hesitation jerked through Kell at the thought that Wayne would just take the hat and mangle it, or take the boots and stomp on them. He made himself still that thought because if that did happen, maybe Wayne would get banished from the valley and Kell would have the tent to himself.

But Wayne didn’t do any of those things. Instead, when Kell handed over his new hat, Wayne didn’t smash or mangle it, but handled it by the edges, rather reverently, turning it this way and that, making an approving face, like a wine steward inspecting a rascally vintage.

When Kell handed him the boots, he actually smiled, taking the right boot out of the box, his fingers lingering almost lovingly over the embossed pattern.

“They’ve dyed this inlaid leather a bit green,” said Wayne. “Verdant, as they say.”

Having no idea what that word meant, Kell nodded anyway as he took the boot back and sat down with the box in his lap.

“Anyway, just wear the boots, any chance you get, to break them in,” said Wayne. He bent to reach under his bed and pull out his boot box, then pulled on his shiny black, pointy toed cowboy boots. “Mine have a stacked heel. The point is, you need to make them look like you’ve owned them forever. No sense saving them, either. The leather will just rot and dry. Now.” He got up with a hearty slap to both thighs. “I’m going to go shave and put some cologne on, because you never know when some cute dames might show up.”

He laughed, as if to show he realized how slim the chances of that were, but that a fellow’s got to be ready, any time, day or night, if there was even a hint of a chance that stray women might wander over to their campfire.

“Coming with?” asked Wayne as he gathered his shaving things.

Kell didn’t have much of a beard, but he changed into his cowboy boots, found his disposable razor and a can of shaving cream, and trotted after Wayne.

Watching Wayne shave wasn’t at all like watching Marston shave, as Wayne slopped the shaving cream everywhere, and didn’t seem to care if he nicked himself, not at all like the quiet ritual that Marston had made of shaving.

Kell shaved quickly too, because now that he’d been given permission, by Wayne, of all people, to wear his new boots a lot, he wanted to show them to Marston and see if Maddy was right in that Marston had the same boots. And whether Marston would mind that they were boot twins.

Newly shaved, they dropped their gear back at their shared tent, then made their way in the lengthening shadows to the fire pit.

There, Gabe and Blaze were hunkered down, blowing gently on the kindling beneath the teepee shaped pyre. A trail of smoke, a gray and silver ribbon, rose from the top of the teepee, and Kell could see only the barest flickers of flame.

Up from the mess tent, Royce and Jonah walked, with Duane, Tyson, and Gordy trailing behind. They were all carrying supplies for s'mores, making Kell's mouth water at the thought of it.

All of this activity left Wayne and Kell with nothing to do but stand around with their hands in their pockets, though Kell was secretly pleased to see that everyone was wearing cowboy boots and hats, as if the little impromptu campfire had turned itself into a celebration of sorts. As if the whole world wanted to acknowledge that Kell had made it through his first week, skin intact.

Well, except for a few bumps and bruises, but that was nothing. He was fine. He was going to be fine.

But where was Marston? Kell kept his focus on the woods behind him, turning to look every so often, but pretending he wasn't, because the last thing he wanted to do was draw attention to the fact that he was looking for Marston.

The woods grew dark and still no Marston. The wood in the fire pit caught, the orange and gold flames licking up into the darkness, woodsmoke drifting over to Kell as Wayne and the others settled into the Adirondack chairs or onto hay bales covered with cherry red wool blankets, their faces aglow. Only Kell was left standing, even though he could have taken a seat next to Duane on a hay bale.

Blaze headed off into the woods, pocket knife in hand, to gather sticks to roast marshmallows with, because some people liked using sticks rather than metal skewers, and Kell knew he was coming back from the crunch-crunch sound of his boots on the pine needles. Only when he turned it was Marston, with Blaze right behind him.

“Excuse me,” said Blaze, slipping past Marston with sticks tucked beneath his arm.

Marston’s face was aglow from the light of the fire, the hard planes of his jawline limned in gold and blue-gold, his eyes reflecting the flickering dance of the flames.

He wasn’t wearing a cowboy hat, but his skin was smooth from a recent shave, his neck bold and bare above the partially undone snap buttons of his shirt. Kell could smell the scent of his cologne in the cool night air, something dusky and low.

“Hey, there,” said Marston, and though his mouth didn’t smile as he said this, Kell sensed there was a smile in those hazel-blue eyes, and maybe that smile was for Kell, just for Kell.

“Hey,” said Kell, looking up at Marston.

He knew he was blocking the way, that Marston couldn’t get to the fire, either to sit or stand, without going around Kell or through him. But in this moment, he had Marston all to himself and, with his back to everybody else, he did not have to hide that he was looking. Didn’t have to hide the way his body leaned toward Marston’s, the height of him blocking the dark shadows from the woods, the warmth of him reaching Kell as though it meant to surround him.

“Everything okay?” asked Marston, his voice low and somber, as if he suddenly realized there might be something wrong and very much wanted to do something about it.

“I think we have the same boots,” said Kell, every other even remotely clever, funny, or insightful thing he might have thought to say running away like a field of escaping bunnies.

“Oh?” The surprise was evident in Marston’s voice, and it seemed for a moment, his eyebrows twitching down, that he meant to cover that surprise for he said, quite smoothly, too smoothly, perhaps, “Is that so?”

Then, in the next second, a bit of the smile Kell so longed to see finally broke through, a gentle, small curve in the corner of Marston’s mouth.

“Show me.”

Pleased, Kell went to the nearest empty hay bale and plonked himself down, with Marston sitting down at his side a second later. He hitched one ankle over his knee and pulled up the hem of his blue jeans to reveal the soft brown leather of his new boot, the low, curved inlay inside of which a pale, soft green showed.

“I didn’t know you had this pair when I tried them on,” said Kell, ready to make an apology, ready to run to the ranch’s store to exchange this pair for a different one, if needed. If Marston wanted him to.

Maybe he should have done that the second Maddy had told him about Marston’s boots. Then he wouldn’t be squirming with a kind of anticipatory embarrassment to be caught copying Marston. Or maybe he shouldn’t care?

It was all jumbled now, his pleasure that they were boot twins battling with whether Marston would be insulted or pleased.

Marston, in echo of Kell, hitched his leg up over his knee so their boots were just about sole-to-sole, and pulled up the hem of his blue jeans. He ran a slow hand down the length of the shaft, fingers curling over the instep.

“I picked these out last season,” he said. “They’re good and broken in now.”

“Maddy said they were good for long legs,” said Kell, his mouth a little dry. “She’s the one who told me you had a pair.”

“She did?” The surprise on Marston’s face was quite evident, at least to Kell, and he wondered why Marston was surprised.

“She did,” said Kell. Then he added, “She seems to be the kind of person who remembers a lot of stuff.”

“She is.” Marston pulled his pant leg back into place, lowered his boot to the ground, and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

Kell leaned forward in the same way, his head turned slightly toward Marston as everybody moved closer to the leaping fire to roast their marshmallows, either on knobby

sticks from the woods, trimmed to suit, or shiny metal skewers.

“Do you want me to exchange my boots for a different pair?” asked Kell, almost whispering this, unsure why his heart was jumping so hard it was bruising his breastbone from the inside.

The answer came without hesitation.

“No.”

For a long moment, Marston stared at the fire, his hands clasped together as if he were on the verge of praying.

They were close to the fire, so Kell felt like he was basking in heat from the front, the cool air whispering across the back of his neck at the same time. And all the while, Marston seemed lost in his own thoughts, the firelight glittering in his eyes. Then someone needed to move in front of him, so he sat up and leaned back, his broad palm, long fingers, splayed on the red blanket.

“Of course not,” he murmured in Kell’s direction, looking down as if avoiding anyone’s, everyone’s, gaze. “They suit you.”

When he looked up at Kell, his hazel-blue eyes were blazing, not just with firelight, but as though something burned from within him.

Kell couldn’t help making a little gasp, as if someone had struck him. As if Marston had reached down and opened his chest and shown Kell his heart.

There was a sheen along Marston’s cheek, the plane of his jaw, the leaping light from the fire turning his hair into burnished gold.

Kell didn’t mean to stare, didn’t mean to let his gaze linger along the long, strong column of Marston’s neck, the way the long muscle there jumped when Marston turned his head to look at the fire. Didn’t mean to memorize the slow rise and fall of Marston’s chest beneath his pale-patterned shirt, the point of one collar brushing gently against his skin with each breath.

Feelings he didn't quite know what to do with sprang upward inside of him, bubbles of energy, curves of excitement shining along those bubbles, each one exploding when it reached his throat, coming in succession so quickly he could hardly breathe.

“Shall we make s'mores?” asked Marston, now. He turned his head away from the fire, focusing his gaze on Kell, and the tone of his voice said that he had no idea, no idea at all, the effect he had on Kell.

And maybe it was better that way, at least for now.

Kell knew he needed to get a grip on whatever was going on with him, to pull back on whatever energy was arcing between him and Marston. For surely, surely nothing would come of it. Nothing good, at any rate.

“Okay,” he said, standing up.

“Get sticks,” said Marston. “Marshmallows taste better when roasted on sticks.”

Focusing on the task at hand, Kell got two of the sticks from Blaze's pile and brought them back to the hay bale. There, Marston had assembled a small pile of raw marshmallows, graham crackers, and one still-wrapped bar of chocolate.

Kell made himself busy with his stick and his marshmallow, as if everything was fine, and he wasn't still reeling from Marston's intense gaze, or the way he'd pulled back from that intensity at the same time Marston had, like both of them were dancing backwards intent on escaping an incoming lava flow.

The darkness of the woods, the cool wind from the nighttime lake, all of this was held back by the glowing, leaping fire into which many skewers and sticks were now pointed, the sweet smell of burnt sugar rising in the air.

“I call this a level four char,” said Marston, somewhat unexpectedly, as he pulled his stick out of the fire, his marshmallow bubbling black along the edges as he pursed his

lips and blew on the marshmallow to stop it burning. “It’s a little burnt, but it’s still good this way.”

“It is,” said Kell, pulling his stick out and blowing on the burning marshmallow in the same way.

Together they assembled their s’mores, as if they were the only two at the fireside, their heads bent together, and with a quick hand, Kell took off his cowboy hat and placed it behind the hay bale, and now Kell and Marston were even more alike, bareheaded in the firelight.

Maybe there was no escaping that lava flow. And maybe Kell didn’t want to. It was certainly easy to smile at Marston as he bit into his s’more, the marshmallow squeezing out, the chocolate starting to melt and dripping along his fingers.

So good. It was all so good, it was hard to believe it was real. Him in this place, warmed by the fire, safe at Marston’s side.

There was no telling what it would look like in the morning, but for now he had a s’more, the fire, the starlight above peeping through the pine trees. And Marston, his smileless face, the smile all in his hazel blue eyes, the smile only for Kell.

## CHAPTER 14

# KELL

On Saturday morning, while Kell helped his team rake up loose bits of hay and secure the hay bales beneath the canvas tarp that had come undone during the windy night, Marston was nowhere to be found.

Sure, he'd been there at breakfast, but he'd eaten hurriedly and rushed out of the mess tent, presumably to his canopy in the woods.

He didn't show up for lunch, either, but Kell saw one of the cooks hurrying off with a large paper bag that might have been lunch for Marston, but Kell didn't want to ask.

Then, much to Kell's dismay, there was a group counseling session after lunch. The cooks were already rearranging the tables to make room for a circle of folding chairs, and Gabe and Royce were standing at the entrance to the mess tent, so there was no escape that way.

"Do I have to?" asked Kell, and though he knew his voice sounded surly, like he was on the verge of swearing, he felt desperate.

He wanted to go into the woods and find Marston, wanted to sit and watch him work. Wanted to ask a question, any question, so he could hear a slow and considered reply, and get Marston to talk with him that way.

"Yes, you do," said Gabe. "They're pretty painless meetings, I hear, and it's a good chance for you to sit and talk and exchange ideas with your fellow parolees."

“There’s no getting out of this, I’m afraid,” said Royce. “Besides, it gives the team leads a chance to meet as well. To go over the routine, and anything new that’s upcoming.” He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Gabe and I will be in my tent, having iced coffee.”

“What about Marston?” asked Kell before he could stop himself.

“He’ll be there,” said Gabe. “Even though he doesn’t have a team, though that might be changing.”

Gabe didn’t say anything else, but walked off with Royce, who, with his old-fashioned clipboard in his arms, looked like a teacher about to give Gabe instruction in math or something. Which left Kell with nothing to do but sit on one of the folding chairs and smile blankly at the young looking fellow in black trousers and a wrinkled yellow tie as he took the chair directly across from Kell.

“You’re new, right?” asked the young man brightly, perhaps too brightly. He checked the tablet in his hands. “Kelliher Dodson?”

“It’s Kell,” said Kell, keeping it short and crisp because the last thing he wanted to do was get drawn into a private conversation with a stupid fucking counselor.

Counselors were nosy bastards, at least the ones at the prison had been, and they were sometimes mean, and usually way too cheerful for Kell. Luckily, all the other parolees soon stomped their way into the mess tent and took seats in the circle, like they were used to doing this. And also, maybe a little, they just wanted to get it over with.

“Hi, I’m Brendan,” said the stupid fucking counselor.

“Hi, Brendan,” they all said in unison.

While the meeting got underway, Kell just kept quiet until he could figure out the tone of the meeting, whether it would be happy or sad, or everybody would complain or argue, or whatever.

To his surprise, it was pretty upbeat, with the two lunkheads, Duane and Tyson, trying to talk at the same time,

and Gordy chiming in when he could.

“And what about you, Wayne?” asked Brendan. “How are you adjusting to having a tent mate after having that tent to yourself?”

It was a mean question to ask because it put Wayne on the spot, and he sat up, his hands in the pockets of his blue jeans turning into fists.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Kell’s quiet, at least, and he isn’t going through my stuff, near as I can figure.”

Kell just rolled his eyes because after even only sixty days in prison, he knew that stealing from another criminal, however tame they might seem, was a good way to get your throat slit in the middle of the night. But he didn’t say anything, and only nodded when the others nodded, and counted the seconds until the meeting was over and he could get back to his regularly scheduled life. And maybe sneak into the woods to find where Marston’s pavilion was.

Except after the meeting, there wasn’t any chance to do that, because Gabe rounded up the team and, with each of them carrying various tools, led them into the pasture among the horses, to the very end, just above where the lake narrowed into a river again. There, he pointed out a clump of what he called Russian olive trees.

“Now, in Colorado, they’re just letting these die out, but here—” He paused to look up along the pasture, at the lake and the gray ridge beyond. “They’re an invasive species and aren’t very pretty, besides, so we’re going to need to dig them up. And collect any scraps or seeds so they don’t continue to grow here. Any questions?”

He looked right at Kell as if he expected Kell would protest or simply not understand. But Kell knew, as he pulled his leather gloves from his back pocket and picked up one of the large clippers, that he was going to have a hard time keeping up.

The ground was hard as it curved downward, going into a little gully before broadening into the bank of the lake. For

yards the grass was scrubby, as if the Russian olive trees were soaking up all the water.

As Kell attacked one of the smaller trees, clipping branches close to the trunk while doing his best to avoid the spines and sticky sap, he tried to imagine how it would look, once all the invasive species were dug up and something else was planted. Pine trees, maybe, or just the tall grass that could be found on the other side of the valley, above the switchbacks, where the land broadened and rolled along to the high prairie.

When he was done with one, he moved onto another tree, and behind him, Jonah or Gabe came along with a chainsaw to cut the tree down to the root. After them came Blaze and Gordy, pouring what smelled like strong vinegar all around the sawed-off trunk. It was when they took a water break that Gabe explained why they were doing what they were doing.

“These trees have roots that go forty feet down,” he said. “They suck up the water all around them, which is why the ground looks so poor. That’s why we have to get rid of them. The vinegar is what will keep them from growing back, but we have to keep doing it, keep checking to make sure they stay gone.”

Kell could see the sense in this, but it was going to take forever to get the job done. He had blisters along the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, on both hands, and his feet felt as though they were boiling inside of his boots.

Gabe set Kell to gathering up scraps of leaves and branches and the small, rough olives that the clipping left everywhere. Even one olive could grow into a tree, and Gabe joked that maybe even the leaves could sprout into a tree one day, they were so pervasive.

Bending and stooping wasn’t as hard as clipping, but it was still hard, and the afternoon air was hot and still, hovering over the hard grasses, making it feel as though Kell was dipping down to put his head in an oven. It had rained so many other days, why not that day?

When Gabe finally called a stop to the work, they wiped off their tools and laid them in the truck bed, then followed the truck back to the supply shed at the end of the pasture nearest the compound.

The shed, which had started out as a place to store grain and some salt blocks, was now cluttered with halters, grooming equipment, three bridles and four saddles. Kell helped as best he could, then, when dismissed, raced to take a shower, and to shave, and to put on a new clean shirt before showing up at the mess tent for dinner.

His heart was a rush of anticipation, the scent of soap on his own skin swirling around him, the leftover feel of the disposable razor on his cheek leaving him bare and exposed. Except, even after he'd gotten in line at the buffet, and made sure to sit at the end of the table, where there was an empty seat next to him, Marston did not show up.

Chowing down on some very good chili, accompanied by several glasses of fresh, cool milk, Kell kept his eyes wide and his ears wider, listening to the general gossip and chatter, waiting for the moment when he could ask where Marston was or, better yet, find out without having to ask.

And what was he supposed to do if Marston had shown up? Flirt like a seventh grader who'd drawn a big heart on his brand new blue canvas three-ring binder?

He hardly knew, only that the draw of seeing that tall form at the open end of the mess tent would really have made his day, and maybe settled the butterflies of anticipation in his belly. Or maybe not because when he heard someone say Marston's name, Kell's head jerked up, and he went quite still, then made himself reach for the saltines to crumble into his nearly empty bowl.

"I think he took the truck and went into town," said Gabe.

"I think he went further than that," said Royce, dabbing his mouth with his napkin. "There's that place he likes to go, the Bucking Horse Grill in Torrington."

“All that way? Eighty miles just for a steak?” asked Gabe, shaking his head.

“I think he likes the drive,” said Royce, and then the conversation moved on to the subject of steaks in general, and whether rare or medium rare was the best way to have it.

After dinner, as it had been so hot that day, nobody wanted to sit around a campfire, so Gabe hauled out the projector and the screen and they voted on the movie they all wanted to watch.

Kell didn't care, but it was nice to sit in the dark and not have to actively participate. Instead, he could munch on popcorn and watch *Back to the Future* with everybody else, and keep his ear cocked for Marston coming in, and think about how he might sit next to Kell, or across from him, and join in the low-key fun.

But Marston never came, and after the movie was over, Kell wandered back to his tent to futz around before getting ready for bed. Wayne joined him in the futzing, an oddly companionable silence filling the tent.

A pair of moths joined them, fluttering around the single overhead light while Wayne grumbled as he searched under his bed for something, and Kell sat on the edge of his cot, thinking, perhaps for the first time in a while, that it might be nice to have a book so he could read before bedtime, the way he used to back home. Or in prison, when Bede would let him take something from his small shelf of books.

While he'd been on the road, access to books was a hit-or-miss opportunity, so it was hard to remember what he used to like to read. His old life was hard to remember and felt so long ago, as though he'd been another person living in a bubble where feeling loved and happy was easy to reach for.

Now, though he mentally squinted, he could not recall a single name of any book in the stack next to his bed. Granted, it had been a small stack, as he'd had an e-reader for most of his books and, naturally, he'd not had his reader in his backpack when he'd left home.

“I’m going to go get a book,” he said, standing up. Still wearing his cowboy boots, he rather loomed over Wayne, who was still on the floor. Wayne’s response was an absent nod, as though it mattered very little to him where Kell went or why.

As he walked through the small glade of trees that surrounded his tent, he inhaled a big lungful of cool, pine-scented night air. Off in the distance was the between-the-trees glitter of someone at the facilities, taking a shower maybe, and in the other direction was the gleaming auto-light on the outside of the mess tent.

Everything was not as dark as it had seemed his first few nights, but though he thought about getting his flashlight in case both of those lights went off, he trudged along the shadowed path to the mess tent. Where he found out why the auto-light had come on.

Someone was in the kitchen building in the back of the tent. The electric light blazed from the partially opened door, so as Kell went up to the set of low bookshelves in the mess tent, he looked into the kitchen, and saw a very familiar pair of shoulders.

The butterflies in his stomach went into high gear, like they’d been startled from pure stillness into frantic flight. He didn’t quite know what to do with feeling like he was being called, pulled from the front of the mess tent, all the way through, past the row of now-empty steamers, to the rubber mat between the mess tent and the kitchen building.

It smelled a little like cleanser and soap, maybe a trace of onions in the breezeway between the two, though at this hour, everything seemed to want to settle into sleep. Except for Marston beneath the blazing light, his back to the door, busy at the metal table in the middle of the single room.

He must have heard Kell’s step on the threshold, for his shoulders twitched, and he turned around. His eyes were level and there was almost no expression in them, and beneath the bright light, the planes of his face were hard.

Instead of the regular snap-button shirt that Kell was used to seeing him in, Marston wore a t-shirt that looked like it had

been washed and worn a thousand times, the gray cloth faded to pearl.

His neck was bare, and his arms, from the bicep down, were bare, and Kell could imagine him in the silver F150, elbow propped on the open window, driving to nowhere as the sun warmed his skin, and then back again, the evening-cool air swirling all around.

“Hey,” said Kell, feeling foolish and barging ahead, anyway. “I came to get a book and saw the light on.”

He didn’t add that Marston’s legs looked incredibly long, and that, yes, they were wearing the same boots again, because for some reason, Marston didn’t seem to want him there, looking at him askance.

Kell hesitated, not moving forward into the kitchen, and asked, “Do you want me to go?”

The question wasn’t hard, didn’t seem to be, but Marston seemed to freeze, one nostril flaring slightly, and then he relaxed.

“No, that’s fine,” he said. “I’m just making an onion sandwich.”

“A what?” asked Kell.

Marston waved him into the kitchen, stepping back from the wide door, and gestured to the metal table, where sandwich fixings were all laid out. A loaf of white bread. Half an onion. Salt and pepper shakers. A jar of mayonnaise. A knife and a plate.

“What’s an onion sandwich?” asked Kell, coming up to the table, though it was fairly obvious what it was, with all the ingredients laid out like they were.

“When I was a kid,” said Marston, going back to his preparations, putting mayonnaise on both slices of bread. “Sometimes we were so hungry we had sleep for supper. Other times—” He paused to slice off two very thin slices of onion and laid them on one slice of bread, shaking a little salt then a little pepper over the whole thing. “Other times there were

franks and beans on toast. Or this. I call it my hunger sandwich, because it fills the corners of my belly.”

Marston’s voice as he spoke was steady and calm, but Kell saw the small shake of his hand as he laid the second slice of bread on top and pressed it down, creating what Kell knew would be a very dense bite to the sandwich. And there was more, the idea that Marston used to go to bed hungry as a kid, more than one time, it seemed.

As a kid, Kell’d had no idea what hunger was, true hunger, but when he’d left home, he’d found out pretty quickly what it felt like to have a belly so empty it started eating itself. A hunger that drove him to go to the dumpster behind McDonalds, to get old Big Macs, or a movie theater, where they seemed to throw out a shit ton of hot dogs and chewy salted pretzels, grown soggy in the rain.

Sometimes, Kell would sidle into a Denny’s and grab packets of sugar and butter and together with a loaf of bread he’d managed to steal from a Seven Eleven, he would make a sugar sandwich, which he guessed was his own version of a hunger sandwich.

He’d eaten hundreds of them it seemed, over the last two years, but had he known about Marston’s onion sandwich, he might have made that, and not had his energy run out so fast.

“Wanna try?” asked Marston, bringing Kell right back into the present, into the shiny clean kitchen, and the simple sandwich that Marston had cut in half, and was now offering one half to Kell, on the plate that he pushed across the metal table toward Kell.

Marston was tall, densely muscled, with the kind of physique that came from hard work, real work, and not the gym. Food was plentiful in the valley, as well, so nobody went hungry, not even a little bit.

But from his experiences walking along a highway with his thumb out, hoping for a ride, or swinging up into a slow-moving, open box car, Kell knew quite well that generosity from a hungry person was a rare thing indeed. And yet here Marston was, willing to share.

Kell could hardly refuse him and didn't want to. To refuse would be rude.

"Sure," he said, picking up the half sandwich and biting into it. The onion was slightly bitter, but the mayonnaise soothed it, creamy and sweet, with the salt picking up the edges, the bread dense on his tongue. "That's good," he said, licking mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth. "Fills you up."

Nodding, Marston ate his half of the sandwich in three huge bites, wiping his mouth free of crumbs with his thumb.

"I can make us dessert," said Kell, following suit.

"Dessert?" asked Marston, his eyebrows going up.

"Sugar sandwich," said Kell. There was a butter dish right next to one of the two stoves, and the butter would be nice and soft, just perfect for a sugar sandwich.

"I know those," said Marston, quite quietly, as if remembering how many times he'd been desperate enough to simply eat sugar, whose energy would run out and leave a belly needing to be filled all over again.

Wordlessly, Marston cleaned up from the onion sandwich, and Kell made two open-faced sugar sandwiches. Sugar went everywhere, in spite of his care, leaving the metal tabletop sparkling as though stars had been scattered across it.

There they stood, almost toe-to-toe, eating their sugar sandwiches. Marston leaned slightly against the table, his hip pressed into the metal, broad thigh tight beneath the blue jeans he wore.

A bit of boot peeked out from the hem of his jeans, a shimmy of movement, as he adjusted his weight to stand up straight, finishing his sandwich with a lick to his thumb. A last crumb of sugar glistened on his lower lip, one on his cheek. There was a quiet glitter in his eyes as he looked at Kell.

"What book were you going to get?"

"I don't know what they have," said Kell, a wild hope springing in his chest that Marston was actually interested.

“Let’s go look.”

Together they cleaned up after their nighttime feast, then, flicking on the light in the tent, Marston led the way to the bookshelves. He crouched down, hunkered on his boot heels, one finger pulling each book down, one at a time.

“*Road*,” he said. “*Young Mac of Fort Vancouver. The Firm. Oliver Twist.*”

He paused, his arms folded over his knees, as though he was trying to make himself look smaller. Even curled up like he was, shoulders ducked down, he was still bigger than Kell.

“This is an eclectic selection, for sure. Oh, look. *Chariot of the Gods*, that’s one I’ve not read.” He paused, standing up, pulling *The Firm* with him. “Royce mentioned that he’s got a bunch of nature books he’s willing to lend, if you like those.”

“I don’t want to bother him,” said Kell, standing up in tandem with Marston. Balancing on his toes, he felt as though he might fall forward, but he pulled himself back, wiping his palms on his thighs.

“Take this one, then.”

Looking down at the copy of *The Firm* that Marston held out, Kell wanted the moment to last forever. Marston, his attention all on Kell. And Kell, standing in the shine of a bright light, the energy teetering between them, back and forth in a dizzying dash.

If Marston was unaware, as he seemed to be, Kell was not, for his heart sped up as he took the book, his thumb brushing against Marston’s thumb, his heart jumping as Marston seemed to lean toward him. There was a brief second of contact, an arc, a spark. Then Marston straightened up, and it was gone.

“Well, I’ll see you,” Marston said, that same thumb brushing against his lower lip. “If you don’t like that one, there are others. Can you get the light when you’re done?”

“Sure,” said Kell, sensing the rebuff, the drawing away, the way Marston seemed to be saying no to himself, to Kell, and to the energy between them.

Marston turned away, a spin of boot heel, a shimmy of heat, he was that close, then he was striding away into the darkness, pierced by the auto-light on the mess tent.

“Sure,” Kell said to the sudden silence and stillness that echoed all around him. “Sure,” he said again as he did his best to take deep breaths, clasping the book to his belly. He’d not had a chance to finish the book while in prison, but he’d have that chance now.

After a moment, the auto-light went off, so Kell flicked the switch to turn off the overhead light, blinking as he stepped down off the wooden platform as the auto-light came on again. Then he made his way to his tent, and knew he might not be able to read, but he was going to get ready for bed, and then simply hold the book in his hands as he lay in his cot.

He would look at *The Firm* and think about how Marston had given it to him. That slow, careful thoughtfulness as he’d handed it over.

Kell supposed Marston would have treated anybody else exactly the same way. With a kind of diffidence, that intense gaze giving exactly nothing away. Suggesting a book he might have wanted for himself. Walking off into the night without a backward glance.

At the tent, Wayne was kicking his stuff under his cot, grouching to himself about something, totally ignoring Kell when he came in. Which was fine. The ignoring was low level and not really mean, and it meant that Kell could pretend he was alone as he got ready for bed.

Crawling into his cot, he held *The Firm* in both hands, the bottom edge resting lightly on his belly.

“What’s that?” asked Wayne with a gusty sigh. It was obvious he didn’t care, he was just asking to ask, just being companionable, which still surprised Kell even after a week.

“It’s a book Marston suggested,” he said.

“You going to read that now?” asked Wayne, and Kell shook his head, because Wayne’s voice had risen, as if he was on the verge of being incensed at not getting his beauty sleep.

“No,” said Kell. He slipped the book on top of his little white shelf and sighed as Wayne reached up to flick off the light. In the darkness, the silence began to soak down, as if the woods were bending close, scattering pine needles as the breeze tossed their branches.

Sighing, Kell turned to face the tent wall, eyes half closed as though his mind couldn't settle, was searching for something. And then he let the quiet take him into sleep.

## CHAPTER 15

# MARSTON

On Saturday afternoon, after the meeting for team leads was over, Marston grabbed the keys to the F150 and took off driving. Sometimes a long drive helped and sometimes it didn't, but he had to light out to settle his mind. A long drive intensified the loneliness, worked it through and through until it settled into familiar patterns, lounging into the background of his awareness. Pretty much going away, if he didn't think about it much.

He'd been confused but pleased to be included in the team lead meeting held in Royce's tent, and while they waited for Gabe to show up, and while Royce brewed some coffee in his fancy French press, they'd chatted about the weather, about Royce's book collection, about nothing in particular.

It had been pleasant to sit in the cool, green-tinted shade of Royce's tent, which was a damn site fancier and more comfortable than Marston's tent. Unlike Royce, who had obviously made an effort to make his surroundings nice, Marston only had the things he needed, and certainly not a small electric fan, a microwave, and three different kinds of sugar for the coffee.

It was when Gabe had shown up, stomping his boots on the wooden platform to kick off the dirt, that Marston learned the reason why he'd been included, even though he didn't really have a team.

"Here's the thing," said Gabe as he took a mug of coffee from Royce and sat down on one of the metal folding chairs. "I got Kell. He's new. He's young. He works hard, but he's got

no muscle tone, and whether that's from not eating very much on the road or what, I don't know. But if I keep working him the way I am, he'll be tearing down muscle, not building it up." Gabe took a slow sip of his coffee and nodded appreciatively at Royce. "Here's where you come in, Marston."

"Me?" asked Marston, wincing as he jabbed his thumb into the middle of his own chest. But he already knew the answer, even before Gabe spoke.

"I need you to take him," said Gabe. "He'll be your team. There's plenty to do, right? Making signs, painting them. Pretty soon you'll have to dig post holes for those signs, and he'll be ready for that level of activity. He just needs to rest and get his strength up. Hot meals and plenty of sleep are what he needs at his age. Coming through what he's come through."

When Marston didn't say anything, Gabe added, "You'd be doing me a favor."

There was no way Marston could refuse, not after everything Gabe had done for him, being his friend, getting him the magic job on the magic ranch. Putting in a good word for him when he'd screwed up.

"Sure," he said, even though he wasn't at all sure. "I'd be glad to."

"Good." Gabe pulled out the manila folder he'd tucked into his clipboard and handed it over. "That's confidential, by the way. You read it and then give it back. I've got a locked file cabinet in the first aid hut."

"Okay."

"I'll tell him tomorrow that he's on your team," said Gabe. "Then you take him on starting Monday, okay?"

"Okay," said Marston again, feeling the weight of the file in his hands.

He did his best to listen to the rest of the meeting, which, oddly, mostly seemed to be about whether they should be having line dancing lessons for the parolees, and, if they did, whether the parolees should be hauled up to the ranch to

participate in the Tuesday night dance sessions that regular guests attended.

Marston kept silent, as he figured that had nothing to do with him, his mind focused, knife-sharp, on the idea of working with Kell day in and day out.

Surely now would be the time for him to confess what was spinning inside of him like a runaway tornado. Want. The draw of connection. The image of that sweet, hunger-thin face, the hope that lingered behind those sparkling green eyes. The way Kell's hair fell over his forehead. How badly he needed a haircut. Someone to care for him. Someone to hold him.

A great lot of this was outside the bounds of propriety, of basic ethics. And now that Kell would be on his team—would *be* his team—Marston was going to be tested every minute of every day. He had a strong will, but would it be strong enough?

Surely he should speak now, because if not now, when? But his mouth never opened, and his vocal cords ceased to work. He nodded when Gabe asked him if he agreed that line dancing might happen, but perhaps later during the summer.

“Here's the other thing,” said Gabe, breaking into Marston's thoughts with a wave of his coffee mug. “Leland wants these guys to have riding lessons and you, Marston, have the most flexible schedule. Tell me if this won't work, but can you manage a few days a week for the rest of the summer?”

“Me?” asked Marston, an echo from before.

“Just you for now,” said Gabe. “Other team leads will be joining us, among them, Zeke, who's very good at lessons. Knows horses as well as anybody I know. Once he starts working with us, you two can get together to set up a balanced way of going about it.”

“Be happy to,” said Marston, sitting up, holding the manila folder between his palms as though it was a prayer book.

He'd met Zeke, worked with him, too. Zeke was pure cowboy, all the way through, rangy, unobtrusive, slow to

speak, observing everything around him. A bad bronc ride had messed up his knee, and essentially ended his rodeo career, but Zeke, in his laconic way, only said, *It was time for me to get a move on, anyhow.*

Once Zeke showed up in the valley, Marston would let him take the lead. In the meantime, he mentally went over how a lesson might go.

“How many parolees at a time for the lessons?” asked Marston. “We only have a few saddles on hand, and that supply shed is a disaster.”

“Depends on how many sign up,” said Gabe. “I’m going to encourage all the parolees to at least give it a try, except for Wayne, as he’s allergic. Otherwise, you call up to the ranch for what you need, and as for that shed, I’ll leave that up to you.”

Marston could see what Gabe was doing, and he wasn’t even being subtle about it. He was throwing responsibility at Marston like a knife thrower at a circus. In Gabe’s eyes, Marston wasn’t a failure, he was an opportunity.

Gabe was also throwing the temptation of Kell at him, full-throttle, and Marston knew he needed to shoulder through this or call it quits and wash his hands of the valley, the ranch, and all the magic that came with it. Life was good here, so he was just going to have to brace himself for the close quarters, the lack of distance between him and Kell.

The distance of a long drive was all he had available to him, so he took it. Drove off in the long shadows of afternoon, heading east so the low sun would be behind him and not in his eyes.

He usually drove this way, along a two-lane blacktop road that went on and on and on, grass and sky and a whole lot of nothing on either side of him. It grew especially pretty past Hawk Springs, as he drove past Goshen Hole Reservoir, because the presence of a body of water meant birds on the wing, and that, along with the strong golden light stretching over the waving green grasses, settled on his shoulders like a cloak of peace.

When he reached Torrington, he thought about heading to the steak house, but it was kind of a fancy place, and he would look strange reading Kell's file in a restaurant that was a tad more elegant than the rest in town, with white tablecloths and fancy folded napkins. So he headed to the Bronco Grill House, which was on the lower end of the old town on Main Street, right across from the Ammo Shack.

Once inside, the kindly waitress gave him a table tucked in the corner, and he ordered an iced tea and their very good pulled pork sandwich. While he waited, he opened the manila folder and thumbed through the pages, absently taking a sip of his iced tea when the waitress brought it to him.

The file was thin, and while he wasn't an expert, he'd had his two weeks of training at Wyoming Correctional, and knew that it meant Kell didn't have much of a record. That in fact, up until the time he'd run away at age seventeen, he'd been a model student, son, citizen.

The file stated that Kell had been a rising star on his high school's track and field team, the picture of Kell standing proud and jaunty in his running shorts and jersey attesting to his energy and youth and hope, his smile broad, the dark hair out of his eyes, the watchful, suspicious look totally missing from those green eyes, sparkling in the sun.

His grades had been good, nothing outstanding, demonstrating, at least to Marston, that Kell was smart enough to get by without much effort. There were no truant notices, no interactions with the local law enforcement, no visits to the principal's office.

Marston turned the page to reveal a smudged copy of a police report that Kell had run away right after school let out, at the end of his junior year of high school. The parents appeared distraught and, from what the police could tell, this was the first time anything like this had happened. There was a copy of a sticky note that someone had written that said: *Find out why he ran away.*

Someone had done this very thing. A young woman from local Social Services, Ms. Hanrihan, had paid the family a visit

three days after the report had been filed. She had gotten the understandably upset couple to open up to her, and was able to find out that Kell had come out to his parents around Christmas, and that, according to Ms. Hanrihan's notes, the parents seemed unwilling to accept this and were concerned that someone had brainwashed their son, perhaps given him drugs to seduce him and turn him gay.

More digging by Ms. Hanrihan, detailed in an additional handwritten report, revealed that Mr. and Mrs. Dodson had paid the hefty fee at a gay conversion camp, Serenity Sleepaway Camp, in upstate New York and had planned to send Kell there, only he must have found out and run away.

Ms. Hanrihan, perhaps as an afterthought, had written down her phone number, and added, *Please call with any questions.*

Marston sat back to let the waitress deliver his pulled pork sandwich, with a side of fries, extra sauce on the side. It smelled amazing, and he inhaled the scent as he let his mind drift over the photo of Kell. It was the only one in the file because, of course, there would be no other intake photo from the local police department or any juvenile record photo because Kell was a good kid. Pure and simple.

The photo of him smiling, hands on his hips, those long legs bare, hair tousled around his head, might have proved it by being the only photo, if it could have.

The fact that Kell had waited until school let out to run away told its own story. The fact that Kell had been on the road for two years before being arrested added another layer to that. He'd been careful, he'd been clever enough to avoid drawing attention to himself, at least up until his arrest, which had occurred in the main Cheyenne train yard, the Union Pacific Rail Yard.

Kell had been seen slipping between the round house and the steam shop, and then was crossing over the tracks, all of which was illegal.

When he'd been arrested, he'd had two bottles of water on him, and a turkey sandwich from Jimmy John's, but no receipt.

Jimmy John's did not want to press charges, according to the arrest report. *Let the kid have the food*, the manager had stated when questioned by the police.

Union Pacific was not so kind, but perhaps with good reason. It was dangerous to walk around a rail yard, as Kell had been doing, and it was dangerous to ride in open box cars or in the well of a grainer, which was what he'd also been doing. He had, in fact, been heading back to one particular train, where evidence of his backpack and blanket, that he'd stored in one of the wells on a grainer car, waiting for his return after he'd stolen the food and water, had been discovered.

Union Pacific was within their rights to press charges, though the terminal master and yard manager both made it clear that, at least as far as they could see, Kell hadn't damaged anything or interrupted the regular function of the yard.

*He was just passing through, I guess*, the yard manager had responded when interviewed. *But it's dangerous, so dangerous, for him to have been there*. The terminal master had added, *It's illegal to ride without a ticket*.

The judge had given Kell ninety days, which, all things considered, would not be too bad, but then Marston had never been to prison. He turned another page to reveal the pair of intake photos from the Cheyenne Police Department.

In them, Kell looked at the camera while holding a modern ID board, giving his name, offender number, location, and date. His face was much thinner than the track and field photo, his eyes glittering with a much darker light, his hair a dark, angry sprawl around his head, going into his eyes.

So much had changed in the two years after Kell left home, and time and life and the open road had left its mark on him. He was bone and skin and fear in those intake photos, one from the front, the other from the side.

"Can I get you anything for dessert, hon?" the waitress asked, startling Marston out of his thoughts.

“No, I’m good, thank you,” he said. “Just the check, please, when you can.”

She pulled her tablet out of her apron, tapped on it a few times, then gave him the total. He paid with his credit card, took the receipt, and drank the rest of his iced tea.

Standing up, he took the file, got in his truck, and drove to a little, no-name gravel area along the South Platte, just behind the Fresh Foods, where Main Street turned into Highway 85 headed south.

Maybe he could have gone further along the river to a place that was quieter, as he had the road noise on one side and the low chatter from a team of men unloading a truck in back of Fresh Foods. But the view was good, the gravel area sloping down to the South Platte, two twin grain towers providing a frame of sorts on one side, the summer-lush cottonwood trees on the other, to the endless stretch of land beyond.

The summer prior, he’d driven to Torrington for something or other for Leland, and had seen the spot and stopped. Now and then, he would come back to watch the sunsets, alone but surrounded by the low bustle of the small, high prairie town.

On impulse while standing there, the sky darkening behind him as the sun slipped behind clouds, settling down in preparation for slipping below the horizon, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Ms. Hanrihan’s number. She picked up almost right away.

“Sheila Hanrihan speaking,” she said.

“Ms. Hanrihan, this is Marston Cleary,” he said, eschewing the traditional hello, as she had done. “I am employed by Farthingdale Ranch and work with the Farthingdale Valley Fresh Start Program. We have with us Kelliher Dodson, who was recently arrested for trespassing, and is now doing his parole with us.”

“Kelliher Dodson?” She asked, in the ruminative way of someone pulling up a mental file. “The runaway,” she said now. “Two years ago. June. Has he been found? Is he okay?”

“Uh.”

Marston paused. Kell might not want his parents to know where he was or perhaps that he was even alive. Kids ran away for a reason, and being newly out as gay, being threatened with a pray-away-the-gay camp would be a strong incentive.

“He is okay,” said Marston. “He’s doing quite well in the program, too. But I’m suddenly thinking he might not want to contact his parents or for them to know where he is. Maybe I shouldn’t have called.”

“He was seventeen then,” she said quickly. “He’s nineteen now, no longer a minor. Even if he is found, he doesn’t have to return home. Though I imagine—” She paused, now, too, and Marston had the sudden idea that they were both moving through the conversation very carefully. “His mother might very much want to know that he’s okay, but his dad wouldn’t care. He—”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Marston held the phone to his ear and waited, squinting at the bright flare of light as the sun truly set and the sky began to turn shades of purple-pink and bright-fire orange.

“The file has been closed because he’s no longer a minor, though I imagine the missing person’s report is still open, but that has nothing to do with my office,” she said, finally. “Whoever arrested him might not have done a nationwide search, so they won’t know about the missing person’s file. You might consider letting them know, because some man or woman is babysitting that file, right this minute, using up energy they don’t need to use on it anymore. As to our records, I can’t tell you a lot, you know, because the information in the file is confidential. But I will tell you this. The mom was crying, and the dad was not. He was stone cold the whole time. So angry. That’s the difference between them, and very hard to convey in the file. Just a feeling, you see. But he was the reason they wanted to send him away and not her. Another thing—”

“Yes?” he asked, taking a deep breath, being his most patient self.

“There was a belt on the sideboard,” she said. “You know, what they store china in? The whole house is spotless, like a museum. The belt was out of place, totally out of place. I think he was using it on Kelliher.”

Rage rose inside of Marston, a shaft of volcano-hot hate at a man he'd never met, never wanted to meet because if he did, he'd certainly get arrested for assault and battery. Kell was the sweetest young man, surly on the surface, a tender scared rabbit beneath, and he certainly didn't deserve to be beaten for being gay.

“That's why he ran away,” said Marston. “Though he waited until the school year ended to do it.”

“I noticed that, too,” she said. “He was a good kid, by all accounts. Just, quite simply, a good kid. The dad barely mentioned the gay aspect, like it wasn't an issue, but it slipped out in the interview when Mr. Dodson said, *We're sending him to camp to get the gay removed*. Like it was a cancer or something.” She sighed, the heaviness of her thoughts coming directly through the cell phone and into Marston's ear. “They'd taken all the pictures of Kelliher from the walls,” she said. “You could see the outlines, and the pile of frames was there on the dining room table. Face down.”

“He prefers to be called Kell,” said Marston quickly. “That's what he goes by now.”

“Kell,” she said brightly. “I'll update the record, but now I must dash. Please consider letting Fayetteville know his status, so they can close the books. They'll be obliged to tell his parents he's been found, of course, but it's the right thing to do. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, but thank you for your time today.”

There was a click on the other end as she hung up. For a moment, he stood there, holding his cell phone in his hand.

The sky turned slowly to darkness all around him, settling from dusk to twilight as a few cars rushed past on Highway 85. The lights came on at Fresh Foods, spreading in a sprawl across the gravel parking lot.

Above the sparkle and shine of city lights, the stars were doing their best to come out behind the fleece of clouds that had formed while he'd not been watching, accompanied by a slight breeze pushing along the river to the east.

When it got truly dark, he headed back to his truck, squinting at the cab light when it came on and then at the single piece of paper in the footwell on the passenger side.

The F150 had been spotless when he'd first got in, so the paper must have come from the folder. Leaning over without getting in, he picked up the paper and read it in the light from the cab.

It was a handwritten note on a sheet of yellow legal paper, the handwriting fine and careful. A secretary, perhaps. It read:

*Mr. Bateman, the warden, wants the parole hearing to go without a hitch. He's concerned that there is a danger presented by Kelliher Dodson's current cell mate, Obadiah "Bede" Deacon, who was arrested for dealing drugs and drug trafficking.*

*Dodson originally had a different cell mate, but something happened in the yard, and Deacon appears to have stepped in and taken over Dodson, and Griff somehow got Dodson transferred to Deacon's cell.*

*Dodson has been under Deacon's wing, so to speak, and the warden is concerned that Deacon has an unsavory sexual influence over Dodson, who is quite young, relative to the rest of the prison population.*

*The warden is prepared to sign the release paperwork the second it hits his desk.*

Quickly, Marston put the handwritten note at the back of the manila folder, and shut it carefully. Getting into the truck, he sat there in the darkness for a good long while, feeling the weight of responsibility settle onto his shoulders.

He was totally willing to be responsible, but what should he do? Contact the Fayetteville police department or let them worry about a missing person's case till the end of time? Should he call the family or, at the very least, Mrs. Dodson?

Even more troubling was the idea that some convict, a drug dealer, no less, had been taking advantage of Kell, and the idea of what that could mean pushed at Marston so hard he wanted to thrust it away and go running into the night.

Instead, he started the truck, taking the long drive back to the valley, as slow as he could make it, to go over everything in his mind.

## CHAPTER 16

# MARSTON

It was late by the time Marston arrived back in the valley, so, beneath the soft light of the stars, he trundled slowly down the switchbacks and along the dirt road to the parking lot next to the main part of the compound. There, he quietly parked the truck and got out, grabbing Kell's folder and leaving the keys in the driver's seat before shutting the door with a soft click.

There were a few lights on in tents, the flicker of gold and silver between the tree trunks, like shy fireflies winking in the distance. Once back in his silent tent, he flicked the overhead light on, blinking in the glare as he placed Kell's folder carefully with the other ones on the shelf.

He should probably have given those folders back to Gabe, who would have returned them to Wyoming Correctional, but maybe, in his heart of hearts, he'd been hoping that Lomax and Hicton might have changed their minds and shown up in the valley to be on his team.

Only now he had a team, a team of one. Kell. Who'd been through more than could be imagined by just looking at him.

Yes, at first he'd seemed surly, a wild kid, a runaway from home. Now, after reading his file, Marston knew more about the glitter in Kell's eyes, understood more why he had sensed that, beneath it all, Kell was a good kid. A young man growing into adulthood, dealing with more than most his age.

At nineteen, Kell was a survivor, living a hardscrabble existence on the road for two years—only now Marston knew

without a doubt that wasn't the life Kell had wanted or even envisioned for himself, not at all.

And, oddly, against all that Marston knew about incarceration, which admittedly wasn't much, even with his two-week training session. Wyoming Correctional had seemed to agree that Kell needed an exit from the horrible situation that had landed him in prison.

Marston had no doubt, none at all, that Kell would pull himself hand over fist into a world of opportunity given the slightest chance, and the valley offered way more than that.

As for Marston, he was going to have to aspire to restraint on a moment-to-moment basis. His budding interest in a young man—who only a while ago had been just one among a group of parolees—would have to be put on hold. Kell deserved more than having Marston moon over him.

It was not only impractical, it was unethical. Not to mention that Marston didn't have anything to offer. Marston was Kell's team lead now, besides, so he was going to have to tighten his belt, keep his eyes averted, and perhaps start taking many, many cold showers.

It was way too late for a shower, so he stripped to his boxer-briefs and lay on his cot, his legs stretched out. With his hands tucked beneath his head, he looked out into the darkness outside his open tent flap, letting the cool breeze sift over his skin, letting the nighttime air soothe him all over.

Only he could not sleep and somehow, his belly still felt empty. Maybe he should sneak to the mess tent and make himself an onion sandwich. Maybe that would do the trick. As he got dressed again, he knew that food wasn't always the answer, but sometimes it was.

## CHAPTER 17

# MARSTON

Sunday morning brought a trio of moths, two black flies, and several mosquito bites, which ought to teach him the foolishness of leaving the screen of his tent wide open. A bear probably wouldn't have found its way that far into the valley, not at that time of year, but the mosquitos always knew the way.

He spent the day doing laundry, tidying his tent, and finally gave into temptation and snuck a little work in, going over supplies and taking sawdust to the composting bin behind the first aid hut. Mostly, except for quick trips to the mess tent to eat, he kept to himself, gearing himself up for the coming week.

On Monday, he got up early, quickly showered and shaved as he mentally went over his tasks for the day.

By helping Gabe's team the week prior, he was a little behind, but not by much. He had the whole summer to catch up, and he would have an extra pair of hands in the form of Kell. Who had yet to be informed of his transfer to Marston's team.

Knowing Gabe, that would happen in a quick meeting after breakfast, nice and professional.

When Marston got back to his tent, he changed into a completely different snap-button shirt, his cleanest one, a pale blue chambray, and wondered why he was making such a fuss over himself. Kell wouldn't care what Marston was wearing, or how close his shave, that was for sure.

Breakfast was a classic farmer's breakfast, from the scrambled eggs to the stack of pancakes and the option of having biscuits and gravy, just to fill the corners of each and every stomach.

Marston ate his fill, keeping an eye out to make sure Kell got his fair share of fresh milk, which he seemed to enjoy with great relish. It was when breakfast was over and the cooks were cleaning up that Gabe gave Marston the nod.

His heart skipped right into his belly, but he shook himself as he went out to the platform in front of the mess tent, right on Kell's heels.

"Hey, Kell," said Gabe, giving the sleeve of Kell's long-sleeved t-shirt a quick tug. "Hang on a second."

Kell turned, his body going stiff, shoulders tensed. He looked about to run off the first chance he got, but he stayed.

"What did I do?" he asked, a hard light in his eyes as he looked between Gabe and Marston. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Actually, no," said Gabe. "We just had some changes we needed to make, and—"

"It's me," said Marston. Placing his palms, both of them, flat on his chest, he directed all of Kell's doubts upon himself, jumping in with everything he had to erase the sad look on Kell's face. "I've fallen a bit behind, what with equipment arriving late, and helping with the haying last week, so I need some help. I've asked Gabe to transfer you to my team, if that's okay."

As Gabe's eyebrows went up a bit in surprise, approval on his face, the energy of the conversation changed from swirling anxiety coming from Kell to something more gracious and gentle.

"I'd be on your team?" asked Kell.

Marston said, "If you'd like to be."

Nodding, Gabe said, "It's up to you."

“Yeah.” Kell’s body relaxed, those stiff shoulders coming down.

A smile broke over Kell’s face, reminding Marston of the expression in the photo of Kell in his track uniform. Whoever had taken that photo, his mom, perhaps, or even the coach, they’d caught him at his most candid, his honest self shining.

“Yeah,” he said again. “That’d be great. When do I start?”

“Now,” said Marston, more pleased than he had anticipated, in spite of his own misgivings.

“In the pavilion?” Kell asked, and Marston wondered at Kell’s curiosity.

“Today, we need to fix up the shed, add a few two by fours to hang saddles and tack on. Maybe build some bins or shelves to hold brushes and tools and whatnot.” Marston ducked his head, feeling like he was sharing something special with Kell. “But I can take you out there, if you like.”

“Now?”

“Let’s go.”

Marston tipped his head to one side to indicate the direction of the pavilion.

“Thanks, Gabe,” he said to Gabe, as if Gabe had done him a huge favor, rather than the other way around.

“Happy to help,” said Gabe, going along with the ruse. “Let me know if you fellows need anything, and also when you’re going to be able to do those riding lessons.”

“I will,” said Marston. “Once I get the shed set up, it’ll be easier to facilitate.”

“Sounds good.” Gabe gave them both a goodbye nod and stepped down from the wooden platform, toward the team of parolees waiting for direction in that morning’s task.

“It’s just you and me,” said Marston. “This way.”

The pavilion was beyond the main compound, past the fire pit and the picnic tables, deep amidst the trees. Beyond the small clearing where the pavilion stood was the new pair of

wooden footbridges that spanned the slow-moving creeks and led to the willow grove and the sloped path that led to the ridge.

Pretty much everybody in the valley was occupied elsewhere, at least most days, so Marston had the view of the lake and the ridge and the blue sky all to himself. At least until that day, and the change was a welcome one.

When they stepped into the clearing where the pavilion was, Kell stopped, a gasp escaping him.

“It looks like we’re at a Ren Faire,” said Kell. “Or just about. All it needs are flags flying.”

“That’s what I think, every time I see it.”

This was Marston’s own private corner of the world, but in that moment, it was Kell’s, too. Maybe, in spite of the fact that there was an untapped well of desire lurking just below Marston’s skin, he could make this work the way Gabe had intended, the way it ought to. With him giving Kell some time to build muscle and strength, time to learn, time to simply be without having to struggle to keep up.

“Let me show you the setup,” he said. “Then we’ll get to work on that shed.”

Leading Kell into the shadowed coolness of the white tent, Marston showed Kell the layout of the tent, the location of paints and stains, the jigsaw and the mitre saw, the main worktable, and, of course, the pile of wood waiting to be made into signs.

“I know what signs need to be made,” he told Kell. “And had gotten a start, but then I needed more paint, and got an updated list from Royce.” He laughed a little as he held up the hand-written list. “The Latin names were in this curly cursive that I just couldn’t read. And here.” Marston held up the manilla folder, open in his palms. “These are the maps of the valley, so we can plot the locations of the signs.”

“Why don’t you do this online?” asked Kell. “I mean, it’d be easier to do updates, right?”

“It would be.” Marston nodded as he put the folder on the table and put a rock on top of it. “Internet is spotty in the valley, which I suppose will be fine if you’re wanting to get away from it all. But in addition to that, this is a dead spot. No phone, no internet, no bars.”

“It’s like stepping back in time,” said Kell, but his smile told Marston that he didn’t seem to mind this idea. “What will we do first?”

“I’ve cut all the signs I think we’ll need,” said Marston. “That’s the big pile here, but we might need some signs to be even smaller. Like, say, for example, we find a patch of ground where Wyoming Townsend Daisies regularly grow. We wouldn’t want a regular sign, as it would out-size the flower. We’d want something visible, but smaller. You see?”

The interest in Kell’s eyes, the bright sparks, told Marston that Kell was ready to go to work on the signs right then. But first the shed, which needed to be done before riding lessons could begin, so he led Kell to where Jasper and Ellis, from the guest ranch, were currently in the small wooden paddock working on trimming and shoeing the hooves of some newly arrived horses.

A small band of horses had gathered in the pasture, their heads over the wooden fence, watching the shoeing with interest. With a friendly wave, Marston took Kell to the shed, and they began to work, removing everything from the shed, laying the items carefully along the fence line: saddles, bridles, grooming supplies, bags of grain and special feed, the clipboard indicating what had been used and what needed resupplying. There was also a quantity of loose hay that had blown in, and spider webs, as well as a cluster of wasps along the roofline.

“We’d normally get Jamie out here to handle that,” said Marston.

“Who’s Jamie?” asked Kell as he dragged the last bag of feed out of the shed.

“He’s the head groundskeeper up at the guest ranch,” said Marston, grabbing the other end of the bag, lifting it together

so they didn't kick up quite so much dust. "He has the right tools to take care of it. Some kind of special spray that doesn't smell and won't upset the horses. Maybe we should head up to the ranch and see what he could loan us."

The most amazing thing about working with Kell was that it felt like a whole lot less effort than it ought to have. Having someone at his side, hopping into the silver truck with him, trundling up the switchbacks to the ranch, felt a bit like magic. The kind of magic he'd felt when he'd first gotten the job at the guest ranch, only this felt personal. Like a gift from the universe sent straight to him.

Marston ignored how Kell brushed close against him when they stood outside the barn, guests milling around as Jamie patiently explained how to use the sprayer, how to operate the valves.

"Just wipe the nozzle when you're done," said Jamie. "Otherwise it gets sticky."

When they got back to the valley, and finished up pounding nails into wood to create saddle racks and bridle hooks, he had to ignore how Kell's hammer sounded in tandem with his own. How it was just the two of them in that shed, coordinating their efforts with a nod or a quiet touch. A team of two in the quiet shadows of the shed.

Stepping out together, they saw that Jasper was collecting his tools, and that Ellis was already in the truck, elbow hanging out of the open passenger window. Gabe was there in the sparkling sunshine, making a gesture toward the mess tent in a way Marston could only presume meant Gabe was inviting the blacksmith and his assistant to join them for dinner.

That was who Gabe was. Inviting people in, making everyone feel welcome. As he had done to Marston. Who, as he looked over at Kell, knew he'd have to be careful, or the feelings in his heart would spill out and the magic of the valley would be ruined.

As Kell looked up at him, sweat glistening on his cheeks, a bit of chaff stuck to his cheek, Marston knew his weakness,

like his weakness for drink, would have to be squashed and beaten back. Otherwise, the magic would be lost.

## CHAPTER 18

# KELL

Kell could not have imagined how cool it would be to work with Marston. To be around another guy all the time. Sure, he had worked around Bede, who'd looked out for him, who'd been kind, but this felt different.

Back in school, Kell had imagined kissing this boy or that, hauling out his newfound realization and taking it for a spin. Giving in to his preference for other boys, trying it on for size.

At that time, that kind of self-honesty had been so new, so overwhelming, that he'd not known how to act on it. But he had a good imagination and had used it, thinking of himself going up to that ginger-haired boy from school, the tall one, and looking up at him and saying something flirty about his delightful freckles. Or accidentally bumping into the captain of the track team, a long-legged gazelle of a boy who probably had no idea how beautiful he was, and simply saying hello.

Even when he'd been on the train with a huddle of other boys his own age, runaways all, sharing a folded burlap sack, stained with engine oil around the edges, with a perfect stranger, he'd never had the guts to do more than imagine.

Once in prison, after Bede had taken Kell under his wing, testing any boundaries, or trying on preferences, even the lightest smidgen of flirting, all of this was a huge no-no.

Bede's advice had been meant to save Kell from getting his asshole ripped open. Kell had been all for that, so his imagination, at least about testing the waters with another guy,

had gone into lockdown. It was as if he'd been frozen in time since the moment he'd left home two years before.

Now? Now, working around Marston, it was different. Not that Kell was able to even begin to exchange flirty words or looks with Marston. Marston was too tall, too broad shouldered, too inflexible-seeming to bend to a little laughter, a wink, or even a grin. No, his was a dour gaze, impenetrable, unknowing.

And yet, Kell's draw to him was a powerful undertow, and nothing he was at all sure he wanted to resist. Besides, Marston seemed to be offering the same kind of safety that Bede had, a shadow into which Kell could step, hidden from anything trying to get at him.

Yes, he was old enough to figure out pretty quickly that the dangers in the valley were minimal. He knew that. But his two years on the road, his sixty-day stint in prison—all of this had left its mark. Was staying with him.

Being with Marston made him feel better and safer than he had in ages. Not to mention, being with Marston was probably the most fun, the most *interesting* time he'd spent in ages.

"Left to right," said Marston, letting Kell take over the task of spraying the inside of the shed. "Steady swings. That's it. You've got it."

Sometimes, when Kell's dad had been trying to teach him something, Kell would have the tool taken from his hand because Dad knew better how it should be done. Not Marston. His trust that Kell would figure it out made Kell feel even more confident.

"I think we should spray the corners near the roof and the ground twice," said Kell. He clicked off the sprayer to check in. "That's where I'd gather if I was a wasp or a spider."

"I agree," said Marston with a quick nod. "We'll give it an hour to dry, then we'll put everything back before dinner. While we wait, let's groom."

Picking out a trio of horses who'd just been shod by the blacksmith, and watching Marston put halters on them with

liquid ease was eye-catching, but even more fun was when Marston tucked a body brush in Kell's hand and led him up to the first horse.

"You can use a cow hitch," said Marston as he demonstrated the knot on a wooden rail. "At least with this bunch. Jasper's got a calming way about him, so they're half asleep already. Here." Marston guided Kell's hand, drawing the body brush along one brown horse's neck. "Slow. Steady. One direction only. You see?"

Kell nodded, drawing on old memories of a summer camp long ago where horsemanship and riding had been part of the equation.

He might have been ten, then, and had enjoyed the experience, but when he'd come home, it had been discovered that Dad was allergic to horses. Dad hadn't wanted to deal with the leftover horse dander on Kell's clothes, and so subsequent summer camps had been those that focused on sports and running and archery and fire building.

When the horse snorted, half-stomping its foot, blinking at Kell with long horsey lashes and liquid brown eyes, he patted the mare's neck. "Easy, girl. Easy," he said.

"You've been around horses, then," said Marston as he picked up another body brush and moved to the other side of the horse.

"Once," said Kell. "Long ago."

He wanted to tell Marston about the time at summer camp when he'd gone down to the barn after the communal dinner in the dining hall. He'd taken the nearest horse, a sweet pale gray gelding named Seesaw, and bridled him up.

Jumping on Seesaw's back without a saddle, he'd ridden off into the woods along the dry, dusty path among the trees, a breeze in the branches, and a brilliant gold and orange sunset leading him on and on.

When he'd finally returned to the barn, in the gloom of fallen night, the camp counselors had been outraged, not able

to understand what the hell he'd been thinking endangering Seesaw and himself.

Kell had withstood the yelling and demerits, the fact that he had extra kitchen duty, and the anxious call from his mom checking in to see if he was okay.

They let him continue riding lessons for the rest of summer camp, but only with supervision, never alone. Even with those restrictions, he'd been far from miserable about it and had forever tucked in his heart the memory of that ride.

Maybe he'd tell Marston about it. Some day. Maybe. Or maybe Marston would agree with all the camp counselors that he'd been a damn fool.

He'd told his mom about that ride, once he'd gotten home and unpacked, leaving his laundry all in a heap. She'd listened wide-eyed and then sighed and kissed him on the forehead. He'd been much younger then and shorter, so she'd had to bend down to do this, but he felt that kiss still.

Sometimes, when he missed her, which was a lot, he had flickers of memories of how she'd stand there simply watching as his dad beat him. Not stopping Dad. Not stopping any of it. But she'd been crying. When he looked back now, he knew she'd been afraid. Maybe of Dad turning and using the belt on her. But he'd not been able to ask, and now, perhaps, would never know.

"Everything all right?" asked Marston.

Kell looked up, his hands on the horse's neck, the brush frozen mid-stroke. He felt the words inside of him like chunks of ice in a half-frozen stream, pushing to get out. Teetering, he didn't know if he should let the ice go or not. But then he saw the genuine interest in Marston's eyes, a flicker among hazel-blue lights.

*I miss my mom*, he wanted to say, but instead only said, "I went to horse camp one summer."

"Oh, so you know how to ride?" asked Marston, his eyebrows going up.

“It was a long time ago,” said Kell, forcing a little laugh, making a mockery of his own memories.

“Some things stay with you,” said Marston, as if agreeing how silly some memories could be. Then, with a slight tuck of his chin, his eyes still on Kell, he added, “Whether you want them to or not,” as if musing on painful memories of his own. “I’m always here if you want to talk.”

With that, he patted the mare’s back, then slid his broad hand down her spine, gently curling his fingers into her coat.

“Let’s finish up,” Marston said, and the two of them got back to work.

Grooming the trio of horses was followed by putting everything back in the shed until everything was neat and tidy, with saddles on racks, and bridles on pegs, a clean citrus smell left behind by the bug spray. Then they trundled up to return the bug sprayer, nozzle wiped, back to Jamie. Which left them just enough time to get back to the valley to wash up for dinner.

Which was its own pleasure. Simply being with Marston made everything feel so normal, from washing at the sinks in the restroom, to stopping at each of their tents to slip on a clean shirt.

“Appearances are important,” Marston said as he smoothed the placket of his snap-button shirt. “And don’t let anybody tell you any different.”

Listening to Marston, following his lead, took Kell right back to the before times. Before he’d opened up to his parents. Before he’d run away. Before, life had become so confusing that each decision had felt like a life or death turn in the road. Jump this train or hitch a ride on that eighteen-wheeler? Steal from the 7-Eleven or scrounge through the trash behind a movie theater?

No, with Marston, it was different, and it made Kell finally start to feel like he could slow down his racing brain and just be.

“There you fellows are,” said Gabe, as Kell and Marston entered the mess tent side by side. “I just saw the shed, and it looks amazing.”

“You’re a dab hand at setting things to rights, that’s for sure,” said Royce with a beaming smile.

“Thank you.” Marston stood in line for the buffet without any other response than that, not even breaking a smile, rather like he was all on his own. Maybe even like he didn’t believe the compliments he’d just gotten.

That didn’t feel right. Wasn’t right.

Standing right behind Marston, Kell slipped close, close enough to brush his chin along the back of Marston’s arm.

“Eh?” asked Marston, looking over his shoulder at Kell.

“We did good,” said Kell in a low, friendly voice, like he might have back in school when trying to be nice to the new kid. When he’d thought about flirting with that new kid on account of the way a curl of hair danced across a forehead, inviting Kell to think *You look like a picture in a story*.

Which was a little odd, because Marston wasn’t the new kid, Kell was. At least in this scenario.

Still, the small curve at the corner of Marston’s mouth emboldened Kell in all kinds of ways that he’d not been expecting. He wanted to see more of that smile, to tuck it into his heart and call it his own.

When they’d gotten their dinners, an assortment of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, brown gravy, and fresh fruit salad, Kell sat at the end, on the other side of Marston, in what felt like a very small attempt to make sure Marston was part of the conversation.

He could have been included, if he wanted to be, and Kell knew that. He just didn’t seem to want to. When Kell had been in high school, being a part of the track team had always felt like coming home, and he wanted that for Marston. That feeling of belonging.

“Will you start riding lessons tomorrow?” asked Gabe as he shoveled in some mashed potatoes.

“In the afternoon,” said Marston, not looking up. “If folks are interested. If it doesn’t rain.”

“I’ll make a signup sheet,” said Royce, looking around the table at all the ex-cons, who were instantly all at attention, their eyes focused on Royce like a pack of well-trained Belgian Malinois. “Or can we figure on everybody joining in?”

“We only have four saddles,” said Marston, and now he had to look up and join the conversation. Which, Kell realized, with a secret bit of pleasure, had been Gabe and Royce’s exact intention. “But we can get more if there’s interest.”

“I’m allergic,” said Wayne, raising his hand.

“You’ll just need one more saddle, then,” said Gabe.

“I guess we could pick one up tonight,” said Marston. He was looking at Kell as he said it, which meant that there’d be a jaunt in the truck, just the two of them. “Want to help?”

Picking up a single saddle when there was the entire truck bed of an F150 to put it in was definitely a one-man job, but Kell nodded because it meant more time with Marston.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

“Finish your dinner, then we’ll go.”

The words were said with a soft tone of fondness, and although Kell was old enough to look after himself, he really was, it was nice just the same to be on the receiving end of a little bit of care and affection.

It was as if Marston knew, even though he couldn’t possibly, that there were pockets of Kell still aching with the memory of his first night after he’d run away. The first time he’d jumped a train, falling asleep in a box car, facing the huge wood-and-metal sliding doors. Hearing the brakes of the train squealing to a stop and opening his eyes to find himself in the middle of nowhere.

And beyond the open doors there had been nothing but the faint gray light of morning and endless miles of land, low rolling hills, scraggly scrub, and not another human being for miles and miles. The train could have been guided by robots for all he knew, and the empty earth could have swallowed him up and nobody would have heard him screaming.

“You okay?”

Kell looked up into a pair of gold and blue eyes, and felt himself surrounded by the soft concern.

“Memories again?” asked Marston, his voice soft, the words meant only for Kell to hear.

“Yeah,” said Kell, swallowing hard. “They come and go.”

“Huh,” said Marston with a soft, below-the-breath huff of a laugh. “I know that feeling.” He seemed to shake himself. “You ready?”

“Ready.”

They bussed their places, then headed to the truck waiting in the gravel parking lot. The key fob was in the driver’s seat, waiting for them as they piled in.

In quick order, Marston drove them up to the barn at the guest ranch, got out to talk with a ranch hand for a moment before going into the barn and bringing out a saddle. This, he placed in the truck bed, stabilizing it in the corner of the bed.

When he got back into the truck and started the engine, he looked over at Kell.

“It’s going to be a good sunset,” he said. “Want to go for a drive?”

“Sure.”

It was as if Marston had read his mind about that illicit bareback ride in the woods from so long ago and decided to do something about it. Which was to drive down the dirt road to the gate, pausing to let Kell jump out to open and close it for them, and then to take a small dirt track off the main road, heading east until they were on a sandy, scrub-covered bluff overlooking the long slow slope into the valley.

Marston parked the truck so it was facing directly east, then clambered out, gesturing that Kell should join him. Together, they lowered the tailgate, then sat on it, their legs dangling.

“I love a good sunset,” said Marston as the sun sank behind Iron Mountain and Guipago Ridge and the undulant foothills. “There’s just something about it.”

Kell nodded, because he agreed, his throat too full to say what he felt.

With his hands braced on the tailgate, he leaned forward, the edge of his palm brushing Marston’s fingers. Marston didn’t draw away, and together they watched as the sun went fully down and the eraser-pink sunset scrubbed at the sky.

## CHAPTER 19

# MARSTON

All the ex-cons, everybody except Blaze, who didn't need lessons, and Wayne, who was allergic, came for riding lessons each afternoon. Trying to keep them under control in the wooden paddock while they whooped and hollered their way through horseback riding lessons while pretending to be cowboys was its own struggle, but trying not to laugh because it would only encourage them was another level of difficulty altogether.

"Jonah, no, don't stand up in the saddle like that, you'll fall off and crack your—" Marston snapped his mouth shut as Jonah tumbled to the ground, laughing as the sensible horse carefully stepped around him, rather than crushing his skull with a misplaced hoof. "Will you learn now, d'you think?" he asked Jonah point blank.

"Nah," said Jonah, a cut on his cheek bleeding as, smiling, he mounted his horse once more.

"For the horses' sake," said Marston firmly. "None of that. If you want to be a trick rider, you need to learn the basics first."

The basics in those first lessons in the afternoons were how to saddle and unsaddle, how to groom, what to call the parts of a horse, and so on. It was finally on Wednesday afternoon that they collected in the paddock and he showed them how to mount up. How to make the horse go and stop. How to sit in the saddle.

Beneath the snickering and egging each other on, Marston had the sense that the parolees did want to learn what he was trying to teach them. It was just years of bad manners and pretending not to give a fuck that was making them act up so, with more good-natured patience than he'd ever thought he'd be able to muster, he remained calm and quiet, giving instruction and correction in an even-tempered voice.

And if he thought that Kell was the most advanced student, the best behaved, the most attentive, that wasn't his own preferences talking, was it? Plus, Kell was a natural with horses, just about fearless, walking into the herd to put a halter on five likely mounts for the parolees to learn on.

He didn't know everything about horses, but he knew enough to jump to the head of the class. Plus, he listened, hanging on every word that Marston had to say.

"Knock it off," he heard Kell say as Duane and Tyson continued to try to push each other out of the saddle.

"Hey, guys," said Jonah, his tone serious and low, as if he too had decided that enough was enough. A second later, he was grabbing the bridle of the horse that Blaze was riding, and threatening to pull it off, laughing the whole time.

"We'll finish up with a smooth walk around the paddock," said Marston. "Just try and focus on the horse's rhythm, the motion of the horse's body, and match your own to it."

By the time the lesson was over, Marston was regretting his agreement to the whole project. It was all he could do not to start swearing because it might upset the horses and it would surely let the parolees know they'd gotten to him. But, while they unsaddled and groomed, the parolees had decided to settle down, which maybe was due to the fact that their feet were on the ground, or that their legs were wobbly from the ride.

"It'll wear off," Marston told them as he walked among them, checking each horse, guiding a hand that held a brush, or handing out horse cookies for the parolees to feed to their mounts. "You'll get better at it with each ride, I promise you."

The better part of his days were the mornings, which Marston spent alone with Kell in the white canvas pavilion in the woods. Not only was the setting like a fairy tale come to life, the weather kept to a daily summer schedule of mornings full of sunshine and fleecy white clouds bouncing across the treetops.

A faint breeze kept the tent from being hot. Every day, one of the cooks would bring out a Coleman thermos full of freshly made iced tea and apples and cheese and crackers for no reason, making each and every morning, frankly, magical.

“Always wear eye protection,” he told Kell as he demonstrated his grip on the chisel and hammer. “Always cut away from your body. Common sense will keep you safe.”

They drank iced tea while discussing the purpose of the chisel, used to make cuts and gouges along the edges of signs.

“They’ll look weathered,” said Marston. “At least I think they will. We can test a few patterns and see what looks nice.”

They settled on a pattern that included long chisel marks and a few deep cuts, keeping the pattern simple so it would be easy to prep a number of signs before cutting the words into the wood.

“We’ll use a wood burner for the words, I think,” said Marston. “And line the letters with black paint flecked with gold, stain, and then coat with varnish.”

“Will that last?” asked Kell, turning a wooden sign over in his hands, the freshly chiseled edges smelling like sap.

“It’s not meant to last,” said Marston. “Not like a plastic or metal sign would. Rather, it’s meant to look like it’s already been around for a good long while. Like there’s a history behind it.”

“Seems like a lot of fucking work for a few signs,” said Kell as he tossed a blank sign onto the table, as if frustrated or maybe overwhelmed with the amount of work that needed to be done.

Taking a slow breath, Marston organized his thoughts in his mind, wanting to keep the energy for the project going

without loading Kell down with a lot of unnecessary information.

“The way I see it,” he said, gently. “Leland Tate wants us to tell a story with these signs. They’ll set the tone that the valley is like it has been for over a century. People will come to escape their lives. The signs are a kind of window dressing to help them with that escape. See? Also—” He waited until Kell was looking right at him. “There’s no need to swear. I know it’s only you and me in this tent, but you’ll get further with fewer curse words.”

For a moment, he didn’t know if Kell was going to laugh in his face, but then, as Kell nodded, he knew he shouldn’t have doubted his first instincts. That Kell’s background had been a good one, and he wanted to make his way back to something like that again. Not that Marston had anything against a well-placed curse, but had always felt it should be saved for special occasions.

What a prude he was. Well, better that than letting his own emotions take him for a ride. Setting a path for Kell would help him keep on the straight and narrow himself. Guiding Kell would be like guiding himself, only—

Only watching Kell lick the corner of his lip as he placed a block of wood in the clamps, and picked up the chisel and hammer, ready to go to work—as if the position of his lip would help with the quality of the final results—froze Marston to the spot where he stood. Where there were no words or guidance, only the slow trickle of desire down his spine. A shiver of something else, like awareness. A wish that he wasn’t in the position he was. That everything didn’t hinge on him getting this exactly right.

“Here’s the template,” he said, handing the thin sheet of plastic so Kell could trace the letters in faint pencil before starting the first cut.

After a while, maybe they wouldn’t need the template, but they were just starting out, so it was better to be safe than sorry. He stood close as Kell traced, telling himself that he

needed to stand close to make sure Kell followed all of the steps.

Kell was. There was no need for the closeness, the rapt attention. What he needed to do was to stand away, stand down. Take a break.

“They’ve not come by with iced tea yet,” said Marston on afternoon as he forced himself to take a step back. “How ’bout I go get it for us?”

Kell laid down his chisel and hammer, carefully, the edge of the chisel away from him on the table. When he turned to smile at Marston, there was a softness to his features Marston hadn’t seen before. Little crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

“What I want is an onion sandwich,” he said, a soft, silent laugh widening his smile. “But I guess it’s too early in the day for that.”

“It’s never too early,” said Marston, his mind racing as to how he might go to the mess tent and elbow his way into the kitchen in the midst of pre-lunch preparation. “Or maybe it is. I also make a mean fried baloney sandwich.”

He did, though his belly revolted at the idea, since he’d made and eaten too many of those to really enjoy them anymore. And why was he thinking so hard about a sandwich he didn’t really want?

Because it was better than the alternative. Better than letting the sense of want hold sway. Better than ruining everything by giving in to the secret, sweet demands swirling around inside of him.

“There they are,” said Kell, looking over Marston’s shoulder. “We’re saved!”

The iced tea and cheese and crackers were a welcome distraction. As was the breaking of the belt on the jig saw the second Marston went over to it and turned it on. By the time they’d repaired the belt, Kell ever attentive at his side, they’d munched and drunk their way through the iced tea and snacks, and it was time for lunch.

After lunch, it was time for another round of horseback riding lessons given to a group of ex-cons for whom all of this was a lark. Something with no consequences, a trend he was sure they'd carried with them a good long while and would continue to do so until hell froze over or they got arrested again.

Or maybe he was, to be honest, jealous of the way they larked about during the lesson, trotting when they should be walking, trying to push each other off their saddles when he told them to turn their horses and walk the other way.

The only thing he would not abide, amidst the rough but good-natured shenanigans, was if any one of them dug their heels too hard into the horse's sides, or flicked the ends of their reins just to get their horse, or someone else's horse, to react, to throw its head up, and maybe toss its rider into the dirt.

The first time, it could have been misinterpreted, but when Tyson's horse half-reared, pushing the rest of the riders back in a bunch, Marston knew he'd not been mistaken.

"Stop," said Marston, the second time he saw it happen, when Duane decided that Tyson was his next victim.

When they didn't stop, he walked up to Duane's horse, a stocky gelding named Banner, and took hold of the reins, right beneath Banner's bit.

"Stop means stop," he said sternly. "You want to crack each other's skulls open? That's fine with me. But if I see you do that again to a horse, you will dismount and not be allowed to participate."

"So?" asked Duane with a sneer, yanking on his reins. Marston had a tight hold, so this only affected him, and not Banner's poor mouth. "So what?"

"So what?" asked Marston quite quietly. "I'll tell you so what. All your friends will be having fun without you. You'll be put back to work with a black mark on your record. Three strikes and you're out."

"Out of lessons?" asked Tyson, sounding a little worried.

“Out of the program,” said Marston. “I won’t abide cruelty to these animals, and I’ll drop you off at the nearest bus station myself if I see it happen again, and to hell with letting you have two more strikes.”

“Gabe won’t let you do that,” said Duane, though he didn’t sound as certain and had stopped tugging on Banner’s reins. “Or Royce, either.”

“They’ll both thank me for it,” said Marston. Tilting his head to one side, he asked, “So, what’s it going to be?”

He could tell that for Duane to back down in front of his peers was a struggle. He also had a sense that everyone wanted simply to get back to the lesson, back to having fun with a little goofing off thrown in.

And then there was Kell, at the back of the bunch, his hands sensibly still on his horse’s reins, watching the situation play out, his eyes wide. Looking ready to jump out of the way if things turned to violence.

Only they wouldn’t, because Marston wasn’t going to let that happen. Not on his watch.

“Duane, don’t be a dick,” said one of the ex-cons. Marston thought it was Gordy, though he couldn’t be sure, but it didn’t matter anyway, because Duane dropped his chin and loosened his hold on Banner’s reins.

“Shall we get back to the lesson?” asked Marston, only letting go of Banner’s reins when Duane nodded with two hard jerks of his head.

The lesson continued, though somewhat subdued and, when the lesson was over, there was hardly any chatter as they unsaddled and groomed their respective mounts. Kell was situated at the end of the row and when Marston came by to check on him, Kell’s wide-eyed glance at him seemed to say, *Wow, that could have gone fucking sideways so fast—*

Yeah, it could have, but Marston had typically been good with his fists in the few brawls he’d been in, and he wasn’t about to let any man be cruel to an animal. *Any* man.

“All right, there, Kell?” he asked, giving in to the impulse to lay his hand on Kell’s thin shoulder and give it a slow pat. “You did good, keeping a cool head.”

“Thanks,” said Kell, sounding a bit breathy.

“I kept a cool head too, boss,” said Jonah, coming up from behind Marston.

“Yes, yes, Jonah, you kept a cool head,” said Marston. “Everybody did, for sure. Now, let’s finish up, go wash up, and get some dinner.”

What surprised Marston was when Duane came up to him as they stood in line for the buffet for dinner with rain brewing outside the tent flaps, and a cool wind moving briskly among the legs of the tables.

Up close, Duane had the same hard edges all of the ex-cons seemed to, with very few exceptions. He was staring at Marston, a scowl accompanying the glitter in his eyes.

“Yes, Duane. How can I help you?” asked Marston.

“You gonna tell Royce?” asked Duane, almost biting the words off. “Or Gabe?”

“Yes, I’m going to tell them,” said Marston. If Duane thought his tough guy attitude was scaring Marston in the least bit, he had another think coming. “Not even sure if I’ll wait till the team lead meeting on Saturday. But it depends.”

“On what?” asked Duane, and the expression in his eyes told Marston right away that Duane suspected that they might make some kind of deal, the kind cons might make with each other in the prison yard with the hopes of staying out of trouble. But Marston wasn’t an ex-con, and this wasn’t a prison yard.

“On whether you want to back up two inches and talk to me man to man, rather than what you’re doing, which is trying on this—” Marston paused to make a gesture meant to encapsulate the whole of Duane’s on-the-verge-of-being-a-threat attitude and how much he, Marston, was unaffected by it. “Like you’ve got a shiv in your pocket and you think I’m supposed to be afraid of it. I’m not, you know.”

“You’re not?” Duane looked like he was pretending not to be shocked, but it must have been like a bucket of water over his head.

“If you were going to do something, you would have.” Marston shook his head, as if at Duane’s foolishness and the fact that the discussion was just about a waste of his time. “Now. D’you want to get some dinner or what?”

The line had not moved, and the mess tent was utterly quiet. It had been easy to forget that there were others in the line for the buffet when dealing with Duane, but now, as he looked up, he could see that everybody was staring, mouths open, eyes wide and watching, everybody waiting to see if the short, hot discussion was going to require body bags at the end of it.

On the other side of Duane, Kell was white faced, his upper lip beaded with sweat, and had Duane so much as taken a step back and stepped on Kell’s toes, Marston would have ended him. *Ended* him.

The valley wasn’t supposed to be a scary place, and yet Duane seemed to need to throw his weight around as if he wanted to pretend he was still in prison. In another minute, if Duane didn’t back down, he was going to find himself face down across a table, squirming to get free, and frankly, Marston was up for it.

But Duane did back down, stepping sideways, taking himself out of the line like he meant to go out of the tent to get a little air. But then Royce ambled in, with Gabe at his heels, and, taking in the general silence of the mess tent, asked, “What’s going on here? Jonah, are you causing trouble again?”

“Who, me?” Jonah asked, overly loud, slapping his own chest with his palm. “Never me, boss,” he said. “And never any of these fellows either, right guys?”

“Right,” they all said in unison, Duane included, though Marston suspected Duane only mouthed the words just to get by. Or maybe he was grateful to Royce and Jonah for diffusing the situation, because Marston had been on the verge of exploding it.

Duane had it good in the valley, all of the ex-cons did, and it was pissing Marston off that they weren't making the most of it. Free food, comfortable beds, job training? They could pretend they were kids at summer camp *and* do their parole at the same time, and they were being idiots about it.

He turned on his heel because maybe he was the one who needed some fresh air, and then maybe he and Duane could get into it in the parking lot—

“Marston.”

He looked down to see where the tug on his sleeve was coming from. It was Kell, his face a little flushed, his eyes looking up at Marston with utter sincerity.

“You okay?” he asked. “I know you're not afraid of him, but you look really mad still—”

“I'm good,” he said, a cool wash of care and concern racing over him. He winked at Kell to put weight behind his words, saying again, “I'm good. Let's eat.”

Dinner was spaghetti with veggies thrown in, mixed with garlic and butter, and it was amazing. What was even more amazing was that the near-fight between him and Duane had rather taken the edge off of everyone's behavior and the ex-cons were talking and laughing, as if trying to outdo each other being amiable, Duane especially.

As for Kell, he was close at Marston's side, like he wanted to get even closer, but couldn't, on account of the chair he was sitting in was already scraping up against Marston's. Their elbows kept bumping. Their thighs were aligned, warmth soaking through the thickness of their blue jeans. Booted ankles just about tangled.

“What's for dessert?” asked Marston as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. He'd been so focused on Kell, he'd not checked to see.

“Chocolate cake,” said Kell. “Here, have mine. I'll get another one.”

Before Marston could protest, Kell was on his feet, racing to the buffet to grab a slice of chocolate cake, on its side on a

white china plate, the dark frosting scattered on the white. Nobody was looking as Kell came back and handed the plate to Marston before sitting down.

Nobody saw Kell's soft smile. Nobody knew how Marston's breath left his body, a thrill coursing through him for no reason at all, but which left a swath behind, a ribbon of joy, a sparkle of pleasure. And surely nobody knew how his body, all on its own, leaned into Kell's body, shoulder to shoulder, as he waited for Kell to take his first bite of cake. Nobody knew for sure, yet when he looked up, Royce was looking at him, eyebrows raised, as if Marston had spoken and told him what was going on inside of him.

Well, if there was anything Marston knew how to do, it was keep a secret. When he'd been young, child protection services would come to his school, asking if everything was all right at home. Were there fights going on that might cause the fracture in his sister's skull?

Marston hadn't even asked what they meant. He already knew. But to talk about it was to invite a rupture in the simple peace that he was able to get from time to time. Not talking would keep him safe, so he'd frozen in his seat and remained mute.

If he could face down a representative from social services, he could face down a fellow team lead. So, with a general nod meant to share his appreciation of chocolate cake, Marston returned to his dessert.

But after dinner, after the campfire activities as the darkness grew, while he kept himself at a stiff distance on the hay bale he shared with Kell, he gathered his things and took a long, cold shower that deadened his skin and calmed his brain. After he dried off, he dressed and walked through the dark woods without a flashlight to his tent. And there, sitting on the camp chair on the wooden deck, he shivered in the darkness, and felt the night air on his skin as the wind scurried between the tops of the trees and the starlight blinked in and out.

## CHAPTER 20

# KELL

The sun was amazingly bright as the two of them worked beneath the shade of the pavilion, and Kell found himself casting sidelong glances in Marston's direction. It was as if his body found itself on alert, and all it wanted to do was make sure of its surroundings, most specifically, where Marston was and what he was doing.

The day before, Marston had gone toe-to-toe with Duane, who was exactly like one of the cons in the yard at Wyoming Correctional, carrying himself as though he was on the verge of battle every other minute. With his mostly shorn head and the bulk of his neck, he was not someone who Kell would have wanted to encounter in a dark alley, let alone anywhere else.

He was the kind of guy, exactly the kind, that Bede had protected him from, and here Marston was, doing the very same thing. And, just like Bede, Marston hadn't acted afraid, hadn't acted like he noticed or even cared how scary Duane was being. Marston's expression never changed, though his eyes got quite still and steely as he stood up to Duane, both in the paddock and in the mess tent.

It was almost as if Marston wanted Duane to step out of line because he, Marston, would have relished the chance to blow off some steam. But then Royce had come in and the whole situation ran out of steam, accompanied by a steady sigh of relief. But it still left Kell rattled, the edges of him keenly feeling the slightest motion, a scamper of wind, even, as if he'd stepped back from almost falling off a cliff.

He'd thought Marston was a regular guy, sort of quiet, sturdily built, tall. Calm. Always calm. Now this was another side of him, a hard side. A scary side. Bede, had he been there, might have said, *Stay away from that one, he's trouble.*

Except when the dust had settled, Marston walked away from the confrontation as though it had never happened. And the look in his eyes when he'd said, *I'm good, let's eat*, told Kell that Marston had not wanted to step up and make Duane stand down, but that he had been willing to. Because it was the right thing to do. Because it needed to be done. Because Marston took his job seriously. Took the world seriously.

And now, that morning, for some crazy reason, all Kell wanted to do was make Marston smile. He'd not had that kind of impulse in a long time. Ever since he'd left home, he'd been looking out for himself. He was just a kid, after all, a runaway kid. Except he wasn't a kid anymore.

If there'd been any vestiges of that part of himself when he'd entered the gate of Wyoming Correctional, all of that had been erased by the hard-knock realization that the world did not give a fuck. That even the simple act of crossing a rail yard was too much like rebellion and he needed to be crushed flat. There was no going back to his younger self, no holding onto his own innocence.

Yet Marston had stood up for him.

"We can keep cutting signs to the right sizes," said Marston, drawing Kell out of his acid-tasting and self-pummeling thoughts, "and rotate that task with carving and staining and trimming, to give ourselves some variety."

They'd gone over this chain of events before, but Marston was a tidy, organized guy, both in his brain and in his actions. He always spoke softly, except when he needed to speak hard, and when he looked at Kell now, his eyes were steady, almost glowing blue and gold in the shade of the white pavilion. Making Kell feel that somehow everything wasn't all bad and that things might get better, if he just gave it a chance.

Kell didn't know if he could trust this feeling, but as long as he was around Marston, it was easy to pretend that he did.

Easy to slip into the rhythm of the work, side by side with Marston, their sleeves rolled up, elbows almost touching, their bodies in sync as Kell made the final measurements, drew the stub of pencil across the wood, and Marston eased the length of wood along the saw blade as it spun.

Bits of sawdust spun crazily in the air, flickering gold in the arrow-thin shafts of sunlight coming through the breaks in the white canvas. The smell of freshly cut pine was rich in the air.

When they took a break, sitting on tall metal stools to drink their iced tea, Marston's phone rang. After taking it out and greeting the person on the other line, Marston's eyebrows went up, though whether at surprise at the caller or the fact that the cell phone was operating inside of a dead zone. He looked at Kell and, with a chin jerk, strode out of the tent.

A private call, then. Kell could barely hear Marston's low voice and hoped the call wasn't about him, and that he'd not done anything which might result in him getting kicked out of the program or dragged back to Wyoming Correctional. Or that it had anything to do with his parents. Anything was possible.

Eventually, Marston came back in, tucked his phone in his back pocket, and the two of them got to work. Around mid-afternoon, after lunch, Marston announced that he had an errand to run, and could Kell finish cleaning up without Marston?

"So early?" asked Kell, again with a pang of concern that he'd messed up somehow.

"Yes, indeed," said Marston. Unbelievably, there was a bit of a smile in those blue-gold eyes. "After that, you'll need to shower and get ready. Wear your best duds."

It was on the tip of Kell's tongue to ask, *Why the fuck should I*, but then he tightened his jaw against the words. The time they shared together was too sweet for that, so he took a breath and tried again. "What's the occasion?"

“Well,” said Marston, with some consideration. “It’s your two-week anniversary here in the program. That means you get taken out to John Henton’s tavern by your team lead, and you get a phone, complete with six months’ worth of data.”

“Oh.” Kell remembered being told this, now that Marston had reminded him of it. Yet, he was so unused to nice things happening to him that it was hard to get a grip on it. “You’re my team lead now, not Gabe.”

“That’s right,” said Marston. “You’d also be going with your team, but you are your team, so it’ll just be you and me.”

“Like a date,” said Kell, without thinking.

“Uh.” Marston clamped his mouth shut, a narrow flush high on his cheekbones, but he didn’t look away when he said, “Well, no, because the program will be paying for our meal, not me.”

Kell had no idea what that meant, either the words or the way Marston looked at him so steadily. The faint pink below his eyes made Marston look sweet, as if he’d said something nice and couldn’t quite believe he had.

“At any rate,” said Marston, scratching the back of his neck, then clasping it with his fingers. “I’ll be back around 4:30 to get ready myself, and then we’ll go. Sound good?”

Wordlessly, Kell nodded, and when Marston left the pavilion, Kell’s eyes trailed after him, as if merely by looking he could solve the nameless puzzle in his heart. The twists and turns his mind took as his eyes drew a line down Marston’s straight back, the denseness of his thighs, his strong stride. The way he paused along the trail, just where it entered the thickness of the woods, a tender curve to his neck as his chin came to his shoulder as if he meant to say something over it or even turn around completely.

Kell’s belly fluttered with the idea of it. What if Marston said, *Come with me now*, inviting Kell along on whatever mysterious errand he had planned? What would they say to each other along the way? And was this heightened sense of connection all in Kell’s head?

Once Marston had vanished into the woods, Kell forced himself to continue with the work, stacking the cut pieces, sanding the edges, sweeping up the sawdust, wiping the saw table down, oiling the blade. Then he secured the tent and ambled to his own tent to gather his things for a shower and a shave. Everybody was elsewhere, and he was quite alone, so the shower felt safe as he bathed beneath the warm water.

While shaving, he saw his reflection in the mirror, and didn't know what to make of it. It was as if he was changing each time he looked in the mirror, even day to day.

His face and shoulders were filling out a bit, but there wasn't a return to round cheeks, and soft muscles, to a time before he'd left home. Nor was it his prison face, gaunt and gray. Now, while he looked older, there was an openness to his eyes, bright from fresh air, good food, and a comfortable place to sleep. His life had changed once again, but still everything felt enormous and out of control a lot of the time, like he was on the verge of being flung into a great, gasping void with nothing to hold on to.

Ducking his head, he finished at the sink and went back to his tent, looking at the unlaced boots on his feet, the roots lacing the path, the sprinkle of pine needles turning to a gentle brown. There, he dressed, almost sweating as he pulled on his cleanest blue jeans, and the cowboy boots with the inlay of green, the ones that matched Marston's boots.

He only had a few shirts, so he picked the pale blue one, snapping the buttons, rolling up the sleeves, and then down again, leaving wrinkles and a smear of dirt he'd picked up even after his shower. Finally, he reached for his cowboy hat and sat it on his head, where it settled like a feather. He was ready, too nervous to be calm about it as he strode to the parking lot.

There was nobody around because it was too early to stop work, even for a Saturday, and the wind in the treetops was a faint whisper amongst the silent stillness, the sun streaming in yellow arrows through the trees. As he looked up at the chunks of blue sky against the pale cream straw of his hat, he thought he heard a faint rumble. A truck engine. Marston coming

down the hill. That must be what it was. Taking the switchbacks slowly, like the sensible guy he was.

When the silver truck glittered out of the trees, Kell was ready. Marston pulled up and casually leaned over to open the door from the inside, like he did this every day, a courtesy, one cowboy to another. Kell clambered in, bumping his hat on the rim of the open door, smiling as if to prove he wasn't nervous.

"Hungry?" asked Marston, as if that was the main focus of the outing.

"Yeah." Kell was always hungry, and he knew Marston knew what that felt like. Which made him feel a little less worked up as he settled into his seat and fastened his seat belt.

Some parolees were just showing up at the mess tent as Marston pulled out of the gravel parking lot and headed through the trees, up the switchbacks, over the hill, and into town. There were half-hearted waves from the men, but most were focused on getting inside the mess tent, getting in line for their evening meal.

The way Marston drove was soothing. However, the way he'd look over at Kell from time to time, his strong wrist draped over the wheel, was not soothing, and jumbled Kell's insides all over again.

By the time they'd pulled into town, and Marston had parked in front of the tavern, Kell was glad they'd soon be focused on the menu, on food, on anything but the two of them in the truck together. Which they'd done before, so why was it a problem now?

It wasn't. At least Marston acted like it wasn't, leading the way into the tavern, into the cool interior that brightened as Kell's eyes adjusted from the bright sunlight outside.

The place was decorated like a Hollywood exec's idea of how the frontier might have looked back in the old days, with bright cheery red-and-white checked tablecloths, large wooden wagon wheels on the walls, rusted bars of iron that could have been a plow or a scythe, he had no idea. But in pockets, here and there, were scattered items in glass boxes that, even with a

quick glance, Kell figured had belonged to somebody and were important enough to put on display. A cut-glass bowl. A brass pocket watch. A deck of playing cards spread out to show a full house.

By the time the hostess showed them their table, a wooden booth with thick red cushions, Kell was ready to sit, ready to let the evening un-spool before him without him having to do much. Except he hadn't bargained for sitting across from Marston in such a cozy space, the overhead light hanging from a cord, the red glass lamp shade creating a warmth to the space.

"They serve good burgers here," said Marston. "And onion rings."

"The beer's pretty good too, hon," said the waitress as she pulled out a pad to take their orders. "Can I get you fellows a couple of beers while you look at the menu?"

"None for me," said Marston with a shake of his head. "I'll just have an iced tea. Sweet, if you have it."

"Sure thing," she said. "How about you, kiddo?"

Kell wasn't a kiddo, not by a long shot. At least he didn't feel like one. Except, at the same time, he'd never been of legal age to have a beer. Sure, he'd stolen a six-pack or two or three in his time, and drunk it warm, behind the bar while waiting for the next train to hop. But not like this.

"You go ahead," said Marston. "Last time I drank, I got myself in a spot of trouble. Maybe I'll have a sip of yours, though—" Marston stopped, his mouth snapping shut so hard, Kell could almost hear it. "Or not."

"That'd be okay." Kell flicked his eyes down to scan the menu. He honestly had no idea what to order, though it was easier to try to focus on that than the thought of Marston's lips on the rim of a glass that Kell would soon drink out of "Uh. Whatever's on tap?" he asked. "Something local?"

"You got it," she said, scribbling on her pad. "I'll be right back with those drinks."

“She didn’t check my ID,” said Kell as she sashayed away. He was pretty sure they were supposed to.

“You’re with me,” said Marston, the corner of his mouth curving up in a smile. “This table was reserved for us. We’re in the program.”

It was still a little odd to fit into a slot the world had opened up for him, but it was comfortable, just the same. Plus, it was nice to sit and discuss the menu with Marston beneath the soft red glow of the overhead light, leaning forward over the table to look at the same menu at the same time, as if the second menu, now folded shut, wouldn’t have the exact same information.

When the waitress came back with their drinks, they were ready and ordered deluxe cheeseburgers, cheese fries and onion rings.

“Any salad?” she asked, which made both of them shake their heads.

As they waited for their meal, a small silence fell, then Kell pushed his beer over toward Marston.

“Take a sip,” he said. “I’m used to drinking warm beer out of a can. Warm, stolen beer.”

Marston shook his head, as if to indicate that this wasn’t at all important, and then, slowly, lifted the glass of beer and took a sip. Then, equally slowly, he looked at Kell with half-lidded eyes as he licked a bit of beer foam from his upper lip.

“Is it good?” asked Kell, though he could hardly focus on anything other than the glisten across Marston’s mouth. “Why were you drinking? Why did it get you in trouble?”

He hadn’t meant to ask the question, hadn’t meant to pry, but Marston seemed like such a steady guy, not one prone to fits of boozing. But Marston had brought it up, so maybe he wanted Kell to know.

Maybe he wanted Kell to understand that while yes, a man might make a mistake in his life, there was no reason to imagine that he couldn’t make a good life. Maybe he was

trying to set an example, or maybe he was just trying to share something he'd learned along the way.

It took so long for Marston to answer that Kell began to imagine he wouldn't. Except Marston took a breath and settled his shoulders, facing the answer like he might face down an ex-con with an attitude problem.

"I was in a bad place," he said, settling his shoulders as he sat up. "Had been for a while, I guess. Gabe got me a job on the ranch. He and I, we called it a magic job, almost too good to be true. So rather than wait for the second shoe to drop, I guess I wanted to get it over with and dropped it myself."

"What happened after?"

"Leland was pissed," said Marston. He swiped at his mouth with his fingers. "But I didn't get fired. He gave me a second chance, and I took it. Held on as tight as I could. I'm still hanging on, which is why I'm trying to avoid trouble. Though I do love a good beer."

Marston took a second sip and gently eased the glass in Kell's direction. Kell took it, picked it up, and drank a huge swallow, the beer bitter in the back of his throat, but almost sweet on his tongue.

"It's good," Kell said, nodding. Then he saw Leland walking over to their table, carrying a white plastic bag, the handles curled around his fingers.

His eyebrows flew up. Was Leland going to join them and ruin their private dinner for two, which was starting to feel—had been feeling—a whole lot like a date, in spite of the fact that the program was paying for it?

"Evening, gentlemen," said Leland. He placed the bag on the edge of the table and made no move to sit down. "Please tell me you ordered the onion rings so I can snag one."

"That we did, boss," said Marston, tipping his head back, a spark of pleasure in his eyes. He didn't seem at all cowed by Leland's height or air of authority and, having only met Leland via a Zoom meeting, Kell could see at once why Marston had

not enjoyed disappointing Leland, why he'd fought to keep the second chance he'd been given.

"Congratulations on making it to the two-week mark, Kell," said Leland. "We're really pleased with your participation in the program, thus far. All the reports I'm getting indicate that you're a hard worker with a sensible head on your shoulders who will soon be ready to go back out into the world."

Leland had the air of a leader, the hard jaw of a man used to being in charge, being obeyed. At the same time, when he looked at Kell, and held out his hand for Kell to shake, he didn't act like Kell should bow and kiss his feet, merely that Kell should act like a productive member of society, be polite, and shake his hand.

Kell shook it, and looked over to see Marston watching him, eyebrows flicking up, a delighted signal that seemed to say, *Here we are. Isn't this great?*

Yeah, it was great. Better than great and when Kell finally let go of Leland's hand, he wanted to do a small jig. He'd made it out of prison, the worst time of his life, pretty much, and he'd made it two weeks in a parolee program he'd not even been sure he wanted to sign up for.

Sure, he was nervous about what might happen when the parolee program ended, but right at that moment, he was inside a bubble of bliss. Both Leland and Marston were smiling at him, and Leland was holding the plastic bag in his direction.

"It's not wrapped fancy or anything," said Leland. "But it's your phone. Every parolee in the program who makes it this far gets one, complete with six months of data."

"Thank you."

Kell took the bag, smiling so broadly it almost hurt. When he pulled out the box, it was wrapped in plastic, as though it was brand new. There was another box, more slender, also wrapped in plastic. Placing both on the table, he looked up at Leland.

“This is new,” he said. “I thought we got refurbished phones.”

“Typically,” said Leland with a tip of his head, stepping to one side as the waitress brought them their cheese fries and onion rings. He paused to take a large, crispy onion ring and sighed as he bit into it. “Damn, these are good.” He chewed and swallowed, then wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

“Typically, that’s what happens. But where you were concerned, Marston over here decided that wasn’t good enough and kicked in the rest for a brand-new phone. And the phone case, which he picked out himself.”

Kell didn’t know what to say as a lump the size of Marston’s fist shoved its way into his throat. He could easily recall the day he’d joined the track team when he’d gotten the uniform, the running shoes, and the cleats for sprinting—not on his birthday, but because he needed them and to celebrate his getting a spot on the team.

This felt like that. A kindness just because.

“Thank you,” said Kell, remembering his manners. “It’s been a while since I owned a phone.”

It’d been so long that phone technology had probably moved on without him, though he knew he could pick it back up in a heartbeat and be back to texting his friends in no time. Or calling his mom to please come pick him up. But would he? Those relationships were in the past, and maybe now the only number he wanted on speed dial was Marston’s.

“You earned it,” said Leland. “Well, I’ve got to go. Jamie’s waiting for me in the truck, and we’re going to try out that steak place you told me about, Marston. The one in Torrington.”

“The Bucking Horse Grill,” said Marston. “The steaks there are amazing, and the drive there, and the view, too. It’s on a hill overlooking a valley.”

“We’re looking forward to it,” said Leland, tapping a finger to his forehead. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he said. “Enjoy your new phone, Kell.”

With that, he was off, and Kell looked at the two boxes on the table. Opening the phone was tempting, for sure, as it was a brand-new phone, after all, and his fingers just about itched to start playing with it. But the phone case was one Marston had picked out for him especially, so it meant more. So even as the waitress brought over a tray with their deluxe burgers on it, and the smell was amazing, Kell tugged the slender white box closer, peeled off the plastic and slid off the lid.

“Your food’s getting cold.”

Kell barely looked up from what he held in his hands. It was a plastic phone case, thin but sturdy, like any phone case, but it was a watercolor of a cowboy on horseback, looking over a striped ridge at the storm that was headed his way. It had a retro look to it, sweet and old-fashioned.

It certainly wasn’t something he would have picked out for himself while in high school. Nothing he’d normally admire on anyone else’s phone. But he’d been younger then, unexposed to the coldness of the world. Now, as he drew his fingers softly along the image, he decided he liked it, and looked up at Marston.

“I like to imagine that’s Guipago Ridge behind those clouds. Thought maybe you might like it to remember us by, when you go out into the world.” Marston shrugged as he unfolded his paper napkin and fiddled with it for a moment. “Anyway. I thought it was pretty.”

More than the phone case, Kell knew he would remember this moment, the steady glow of Marston’s gold-blue eyes, the stillness surrounding the booth where they sat. The energy arcing between them, a connection of light and movement and promise.

Shaking his head, Kell looked back down at the phone case again, pulled the new phone out of the box, and slipped the case on.

“I love it,” he said, meaning it, his hands curved around the slenderness of the phone, touching the cool, shiny glass on its front. Then he looked at Marston again.

He could not say what he wanted to say—and could not make sense of the jumble of words in his head, nor the stirrings of his heart. It wasn't the gift, it was the thoughtfulness behind it.

Had he still been at home, amidst the lush trappings of a middle class life with nothing missing and parents who loved him, would he have been as moved by the simple gift? Maybe he wouldn't have been, but at the same time, having come through what he had, it did move him, and then some.

"I'll get your number," he said, carefully laying the phone on top of the two boxes. "We'll keep in touch when the summer's over, right?"

"Sure, Kell," said Marston, just before he took a huge bite out of his burger.

Maybe Marston didn't mean it, or maybe he didn't want to show that he meant it, playing it close to his chest, like he always seemed to do.

But in that moment, Kell wanted more. More than an evening out at a tavern. More than just knowing that beneath the table, their boots were in the same style. More than knowing that last season, Marston had a bout of drinking trouble, and was still fighting his way out of it, struggling to keep his magic job, as if he felt it would save him from everything he thought was wrong with his life.

Only from where Kell sat, Marston had it pretty good, having a job, being independent, without the scar of having spent time in prison. Or maybe there were secrets behind that calm gaze. Kell wanted to know. Wanted to see if the stirrings in his heart, his curiosity, his untried desires might find a safe haven in Marston's arms.

"Go on, eat now," said Marston, after he'd swallowed. "You won't taste a better burger."

So calmly said, as if Kell's heart wasn't filling with energy and movement, as if urging him to say all that he was feeling.

No, he wasn't won over by a gift of a phone and a case, but it felt like a tipping point because the kind of guy who

looked at him like that, who was as thoughtful as Marston was, as still and peaceful as a slow-moving river on a warm day—that was the kind of guy who would be safe to be with. Who might hold Kell in the dark when his fears overtook him. Who could urge Kell to stay put rather than running for the hills when things got tough.

Kell's shoulders sagged a bit as he made himself focus and he picked up his deluxe burger. Which was no longer piping hot, but still tasted delicious. Eating helped settle him, and he snagged an onion ring and shoved it into his mouth.

“You could also put Bede's number in there,” said Marston, unexpectedly. When Kell started with a bit of surprise, Marston lifted a shoulder and grabbed some cheese fries. “I read the file. I know he was your cellmate.”

“Yeah.” Though it was a little unsettling to know that Marston had read the file on him, Kell was pleased to have two numbers to enter on speed dial. The question remained, would he enter his parents' numbers? Maybe not his dad's, but maybe his mom's?

That was too many questions to answer and besides, he was here now, in a tavern in the middle of the wilds of Wyoming, enjoying a damn fine burger while sitting across from a man who looked at him with gentle eyes.

## CHAPTER 21

# MARSTON

By the time they drove back to the valley, it was just about raining, a fine sprinkle that kept Marston's fingers adjusting the auto-wipe mechanism, keeping the wipers going as the rain misted and then fell. In the passenger seat, Kell was looking at his phone, turning it over to admire the image on the case. They were too far out of reception range for Kell to do the final setup, but they soon would be in range of the camp's wi-fi, and then Kell's first call would likely be Bede.

There was nothing Marston could do to stop that, though he wanted to. But what right did he have? Kell's life was his own, and he could be friends with whomever he wanted.

The only saving grace was that Bede was still in jail, and Kell was here with Marston in the valley. Which, given the draw Kell had on him, might be almost as bad.

When he finally parked the truck, a mist was coming through the trees like a silver cloak illuminated by the auto-light on the mess tent, where it looked like the parolees were still hanging around after dinner.

"What's going on there?" asked Kell as they both got out and Marston left the key fob on the driver's seat.

"Don't know," said Marston, but when he took a few steps forward, he could see that everybody was wearing their cowboy hats and light gray rain ponchos, making them appear like cowboy ghosts doing a silent dance on the wooden platform in front of the mess tent.

“Hey, fellas,” said Marston as the two of them approached the gathering. “What’s up?”

“We’re going on a bat hike,” said Gordy, his face appearing a little pale beneath the shadow of the brim of his cowboy hat.

“But it’s raining.”

“Not for long,” said Gordy. “At least that’s what Royce says. It’ll end soon, so we’re going a little ways up the ridge and then he’ll shine a light over a gully or the rocks or something, and we’ll see all these bats.”

“At least that’s what he says.” Duane had come up behind Gordy and seemed to be derisive of the entire outing, though Marston noted that Duane, like the others, was wearing the gray poncho and seemed raring to go.

“We have more ponchos, if you fellows are interested.”

Now Royce stepped to the fore, with the group of parolees settling in behind him, and it all made more sense to Marston.

Royce was very, very good at creating his own kind of fun and taking people with him. That he’d manage to wrangle the parolees and convince them that some nature loving was a good way to spend their Sunday evening, a rainy one at that, demonstrated his mad leadership skills.

“We are,” said Marston, looking at Kell. “Aren’t we?”

“Sure.” Kell tucked his new phone into his back pocket and reached for the poncho that Gordy was holding out. He took off his cowboy hat and slipped it on, and smiled at Marston through the fine mist. “Now you.”

As Marston got ready, everybody patiently waited for him, as patiently as a group of ex-cons could, at least, and when Royce was satisfied with their readiness, they headed off along a damp path into the woods.

As promised, by the time they reached the river, all in a straggled, gray-draped line, the mist had let up and the clouds were parting. And as they climbed the lower part of the ridge, they had moonlight to guide their way.

It was in Marston to wonder whether they really needed to go all this way in near-darkness just to see some bats, but at the same time, here he was, marching behind Kell. He could tell himself he was walking off the amazing dinner he'd just had, but in truth, more time spent with Kell was the real benefit.

As they walked, Kell would look back at Marston, and smile over his shoulder, wiping leftover mist from his nose, that smile bright as though this evening was all Kell would ever want.

Which begged the question: what did Kell want? What would he do after the summer's program was over? Would he, certificate and phone in hand, go home to New York? Or would he strike out for fresh fields, leaving Marston with his heart a little emptier?

Before Marston could start mulling this potential sadness to its fullest, Royce, at the head of the line, called a halt, and everyone bunched together as they peered into the silvery darkness amidst the dark line of trees along the ridge.

Kell nearly stepped off the path and since it was just about too dark to see how close he might be to the edge of the slope, Marston reached out and pulled Kell to him.

Kell's body was warm beneath the poncho, the slickness of the material making it seem as though Kell was slithering against him, a solid body made light by water. Instead of tugging himself away once his feet were on solid ground, Kell leaned back and lifted his chin, sending a smile in Marston's direction. A rain-scented, soft smile that went straight to Marston's heart.

"We'll stand here for a minute or two," said Royce, his voice clear and low in the dark. "There's a gully along this area that leads into a cave. The bats are drawn to the bugs that are out and about as the rain clears."

To Marston's amazement, or maybe not, since it was Royce leading the charge, there wasn't a single peep out of any of the parolees, nor Gabe, who was standing to the front of the small pack. They all stood still as a low wind came down

from the top of the ridge and eased the tumbling clouds back fully from the round, silvery moon.

The sight of it took his breath away, and the gasp from Kell made him smile. It was already well worth it, then, this mad hike in the dark, when Royce cast his flashlight over the gully, illuminating the silver-tipped wings of a hurrying cloud of bats silently winging after night-time bugs.

The bats rose and flew around their heads, whisper quiet, never touching them, except for the feather-soft breeze their passing made. They were everywhere, all at once, dancing about as they got their dinners.

“These are silver-haired bats,” said Royce softly, but still clearly. “Or *Lasionycteris noctivagans*, to call them by their proper name.”

Marston knew anything he was learning would always be touched by the memory of Kell turning in his arms, looking fully up at him, beaming, a mist curling his dark hair like silver beads among coal-black threads.

Everything was nearly black and white in the moonlit dark, but Kell’s eyes shone like green diamonds, precious to behold, stamping the moment firmly in Marston’s heart. He would have to let all of this go come summertime’s end, and he would, even though it would hurt like hell.

More wind rose, causing the bats to disperse into the shadowy darkness as the clouds pulled over the moon, their tumbled edges looking hand drawn and artistic. A mist built in the air, clinging to Marston’s skin, making him shiver.

“It’s starting to rain again, Royce,” said Marston, making his voice carry to the front of the group. “I think we should head back down.”

“Agreed,” said Royce. “You’re at the end there, so lead the way and we’ll follow. Then we’ll have hot cocoa in the mess tent.”

Amidst the murmurs of agreement and taking slow steps, Marston began the careful walk back down the trail and off the ridge. The rain made the gravel and slanted stones slick, so it

was important to go slowly, however urgent the footsteps behind him.

As well, Kell's fist was clutched into the folds of his poncho, as if Marston and only Marston was Kell's ticket to safe passage back into the valley. If that was true, then Kell was Marston's guide into a world full of feeling, of connection to another, the weight of Kell's grip as solid as an anchor keeping him from floating adrift.

His mind was whirling as he paused at the bottom of the trail, just at the bridge where it crossed the river.

"Keep on, Marston," said Royce, from the back of the line.

Kell's grip shifted, and he clasped Marston's hand, and for a moment, Marston held that hand right back, his heart beating into that moment, the two of them like innocent teenagers, smiling at each other beneath the rain-shrouded sky.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," said Duane, pushing past them, rudely, but not very roughly, for if he had, they might have fallen into the river and gotten soaked all over.

Marston shook his head and let Kell's hand go, though they walked shoulder to shoulder through the woods and into the brightness of the auto-light as they neared the mess tent.

"Drape your ponchos, gentlemen," said Royce as he went to the front and climbed the stairs. "I'll make hot cocoa and we can talk about bats."

As Royce divested himself of his rain-shiny poncho, he and Jonah bustled in the kitchen, talking about bats the whole while, and Gabe and Blaze got out some of the games from the little office area at the edge of the tent.

Soon there were ponchos draped everywhere, and ex-cons with mugs of delicious hot cocoa in their fists as they bent their heads and expended energy over Jenga and Dominos and a hotly discussed game of Clue, while the rain gusted a bit outside the mess tent and tugged at the green canvas.

As for Marston, he found himself sitting with Kell at the end of one of the long tables, setting up an old plastic game of backgammon. Only two could play, which suited him just fine.

But did it suit Kell? Would he rather be with his fellows, joining in?

“You okay just playing this?” asked Marston, flicking his glance over the general gathering, which was nearer to the now-empty buffet line.

“Yeah, of course.” Kell took a careful sip of his cocoa and then, as his eyebrows flew up, he took a bigger drink. “Fucking Christ, this stuff is good.”

“I think Royce makes it from scratch.” Marston took a drink of his cocoa as well and as the sugar rushed through his system, warming him from the inside, he felt his shoulders relax.

“Finally a smile,” said Kell, smiling from behind his mug. “At least a little one.”

“A what?” asked Marston, totally confused.

“You have a very small smile,” said Kell, unabashed. “At least when you do smile.”

Kell’s attention was fully on him now, and it was as if they were alone together, rather than at the edges of a group of men enjoying some downtime in a canvas tent while the rain danced about the open entryway.

Marston always knew that if he made more of an effort, he could be a part of things, a part of a bigger group. But here, without any effort at all, they’d created their own group of two, and Kell had just pointed the spotlight at him, directly, with an energy Marston wasn’t used to.

“I—”

His brain stuttered on all the things he could say, and maybe should say. *Sure, I smile. Or, I don’t find much to smile about.* Anything to keep Kell’s inquiry at bay. Anything to keep himself safe, the way he usually would.

Instead, what came out was, “You make me smile. You make me *feel* like smiling.”

Which felt a whole lot like he’d just peeled off his skin and left himself exposed to the elements and prepared himself to

die.

Instead, what he received was the otherworldly glow in Kell's green eyes, a flush on his face, and a whole force field of energy settling over him, a good energy that gave him a glimpse into how other people must feel pretty much most of the time. Surrounded by affection, acceptance, a sense of joy.

Which was, in its way, worse than just gawping after Kell's sweet face and coltish grace—it was wanting the kind of connection that, however much he might enjoy it, would be gone at the end of summer.

“Um. Um.”

Now he was scrambling, reflexes looking for a way out, shoulders tightening. Kell was looking worried, like he felt he'd mis-stepped. And Marston was completely out of his depth, gaze casting about like he was looking for a lifeline. Then he saw Gabe, head back, his low laugh at something Blaze had said coming across the tables in the mess tent. What would Gabe do?

Marston took a breath and settled himself.

“Thanks,” he said, meaning it. “I'm not used to compliments.” He especially wasn't used to compliments from young men who'd probably had a harder time of it than Marston ever did, even with his own shitty background.

“Well, maybe get used to it,” said Kell, flip and brash and young and sweet, all at once, taking Marston's breath away.

“Okay.” Marston ducked his head, feeling his face grow hot. He was older than Kell but, in that moment, far less experienced, a new feeling, fresh and soft, a rose petal to the skin.

They played backgammon for a time, had a second round of hot cocoa, courtesy of Royce, and Marston smiled more than he could remember, using muscles he didn't know he had. When things shut down around ten o'clock or so, Marston was rattling on the inside with sugar and chocolate, and the buoyed up feeling, probably very much misplaced, that even if he

couldn't take his growing feelings for Kell any further than a truly good friendship, it might be well worth it, even for that.

## CHAPTER 22

# KELL

In spite of the misty rain the night before, the day dawned hot, the smell of sun-warmed canvas filling Kell's lungs as he hopped out of bed, bare feet curling on the cool wooden floor. A breeze came through the tent flap that Wayne had left open, the fly screen half-zipped shut. Beyond, the woods were silent, except for the faint bird call and the rasp of tree trunks expanding in the heat.

Kell hustled to get ready, then went to the mess tent for breakfast, head on a swivel, looking for Marston.

Surely what he had felt between them the night before wasn't a fluke or his imagination. Surely he could bring another smile to Marston's face, and enjoy the spark in his eyes, and the sudden shyness, so adorable on such a strong, powerful guy. Surely good things would come from this.

The line for the buffet was forming, so Kell got into it, not wanting to draw attention to how he felt by waiting on the sidelines until Marston showed up. He ignored Duane bumping into him, kept his eyes focused on the warming tray full of crispy bacon, salty in the warm air, when, yes, there was a tap to his shoulder, a shuffle of bodies to make room for whoever had just shown up.

Kell raised his gaze, taking in the sight of Marston, who, with his slightly damp hair, curling dark gold around his ears, must have gotten up early to shave and shower. Bits of his snap-button shirt stuck to his damp skin, as though he'd not taken enough time to dry off properly. In a hurry for breakfast, or so he could be with Kell?

Not having enough gumption to ask outright, because maybe he was imagining this whole thing, Kell ducked his head to hide his smile, inched forward when the line moved, and made room for Marston at his side.

“I could eat a bear this morning,” said Marston, leaning close to murmur into Kell’s ear. “Look, they’ve got buckwheat pancakes.”

Together, they got their breakfasts and sat across from each other. Though others sat around them and they weren’t completely alone, Marston had a smile or two for Kell and a quiet comment about setting ground flags where the signs would eventually go.

“It’ll involve a bit of hiking in the heat,” said Marston. “But maybe we can go swimming in the lake after.”

“Swimming?” asked Gordy. “I’d love to go swimming. When? After dinner? Or before, so we don’t get a cramp and drown.”

Marston scowled at his plate as though wishing he’d not made the suggestion out loud, and Kell knew exactly how he felt. For a long, heart-soaring second, Kell had visions of the two of them diving into blue water and coming up gasping for air at the same time, the way they did in movies.

That soon evaporated as the chatter rose about everybody going swimming when work was done for the day.

“It’s going to be hot today,” Royce said.

“There’s an old dock at the far end of the lake,” Gabe added.

And while Marston could agree with them, now, instead of a romantic interlude for two, it was going to be a circus.

In response to this, Marston gave Kell a slight shake of his head as if to say, *Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out.*

Kell couldn’t wait to call Bede and tell him about it, about the flutter in his belly, and the soaring joy that gave him hope.

It’d felt so long since things had seemed normal, it was almost like being back in high school and having a crush on

his fellow track-and-field teammate, with the world opening up with so much possibility it almost made him giddy.

He was giddy now as he finished his breakfast, bussed his tray, and went to the edge of the platform to bend and make sure his boots were tied firmly.

“You’re going to need your hat and sunscreen today,” said Marston, coming up beside him. “I’ll grab some waters and snacks, maybe even an insulated canteen, and meet you at the pavilion. We’ll go over the map and plot our course.”

“Okay.” Kell straightened up, wiping his suddenly damp palms on his thighs.

Marston was tall, and the sunlight caught the curve of his eyes, making the blue and gold colors sparkle. His hair was drying, a wisp stuck to his cheek. Kell reached up and touched it free, a mere stroke that seemed to make Marston shiver all over.

Marston half turned his head away as if he wasn’t sure whether or not he wanted to tell Kell to stop. With a stroke of his thumb to his bottom lip, Marston nodded, almost to himself, and stepped off the wooden platform of the mess tent.

“See you in a bit,” he said, his voice sounding like this was any other morning, and not one that had Kell’s heart pounding a rollicking military tattoo.

Kell hurried, but Marston beat him to the pavilion just the same, fussing with two small day-sized backpacks, and two wool-sided canteens. Between the two backpacks was a pile of pink plastic flags on slender metal sticks.

“Pink?” asked Kell, going over to the pile to pick one up and twirl it in his fingers.

“Colors for these flags have meanings,” said Marston. “Red for electricity, yellow for gas, and so on. Pink is for survey markings, so we’ll use it to indicate where the holes for the signs will go.”

“I see.” And Kell did see, as he’d noticed different colored flags in the past, but as he looked up Marston looked away, as

if he wasn't sure that his previous warmth was at all appropriate or even wanted.

Just then, Gabe showed up, walking out from the woods and stepping into the shade of the pavilion.

“Hey,” he said. “I heard you're planting marking flags today. That's a lot of miles of trail, so did you think you'd need some help?”

For a moment, as Marston drew in a breath and held it, Kell imagined he knew what was going through Marston's mind.

If Marston was having doubts, a change of heart, then he'd welcome the distraction of having every single parolee in the valley surrounding them. But, if he didn't mind what had started between him and Kell, welcomed it even, then he'd tell Gabe no, leaving Marston and Kell alone together for a good long stretch of time.

Kell held his breath.

“We're good, I think,” said Marston. “We'll see how far we get. Tomorrow, we might need some extra bodies so we can finish up.”

“Sounds good,” said Gabe. “See you at lunch.”

With a wave, he headed back down the path that led into the woods, and, once again, Kell and Marston were alone. Which was how Kell wanted it and maybe how Marston wanted it, as well, for as he let out a breath and squared his shoulders, it was as if he was about to face a firing squad. Yet, at the same time, his eyes were bright, and there was a small, very small, curve to the corner of his mouth, a Marston-sized smile.

“Grab half of these and put 'em in your backpack,” said Marston, diving into the work, showing Kell how it was to be for the day. Sticking to business, getting things done, with the promise of something later. Or at least the sense of a promise. Otherwise, why would Marston suggest the evening swim, seem disappointed that there'd now be a crowd, and turn Gabe away even though they could have used the help?

When they were ready, backpacks on, canteens over their shoulders, a few flags in hand, Marston surprised Kell by unfolding a paper map, and grabbed a stub of a red pencil from the table.

“I know, right?” asked Marston. “Cell service is unreliable in the valley, so I’m using a topographic map, set to scale, so we just get this area.” He held out the map to Kell, showing him the red dots where the flags needed to go. “That way, if we need help digging holes, which we might, they just need to look for the pink flags.”

Marston handed the map and the stub of red pencil to Kell and strode purposefully toward the mess tent. There, he planted a pink flag, gestured that Kell should mark the map, and said, “This is our starting point.”

Kell knew that they’d been creating signs that indicated direction and distance, as well as ones that said what kind of tree or rock formation something was. Hole digging was an unpleasant prospect, so he hoped they’d get help for that, but in the meantime, being alone with Marston while they planted pink flags was fun, and it was interesting to go into different parts of the compound amidst the quiet morning air.

It was when they headed out from the woods that it got truly hot, the sun blazing down, dust kicking up from their boots as they walked and bent and planted flags where Marston’s map said they should.

They passed a group of parolees in a clearing in the forest, with Wayne at the helm of the wood chipper, looking self-important as he gave Kell a mock salute.

Further into the field, along the horse paddock, other parolees were digging up the last of the Russian olive tree roots, a task which Kell was mightily glad he wasn’t a part of.

The lake stretched in a blue curve to their right as they worked, looking cool and inviting, and they followed the path alongside it all the way to where the old dock was.

“I thought it’d be nothing but nails and wood rot,” said Marston as he paused to take a swig from his canteen. “It’s

marked in my notes as being old, but it looks pretty good. Good enough for diving off of, anyway.”

There was sweat along Marston’s brow beneath his straw cowboy hat, but he looked pleased at the prospect of an evening swim. His smile as he looked down at Kell was small, but it warmed Kell just the same.

“Where the lake narrows—” Marston paused, brushing his thumb along his lower lip. “There used to be a bridge crossing, but I don’t know if it’s there anymore. We might tell Gabe what we find.”

What they found at the southern point where the lake narrowed, the tip turning into a fast, narrow river tumbling across rocks, was that there were two logs and a broken-toothed stretch of wood that had once spanned the distance between the two logs, both of which were sagging to one side.

“Definitely needs replacing,” said Marston. “Well, let’s head back, get some lunch, and then hit the other side of the lake this afternoon.”

They’d scattered a trail of pink flags in their wake, and a gladness settled in Kell’s heart to be working with Marston like this, just the two of them, side by side.

They arrived late at the mess tent and had to hurry through lunch, refilling their canteens before crossing the bridge at the top of the lake to take the path among the willow bushes. In the curve of the sage-green branches bending over their heads, the air was still and humid, smelling like dampness and old, last-winter trees turning into mulch.

They were sweating buckets by the time they followed the path along the north side of the lake to where it ended, where the different teams had last left off in their path building.

“We haven’t even gone up the ridge yet,” said Marston as they took a well-needed break, sitting on large boulders overlooking the lake, at a place where the willows ended. “We might need a team, then.”

He looked at Kell, wiping dampness from his jaw where he’d taken a long drink of water, and seemed to be waiting for

whatever Kell might reply.

“I think we could do it on our own,” said Kell. “But we might need help digging holes.”

Digging holes sounded like the least fun thing to do, and it'd be easier and go faster if they had more men doing the work.

“You're right,” said Marston. “I'll check with Gabe. See what we can set up.”

He began rolling up his trash, wrappers from granola bars, the core of an apple. When he flicked his gaze at Kell as he stood up and slid on his backpack, Kell saw something in those eyes he'd seen before, so fast, it was merely a glimmer that his body recognized even before his brain registered what it was.

His thighs tightened at the memory of that teammate and how he'd wanted to be near him all the time, wanted to reach out, to share the energy between them, to kiss. All of this now shifted, a huge weight he'd not known he'd been carrying, coming to the surface of his skin. The heat of desire, an unnamable longing. Blood racing up his thighs.

“Okay,” was just about all Kell could manage as he hefted on his backpack, and kept close at Marston's heels as they made their way back down the willow path, counting pink flags as he went.

## CHAPTER 23

# KELL

During dinner, the discussion about going swimming at the lake came up, even though Kell'd hoped it wouldn't. But it was too hot for a bonfire, and the idea of swimming was novel enough that any hopes he had of swimming alone with Marston were dashed.

"I don't have any swim trunks," said Royce, frowning.

Jonah just laughed and clapped him on the back. "You'll be *naked!*" he said, which made everyone roar.

"We can wait till it gets a little darker and you can keep your underwear on," said Gabe, though Kell could see he was trying to hide his smile at Royce's modesty.

Kell had been naked in front of other men in the prison shower, but Bede had been with him then, making him feel safe. He felt that same way with Marston, even more so, perhaps, so he wasn't at all worried—or maybe a little, so he'd keep his briefs on in the water until he felt more comfortable.

As for Marston—

Kell leaned close, almost rubbing his cheek on Marston's shoulder, feeling bold and shy all at once.

"It'll be fun, right?" he asked, so only Marston could hear him.

Without seeming to move a muscle, without a heartbeat of hesitation, Marston replied, "I'd rather it was just us two."

Then he leaned away as if his attention was focused on needing the salt or the butter, anything but what he'd just said,

but which had Kell's heart growing warm. His face felt hot. Surely this wasn't happening to him? Was it just another crush, like he'd had in the old, old days before he'd grown wise on the road and learned to keep his mouth shut?

But in that moment, he didn't want to be wise. He wanted to be wild. Wanted to hook his fingers around Marston's arm and tug and say *Hey*, as if the only thing that mattered was that Marston's attention was focused on him, rather than on everything else. Everyone else.

What the fuck was happening to him? He hardly knew, only that what he was feeling was the closest thing he'd felt in two long years to the joyous hope in a glossy-floored corridor in high school as he imagined what he might say and how he might say it to his teammate. And what his team mate might say in response when he did.

That joy. That sense of buoyancy, so long missed, now bubbled up inside of him, lifting him up.

The evening's swim loomed, making him slightly anxious and tender and vulnerable and excited, all at once. Mixing together, on the verge of feeling like he did when he got into a stranger's car on the highway after holding his thumb out for an hour. An eternity. Would this next driver be a serial killer? Or would Kell make it okay to his next destination? The only way to find out was to get in.

After dinner, a few of the guys went off together, and though Kell could hear the sounds of their roughhousing, he couldn't imagine why they would want to get even more hot and sweaty before the swim. Or maybe they had the right idea, because the cool water would feel even more amazing.

As he walked to his tent, his head was on a swivel as he looked for Marston, who, naturally, was nowhere to be found.

Maybe he was headed to his tent to look for his newest underwear the way Kell was now, pawing through his cardboard box. Or maybe Marston would be bold, and just strip to the skin and, at that moment, where was Kell supposed to look?

With a small huff of a laugh, he sat on his cot and planted his elbows on his knees and made a list of who would show up and swim in their underwear or briefs or whatever, and who would skinny dip from the get go. It was better than the alternative, which was to angst over what Marston would make of Kell, naked with a farmer's tan, belt scars on his back, and not nearly enough muscle in comparison to everyone else.

But when he started thinking about it, the only one who might be shy was Royce, since he was so fussy, so clean, all of the time. Nobody else would give a damn and it'd be one big swimming hole full of naked men. Naked men and Kell, trying to keep his eyes from devouring every inch of Marston's skin, his long legs, those shoulders, all the while looking for a hint of a smile.

When twilight began to settle in, velvet among the trees, soft against the narrowing shafts of sunlight, it hadn't grown any cooler, and there was sweat on the back of Kell's neck as he stripped, put on his cleanest underwear and got dressed again.

It seemed silly to put his boots back on when he was just going to take them off again, but he'd rather wear the boots than take his cowboy boots and maybe have them get messed up in the mud along the shoreline. Then, more eager than his nerves could hold him back, he tromped through the woods, past the horse pasture, and along the lakeside path, all the way to the dock.

He was just about the last one there, arriving in time to see Gordy strip off his plaid boxers and fling them into the air before cannon balling off the end of the dock with a shout loud enough to echo off Guipago Ridge.

Gabe was in the water and had balled his damp briefs up and was tossing them onto the dock where Duane, still attired in the tightest of tight whities, laughed and kicked the briefs off the dock. At which point, Blaze, naked as the day he was born, dove in after them.

And that's how it was, a lot of splashing and horsing around without anyone giving Kell more than a moment's

notice, a brief wave, a damp, water-speckled smile.

Even Wayne, with his glistening round belly, his pecker half sticking out, gave Kell a hello wave before diving into the cool blue water with all the agility of a pro who'd been doing it since birth.

The only person missing was Marston.

Holding his breath, feeling warm all over, Kell got undressed, dumping his things in a pile a few feet from the dock with his boots on the bottom. At the very last second, he stripped out of his briefs, added them to the pile, then ran along the dock and dove off the end.

The water slid all over him, cool and bright and freeing, and when he came up for air, he heard shouts and laughter, a bit of applause as he treaded water and blinked water out of his eyes, his hair blocking half his vision. With a hasty hand, he scraped his hair back, tasting the water in his mouth, moving to the edge of the group. He had a sense that the water had gotten quite deep where he was, for it was colder and more still, as though secrets lurked below the surface, darkening as the twilight grew.

Gordy climbed out on the rickety wooden ladder and cannon balled into the water again, causing a spray and shouts to rise, and water to slosh against the dock.

Kell had swum in a lake before, of course, but at summer camp, with an orderliness that indicated an emphasis on safety, on lifesaving drills, timed floats. Nothing like this, a raucous gamboling, tough men slipping back in time to when they were ten or eleven, before crimes had been committed, before tattoos, before knife fights and back alley deals. To a time when each of their moms might soon be calling them in because it was getting late.

There was that sense of this, but these were grown men, strong-limbed, agile, wet all over, from the tops of their heads all the way down to their toes. It only took Kell a little bit before it seemed the most normal thing to swim without a swimsuit, except for Royce, who stood a little anxious on the dock as Jonah plucked at the waist of his red and white jams,

as if urging him to take them off. Royce shook his head and dove into the water, slicing like a seal, barely breaking the surface.

Kell was about to head to the dock as well, to take his turn at diving, thinking it might be nice if they had a few inner tubes to float on, or an anchored dock in the middle of the lake to swim to. Ordinary summer camp stuff. Maybe he'd bring it up to Gabe, and he was just about to swim in Gabe's direction when Marston showed up.

He was dressed simply, blue jeans and his old, faded gray t-shirt. Maybe he had flip-flops on, but he looked barefoot. Under his arm, he carried rolled up towels, as if he'd known to be the smart one, as nobody else, except maybe Royce, had brought one. He also had a few flashlights in his pocket, which he put on top of the towels.

"Thanks, Marston," said Gabe, his voice rising to carry across the water. "Maybe this wasn't as well planned as it should have been."

Twilight was coming down, turning to dusk, framing Marston's shoulders against the darker darkness of the forest around them. His face was limned as though by moonlight, features bright and bold, painted, crisp and clear in that moment, as if the soft air had brought into focus the hard planes of his face, his unsmiling mouth, the dash of curl behind his ears, the gold and blue of his eyes.

Completely without fuss, Marston got undressed, shimmying out of summer-weight jeans, an old t-shirt, flip-flops, and then lastly, his tight, white briefs.

At the last second, Kell looked away, and then, unable to help it, looked back, eyes traveling up Marston's strong, dense thighs, solid waist, the farmer's tan slicing his arms into light and dark. His broad chest, a speckle of hair, bending to place his clothes in a neat pile. Finally, as Kell's eyes slid back down again, he could see the hard curve of Marston's hips, the dark thatch of pubic hair, the vulnerable curve of his groin, his cock.

Marston was beautiful, older, more masculine, so different than the boys he had crushes on in high school. Kell looked away, hard, stilling himself in the water, making a brief, white-clear splash, drawing Marston's gaze to him just before he bent and dove into the dark blue water.

When Marston resurfaced, sleek-shouldered, his gaze came to Kell, eyes bright as he swiped his hand over them to dash away the water. The last of the sunlight went behind the mountains, a blush of shadow casting over everything, rose gold and tender.

Wanting to go over to Marston as much as he might want air to breathe, Kell treaded water a bit and thought he might go to the dock, get out, and dive in, because just as he'd seen Marston, now Marston might want to see *him*—

Had he been seventeen again, innocent, still in high school, this kind of hesitation and shyness might make more sense. But he was older now, nineteen, not innocent to the world or its cruelty. He could do this. He could swim over there, not remain frozen like some frail damsel who needed rescuing.

Marston had brought towels for everybody, flashlights too, yet he'd said, quite clearly, that he wished it was only the two of them going swimming.

*Be brave.*

Kell turned to his side, and side-stroked in Marston's direction, easing around Duane and Tyson, whose horseplay might end in death or it might not. Only neither of them seemed to care. Marston swam over to him those last few damp feet and, breathless, they smiled at each other as they treaded water.

"We need inner tubes and floats," said Kell, his heart pounding, because that's not what he wanted to say at all.

"You read my mind," said Marston, his mouth curling into a smile in one corner. "How about we add a floating dock, anchored in the middle of the lake, that we can swim to?"

"Yeah." The air in Kell's lungs seemed to have left him as he absorbed that little smile meant only for him, treading

water, inching a little closer.

“Shark!”

Distracted, Kell turned to see Gordy swimming up to Duane and Tyson, utterly fearless, in full attack mode. Duane, dodging out of the way of Gordy’s mock attack, shoved himself back, and it wasn’t that he would have drowned Kell, but he’d shoved back hard and banged into him.

In that instant, as Kell took a breath and struggled to change his treading water into a hasty retreat, Marston was there, sweeping the back of his arm across Kell’s submerged belly, quickly moving him out of harm’s way, and the heft of Duane’s denseness, the crash of limbs and flailing arms. Now Kell was at the edge of the group, in deep water as he treaded, with Marston’s back to him.

“Knock it off, guys,” said Marston, his voice commanding and low over the water as Gabe began to swim in the group’s direction.

Even as Gabe gave Gordy a hard talking to, Kell’s skin still shimmered from Marston’s touch, the firmness of his arm, the movement pushing Kell back. And how, as Marston’s gaze turned to him, sweeping him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Kell nodded, his chin ducking into the water, but in the growing darkness, he was not okay.

He wanted more than he had. He wanted to swim right up close to Marston, so close that he might feel the warmth of Marston’s skin through the coolness of the water. Feel the shimmy of movement as Marston’s arms and legs moved below the surface. Bump close enough for whatever might follow.

“I see lightning,” said someone. It could have been Gabe or it might have been Royce. It was darker now, a ripple of wind across the water cool on Kell’s shoulders. It was smart to get out, and maybe they might gather in the mess tent for another round of hot cocoa. But what he really wanted was—

“Hey.”

Marston's warm breath moved across Kell's bare, damp-speckled shoulder. Marston was right there, up close, treading water, his arms in a half circle around Kell. There was an energy in Marston's blue-gold eyes, a question, a pause, dampness on his cheeks, a lock of wet hair curling on his forehead, a half-tilt to his head as he neither moved forward nor back, but stayed, a waiting watchfulness all around him.

Catching his breath, Kell eased into the circle of Marston's arms and lifted his chin, catching Marston's mouth with his own. Tasted the dampness, felt the warmth, the response as Marston didn't draw away but let their lips linger, sweet and petal soft, the falling darkness all around.

When he opened his eyes, all he could see was Marston with a slender silver jag of lighting over Guipago Ridge, gray and looming, lit up for a single heartbeat, then falling into shadow again.

Kell wanted to push into Marston's arms and let the two of them sink below the surface of the water so they could be alone. But the moment, spare and shear-edged vanished as Gabe clambered up the ladder and was shouting at them to get out because a storm was on the way, and then Royce added that lightning could arc over a distance of ten miles and that safety was paramount.

"Guess we better get out," said Kell, treading water, breathless.

"Guess we better," said Marston, though he didn't look happy about it at all, which made Kell smile and his heart sing.

They both swam toward the dock, and Kell scrambled up behind Marston, the last one out. Which meant that there were no towels left for the two of them. Which meant they had to get into clothes with wet skin, or use the tail end of a damp towel that Duane held out with a wicked laugh.

"You can come back to my tent and dry off at least a little," said Marston, low, under his breath as he shook droplets from his hair that fell like silver in the air, lit up by faraway lightning.

“Okay.”

The response sounded faint to Kell’s ears, and it almost didn’t make any sense to do what Marston was suggesting, as his own tent was just beyond where Marston’s was, and not all that far away. He could just as easily dry off a bit in his own tent, and his clothes were already sticking to him, so what difference would a few more feet make?

In spite of this logic, he followed Marston, one of the flashlights in his hand, bringing up the rear, keeping his head down because he wasn’t sure if he should let any of the others see that he was stopping at Marston’s tent. Even he knew that the single kiss they’d shared—his first kiss!—was very likely against some rule or other. Even he knew that to share more than that would definitely be breaking the rules, and if they were to do that, he didn’t want anyone to be watching.

“Come on in,” said Marston as he went up the single pair of steps to the wooden platform in front of his tent. He unzipped the screen and reached in to turn on the light, a simple overhead bulb. Then he stepped in and gestured for Kell to follow.

Inside, the tent was laid out very simply, perhaps even more simply than the one Kell shared with Wayne, which had clothes and boots all over the place, books stacked haphazardly on the shelves between the cots, Wayne’s dirty underwear beneath his cot.

Marston’s tent, on the other hand, was as neat as an army barracks, and quite bare, except for the single book from the mess tent’s library, a ratty shaving kit, a neatly made cot, and the green inlay cowboy boots and yellow work boots neatly lined up on the bottom shelf.

“Let me get you a towel,” said Marston as he turned to his shelf and pulled out a white towel, clean and rolled up.

“Get one for yourself, too,” said Kell, because Marston had pulled on his clothes over wet skin, just like Kell had. Marston’s hair was still dripping down the back of his neck, and his soft gray t-shirt was sticking to him in places.

“I’m fine,” said Marston. He unrolled the towel and lifted it and began to dry Kell’s hair and the back of his neck.

Kell let him, stepping forward, a stumble, really, into the strong curve of Marston’s arms. Into the warmth of that embrace, droplets drying along Marston’s neck, curling his fingers into Marston’s damp and oh-so-soft t-shirt.

“What?” asked Marston, just that, a single word, a query as to how he’d found himself with an armful of Kell.

“Please.”

Marston ducked his chin, looking at Kell with half-lidded and very bright eyes, unsmiling, almost stern.

“Oh,” he said, the word coming out a joyous sound, and then, without another moment’s hesitation, he pulled Kell to him, hard, his hands on Kell’s arms, letting the towel drop, and kissed him, intensity and heat all at once, shocking Kell breathless, eager, his head going back, wanting to wrap his arms around Marston’s shoulders, but he couldn’t because Marston held him fast.

The kiss ended too soon and Marston let him go, not quite shoving Kell away, but taking a step back himself. He stooped to grab the towel and balled it in his hands.

“You better go.”

Anger flashed in the look Marston gave him, but then, behind that, like a secret message only Kell could decode, was a darker depth, simmering like sadness or maybe regret.

“I don’t want to,” said Kell, his voice breaking halfway through, his heart dropping.

“I think you should.” Marston stood his ground, the shadow from the overhead bulb casting the hard planes of his face in stark relief.

“You don’t know what’s best for me.” Kell stood up even straighter, anger bolstering him, to match Marston’s strength, and was surprised to see Marston’s shoulders sag and roll forward as if in defeat.

All of the energy flew out of Kell, and all he wanted to do was apologize and find out what was going on. Did Marston want him? Or was he playing a mean game of kiss-kick?

“Please.”

The single word was clear and clipped. There were a thousand ways to interpret it, but Kell knew he could see straight to the heart of the matter. Somehow, he could, because this had happened before, when Marston had made that onion sandwich for him and Kell had returned the favor by making open faced butter-and-sugar sandwiches.

They’d shared more than the food, they’d shared a moment, only Marston had turned away then as he was turning away now.

Marston wanted him, pure and simple. But didn’t want to want him, for a whole host of reasons, much to do with his sense of responsibility and ethics and a bunch of other bullshit.

Kell knew that if he pushed it, he could probably get what he wanted. He could get his way and stop being a virgin by the time the sun came up. But to do that would hurt Marston to the core. Maybe all this was too fast too soon, but Kell was going to have to tuck down his desire to do what Marston needed him to, at least for now.

“Okay,” said Kell. He held out his hand. “But can I keep the towel? And can I have a flashlight? It’s pitch dark.”

The simple request seemed to calm Marston, as perhaps no attempt at reassurance would. And it made Kell feel older, as if he’d matured inside of the last two minutes, looking out for someone else, doing what was best for them. As to how long that might last, he didn’t know. But he got his towel and a little blue mini Maglite flashlight, and tried to slow his heart back down.

“See you in the morning?” he asked, making it into a little bit of an apology and inquiry all at once: *Are you okay?*

“Yeah,” said Marston. “See you in the morning.”

Kell turned and left the tent, stepping down from the wooden platform even as Marston was zipping the tent closed

behind him. Then, gripping both the towel and the flashlight perhaps a tad too tightly, he made his way back to his tent.

There he found Wayne just as naked as he'd been at the lake, rubbing his hair with a towel.

“Got moss on me,” he said. “And mud. Took a shower. You gonna take one?”

Taking a shower would mean washing Marston's touch from his skin, and that he most definitely didn't want to do.

“No, I'm good,” he said as he folded the towel and tucked it under his pillow.

Instead of the shower, he stripped to the skin, beyond feeling abashed to be fully naked in front of another man. He sensed Wayne tossing his damp towel over the foot of his cot, regardless of the fact that, left that way, it would dry full of fungus and mildew. As Wayne climbed into bed, grunting good-naturedly, mumbling something about Kell turning off the light, Kell stepped fully naked onto the wooden platform, the edges of the open zipper on the screen scratching across his shoulders.

Behind him, the tent emitted a sliver of light, but all around him, in the depths of the woods, it was dark. Overhead, the stars gleamed silver in a blue blanket as a cool wind sifted along his skin like a caress, a kiss. Whoever would stay in this tent, once the valley was complete and the parolees had moved on to the next phase in their lives, guests would get their money's worth, for sure.

As for now, in this moment, Kell closed his eyes, palms splayed across his bare chest, and dipped his head, not quite in prayer, but in reverence. He'd had his first kiss with a nice man, a really nice man, just like in his dreams. A sweet moment, shared by two, and if whatever was happening between him and Marston went no further, he'd live on it for the rest of his life.

## CHAPTER 24

# MARSTON

Unsteady on his feet, Marston clenched and unclenched his hands as he listened to Kell's footsteps disappearing into the darkness.

*You'd better go, he'd said, when what he'd wanted to say was, You'd better stay. I need you to stay. You make me feel alive.*

Kell had made him feel more alive in that moment, in those two moments, while they'd been swimming, and all the days since his arrival there than he'd ever felt in his whole life. If the ranch job had been magical, and the valley job like a fantasy come to life, Kell's arrival had become a whirlwind of the two, a consummate dream, where Marston's every wish, spoken, unspoken, unknown, had come true.

Only now, as the night settled in, the sound of distant thunder echoing in his ears, the rasp of canvas rubbing against itself as the slight wind rose and fell, he knew he needed to squash his own feelings flat, for Kell's sake. Kell was young in so many ways, even if his years on the road had hardened him, flinted his edges and experience. Made him wiser than most nineteen-year-olds Marston had met, not that he'd met many.

He'd come to the valley for the opportunity of doing his parole and making a new life for himself. The last thing he needed was Marston mooning over him, wanting him. Putting pressure on Kell to stay with him forever and ever.

Kell had a new life waiting for him and all Marston had to offer was broken dreams and the faint wisp of hope that the

good things he'd found in the valley would stay with him when he left. Marston knew he would be leaving one day. What he had wouldn't last forever, right? He had an obligation, besides, to behave in an ethical manner and abstain from a relationship, however consensual, with Kell.

All of this spun in his mind as he stripped to the skin and buffed himself off, shivering as if he meant to shed one layer after another, getting to the heart of how he felt. What he was going to do.

The smartest thing would be to head to the shower and wash away the scent of lake, to brush his teeth. But putting on cotton briefs, turning off the light, and pulling back the sheets to sink heavily onto his cot was all he could manage. He lay down, not pulling the sheet over him, but letting the night air sift as it would.

The screen was open, unzipped.

He'd be awash in mosquito bites by morning, but couldn't make himself care. Besides, he'd gotten this far in bed, prone, waiting for sleep to take him, and he didn't think he could manage more than that.

In the morning, half awake, his body still buzzing from two kisses, one stolen, one given, Marston showered and shaved, and did his best to sink into his normal routine. Which just about steadied him, that is, until he strode up to the mess tent.

Kell was waiting there for him on the wooden platform. His smile wasn't shy or coy, and his green eyes were filled with brightness, with gladness, even. As Marston went up to him, for where else was there for him to go, Kell tossed his dark hair out of his eyes and tipped his head back as if issuing a fun challenge.

"You need a haircut," said Marston, reaching to brush Kell's cheek with his fingers before he could help it. He closed his eyes and half turned away, wishing he could pull the words back where they wouldn't push Kell into thinking he had to respond in any given way, but in his own way.

Kell should tell Marston to fuck off. That's what he should do. But of course, Kell being Kell, that was not what he did. Instead, Kell sidled up to him, brushed his shoulder against Marston's and asked, "Know anybody who's got some scissors?"

In another minute and a half, they were going to give everybody something to talk about, and Marston wouldn't have the heart or the power, the will or the energy, to give a damn or do anything about it.

"Me," he said. "I know someone."

Kell's smile was brilliant, shining onto the parts of Marston's soul that hadn't seen sunlight, let alone moonlight, in years. And he was gone, gone, gone.

With a touch to the back of Kell's arm, he guided them both into the line for the buffet, which moved in a slow, desultory way, the scent of salty fried bacon in the air, fresh coffee, the contrast between the hot breakfast and the cool air quite marked, searing the moment in Marston's brain.

Over breakfast, as they sat across from each other at one of the long tables, Marston hardly noticed that the place they chose to sit was soon surrounded by pretty much everybody in the valley. They were not on their own. They were both part of the general hubbub of the morning, and Marston was no longer on the sidelines.

The moment sank into him, joy bubbling up inside of him. That, along with the sublime pleasure of going over the plan for the day with Kell, of planting flags along the ridge, and how far they would take the signage into the wilderness, made him feel truly alive. And happy. Unbelievably happy.

"Oh, the bat cave," said Royce, barging into the conversation with his typical energy. "Could you do a placard that explains how not to disturb the bats and when they come out to feed and so forth?"

"You'll need another sign to indicate how steep the grade is along there," said Gabe. "And a few more to indicate the distance to the watchtowers we plan to build."

“You got it, boss,” said Marston, casually, taking a sip of sweet, hot coffee, feeling a curl of a smile at the corner of his mouth that he knew Kell would see. Only Kell.

He would stick to business during business hours, as he would at any job. As for what might happen after hours, he’d have to see.

He’d have to see hard, because what he did next, whether he fanned the flames or doused them, would irreparably change everything between him and Kell.

When breakfast was finishing up, Royce announced that he was making iced coffee for everybody, and that he’d ordered some Valley-branded Yeti mugs for them to take with them. Marston lined up, because iced coffee sounded perfect, and Kell was close at his heels, grabbing his mug, and following Marston into the woods, along the path to the pavilion.

It was a clear, cool morning, the scent of the lake coming through the trees as they arrived in the clearing.

“Work first?” asked Marston as he placed his Yeti mug on the paint table. “Or haircut first?”

He pulled out a stool and patted it, more of a caress, and though it wasn’t perhaps the smartest move, it felt right. More right, anyway, than pretending nothing was happening between them. Even if it was risky, at least it was honest.

Kell sat himself on the metal stool and ducked his chin to unsnap and slip off his shirt. Which was smart, so at least he wouldn’t be itching from specks of hair all day, but it left Marston feeling the shock as his breath left his body. Both at Kell’s boldness, his willingness to be so vulnerable, and also the thin white stripes, three or four, just above Kell’s belt line. The marks from blows. Scars left in anger. If Kell’s dad had been within striking distance—

Settling himself, Marston only asked, “Did those heal okay?” He wanted to offer to fetch something soothing, as if the scars were still healing, still needed first aid, needed care. He wanted to unmake those scars, to heal the skin until it was brand new.

“Yeah,” said Kell. He lifted the hair from his nape with his fingers. “Don’t worry about it. Just cut my hair.”

Marston was a dab hand at cutting his own hair when he wanted to save a few bucks, so it was easy to grab the smaller pair of shop scissors and use his fingers as a comb to align the dark strands and waves and snip away. Kell’s skin shivered as bits of hair fell along his naked spine and settled on his shoulders.

Doing his best to wipe away the hair with his fingers, Marston bent forward and blew a few strands from Kell’s shoulders.

Shivering again, Kell turned to look over his shoulder at Marston, eyelashes in silhouette, cheeks flushed, lips parted. All but begging Marston to kiss him again. And how was Marston supposed to resist that? He couldn’t, so he wouldn’t.

The kiss was tender as he clasped Kell’s chin, unlike the hard kiss the night before in Marston’s tent. This sweet, sweet connection sent shivers up Marston’s back, slithering into his belly, his groin, a tender press.

Kell’s soft lips curled in a smile, making Marston want to swallow Kell whole. Holding himself back from that, he sank into the moment, submerging his whole being in that gentleness, the joy that rose around them. The taste of salt, the rose softness of Kell’s mouth.

When he heard footsteps coming toward the pavilion, he lifted himself up, as though lifting a great weight, pulling away, his thumb to his mouth as Royce came into view, a manila folder of papers in his hand. Which turned out to be a treatise on bats and their habits and habitats.

Marston took the folder, mumbled something about getting right on it, and didn’t allow himself to explain the tableau that Royce was casting his gaze over. A half-naked Kell propped on a metal stool like an art student’s dream, a scattering of dark hair on his shoulders, the scissors in Marston’s hand, opened like jaws.

“Come to me with any questions,” said Royce, not commenting, not one word, about anything else.

“Will do,” said Marston, and Kell nodded in agreement, curling forward, his spine and ribs in relief, then straightening up.

“Guess we should finish up and get to work,” said Marston as Royce’s footsteps faded away amidst the quiet peace of the morning.

“I could cut your hair, too,” said Kell, as Marston trimmed the final wisps of dark hair, until the layers were even along the top of Kell’s neck.

“Maybe later,” said Marston, because he knew full well and good that if he felt Kell’s hands upon his neck, he would not be able to say no to what might follow. “Why don’t we measure the wood for Royce’s bat sign and get work underway?”

“Sounds good.”

Kell hopped off the stool and put his shirt back on, ducking his chin to snap the buttons and tuck the shirttails into his jeans. Marston resisted the urge to help him, because if he did that, the urge to undress Kell might take over, and who knew if and when Royce might be back to give them additional information about his special sign. Best to focus on the work, and not on the newly shorn nape of Kell’s neck, leaving him as cute as a cut button.

The rhythm of the morning was soothing. Together they cut the remaining signs, setting them aside to be traced, lettered, and then scored with wood-burn to make them look old. From there, the signs would be painted and touched up before being shellacked all over.

They had flags still to plant on the west side of the lake and up along the ridge, so they went over the map and made red grease pen circles where the pink flags should go.

“We’ll need help planting flags on the ridge,” said Marston at one point.

“Maybe we could do it ourselves,” said Kell, which told Marston that yes, Kell preferred that it was just the two of them, just as Marston did.

At lunch, Marston brought up the idea of getting a little help to plant the remaining flags, so, in spite of Kell’s slight pout about this, Gabe urged Royce to assign Duane and Tyson. And while those were the last two Marston wanted to work with, once on the ridge, once they’d finished goofing around and threatening to push each other off the paths along the steeper parts, they were good, solid workers, heads down, eyes shaded beneath the brims of their hats, sweat pouring off their necks when Marston made them all stop for a break.

As they all stood in the spot where Marston wanted to put a map indicating what everything in the valley was, Duane said, “It’s pretty up here,” as if he was surprised to think it so.

Marston imagined that the magic of the valley was working on Duane, as well as all of the other ex-cons, slowly and surely showing them how their lives could be different from the ones they’d once known.

Considering this small miracle kept Marston focused on the reason he was there, to help ex-cons move into new kinds of lives, a change in attitude that had overtaken him without his knowing it.

Marston tried to let helping ex-cons keep his focus, rather than his gaze resting on Kell, sweet faced with his newly shorn hair, his pale straw cowboy hat planted on the back of his head as he guzzled down the cool water they’d brought in their canteens. Water slid down Kell’s skin, splashing onto his neck like a glinting necklace made of diamonds.

Marston made himself look away. It was one thing to share small kisses and anticipate, perhaps, more than that. It was another thing to stare like a lovesick kid, and never mind that Duane was giving them side eyed glances, like he totally knew what was going on.

Which made one of them, at least.

The last flag was planted near the top of the trail, just before it leveled out. There was a spot, as Marston knew, where one or two watchtowers were going to be built. Only from the trail, with the curve of the path, the gain in height, with gray spires of rocks jutting skyward, it was hard to tell how much farther it was to that spot. The bright pink flag, slowly flapping, stood bravely, a sentinel, as they headed back down the path.

“Do we report back to Gabe, now?” asked Tyson as they stopped at the pavilion and handed Marston the few remaining flags.

“I think you can take a break,” said Marston. He placed the flags on the paint table, along with the map, and his canteen, his movements slow as he did his best to think everything through. “It’s hot, and it’s only an hour or so until dinner.” When none of them moved, Marston made a little waving gesture in the air. “You are on break. Seriously, you are. I’ll let Gabe know.”

With a small flurry of *Fuck, yeah*, as if the two of them had just stuck it to The Man, Duane and Tyson ambled along the path and disappeared into the woods. Which left Marston alone with Kell.

Kell had taken off his hat, holding it at his side with his fingers. There was sweat on his bare neck, dirt stains on his knees, and his blue jeans were still a little large on him, but he looked beautiful to Marston.

“I was going to take a shower and cool off,” said Marston, only seconds quicker than he could stop himself. It was an invitation he should not be making, but he’d made it. “Care to join me?”

This would not be a fast fuck in an anonymous motel room. This would not be a casual encounter in someone’s trailer in the back parking lot of a small-town rodeo, with only a single light atop a very old wooden pole to help him find his way back to his own truck. This would not be any of those things.

Marston's heart was in this one, his tongue too thick to ask if Kell felt the same. Only the expression on Kell's face should have told him what he needed to know, bright and shining, those green eyes filled with light.

"Yeah," said Kell. "I'll get some clean clothes and a towel and meet you there."

Such an ordinary thing to say, so ordinary, so everyday. A response to the opportunity to cool down after working hard on a very warm summer day. But it was more than that, and had Marston made himself clear? It was almost as if he was on a runaway truck that he'd willingly gotten behind the wheel of, only he'd not enough breath to shout out a warning to everyone around him. How fast it was going. How he had no brakes.

*I want you, his heart said. You make me feel—*

Breath catching in his chest, Marston laid his hand over his heart as he watched Kell rush away, almost jogging, steps sure and strong and steady, a dapple-green shade falling over him as he vanished into the woods.

Kell made him feel just about everything, all the feelings he'd stuffed down for so long, all the feelings he'd forgotten how to feel. All of that. He wanted it now.

But did Kell want it too?

He needed to find out, all of his attention focused on that idea as he made sure the power was off on the saws and tools, and zipped the pavilion closed. Even if he was being foolish, he'd be more heartsick if he didn't try, that he knew.

## CHAPTER 25

# KELL

Kell was not so new to the world that he didn't understand what Marston's invitation really meant, below the surface. That an invitation to cool off in the shower was *not* just an invitation to cool off in the shower.

The slow, simmering looks Marston had been sending his way all morning, mid-morning, afternoon, could not be mistaken. Nor could Kell's body's reaction. There was a tightness in his belly, a looseness in his joints, a heady sensation as if his brain had been pumped full of a chemical that opened his eyes and widened every nerve to the point where every movement, everything he touched, saturated him, made him feel tall and strong and desired. And, perhaps, loved.

Sex wasn't love, even he knew that, as inexperienced as he was. But it was connection, part of what was growing between him and Marston. In the moments between the glances and unspoken words and the small, half smiles Marston sent his way, perhaps even without realizing it.

At his tent, Kell grabbed his shower stuff, his towel, and the cleanest shirt he could find. Everything he owned was in a jumble, so it took him a few moments to dig, turning over his pillow, the pile of dirty clothes at the end of his cot. Thank goodness Wayne wasn't there, or he would have been heaping snide remarks all over Kell's bubbling sense of joy.

He'd had his first kiss, and now—now, he'd have his first time. It was as if the universe was rewarding him for the fact that he'd been brave enough to run away from home. Stupid

enough, perhaps, to get himself arrested, but, along the way, he'd put one foot in front of the other over miles and miles, and now here he was.

*Care to join me?* Marston had asked. Yes, of course, the answer was and would always be yes.

Racing to the shower left him breathless and even more sweaty, but as Kell looked around, fingers clenching around his towel and shower gear, Marston wasn't there. There was just the empty row of shower stalls and the midday echo of birdsong coming through the screens near the roofline.

For a hard second, Kell let himself imagine that Marston had decided that the shower was a bad idea, that the two of them should not, most definitely should not, get naked and wet and fool around. His heart thumping hard against his breastbone, Kell forced those thoughts away. It wasn't fair to not give Marston the benefit of the doubt. It was the middle of the afternoon, so maybe he'd gotten held up by Gabe asking him to take care of something—

And then Marston *was* there, stepping close behind Kell, gently touching his cheek as if stroking away a stray hair. He had a rolled-up towel under his arm, and his ratty shaving kit and, clutched in his hand, a new bar of soap, Kirk's Castile, and a clean, folded washcloth.

"I thought—" began Marston, and he husked in a breath, mouth moving, almost wordless, as if he'd forgotten why he was there. That he'd invited Kell to join him. That what he wanted was something Kell wanted, too.

Which, oddly, relaxed Kell to the point where he gently placed his palm on Marston's chest and moved in close, feeling as though he'd stepped into a fantasy from his high school days, dreamy yet more real, for Marston's heart was thudding beneath Kell's hand and his skin was warm through his snap-button shirt.

"I think," said Marston, finally, the words coming in a low gasp. "All the stalls are the same size." Then he shook his head as if at his own inanity. "Anyway—"

Leaning forward to kiss him, Marston's eyes were on Kell, watching, as if testing, as if asking, *This okay?* The answer was yes, of course it was. Kell rose on his toes to meet that kiss, toward that warmth, the tender curve of Marston's mouth like a brush of rose petals.

Even better than the first kiss, this second one grew from warmth to an electric pulse, the flick of Marston's tongue startling him, the slight sound he made. The way Marston withdrew, seemed to memorize Kell's face with his eyes, and then cupping the back of his head, kissed him again. Absorbed him, an insistent urge, that hand on his skull steady and strong, yet gentle, too.

This kiss outshone even his wildest dreams, locker room fantasies, hallway musings as he brushed past his latest crush. Marston was real, cloth tight across his shoulders as he bent to place his things in the little room in front of the last shower stall, the most private one. Water mist roiled up, warm in the warm air, and Kell placed his things on the little wooden bench as well, and his fingers reached for the snaps on his shirt.

“Let me.”

Marston's fingers were gentle on those snaps, soft on Kell's neck as he pulled the collar away and shifted the shirt off his shoulders, until Kell was half bared, the shirt trailing from the waistband of his jeans.

“Boots, first,” said Marston. “I'm not thinking this through.”

With a soft laugh, they both lifted their booted feet to the bench and unlaced their yellow boots, and it was with a grateful sigh that Kell dragged those boots off and peeled off his dust speckled socks. Marston did the same, and then Kell reached up to help him take off his shirt, marveling at the dense strength of Marston's chest as he unsnapped buttons and pulled the cloth off Marston's shoulders.

Marston took Kell's shirt and folded it and then did the same with his own. Now they were half naked together, their

chests bare, sweat on their necks, dusty bare toes on the flagstone floor.

“This fancy shower,” said Marston with a shake of his head, as if they’d been discussing the state of it and how, the following summer, only folks who could afford it would be able to leave the water running.

He hooked his fingers into Kell’s waistband and tugged him close, but gently, as if giving Kell every opportunity to bail on him. But Kell didn’t want to bail, didn’t want to rush it either. He sighed as Marston kissed him again, his fourth kiss, echoes of the first kisses, sweet and warm, deepening, drawing Kell out of every half-imagined fantasy that he had not enough fodder for and into something so real, he was more alive than he ever had been.

Kell placed his hand on Marston’s bare waist, warm beneath his fingers, muscled, trim. Which was when Marston did the same, an echo of what Kell was doing, as if following Kell’s lead. So Kell moved his hand to tug on Marston’s button, above the zipper of his jeans. Then quietly, without much fuss, he unzipped those jeans, and slid his hand along the top of the elastic waistband of Marston’s briefs.

This was as far as his fantasies had ever taken him in the past, this last barrier between the outside world and the privacy of somebody he might have lusted after, panted after. He’d not really known what came next, what happened between the elastic band and what might follow.

As if sensing his hesitancy, Marston showed him. He unbuttoned and unzipped Kell’s jeans, slipped his hand just inside the elastic band of Kell’s briefs, and then paused, his gaze catching Kell’s, making sure of him, gentle and slow.

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

With a curl of his fingers, Marston traced the line of Kell’s hip, pushing the elastic band down, fingers warm, the elastic stretching taut. He paused again, then moved downward, finally cupping between Kell’s thighs, his balls, his hardening

cock, a little tug on his pubic hair, the weight of him gathered in Marston's palm.

"You feel beautiful," said Marston. "Just beautiful." He sighed, eyes half lidded. "Now, shall we get undressed and take advantage of all this water?"

Getting undressed in a mutual way felt more natural, now that Marston had touched him, as if they'd broken through a barrier, thin as a bubble of glass but tough as nails. With their hands on each other, they undressed, stripping quickly. When they were bare to the skin, Marston hugged him and drew him beneath the water's spray, pulling the thick canvas curtain closed, sealing them in.

Then Marston laughed under his breath and stepped out to grab the soap and washcloth. Only the soap was still wrapped in white and blue paper, so for a moment he stood there, head bowed, droplets of water glistening on his head, his jawline, as he, with the most serious of expressions, undid the paper. Kell's heart twisted at the sweetness, the ordinariness of the moment, the paper sticky and growing soggy, almost impossible to manage.

"Here." Kell took the soap and unwrapped it, placing the fold of paper on the stone-lined soap tray, then handed it to Marston. "There you go."

Marston held Kell as he washed him, a damp washcloth, the new bar of soap, clasping Kell to him, Kell's shoulder to Marston's chest. Lather bubbled beneath Kell's chin and as he looked down, he could see the long length of Marston's legs, the spiral of dark hair along his thighs, the clump of dark, water-speckled pubic hair, the hardness of Marston's cock, arcing from beneath his trim belly.

Marston could not be more perfect, more steady against Kell's lightheaded joy, and when he reached to splay his fingers along Marston's hip, the sturdy bone, the thin tender skin, he felt Marston pause in his ablutions, saw the dip of his chin as if Marston wanted to say, *Yes, go ahead*. So Kell went ahead.

The shower, the washing, was a guise for something more, of course it was, and Kell was glad for the spray of warm water as he moved his hand and cupped between Marston's legs, as Marston had done to him. All new. All fascinating. The heft of Marston's balls, the dense tenderness beneath his cock, the heat of his rising hardness.

He looked up, soap sliding down his chest, Marston's gaze a little hard, a little intense.

"Can't get clean that way," said Marston, and at first Kell didn't know what he meant. But then Marston went to his knees beneath the pelting spray, his hands on Kell's thighs, chin raised, those blue-gold eyes asking without words.

With a gulp, Kell nodded, his hands on Marston's shoulders, the muscled curve still as stone. Then Marston moved, taking Kell's damp cock inside his mouth in a single pull, and held it there, eyes closed as Kell hardened further beneath the onslaught of Marston's warm tongue, the suction, the pounding water all around. No fantasy could match this, the intensity, the heat, the vulnerable slip of Marston's tongue along his length.

Kell tipped his head back and let himself all absorb it all, felt himself melt inside of that sensation, so simple, so shockingly tender against his hard cock, and the sensation of Marston's mouth sucking him, sucking him while he seemed to slip right out of his body and float to the sky.

When he came, it felt like he jerked, hips thrusting, into Marston's mouth, which would be so rude, but he'd never done anything like it before, so what did he know. He did not. Only that the sucking of that mouth, the hands clasped on his thighs, fingers digging in, was the most sublime sensation, wrapping him in ribbons of warmth and pleasure, tracing up his spine as the water poured over his chest.

Mouth open, he was drowning, but then Marston stood up and kissed him and pulled him out of the spray, and cupped his fingers along the back of Kell's neck as his breathing slowed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to do that to you."

“Don’t worry about it,” said Marston. “Was it good?” he asked with a kiss to the tip of Kell’s nose.

“Good?” asked Kell, because of course it had been. “I didn’t know it could be like that.”

“Like what?” asked Marston. “Cleaner than doing it in a jail cell?”

Puzzled, Kell paused, blinking against the mist of the shower. “I’ve never done it in a jail cell,” he said. “I’ve never done it anywhere.”

“Done what?” asked Marston. He pulled back, his hands still on Kell’s neck, splayed gently along his shoulders. “Had a blow job? Been about to fuck in a shower?” Smiling that small smile of his, he seemed to be on the verge of teasing Kell, though Kell wasn’t sure why.

“Done any of it,” said Kell. “Had a blow job. Given a blow job. Or fucked. Sure I’ve been naked in a shower with other guys, but that was in prison, but Bede was always there to make sure nobody laid a hand on me—”

“You’ve never had sex before?” The question came hard, and the smile was gone as Marston took a step back, his fingers trailing from Kell’s neck. “Ever?”

“No, you’re my first.”

“Your *first*?” asked Marston, looking a little white and stunned. “What about Bede?”

“What about him?” Kell couldn’t understand the tense feel in the warm, damp air around him, or the look on Marston’s face. “I never did anything with Bede. I’ve never done anything with anyone.”

Marston went white beneath his tan, the planes of his face hard, jaw set.

“So you’re a virgin,” he said. “Or you were.” He seemed to choke on these words, as if something had happened, so irreparably horrible, that no amount of kisses or wishes would make it right again. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Bede always said it was safer if I didn’t tell anyone.” Kell stepped back as Marston rinsed off and then into the spray when Marston pointed at it. “I mean, that’s not what this is. Of course I should’ve told you, but I got carried away—”

“Me too, I think.”

Marston turned off the shower, and a silence fell, a roar that became filled with the thudding of Kell’s heart.

“What?” he asked. “What are you doing?”

It was obvious that Marston was drying off, hard buffs to his body, a scrub to his water-darkened hair. Then, still damp, he got dressed, like he’d just received marching orders and was going to be late if he didn’t hurry. Or like a ghost who doesn’t realize that it needs to pass on to the other side, his motions as though he’d done them a hundred times, a million times, through the eons. It was as if Kell wasn’t even there, close, naked, dripping, his hair in his eyes like inkblots covering parts of his vision.

“Where are you going?”

Marston was dressed, slipping into his boots, ripping the shower curtain aside, grabbing his things like an afterthought. And then, just as he was about to stride off, he paused, looking over his shoulder.

“I didn’t know you were a virgin,” he said.

Mouth open, Kell watched him go, then hurriedly dried off and dressed, not stopping to lace his boots so he could race after Marston. Stop him. Try to explain. Do his best to fix it so what they had started didn’t get blown into pieces.

As he raced along the pine-needle strewn path, his boots loose on his feet, he slipped, face-planting in the dirt just as he reached the gravel parking lot to see Marston gunning the engine on one of the silver trucks, and sending a plume of dust and gravel in the air behind him as he spun out and headed up the switchbacks among the trees.

“Everything okay?” asked a voice above him.

Kell looked up, half rising on his hands, to see Gabe, with half of his attention on the distant sound of a truck's engine, the other half on Kell. He reached out a hand and Kell took it.

"What was that about?" asked Gabe as he swiped the pine needles from Kell's shoulders.

"I'm not sure." Tasting dirt on his lips, Kell brushed the back of his hand across his mouth as if to seal the shower-drenched kisses his body was still tingling from. Gabe didn't need to know exactly what happened, but it was obvious that something had, so Kell needed to give him a reason. "I think we had a fight."

"He needed a drive, then," said Gabe, for some reason not asking the name of the individual whom Kell had a fight with, or the name of the person driving the truck away from the valley. "He does that sometimes."

"He does?" Somehow Kell wasn't as surprised as he knew he sounded, but the ache in his chest was growing by the minute, and he didn't know what to do.

"He'll be back, trust me." Gabe's smile was kind, and he seemed sure of what he was saying, but that only helped a little.

"Okay."

Except it wasn't okay. Even as Gabe led Kell to the mess tent, where the good smells of cooking wafted in the cool early evening air, he felt like he was shaking all over.

When he stopped at the wooden steps to tie up his boots, his fingers fumbled, and he knew he was trembling, just like that first time he'd hopped a train to find himself in a box car with two strange men, scared out of his mind, but unable to make himself jump off that train.

And in this case, Kell didn't want to go back to the time before the shower, before he'd met Marston. He wanted to fix this, but he didn't know how.

During dinner, Kell could hardly eat, his ears listening for the sounds of the truck's engine, his eyes always going to the opening of the mess tent, watching, waitful, every nerve on

high alert. Even as dinner was over, and everyone bussed their places, he was still watching, hope dimming.

“Hey,” said Gabe, coming up to him as Kell stood on the edge of the wooden platform in front of the mess tent. “This is long, even for him.”

“Is it?” Kell asked, but he wasn’t surprised by that bit of information, either.

“You’ve got his number, right?” asked Gabe. “Call him. Make sure he’s okay.”

What a dumb fuck he was. He could have done this ages ago, called Marston to let him know how worried he was. Do his best to apologize for screwing up.

Racing to his tent, Kell grabbed his phone and, standing in the center of the shade-dappled tent, he pressed the speed-dial number, the only one he’d entered. And listened to the electric ring, and kept listening, his hand going numb along the edges of his cell phone.

## CHAPTER 26

# MARSTON

The roaring of the truck's engine was satisfying as Marston tore up the hillside and across the top of the grass-swept hilltop, and past the replica of a cabin belonging to a man called John Henton, a frontiersman who'd lived above the valley long ago and whose connection to the guest ranch always evaded Marston's understanding.

Marston barely paused to open the green-painted gate, or to close it behind him, though he did slow down once he was in the town of Farthing.

There, parking sloppily in front of the bodega, he purchased two six-packs of shitty beer and a fifth of crappy rum. Then he tore off again, the low sun stretching his shadow in front of him, a marker of darkness that grew longer and longer, no matter how fast he was going. Even the prettiness of Hawk Springs wasn't enough to slow him down, the tall green grasses going by as a continuous blur, his windows all the way open, the air howling in his ears.

He'd screwed up big this time, taking advantage of a kid who'd been arrested even before he'd gotten his driver's license. A virgin, for fuck's sake. A sweet-faced strip of a boy just doing his best to get to the next safe place, the next level up. Trying to make his life turn around.

He didn't doubt what Kell had told him. Sure, Kell's file made it seem like Kell and Bede had been lovers, especially if Kell had been on the road for two years, because there was no way he could have stayed innocent that long.

But the look on Kell's face when he'd told Marston the truth was pure honesty, framed in droplets of water. *I never did anything with Bede. I've never done anything with anyone.*

Marston's own first time, hurried and hard over a low motel room bureau, had been done for a double cheeseburger and a fold of twenties. Sometimes, he paid someone. Other times, he got paid.

What had happened in the shower hadn't been for money, and he'd not hurt Kell. But, if he'd known the truth, rather than just going to his knees to break the ice and offer pleasure, he would rather have taken the time to worship the gift he'd been given. Would rather have focused on Kell's pleasure than his own satisfaction on a job well done.

If there had been a way to teleport himself far, far away from the valley, and from Kell, he would have. And how he would miss the magic of pine-scented sunrises, and cloud-dappled sunsets, complete with streaks of color as vivid and varied as if from an artist's paintbrush. The magic of Kell's smile, his sweetness that the valley had revealed beneath the tough, street-kid exterior that Kell had presented upon arrival.

Missing all of this was only what he deserved.

How he wished he could have courted Kell properly. Slow hugs beneath the moonlight, gentle kisses over coffee, laughter in the sunshine. Instead of what now felt like a furtive blow job in the showers. Something from his old days, when money exchanged hands more frequently than hello or goodbye.

As he screeched into his favorite spot, the blank gravel area next to the Fresh Foods, he knew he was about to throw himself a party that would be more about self-pity and grief than anything else. He was going to drink himself sick to match how sick he felt inside.

That exercise would end with him nursing a roaring hangover and the need to find a new job come morning. Because after this, after leaving the valley without word to anyone and coming back drunk, they wouldn't want him anywhere near.

More of what he deserved.

Somewhere, on the inside, as he reached for his first beer, prepared to pop off the lid with his teeth if he had to, a tiny voice was screaming at him. He was being pathetic. He should have stuck it out, or brought Kell with him so they could talk while watching what promised to be an amazing, technicolor sunset, the clouds already moving into place, a fine haze of dust on the horizon for the sunlight to reflect off.

But no. He was going to drink himself sick and ask himself whether the sun was lingering in the sky as if it didn't quite know whether it wanted to set. As though it was waiting for something, some signal.

He needed the darkness the sunset would bring, so no one had to see him as he became even more of a disaster.

In the seat behind him, he felt a vibration, and turned. His phone had slipped out of his back pocket, and the ringer was on silent. But it was vibrating, doing a little dance against the seat cushion like a cute metallic bug wanting attention.

Switching the still unopened beer to his other hand, Marston picked up the phone and looked at who was calling.

It was Kell. The last person he wanted to talk to and yet, the only person he ever wanted to talk to.

The vibration continued, insistent, continuous. He had a feeling that he could ignore Kell to the end of time and Kell would just keep calling. Which, again, was more than Marston deserved. So, to put Kell out of his misery, at least, Marston tapped his phone with his thumb and brought it to his ear.

“Marston here.”

“Where are you?” Kell's voice was sharp and urgent, still sweet.

“In my spot,” said Marston, not explaining it any more than that. “Got some beers here. A fifth of rum. I've fucked it all up anyhow.”

“Fucked what up?”

“You,” said Marston. “Everything.” Darkness tore inside of him, dragging long and hard at his heart. His reaction felt extreme, but he was at a loss to stop it from happening.

“Why would you think that?” asked Kell, and it sounded like he was holding the phone very tight and close. “Because I didn’t tell you? I should have told you, but I got carried away. This is my fault and I’m sorry. Please come home.”

“No.” Marston snapped the top of the bottle of beer on the metal part of the door handle, and brought it to his mouth, but before he drank, he said, “If I would have known, I would’ve done it differently.”

“Done what differently?”

Marston knew he was confusing Kell, talking in cryptic code, as though he and Kell had known each other for years and Kell was just supposed to know how to untangle what Marston was trying to say.

“Courted you,” he said, taking a long, slow sip of beer.

That first swallow wasn’t as good as it ought to have been, but it was about as bitter as it should have been. It being cheap bodega beer, he should not, in any universe, expect it to taste any different, but he did. So close to the ranch, to the valley, the magical valley, it should have rivaled all the Pilsners in Germany, even Outlaw Pale from that bar up in Chugwater, but it didn’t. It was just shitty old rotgut beer, and too good for the likes of him.

He finished the swallow and grimaced, wiping the traces of the bad taste with the back of his hand, almost spilling the beer he held.

“Courted me?” asked Kell, his voice sweet and soft, but with worry sifting behind both words.

“Like a besotted mooncalf,” he said, his throat closing up. “Brought you flowers. Held your hand. And, if nothing else, taken it way slower. Not treated you like some back alley hookup.”

Bringing the beer to his mouth, he prepared himself for that next long swallow, the one that would eat at the back of

his throat, the one that he would tell himself hit the spot, but that would land in his stomach, a tumbril of aches radiating out from it like spokes from a poisoned wheel.

“I’ve never been courted before,” said Kell, even more gently than before. “You’re my first. You’ll always be my first.”

Marston wanted to bury his head in his hands and weep, for being so stupid, for taking Kell’s virginity and not even knowing it. Flinging it about like it meant nothing.

“I’ve ruined everything,” he said, taking that second gulp of beer, at long last, swallowing it with a grimace, his eyes hot as he glared through the windshield at the sun that refused to set, refused to cloak him in darkness so he could get drunk in fucking peace.

“You haven’t.” Kell paused, as if he was nodding, and there was noise in the background, a cacophony of voices, as if a sudden cocktail party had started up all around him. “In that shower? You made me feel special.”

“Well,” said Marston, replying to this with a little laugh that, to him, sounded more like a cough. “Nobody has ever made me feel the way you do, that’s for sure. And nobody will again, I guess.”

“They better not. You have me.”

Marston blinked at this, not understanding it. There wasn’t enough beer in the world to help him understand it.

“Come back to the valley,” said Kell, strong and sure, the cocktail party growing a little quieter. “Let’s drink that beer together.”

“I can’t.”

He couldn’t go back, that much he knew. This was how it felt last season. Something had brought him down, a spiral into a deep, dark place from which there was no climbing out. No matter how hard Kell was reaching for him, Marston couldn’t reach up to find his hand.

“Well, if you’re going to drink, then tell me where you are and I’ll come to you. I’ll drink half so you don’t have to do it all alone.”

If he told Kell where he was, then Kell would come and drink half the beer and make himself sick on shitty beer and even shittier rum in the process. Nobody deserved to feel that way, especially not Kell. Bright-faced, sweet-smiled, looking at Marston like he hung the moon. Which had never happened to him before. All of which was permanently marked by Marston’s own carelessness. As usual.

“Gabe says he knows right where you are,” said Kell, the words strident and quick. “I’m getting in that truck and coming to you. Wait for me.”

With a click, Kell hung up, leaving Marston holding the now-silent phone in his palm, looking at it like it was going to tell him what to do.

He was standing at a crossroads, and no direction seemed the right one.

He could leave that very minute, drive north into darkness until the beer ran out and the rum ran out and the road ended.

He could wait where he was, beer in hand, and get himself drunk as a skunk by the time Kell arrived.

Or. He could just cast himself into the wind, arms spread, and see what fate had waiting for him. This would mean putting the half-drunk beer back in its thin cardboard carrying case, starting the engine, and driving back to the valley to meet Kell halfway.

All that he needed to do was one tiny thing different, make up his mind inside half a second that he was going to go home, and get on his knees and say sorry over and over. Not until Kell believed him, because he knew that Kell already did. He needed to convince himself that feeling bad and trying to fix it was going to matter, was going to mean more, than simply driving north to the edge of earth’s horizon.

Numb all over, he slid the beer back in its case, a thunk of it landing, driving foam to the mouth of the bottle. Then,

without looking at what his hands were doing, eyes focused on that foam in case it really spilled over, made a mess, left the scent of beer behind, he started the truck. Gunned the engine a time or two, just to make sure, then pulled out of the gravel lot like he did this every day. Drove around with an open bottle of beer in his truck while swallowing that last taste of beer.

As his truck nosed down the two-lane blacktop going over the bridge, leading out of Torrington, it wasn't quite twilight, but it was getting close. Puffy clouds had thinned and arranged themselves like the bunting around an old-fashioned movie screen, ready to present in wide panorama the most amazing sunset anybody had ever seen.

He kept driving along Highway 313, his mind numb, his heart thudding like a stone in his chest. The twilight seemed to be growing, inching along like a reluctant child who doesn't quite understand, or fears, what will happen when the sun finally sets.

If he ended up having to drive in the dark, with deer and antelope a potential hazard on the road, then that was his own damn fault.

He rounded the curve after Hawk Springs, where the rocks jutted up from the hard ground like fingers reaching for the sky, just as the sun hit the edges of the mountains, turning the sun into arrows of piercing light. Before him, the land swept low, racing to meet those mountains, racing to meet the dark.

Just as he might have put his foot on the gas to go ninety, he saw blinking headlights, as if someone coming east was trying to warn him of a potential accident. A flatbed truck on its side, perhaps, or a load of cattle in an eighteen-wheeler with a flat tire.

He slowed, trying to focus among the last strings of glare from the sunset that glistened on broken roadside grasses. Then he heard a truck's horn blaring. Saw the truck racing at him. Saw the truck screech to a halt, planting itself sideways across the two-lane blacktop road, completely blocking his path.

What was some asshole up to?

He stopped the truck, the engine still running in case he needed a quick getaway. As he got out and stood on the road, he lifted his arm to shield his eyes from the sun's last flint-edged rays.

His intention was to give whoever was behind the wheel of the other truck a piece of his mind, and when someone barreled into him, he grabbed at them instinctively, only to find himself with an armful of Kell, breathless, those green eyes so earnest as they looked up at him.

"What the hell?" he asked, not knowing how to focus the question any clearer than that.

"We came to join you," said Kell. There was a bit of laughter in his eyes, and he wasn't letting go. Was, in fact, moving closer, as if there wasn't a whole host of other folks tumbling out of the trucked of the sideways-parked truck.

"We heard there was beer," said one, who turned out to be Jonah, walking to the passenger side of Marston's truck. "And rum." He reached in and pulled out the fifth of rum. "But this stuff is crap."

"Good thing we brought our own."

Someone bumped into him, the cloud cover shifting to allow him to see properly without the glare, that it was Duane, carrying two six-packs of, yes, Outlaw Pale.

"We should park these off of the road," said Gabe.

Without asking, he clambered into Marston's truck, and together, he and Wayne, who was smirking in the driver's seat of the other truck, maneuvered the trucks side by side, safely off the road. Blaze and Royce opened the tailgates and pulled out some lawn chairs and snapped them open. And suddenly, in the midst of the pinking sky was an array of places to sit.

"I don't get it," Marston said, as Kell dragged him to sit on one of the tailgates and wiggled to sit beside him.

"We've come to help drink your beer," said Kell, as he accepted a newly opened frosty bottle of the Outlaw Pale.

“I will take the shitty beer, if you please,” Duane was saying, reaching for one of the bodega-bought six-packs. “You fuckers can have the fancy beer if I can have all this.”

“Three maximum, please,” said Gabe. “We’ve got work to do tomorrow and we don’t want to fall behind schedule.”

Duane and Tyson wagged their heads, making fun of Gabe, as if they thought he wouldn’t notice. But obediently, they split one of the six-packs of bodega beer between them and settled into two of the lawn chairs.

Meanwhile, Gabe and Blaze took the remaining spots on the tailgate with Marston and Kell, and Royce and Jonah took the other two lawn chairs. Gordy and Wayne took the other tailgate and, as if on signal, everyone took a good long swig of their beers, and sighed in unison and watched the clouds shift from pink to orange.

Marston, leaving his beer, surely a truly delicious beer, untouched, bent closer to Kell. They had zero privacy, but in that moment, it didn’t seem to matter anymore.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Kell half whispered. He took a small sip of beer, and though his gaze was on the sunset, his face aglow with sky-pink and fiery orange, his attention was all on Marston. “I wasn’t trying to lie or anything.”

“I know.” Marston thought maybe Kell didn’t hear him, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “It happened so fast. I let my wants outweigh what you needed. I only wanted to make you happy and didn’t think—”

“Stop.” Kell held up his hand, palm out, a slight shake to his head. “You can’t do that. Blame yourself like that. I don’t know much, but even I know that. You didn’t know. Now you do.”

He looked up at Marston, his green eyes earnest, a wise glow shining from them, an earnest smile showing white teeth. The flush of youth and health and grace that left Marston breathless.

“My favorite flower is—well, I like roses and stargazer lilies, and my favorite candy is Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups,”

said Kell, sounding a little breathless himself. “And I love onion sandwiches, though I’ve only had them the one time.”

He paused to take a swig of his beer, never looking away from Marston, holding his attention as firmly as if he’d skillfully tied a rope around Marston’s heart. Then Kell laughed, looking abashed and away at the sunset, now glowing bright orange, setting everything on fire.

Marston knew that he’d been given a second chance, and while the universe didn’t have an endless supply, maybe a good handful was all he needed.

He wanted to remember this night forever, undulled by alcohol and early morning regret, but the long draw or two he took of his beer certainly tasted fine. And the sunset was fine, orange darkening to purple-blue, the purple so intense it looked as though it had been painted by a generous and skillful hand. Clouds stretched left to right, darkening at their outer edges, melting in the middle as the sun sank below the long edge of the back ridge with a silent sigh.

Half expecting that they would all pack up and head back to the valley at that point, he waited a heartbeat and realized that nobody was moving. Rather, they slouched in their seats and tipped their heads back as if waiting for the darkness to unfurl itself above them in an endless blue-black cape.

Which begged the question: why was everybody here? Sure, to drink his beer so he didn’t have to drink it all himself. And to bring more beer, so there was enough to go around.

It was growing too quiet to ask Kell without everyone overhearing, and he didn’t want to disrupt the show as the stars started dancing into brightness, one by one, a glowing sprinkle that grew and grew, thickened in the middle by the Milky Way.

Then he heard Duane snort into his beer and recognized the sound from the imaginary cocktail party he thought he’d heard in the background when Kell had called him. Somehow, his absence had been noted, not just by Kell, but by everyone. And upon hearing Kell volunteer to drink half of Marston’s

beer so he wouldn't have to, so he wouldn't have to drink alone—they must have all agreed to come. To rescue him.

With a shaky hand, he wiped at his mouth with a palm and when Kell nudged him with a shoulder in camaraderie, in understanding, Marston nudged him right back. He put the beer on the tailgate between his thigh and Gabe's.

Maybe in the morning, Gabe might want a little chat with him about his proclivity to run, head ducked, a six-pack of beer under his arm, but for tonight, he was done drinking. Done running.

Slipping his arm around Kell's shoulders in the growing darkness, he gave Kell a quick hug. A kiss to his temple.

None of these guys were blind to what had happened between him and Kell, but nobody, seriously nobody, seemed to care, beyond not liking the idea of him drinking himself sick because he'd screwed up.

"I'm rather fond—" He had to stop to swallow hard, his throat was so dry. "Of daisies. So bright and cheerful. And of onion sandwiches." He paused, but he knew Kell was listening, that Kell knew that he was trying to open his heart, a rusty-hinged door that seemed to scream as he pulled on the handle. "And long-legged green-eyed boys."

"That's me, isn't it."

Marston could just about feel Kell's smile where their shoulders brushed together.

"It is."

Somehow, in spite of him, the magic of the ranch had transferred over to the valley, but in full force. He couldn't hold on to it. The good times never lasted, but he could revel in what he had. A sky full of stars, friends all around, and a connection with someone, leaving him less alone in the universe.

As the darkness spread, a gentle cloak, the wind stirred in the grasses, and beyond the darkness, a trio of coyotes sang. Marston sighed, his arm around Kell, the warmth of Kell's body up against his, a cocoon of two. He watched for shooting

stars and when he found one, he made a wish on it with all his heart that it could stay like this, just like this, forever.

But eventually, Gabe must have checked his phone, a flash of light glowing in the darkness, and determined they needed to be heading back, for work in the morning awaited them.

“We could do this again, for sure,” he said, amidst the general complaints and Gordy’s pout as he helped put the folding chairs in the bed of one of the trucks.

There was room for everyone, but Marston reserved the passenger seat for Kell and Kell alone, with anyone else who wanted to piled in the back. Then he drove them back to the valley, trundling along behind the truck that Wayne drove, following the bright headlights, the red taillights, as they wended their way back to the valley.

The drive was quiet, Kell’s eyes shining in the lights of the dashboard.

“Did you wish on that shooting star?” asked Kell.

“Yes.” Then he ducked his chin, and flicked a glance over at Kell. “But maybe I already got my wish.”

What a sap he was. A stupid, besotted sap. But then, maybe Kell didn’t agree with him that he was stupid, or that it was stupid to be sappy, for he leaned close and brushed his head against Marston’s arm, affectionate, gentle, sending shivers up Marston’s spine.

“We’ll be home quick,” he said, wishing he could just speed ahead and pass the truck Wayne was driving. But that would be rude, and going faster meant that if you hit a deer, it would be that much more disastrous. So he didn’t.

But they were home soon enough, heading slowly down the switchbacks, trailing behind Wayne’s truck by a mere foot or two until finally both trucks pulled up in the parking lot.

As Marston turned off the engine and got out, the darkness was quiet and cool right up to the moment when everybody hopped out of the truck beds and made the auto-lights go on around the mess tent. Then there was a blare of light amidst the trees, the coolness seeming suffused with warmth.

“Marston,” said Gabe as he came up to the two of them, side by side. “We’ll talk tomorrow, yes?”

“Sure thing,” said Marston, making the words more cheerful than he felt.

Of course, he knew it could have been foretold the second he lit out that Gabe would want to discuss what had happened, and what they were going to do about it. At the very least, Marston, who was still just about perfectly sober, would not be nursing a hangover in the morning.

At the same time, if Gabe wanted to bring up any non-fraternization rules, then Marston could come fully armed because, for crying out loud, Blaze was standing right behind Gabe and plucking on his sleeve. Royce and Jonah were already walking into the darkness, in the direction of Royce’s tent, arm in arm, their gazes on each other as if they’d only just fallen in love.

“Before breakfast,” said Gabe. He pointed to the ground in front of the mess tent. “Right here.”

“You got it.”

Marston would be there.

In the meantime, the morning could wait, because Kell was there as everyone went in their own directions, and they were the only two standing in the light of the mess tent.

Was anyone spying on them? But as Kell came up to him and slipped his arms around Marston’s waist, he really didn’t give a damn. Everybody in the valley could watch as he bent to kiss Kell, and to savor that moment, the warm connection between them, soft and slow, as a trio of bats flitted in and out of the light on silent, black-edged shadowy wings.

“Maybe we could go to my tent?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” said Kell, on his toes for another kiss, sweet and soft and quick.

Marston guided them to his tent, the third one along, the auto-lights going off behind them, leaving them in total darkness, save the glow of the two other team lead tents they

passed, clean, dark outlines of the duos within so easily seen. Low voices. A bit of a laugh, teasing.

“Here we are,” said Marston.

He led the way up onto the wooden platform and unzipped the tent. Stepping inside, he pulled the chain for the light and cast his gaze around to make sure everything was put to rights.

Everything was fine, though the quiet nighttime air inside the tent seemed much less dramatic and romantic than the stargazing while sitting on the tailgate of a two-lane blacktop road. That is, until Kell eased beneath Marston’s arm and wrapped himself around Marston like a warm starfish, temple pressed to Marston’s chest, an excited tremor seeming to make him shake.

“You okay?” asked Marston. He drew his hand along Kell’s head, fingers carding through his dark hair, then along his neck, and then long strokes to his back. “Nothing’s going to happen that you don’t want.” He paused, thinking to add that they might just sleep next to each other, this first time, ease in slowly.

“This is you courting me, right?” asked Kell, a quick, impish smile on his face.

“Yes,” said Marston, feeling quite sure, more sure than anything else in his life.

“But you’ll fuck me someday, right?” asked Kell, a soundless, open-mouthed laugh taking the sting out of the words, the harshness.

The idea of it made Marston’s heart speed up, almost painfully, a hard feeling, but a good one that sent hot shocks through his thighs.

“Yes,” he said. “But tonight I thought we’d sleep—” He paused, his face feeling a sear of heat for wanting something so—so fucking domestic and sweet. “That we’d just hold each other.”

He was on the verge of saying it out loud, that he’d never slept with another human being, not since he’d slept on that mattress on the floor with his brother and sister, not since

social services had come and scattered their wreck of a family to the four winds.

“You’d like that?” asked Kell, and now the laughter was gone. In its place was a tender green-eyed gaze, a soft arm looped around his neck, pulling him down for a soft, soft, soft kiss to his cheek.

“I’ve never just slept—” he began, but stopped trying to talk when Kell cupped his fingers around Marston’s jaw. “Never just slept with anyone.”

“I have,” said Kell. “But not like this, so it’s still a first for me. I’m good with any of it as long as it’s with you.”

Wordlessly, Marston nodded, then dipped for another kiss, the simple connection of their bodies sweet and tender, featherlight, like the brush of a bat’s wing.

“I’ll help you undress,” he said. “And you can help me.”

There was magic, and then there was this. This moment, forever emblazoned on Marston’s brain, carved in his heart, remaking him from the inside out. The way Kell sat on Marston’s cot, just about at ease, his eyes a little wide.

Then he smiled as he reached for his top button, paused, and then bent to untie his boots. Midway through, he patted the cot beside him and Marston realized he was, quite simply, staring. As if he’d never seen anyone take off their boots before.

“Let me—” he said, now, once again leaving off the rest of what he wanted to say, as if all the oxygen had been ripped out of his lungs. “I’ll zip us in, so we don’t get eaten by mosquitos.”

This he did. Then he sat next to Kell and together they got undressed.

After Marston had pulled the chain on the light and cast the tent in darkness, they clambered into the single cot together, giggling low as they arranged themselves, Marston on his back, Kell in his arms.

“I’ll get more pillows,” said Marston, trailing his thumb along Kell’s arm. “Amazon delivers, you see.”

“You’re my pillow,” said Kell with a nuzzle along Marston’s neck. “You’re all I need. All I’ll ever need.”

That wasn’t quite true, because surely in his life Kell would need more than just Marston. Or maybe Marston was just thinking dark thoughts because that’s what he was used to. Maybe with Kell in his life, the future would be brighter, enough to chase the shadows away, enough to feel the sun on his face and not imagine it was going to be ripped away.

“Sleep well,” he said with a quick kiss to the top of Kell’s head, savoring the relaxed sleepy feel of Kell’s legs alongside his. The slow rise and fall of Kell’s bare chest against his side. Kell’s scent filling his lungs, the odd, dense feeling of falling as he fell asleep so fast, he was almost spinning into it.

This, then, was how it felt to not be alone in the darkness. This was precious. This was true magic.

## CHAPTER 27

# MARSTON

**A**s painfully as if he'd been ripped at by rotating saws, Marston crawled out of bed early, gently lowering the sheet and cotton blanket over Kell's sleeping form.

Kell was curled on his side, facing the wall of the tent, his hair a dark stain on the pillowcase, the back of his neck vulnerable as Marston covered him up. Then, as quickly as he could, he showered and shaved, walking to and from the facilities in almost pitch blackness, due to the earliness of the hour.

Gabe wanted to talk to him before breakfast, and Marston wanted to be at his best, showered and shaved. Dressed. Ready.

Sunrise came slowly, as if it knew that Marston's heart was racing while he waited, perched on the edge of the wooden platform in front of the mess tent, waiting for Gabe. Who was either going to fire him or lecture him. Marston was ready for either, but though he could list a hundred ways he was useful to the valley program, it almost felt inevitable that Gabe was going to tell him to pack his things and leave within the hour. Which might be no more than Marston deserved.

Inside the mess tent, the two cooks were already at it, cracking eggs, banging pots around the stove, chatting while they drank coffee. He thought he might smell maple syrup being warmed up, but the trace of that scent was too faint to follow.

And yes, eventually, Gabe came up to the mess tent and, with a nod, went inside and returned with two white china mugs of hot black coffee. He sat down next to Marston on the wooden platform, his booted feet in the grass, shirt tails untucked, his sleeves rolled up, like he'd already been hard at it that morning, and was just taking a break to talk with Marston. Which was like him. Making the conversation casual and friendly, rather than onerous and threatening.

Marston didn't think he'd be told to pack his stuff based on his stunt yesterday, but Gabe certainly deserved to say his piece, and to get the apology Marston was going to, most assuredly, offer up to him.

"Say what you have to say," said Marston, wanting to get this over with as soon as he could. He tried taking a sip of the coffee, but it was too hot so he cupped his hands around the mug to warm them.

"I think you should tell me what happened yesterday," said Gabe, quite able, it seemed, to take a sip of his coffee, though he did wince at the heat. "Because I have no idea what was going on in that head of yours."

"Am I fired?" asked Marston, rather than letting spill all the rushing worry in his heart.

"No." This was said as if Gabe considered the question quite foolish, but he was going to humor it, anyway. "That's not how we do things around here. The valley is magical. Remember? Just like the ranch is, this place is special. And with that comes some responsibility to keep it that way. So no, you're not fired. I just want to hear you tell me the truth."

Marston took a breath. Gabe was the kind of person who placed trust in someone and kept it there until it was lost. The trust, the opportunity to be trusted, came first. And that deserved honesty. So Marston gave it.

"I fell in love," he said, then took a sip of his coffee to bolster his courage. "Didn't think I deserved it."

"Kell?" asked Gabe, though it was obvious the answer was yes.

“Convinced myself maybe I might deserve it, if I treated him right,” said Marston, nodding. “And then I found out—” It made him cringe to think of it, so he was barely able to say it out loud. But he made himself, because it was Gabe. “I found out too late he’d been a virgin. Thought coming from prison, from being on the road—I mean, in two years, how do you stay innocent that long?”

“I read that same file as you did,” said Gabe. “I thought the same thing. Bede, his cellmate, right? Even the warden thought they were together.”

“Turns out that was a cover.” This part was easier to tell. “Bede and he pretended, using each other as a shield. Bede never laid a hand on him.”

“That was smart of them,” said Gabe. “I’ve never been in prison, but if you’ve got your back to the wall, maybe it’s better to have another human at your back.”

“My number is on Kell’s cellphone,” said Marston. “So is Bede’s. Or, at least, the number to the prison, so he can talk to Bede.”

“Kid like Kell trusting a guy like that?” asked Gabe, ruminatively. “Maybe there’s more to Bede than the file says.”

“Maybe.” Taking a deep breath, Marston shrugged, trying to ease the tightness in his shoulders. “Anyway. I found out, flipped out, returned to my old habits.” He turned to look at Gabe, to get Gabe to look at him.

When Gabe lifted his gaze from the morning sunlight streaming through the woods, Marston said, “Old habits seemed easier. I regretted it almost right away. Knew I should have taken him with me. Couple of brews. Long drive. We could have talked it over, rather than me behaving like a teenager acting out.”

Gabe’s eyebrows went up, as if he was astonished at the amount Marston had just shared. But then he nodded in that nonjudgmental way he had.

“I’m lucky Kell called me,” Marston said at last.

“You *are* lucky,” said Gabe, nodding. He took a long sip of his black coffee that must have been quite good, for he sighed, his eyes half closing for a second. “And I’d start talking about ethics and non-fraternization, but I think we’re both long past that point. Way long past. But then, the valley creates this perfect storm, you know? All this energy and fresh air and beautiful surroundings.”

“But, Gabe, what should I do?”

“What should you do?”

Gabe paused to lift his mug when one of the cooks came out with the coffee pot to refill it for him. Marston, who’d barely drank any of his, covered his mug with his hand, feeling the faint mist of the steam from the coffee in the cool morning air.

“What do you *think* you should do?” asked Gabe, now.

Marston had no idea, so he shook his head and took a long swallow of the black coffee. “I have no idea.”

Off to Marston’s left, beyond the dense trees, Kell was still asleep in Marston’s tent. Or maybe he was waking up with a sleepy yawn as he scraped his dark hair out of his eyes. Wondering where Marston was. Thinking about a shower. Breakfast. The day’s work.

“You do your best,” said Gabe, not seeming at all irritated that he had to answer for Marston. “Do the work you signed on for. Be a decent human being. That’s who you are anyway, so that’s what you’re going to do. But most important, follow your heart.”

“My heart?” Marston straightened, not sure if he was hearing right. Was he being given permission? Could he and Kell stay together?

Gabe gave a low laugh as he shook his head, downed a swallow of coffee, then cupped his hands around his mug.

“Giving you responsibility for him was the smartest thing, I think,” said Gabe. Then he looked at Marston and smiled. “He lights up when he’s with you. And you light up like the moon just thinking about him. Like you are now.”

“Really?” Shock rippled through Marston’s body.

“I think you’re good for each other, in spite of you being all hangdog about it,” said Gabe. “At this point, you’re just fighting your own happiness. Quit fighting it or by golly, I *will* fire you.”

“I want to apologize for causing such a ruckus,” Marston said, remembering his promise to himself. “Driving off last night, making you guys feel you had to come rescue me.” For that’s what it had been, a rescue, pure and simple.

“It was a fun outing, and the guys had a good time,” said Gabe. “But next time, give me a little warning, because there wasn’t enough Outlaw Pale to go around, and I had to drink your shitty bodega beer.”

With a gusty sigh, Gabe hauled himself to his feet and, carrying his now-empty mug, marched up the wooden steps so he could be first in line at the breakfast buffet. Everybody else came tromping through the woods in various stages of wakefulness.

Lastly, but most definitely not leastly, came Kell, tucking in his shirttails as he walked, his head on a swivel as he came closer, because he was looking for someone. Someone who was, to Marston’s delight, himself.

“There you are.” Kell moved into a trot, hurrying over to Marston as if it had been days, maybe even weeks, months, since they’d last seen each other. Being wise, for all his young years, he didn’t fling himself at Marston and demand hugs and kisses in front of everybody, though Marston could see in those green eyes that he wanted to. Rather, he grabbed Marston’s hand and hauled him to his feet, mug and all.

“Did you get your talking to?” asked Kell as he hurried Marston up the wooden steps and got into line behind him.

“I did,” said Marston low, over his shoulder. “And I apologized, too.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” said Duane’s voice ahead of him in line. “Just bring more beer next time, will ya?”

Marston's shoulders wanted to curl forward, as if anticipating the accusation that he'd screwed up all over again. But then general shouts rang out. This one wanted Coors, another one wanted pale ale, someone else, Gordy, perhaps, wanted Stella and nothing but Stella.

General good nature accompanied these requests, as if the only irritation was that Marston had not suggested sooner the kind of outing they shared the night before. And with more variety. Snacks, also, please. Pretzels and chips and dip, maybe even a charcuterie board. This last, of course, was a suggestion from Royce.

A bit dazzled, Marston kept his head down as he took what he wanted from the buffet. As he carried to the table his heaping pile of pancakes and covered pitcher of maple syrup, most assuredly real and not fake, he tried to imagine the day when he might complain about being surrounded on all sides by ex-cons grabbing for the butter, and team leads trying to set better examples by waiting their turn, the whole of it like a rowdy class out of control because the substitute wasn't paying attention.

Today wasn't that day. Tomorrow, and a whole host of tomorrows, didn't look good either. And that was just fine by him. New but fine. He could get used to this.

"We need to get some volunteers to dig holes for those sign posts," said Marston, doing his best to focus on work and not the shining green eyes gazing at him with a bit more than a little adoration.

What a head-turning, heady feeling it was. Strange and new and yet, at the same time, soothing. Bolstering. It made him hungrier than he could remember. More alive. More aware of everything around him, from the hustle to grab the last bit of bacon from the platter one of the cooks brought to their table, to the general consensus that Royce should let them know when the next meteor shower was going to be, and could he make sure that there were enough blankets and reclining lawn chairs for everybody?

Royce seemed agreeable, which was when Marston asked again for volunteers, and, to his surprise, got three: Duane, Tyson, and Wayne.

That made five to do that task, which would make it quicker than if it had just been him and Kell doing it. Filling the holes with cement and placing the sign posts would be hard work too, but nothing like actually digging the holes.

It was like having a group of friends all around him, which also was new. Gabe had been right from the first. The valley was magic and now that magic was pouring all over Marston, soaking into his soul, lighting him up, bringing him to life.

“You ready?” he asked Kell, standing up with his tray in his hands. “Let me wash this syrup off my hands, and we can head out.”

They headed out, grabbing gloves and shovels from the supply shed, and then the two posthole diggers from the pavilion. Marston felt buoyed up by the fact that, at least for the day, he had a whole team to work with, and yes, they worked hard, but he made sure they took breaks, and followed good safety habits and, basically, they acted like a regular work crew, and not a bunch of ex-cons trying to skate by on as little effort as possible.

It was when they returned to the pavilion so they could set aside their tools and wash up before lunch that Kell paused to grab his cell phone and stood to one side to make a call. Which was to Bede, Marston guessed, so he couldn't begrudge Kell that, since Bede had kept Kell safe while in prison.

Afterward, Kell came up to him, watching as Duane, Tyson, and Wayne sauntered off into the woods, headed for the mess tent and, for the first time that day, they had a private moment to themselves.

“Was that Bede?” asked Marston, ducking his head, focused on the top of Kell's dark head as he put his cell phone back on the table.

“Yeah.” Kell lifted his chin, all but asking for a kiss, and Marston gave it to him, a gentle sweep, the connection of skin

and warmth, a gentle clasp, Kell's hand on his waist.

"Told him about us," said Kell, when the kiss ended.

"Oh?" Marston wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"He said I acted like an asshole not telling you." Kell nodded as if agreeing with an invisibly present erstwhile cellmate. "But he said you sounded cool."

"I'm glad he approves of me," said Marston, though he really didn't care whether Bede approved of him or not. Bede was far away and Marston was here and Kell was here, and that was just fine by him. "Bet he was jealous of your new phone, though."

"Yeah." Kell seemed pleased by this. "Before I left home, I had a nice iPhone, but I left it behind, figuring they could track me if I took it."

"Smart thinking." Which it was, though Kell's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dodson, however eager they'd been to send their kid away to be stripped to the very bones of his being, must have wished from time to time that Kell had taken his phone with him so they could find him easier. Or would they have? Maybe the mother, perhaps, but not the dad.

This direction of musing reminded him that he needed to call the Fayetteville police department and let them know that Kell was no longer a missing person. He'd delayed because he'd been distracted, but that was no excuse for making a small-town detective, or whoever was on the case, keep a file open simply because Marston had gotten lazy. Though he had to wonder why Wyoming Correctional hadn't already made that call.

"Go get some lunch," he said. "I have a call to make."

With a quick kiss, Kell ambled away along the path that led into the woods and to the mess tent. Meanwhile, feeling guilty, Marston quickly found and dialed the non-emergency number for the Fayetteville police department. It rang once and was picked up.

"Fayetteville Police, how can I direct your call?" asked a professional, feminine voice.

“I need to speak to whoever runs your missing persons department,” he said, holding his phone tightly to his ear in an effort to stave off how surreal it suddenly felt.

“Can I ask in what regard?” she asked. Then she explained, “We have two officers who handle that, so I want to make sure to get you to the right person.”

If he was being screened in case he was some kind of nut job, well, that went with the territory, it only made sense.

“I work with the Farthingdale Fresh Start Program here in Wyoming,” he said. “We take parolees from Wyoming Correctional and help them work off their parole conditions.”

“Okay,” she said, and he thought she must be taking notes.

“Recently, we took in a kid named Kell. Kelliher Dodson is his full name. His parents reported him missing about two years ago? He was seventeen then. He’s nineteen now, and he’s safe. Not missing. I wasn’t sure if Wyoming Correctional contacted you, so I thought I would.”

“Just one moment,” she said, and put him on hold.

Whooshing out a breath, he realized that all kinds of changes might come from this phone call, all of them unknown at that moment. But it was the right thing to do, helping to close that file so the police at that station could concentrate on crimes that needed solving.

When the phone clicked, Marston straightened up.

“Hello,” said an older voice, masculine this time. “This is Alvin Roebuck, in charge of missing persons. I hear you have a find for me. Something to help me close the file on Kelliher Dodson?”

“Yes,” said Marston, and he told the story again, feeling as though he was handing over something rather precious to him. He told Alvin about how Kell had gotten arrested, and how he’d come to the valley. How well he was doing. How he’d received his cell phone at two weeks, how he’d put on good weight, how he got along with everyone. “And it’s Kell,” he added to all of this. “His name is Kell. It’s what he prefers.”

“I’ll make a note, and double check with Wyoming Correctional, see if they can fax me something over,” said Alvin, pausing as if writing that information down. “Thanks for letting me know, but um. Here’s the thing. Mr. and Mrs. Dodson got divorced right after Kell ran off. The mother’s been looking for him ever since. Can you give me Kell’s number and she can call him? I mean, I’ll tell her where he is, but I know she’s going to want to reach out. She’s been frantic, hiring a string of PIs and calling down to the station every other minute.” Alvin paused and Marston sensed he was thinking something through. “Don’t get me wrong. I can tell she loves him. The father doesn’t give a shit, but it sure would be nice to have her off my back.”

The sound Marston heard spring from his throat felt as though it came from his heart, a scarred, deep place which if opened up anew might never heal. If Kell’s mom called him and told him she wanted him back, then Kell might go to her and Marston would be alone again. It would break him like nothing else.

On the other hand—

It would be wrong not to let them connect if they wanted to do so. If Kell wanted it, at least. That was the key thing.

“Look,” said Marston, his mouth suddenly dry. “He ran off for a reason. If you read the file—”

“I read the file,” said Alvin. “Believe me, I’m well aware what was going on in that house. Have you spoken to Mrs. Hanrihan, by the way?”

“Yes,” said Marston. “She’s the one who suggested I call you so you could close the books on this case.”

“She’s a firecracker, that one,” said Alvin with undisguised admiration in his voice. “Nothing gets past her. Nothing.”

“He ran off,” said Marston. “So I want it to be his choice whether or not to connect with his mom. I mean, from what I know, it seems like there was a lot going on for her too, maybe none of it pretty. But it should be Kell’s choice. I promise I’ll get her number to him.”

After a pause, Alvin said, “Okay, here’s the number.”

Marston hurriedly switched to speaker, then flipped the screen so he could enter contact information for Mrs. Dodson. Mrs. Janet Dodson of Akron, Ohio.

“Akron?” he asked.

“That’s where she’s from, I guess,” said Alvin. “Listen, I want to thank you for calling this in. I’ll confirm it with Wyoming, but if you could give Kell her number pronto, sooner rather than later, that’d be great.”

“Will do,” said Marston, feeling a little lightheaded as he clicked off the call.

There was no question he had to tell Kell right away, and that he had to support Kell in whatever decision he made. But when he arrived at the mess tent, lunch was underway, and Kell and Wayne were duking it out for the butter to slather on their respective ears of corn on the cob.

Kell was, in fact, in the middle of a table, surrounded on all sides, so Marston got a plate of food and sat at the end of the table.

He was used to being by himself, had gotten a lot of practice over the years. Except now he knew what it felt like to not be alone, so it would be far more painful, a lonely march into the future of being single. Isolated. Bereft.

Then he felt Gabe looking at him, a deep scowl across his forehead, his mouth, and Marston knew he was being stupid again. He owed it to Kell to tell him right away, and though he knew he shouldn’t be worried, he was a little.

Standing to bus his dishes, he jerked his chin at Kell, catching his eye, letting him know they needed to go. As for Kell, he stood up with a smile, said something about needing to get back to work, and followed Marston out to the gravel parking lot.

“We’ll be back in a bit,” Marston told his team-for-a-day, Duane, Tyson, and Wayne, all of whom looked up at him like they were a well-trained, responsive team. “Then we’ll get to

work. Here,” he said to Kell, holding out Kell’s cellphone. “I grabbed your phone. It’s all charged. Hold on to it and hop in.”

“Where are we going?” asked Kell as he obediently got in the truck and buckled his seatbelt. “In town?”

“No.”

Marston’s throat closed up so he couldn’t say any more than that, couldn’t explain. This was a necessary errand they were on, and he couldn’t stint his responsibilities. It was up to Kell whether or not he called his mom and, after that, it was up to fate. In which, Marston had very little trust.

## CHAPTER 28

# KELL

Kell didn't know where they were headed, other than they drove up the switchbacks, the truck slipping in and out of the pine-scented shadows. At the top of the hill, a long, curved slope marked only by the new-looking cabin that he'd been told was the replica of some old time guy who used to live in it, Marston slowed the truck, pulled off near the cabin, and turned off the engine, which pinged as it cooled.

“So.”

Marston wiped his hands on his thighs, like he was nervous, and his face was white, and a little still. He looked through the windshield rather than at Kell, which made the hairs on the back of Kell's neck stand up.

“When you left home, they considered you a runaway and a missing person. There was a file on you. I called the Fayetteville police department to let them know you'd been found so they could close the file.”

Kell had not known this, though of course it made sense. His parents would want him found and brought back so they could tear him apart and make him fit their ideal mold of what a son should be. Not gay, for starters.

That Marston had made the call to give the police station the news must have upset him, for he still wasn't looking at Kell as he got out of the truck, his back to the east as he stared across the tops of the trees at Guipago Ridge, a faded gray in the bright noontime sunshine.

Now Kell got out and went to his side, staring at the ridge alongside him as if that would help him untangle what Marston was trying to say, what he was not saying.

“So what’d they say?” he asked, brushing close in a way he was fast coming to know that Marston adored. Only instead of leaning into it, Marston moved away, an infinitesimal inch, but an inch just the same.

“I spoke to Alvin Roebuck,” said Marston, the words quite careful, as though he’d learned them by rote and didn’t want to get any of them wrong. “He’s the guy in charge of your case, or he was while you were missing, though I expect he’s closed that missing-persons file by now. *And* called your mom. To let her know.”

Putting his hands in his back pockets, Marston flexed his shoulders and looked down at Kell.

“You should know,” he said, his words almost clinical in their precision. “Your parents got divorced right after you went missing, and your mom’s been looking for you ever since. She looked every day. Hired more than one private eye. Called Roebuck and bugged him all the time. Missed you.” Marston swallowed hard and looked at the ridge again. “She missed you a lot, according to Roebuck. So I’ve got her number if you wanted to call her.”

“And my dad?” Kell asked, the spin in his head making him dizzy. “What about him?”

“Gone from the picture, near as I can tell,” said Marston. “Not looking for you. At the very least, he wasn’t bugging Roebuck for updates.”

Kell wished he could tell himself he was surprised that his dad had given up on him, that he didn’t seem to care that Kell had been missing and now was found. But as for his mom—

“Did you talk to her?”

“No.” A firm, quick shake of his head. “Roebuck wanted me to give him your number so he could pass it on to her. But I said—” Another hard swallow, and a shaky breath. “It was

your choice to call her or not call her. Your choice, and no one else's."

Not quite sure why Marston was so upset, Kell reached for and pulled out the cellphone from his back pocket, now understanding why Marston had given it to him.

"But why are we up here?" Kell asked, waving his cellphone at the expansive view like a baton.

"Cell reception's one hundred percent up here," said Marston, still very clearly, still not looking at Kell. "No chance of the call being dropped, so you can do what you need to do. Or not. The choice is yours."

With that, he walked back to the truck, passing it to go stand in the growing shadow of the roofline of the rebuilt cabin. He had his arms crossed over his chest and looked as though he would have wanted to bring his cowboy hat so he could duck beneath the rim of that and not show anybody what he was thinking.

Which left Kell standing on the slight hillock, in the bright sunshine, overlooking the green slope of trees going down into the valley and the glittery blue of the river leading into Half Moon Lake. If he allowed himself to forget that there was a cabin, a truck, and a stone-faced unsmiling man behind him, he could pretend he was all alone, the way it had felt since that awful day he'd been honest with his parents.

Except he wasn't alone. Marston was there, like he always had been and always would be. Waiting. Wanting what was best for Kell, so, with a decisive shove, he put his cellphone in his back pocket and marched over to stand in front of Marston, so he couldn't possibly pretend Kell wasn't right there.

"What?" asked Marston, his lips barely moving.

"I'm going to call her," said Kell, forging ahead as if it didn't look like Marston couldn't give a fuck what Kell was going to do because he knew differently.

Marston *did* care, and it just might be that he thought Kell would go back to his mom to live with her, leaving Marston far behind. Which, of course, was the last thing he wanted to

do. He didn't know what would happen with his mom, but he knew he didn't want to leave Marston's side, not for any reason. He just needed to make sure Marston knew that.

"Will you stand next to me while I call her?" he asked. "Will you stay with me?"

Kell saw the melting in Marston's eyes, the way the gold-blue color darkened, as if with resolve, Marston determined to do whatever Kell wanted from him. Even if it hurt—which made sense. Marston was afraid Kell would leave him. Was just about sure of it, in fact, and was steeling himself for it.

"Hey," said Kell as he tugged on Marston's sleeve. "Let's go stand over there. Together."

Marston's whole body was tight like newly strung barbed wire, but he went with Kell and together they stood on the little hillock as Kell pulled out his cellphone and looked at Marston's cellphone, at the list of contacts where, so very oddly, Kell could see the name of his mom and her new, never-before-seen phone number.

He dialed it, doing his best to keep his fingers from shaking but failing miserably.

The phone rang, a crystal clear signal, and then there was a click that echoed in Kell's ears. And a voice.

"Hello?" asked a voice, so very familiar and yet new at the same time. "This is Janet Dodson."

"Mom?"

He was young again, maybe ten years old. Calling from a sleepover, one of his first. He wasn't homesick, but two of the boys, bigger, held back a grade the year before and who shouldn't have been there, were smoking.

The basement den smelled awful as the smoke trailed around it, unable to get out of the closed basement windows or the door to the upstairs. They were laughing and flicking ashes around and he was afraid they would light their sleeping bags on fire—he'd wanted to go home so he'd gone upstairs and, with a shaking voice, called his mom, asking her to come get him.

*Don't say it's because of the cigarettes, Mom, he'd pleaded. Say it's for something else.*

Which she had. When she'd shown up at the front door, knocking loudly at eleven o'clock at night, she'd explained that they were all leaving for Kell's Aunt Miriam's in the morning and she'd forgotten. How foolish she was, terribly sorry, but Kell needs to get his things and come along.

She'd not even yelled at him when they got home or woken up his dad. Just told Kell to take a shower to get the smoke smell off him and made him some hot milk with vanilla in it to help him fall asleep.

And in the morning it was as if none of it had happened. Nobody at school teased him for his mom showing up like that, and while nobody had lit themselves on fire, he was leery about sleepovers from that point forward.

"Mom, it's Kell."

"Kell?" Her voice, so familiar to him, shook. "Are you okay? I just got the call from Mr. Roebuck. He said you'd been in prison but that you were out now. On parole on a ranch? Or it was a valley—"

"Mom."

He wanted her to stop talking while he arranged his thoughts in his head and he wanted her to never stop talking, her voice a soothing ribbon wrapping itself around his heart. But should he let it? She had stood to one side and let his dad torture him. Surely he shouldn't have any soft thoughts about her, not a single one.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear from you, Kell," she said into the silence. "Two years. You've been gone two years. An eternity. I looked every day. *Every* day. Spent pretty much all your father's alimony on PIs and not one of them could find you, not one. But I never gave up hope, never—"

"Mom," he said again to get her to stop talking. "Why did you let dad do that? Why did you agree to send me away? To that camp?"

There was a long, heavy pause. Kell gripped the edges of the cellphone until his fingers hurt, lifting his head so he could look at Marston, see those eyes, that unsmiling mouth. Feel the safety of the nearness of that strong body, the kind sweetness of a heart that Marston hid beneath layers and layers of silence.

“Your dad thought Serenity Sleepaway Camp would cure you, would keep you from being evil.”

Kell blinked. He’d not known his dad thought he was evil, though perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised.

“But I never did,” said his mom. “I figured we needed to find out—I mean, did I know any gay people? Maybe more than I realized, after I read a few blogs, started researching. But he got mad—he was monitoring my computer searches. Turned out he’d been doing it for years. Nothing was private, and he was so mad, and that temper of his, not in check. Not anymore.”

Kell didn’t know what to say about that, only it was news to him, though still not surprising, that his dad would spy on their computer usage. Luckily, Kell had used the school computers for the things he’d looked up when trying to figure out why he felt the way he did.

“You let him hurt me,” he said, quietly, keeping his voice as level as he could as the memories surged up like a dark black tide. “You let him *beat* me.”

Maybe she started to cry, for the sound was muffled, as though she had her hand over her mouth. Maybe he started to cry, too, for Marston suddenly moved, his arms around Kell, holding him, shielding him from the whirlwind that seemed to whip around him, trying to get in where the cracks in his skin might let them.

“Mom.”

“Kell.” She took a breath, and the word sounded so rough, like it hurt her to say it, like it wounded her to say it. Like she had her own maelstrom swirling around her, only she had nobody to hold her.

“Mom.” More gently this time.

“He scared me,” she said. “I knew he had a temper, but when you came out to us, it was like he was unleashed. I couldn’t stop him, couldn’t reason with him. I was scared he’d turn on me—” Another breath, a gasp that sounded as if she was on the verge of drowning, and he was on the verge of hardening his heart to her, when she said, “I love you so much. I’ve loved you since before you were born. I didn’t care that you were gay, but I was confused. Very confused, but I still wanted to help you navigate all of this—how did you know and what kind of boy might you like? What kind of mom would I be if I didn’t do my best to help you? But your dad—the threats, the anger—I was just so scared.”

He waited as she seemed to calm herself down, and then she said, “I don’t expect you’ll forgive me, but I hope one day you’ll understand. I let you down, in the worst way. I should have left that night, suitcases packed, you at my side. I was even thinking it at that moment, but I didn’t do it. I did leave him after you left, but it was too late, and I’d lost you.”

“Mom.”

His heart ached, not just for himself, but for her. He could remember her standing there, crying, not lifting a finger to help him, but thinking that she should. Too scared to try and leave. Immobilized by fear, then riddled with regret for the two years that followed. Kell’s dad made good money, so the alimony must have been hefty, and his mom had spent it all on PIs trying to find him.

“Mom, where are you now?”

“I’m staying with your Aunt Miriam,” she said. “She’s got a little guest house and I work in a fabric store, Dot’s Fabrics and Notions. You remember. Over in Onondaga Hill.”

Kell remembered the rambling old house overlooking a pond where his aunt lived, and where the family would visit in the summers. His dad had never liked going, and sometimes it would just be Kell and his mom, his Aunt Miriam and her three beautiful dogs, Brittany Spaniels all, with their orange and white coats, Trey, Sadie, and Jenny, romping on the slope

of green grass in summer's twilight, the fireflies dancing in the air.

But however good that memory was, he couldn't imagine his mom wearing a clerk's smock like the pale blue ones they had at Dot's Fabrics and Notions, standing behind a counter and waiting on customers. His mom had graduated from college to become Mrs. David Dodson and had never received a paycheck in her life.

"Kell," she said into the silence of his memories. "Tell me true. Are you okay? You went to prison for trespassing, Mr. Roebuck said. Spent sixty days there before you were released. Are you okay? You're in Wyoming, he said, on some kind of ranch."

"It's a valley," he said, his eyes sweeping over the view as the tears dried on his face, an urgent desire to describe its beauty to her. The peace he'd found there, the goodness. And Marston. That was the most important thing. "I've got a boyfriend," he said, the words quite clear. "His name is Marston."

He felt Marston's arms tighten around him, gentle and so solid, then Marston let go of him and stepped away, as if giving Kell a little privacy, now that the hardest part was over.

"Marston," she said, the surprise in her voice making it rise. There was a long pause, and then she asked, "Is he nice?"

The question was asked in the way any mother would ask it when inquiring after a child's newfound love. That's what he told himself as he nodded and relaxed his fingers on his cellphone.

He wasn't alone in this. He had Marston, and maybe, just maybe, he'd have his mom back. But it would take time. He needed to let it take time. Not rush. Not flail about.

If being on the road for two years and then being in prison for sixty days had taught him anything, it was to pace himself. Check the train tracks or the road, read the face of the guy in the driver's seat who was offering him a ride.

“He’s very nice,” said Kell. “He’s exactly what I needed, only I didn’t know it till I met him.”

“Is he—” She paused and he could almost hear her thinking how to phrase the question. “Is he doing his parole there as well?”

Her voice rose so hard and high that it sounded like it might shatter. But at least her worry made sense. She didn’t care that he was gay, but she cared about the kind of company he was keeping.

“No, Mom,” he said. “He’s one of the team leads. I’m on his team. We fell in love.”

“Oh,” she said. Another pause. “Is that ethical?”

The question made him laugh because it was a mom type of question. More, it was a good question, one he didn’t know how to answer himself.

And maybe Marston didn’t either, because when Kell looked up at him, Marston’s eyebrows had risen on his forehead and he shrugged. Still, what had grown between them surely hadn’t gone unnoticed by anyone else in the valley, so maybe it didn’t matter, only that they were circumspect about it.

“We’re still figuring that out, I think,” he said, feeling very wise about it all, slipping into a familiar place of exasperated love for a mom who just didn’t get it, how important a brand new iPhone was to have, or the latest style of sneakers, but who had gotten them for him just the same.

“Can I see you?” she asked. “I know Dot will understand if I take some time off.”

“Maybe at the end of summer,” he said. “I need to finish the program first.”

“But Kell—”

“I need to finish this,” he said as firmly as he could. “It’s important. It’s so that when I see you, I’m done with my parole, a free man.”

“I love you, Kell,” she said softly. “More than anything.” She paused and seemed to be talking to someone, Aunt Miriam perhaps. “Miriam says you can come stay with us when you’re done with your parole. There’s plenty of room.”

“Maybe,” he said, not wanting to commit, not liking the feeling of heading back east, being stuck in Aunt Miriam’s guesthouse. Leaving Marston behind. “Marston and I need to figure out what we’re doing when the season ends.”

The small smile Marston gave him was sweet, and the way it lit up his beautiful eyes took Kell’s breath away.

“I have to go, Mom,” he said. “But I’ll call you, like, on the weekend? That’s when we have our day off.”

“I have your number now,” she said. “Can I call you?”

“Not during the day,” he said. “But maybe let me call you the first few times.” He took a breath, a deep one. “I’m still working things out. What I want to do. How I feel.”

“That’s fine,” she said, her voice filled with warmth. “As long as you are safe and happy. That’s all I ever wanted for you. You know that, right?”

He did know that and maybe it’d been cruel of him never to call her from the road, but the hurt from her betrayal, what had looked like betrayal, had been so bad, it was like spikes poking up through skin at every turn.

“I do know,” he said finally. “I’m figuring that out, along with everything else. But I have to go now.”

“Wait,” she said. “What’s the name of the town you’re in? I won’t come visit you till you say, but at least I can look on the map. And then maybe one day you can tell me about where you’ve been.”

“Farthing,” he said. “It’s a town called Farthing, and I’m in Farthingdale Valley.”

The words felt sweet as he said them, the kiss from Marston to his temple, even sweeter.

“Okay,” she said.

“I’ve got to go. Maybe I’ll call you this weekend. Bye for now.”

He made himself click to end the call, which wasn’t the hardest thing he’d ever done, but it was up there. However, folding himself against Marston’s waiting body, feeling those arms come around him, was the easiest thing in all the world.

“Thanks for being my lifeline,” he said, the words pressing into Marston’s strong chest.

“I’ve never been anybody’s lifeline before,” Marston said, the words a whisper in Kell’s ears.

“Well, you are now,” said Kell. “Only don’t tell anyone you saw me crying over my mom. I don’t want that.”

“No, I won’t,” said Marston, holding him tighter. “I won’t, and that’s a promise.”

Marston had never lied to him, and had never broken a promise to him, so Kell knew he was in good hands. The best hands, the safest arms.

## CHAPTER 29

# KELL

Shivering in the sunlight, Kell was grateful for Marston's arms around him as his tears subsided, drying in the faint breeze, vanishing as if they'd never been.

"I feel so messed up," said Kell as he pulled away, scraping his eyes with the heel of his palm.

"Anyone would be," said Marston. He'd let Kell go when he'd wanted to be let go, but he didn't move far, instead lingered, watchful and close. "It'll get easier, I think. And that phone call had to be the hardest part."

"Yeah."

It was easier now that the call was over. Now that she knew he was safe, but that he'd drawn a boundary around himself that she couldn't cross. Maybe she would try. Maybe in a little while he wouldn't care so much, but right now he needed to feel as though he controlled when and how he talked to her. Right now, all he needed was another hug from Marston, which he got, a bear hug, close and swift and strong and sure.

"Should we get back to work?" he asked, tipping his head back to look at Marston. "I feel like we should."

"You got it," said Marston. "C'mon, get in the truck and we'll head back down."

Heading down the switchbacks felt slow and careful, but maybe that was because of Marston's glances his way, as if Marston was checking in on him, making sure he was okay.

With his window rolled down, the pine-scented breeze in his lungs, Kell did feel better. He was okay. He didn't know what the end of summer would bring, but if he could deal with his mom, he could deal with that.

Once in the parking lot, Marston parked the truck and the two of them headed to the pavilion, only to find it empty, and the two posthole diggers not in their usual place. When he looked at Marston, Kell knew that Marston, too, expected that Duane, Tyson, and Wayne would have been lollygagging, waiting for orders, and yet it seemed they were hard at work.

Kell put his phone on the table, along with Marston's phone, grabbed his gloves and his hat, and together they headed to the last place they'd been digging holes, along the willow path on the other side of the river.

Sure enough, a trio of men were hard at it, sweat glistening on their necks, a hard flush to their faces as Duane and Tyson dug holes and Wayne busied himself by shoveling half of the leftover dirt in a wheelbarrow to be carted away. The other half of the dirt would be used to fill the holes halfway up, stabilizing the signposts so concrete could be poured in.

Marston and Kell joined in, tugging on their gloves, each pairing off to help handle one of the posthole diggers. Each hole took about half an hour, so they were able to finish half a dozen before it was time to quit for dinner.

After they took their tools back to the pavilion and washed up, they got in the buffet line, and Kell felt as though he'd been pummeled all over. But he felt good, too. He'd kept up with men who were stronger than him, and he'd talked to his mom, and Marston's small smiles in his direction were just the topper.

Dinner was fried chicken and cornbread, with slaw and mashed potatoes and green beans, and Kell inhaled everything, including drinking two full glasses of milk.

"I could fall asleep right here," he said to Marston as he patted his belly.

“There’s chocolate cake,” said Marston. “But maybe we could get a couple slices to go.”

To go? Kell’s mind spun around the idea of it, and why they would do that when they could just eat dessert right away, rather than saving it. Then he saw the look in Marston’s eyes, the blue-gold glow there, the flush to his cheeks.

He sat up straight when he figured it out. Then, as casually as he could, as if his heart hadn’t started to race, he said, “I guess I could use a shower to cool off first.” Blinking Marston a kiss with his eyes, he added, “Maybe you’d like to join me.”

From the other side of the table, Duane rolled his eyes, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and said, “Get a room, you two.” But quietly, so only Kell and Marston could hear. Except Tyson heard him, and sniggered under his breath and got up as he said, “I’ll get us some cake.”

And that was the extent of it. Nobody seemed to mind that Marston got the cooks to wrap up two large pieces of chocolate cake to be left in the small service fridge.

And nobody minded when Kell and Marston went their separate ways, following the paths to their respective tents. And nobody saw when the two of them met at the entryway to the showers, each with a towel rolled up and tucked beneath their arms. Each with a shower kit. Stopping for a kiss, fond and slow and sweet.

“I know to go slow this time,” said Marston, sounding a little breathless, worry in his eyes.

“I’m not a virgin anymore,” said Kell, then he added. “At least not mostly.”

“You deserve to be treated as carefully as if you were made of bone china.”

Marston sounded absolutely serious about this, and Kell knew he didn’t mind. He knew what bone china was, and though he might be otherwise irritated having someone think he was that delicate, he knew that for Marston, it was his way of making up to Kell what he considered a grave mistake. There didn’t seem any way to convince him otherwise, so Kell

took a nice, slow breath and prepared himself to receive what Marston wanted to give him.

Which turned out to be a slow disrobing of Kell, just Kell, in the stall furthest from the main door. A sigh of appreciation with each garment Marston opened and removed. A small laugh as he bent to untie the boots on Kell's feet, small kisses to his belly before Marston helped him slip out of his boxers and blue jeans.

"Now you," said Kell, ready to insist on it, if he had to, in case Marston had some idea that all of this was supposed to be one sided, with Marston giving and Kell taking. Even as inexperienced as he was, he knew it shouldn't be like that.

To show he meant what he said, he slowly unbuttoned the buttons on Marston's shirt, and even more slowly, pulled the shirttails out from the waist of Marston's jeans. Then he made Marston sit down so he could untie his boots and pull off his socks, all the while, pretty much naked, with Marston's hands skimming his hips, barely touching, a butterfly's kiss.

Marston's body was beautiful to behold, muscled lines along his legs, broad shoulders, solid waist, and those arms around him when Kell had finally disrobed Marston to his skin. He could feel the hardness of Marston's cock pressed between their bodies, and his own hardness rising to meet it. His heart thudding like a runaway thing.

"We'll start with a shower," said Marston, reaching to turn the shower on full force. "Then we'll go back to my tent so we can lie down and do this properly."

"Not standing up?" asked Kell, eagerly following Marston beneath the spray.

"There's nothing wrong with it," said Marston. He tipped his head back and let the spray bounce around his head, his shoulders. "But I can go slow if we're in bed."

"*We* can go slow," said Kell. "It's not just going to be you doing me. It's going to go both ways."

"Okay."

They traded kisses beneath the spray, wet lips meeting, tongues touching, a flicker of warmth and salt mixed with the heat and force of the water. When they parted, Marston gently washed Kell's hair, a novel sensation that made Kell purr, deep in his chest, as Marston's fingers massaged his scalp and tendered all the tension away until Kell felt like he was floating amidst a layer of bubbles. Then Marston bathed him all over, top to toe, using the washcloth and the bar of Castile soap, scrubbing along his thighs, between his legs, everywhere.

When he gave the washcloth and soap over to Kell, Kell knew what to do, what felt good. Where to scrub and how hard. Marston was a bit taller than him, so he had Marston bend down a little so he could wash Marston's hair, urging him beneath the spray so he could make sure all the soap was out.

"I'm surprised we never ran out of hot water," said Kell when Marston turned off the shower and they began buffing each other down.

"There's a hot water on demand system in place," said Marston. "We could actually shower all night if we wanted to, but then we'd be prunes."

He held up Kell's hands and kissed his fingers one by one. Lingering, eyes half closed, reverential, as if he were praying.

"C'mon," he said, finally straightening. "Let's dry off and head back."

They traded kisses while getting dressed and then hand in hand as they walked along the path in the growing darkness, they traded more, quick laughter beneath the press of mouths, the stars in Marston's eyes, all of this branding itself on Kell's heart.

The scent of pine cooling from the heat of the day became laced into his skin, and the echo of their boots on the wooden platform in front of Marston's tent echoed its way into permanence in his brain. He would never forget Marston's soft touch to his cheek before he unzipped his tent and reached in to flick on the overhead light. Nor the way Marston pulled him

close, kisses to his cheeks, his temples, Marston's hands, strong and sure, clasping his face.

"Good so far?" asked Marston, checking in with Kell because that's just who he was.

"Yes. Oh, yes." The words escaped Kell's throat as he rose on his toes and eased himself further into Marston's embrace. "Get the screen," said Kell, whispering against Marston's mouth. "So the mosquitoes don't eat us alive."

Marston did as Kell asked, zipping the outside flap as well so they were enclosed in their canvas cave, leaving the darkness outside, the bit of wind, the lingering of the sunset above the ridge.

It was their own private world now, with no one watching, just the two of them, quickly getting undressed, right down to their boots, their boxers, and slipping into the cot, with Marston pausing to flick off the light. Even so, with the light out, there was ambient light at the head of the tent, where Marston had the top of the flap zipped down to let in a small breeze.

Marston began by touching Kell all over, kissing with his fingers, a sweet touch behind his ear, a stroke along his ribs, his hip, and then down his legs. All of this over and over until Kell was shivering, hard against his belly, breathless, mouth open, seeking a kiss. Which he got, and then some, a flick of Marston's tongue, the pressure and the warmth, Marston's arms around his shoulders, the heft of him comforting and solid.

"I don't mean to—" he began, sliding off Kell.

"No, stay," said Kell, looping his arms around Marston's neck to tie him fast, to keep him where he was forever.

The weight remained, the tangle of his thighs with Marston's thighs, the scratch of leg hair, the brush of pubic hair, all of this delicious and lingering, all in a dreamy slowness that outshone even his fiercest and most durable fantasies.

This was real. Marston was real, his kisses hot, his hand shaking when he reached between Kell's thighs and gathered him up, stroking oh, so slowly, an agonizing softness replaced by a hard stroke or two and then back again until Kell felt a dance of light building in his spine, until he didn't know whether he was floating or drawing.

"A little—" he gasped, stopping to lick his dry lips. "Harder," he finished, blinking as he said it, looking up into Marston's blue-gold eyes, so dark and deep he wanted to fall into them.

Marston obliged him, kissing Kell hard as his hand sped up, the curve of his body around Kell all but absorbing him, as if their bodies were merging, skins melding, until a ripple of delighted energy sparked through him and he came into Marston's hand, arching against Marston's chest, sighing as he was kissed and kissed again.

Then Kell did his best to return the favor, stroking Marston's cock, feeling clumsy, his fingers doing all the wrong things at the wrong time. But, beneath his inept touch, Marston felt new, and arched his back, his neck, a guttural sigh echoing in the air, his chest rising and falling. And when Marston came in Kell's hand, the length of his body hot against Kell, pleasure flushed his face, and a final gasp of pleasure against Kell's cheek told him that maybe Marston had liked what Kell had done to him, just the same.

As Marston caught his breath, Kell caught his and did his best to hold on to the sensations turning into vapor all around him. Marston kissed his closed eyes and asked, "Better than in the shower?"

"Not better." Kell shook his head and opened his eyes, knowing this like he knew nothing else. "New. Good. But not better. Can't measure something like that, you know. Don't think there's a scale for it."

"No, you're right." Marston kissed a long line from his shoulder, up his neck, possessing Kell's mouth with a sigh that seemed to come from deep within him. "I wish we'd done it

this way for your first time—” he began, but Kell stilled him, his palm to Marston’s mouth.

“We already discussed that,” he said, quite sternly, keeping his voice low. “You didn’t know because I didn’t tell you.”

“I’d read your file, you see,” said Marston, grasping Kell’s hand gently and moving it. “There was the thought that you and Bede were partners, so I thought it too. I should have asked.”

“You will stop.” Kell rose up and pushed, and Marston fell back so Kell could half-clamber on top of him. “We could do this forever, but really. Stop apologizing. We’re here, now, you and I. We decide what happens next. We’ll talk, always. That’s the best way, isn’t it? Not you beating yourself up all the time.”

“You’re right again,” said Marston, and Kell bent close to kiss that small smile that he couldn’t quite see but knew was there.

He loved the feel of the smile growing a little more broad, wider, as though Marston had begun to open his soul, his very self, to Kell.

When he’d announced he was gay. When he’d run away. Gotten arrested. Arrived in the valley. At no point had he imagined his life would turn out this way, him astride a golden god of a man, brimming with love and joy that he’d hidden away for so long it was as if he’d forgotten how to be happy.

Only now, Marston had Kell in his life, and Kell knew he would work as hard as he’d ever worked to make sure Marston knew—

“I love you,” he said, whispering it against Marston’s warm cheek. “I think I always have, and I always will.”

He felt Marston’s breath catch beneath him, the pounding of that strong heart, and the sigh as Marston reached up to clasp Kell’s face, so very gently it made Kell want to weep.

“Nobody’s ever said that to me before,” said Marston, low, lacing this with sweet, nighttime kisses. “And I’ve never felt it before, but I love you, Kell Dodson. I love you so very much.”

The last of these words cracked sharply in the calm of darkness, urging Kell to worry, to trace Marston's face, to wipe away the faint tracks of dampness at the corner of his eyes. Those eyes, blue and gold, that Kell had so easily come to adore. He wouldn't make Marston stop or tell him not to cry, because Marston's feelings went deep and for them to surface was a gift.

He hugged Marston tight, drew him close, tucked his face in Marston's neck, breathed in his scent, and knew he'd never been happier. Sure, there would be struggles and crossroads ahead of them, but in that moment, all of his dreams, even the unknown ones, had come true.

## CHAPTER 30

## EPILOGUE

S now furled around Marston's legs as a wind whipped across the narrow snow track alongside the valley. Making the snowmobile turn into the shadow of snow-coated pine trees was a kind of blessing, though it wasn't any warmer. He was glad for his snow pants and thick gloves and balaclava beneath his safety helmet, and even more glad to feel Kell's weight on the snowmobile behind him.

*How's the trailer doing?* he wanted to ask, but the balaclava and helmet wouldn't allow for any kind of conversation, and even if they would have, the wind would have whipped his words away.

The trailer was a whisper weight behind the snowmobile and was packed with supplies for the blizzard to come. There were two cords of wood, a small tank of propane, coffee, sugar, milk, potatoes for baking in their very small stove, as well as steaks, two turkey breasts for roasting, veggies enough for an army, a chocolate cake that was well frozen by now, ice cream, and, of course, an entire box of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

There might have been a few extras in there that Kell had grabbed from the bodega shelves when Marston had been looking the other way, and that was fine with him. Kell should have what he wanted for Thanksgiving, especially since the weather had made it impossible for his mom to join them.

Currently, Mrs. Dodson was getting picked up at the Akron airport by Aunt Miriam, luggage, home-baked cookies, and all, and taken back home. The blizzard currently over the

Rockies was a five-day one, and no planes were getting in or out, not at Denver International, Cheyenne International, and especially not at the little single runway local airport outside of Casper. Thus, Thanksgiving with Mrs. Dodson was canceled.

That morning's phone call between Kell and his mom had been dotted with tears and promises for a future visit. Not Christmas, though. Marston and Kell were going away for Christmas, to the California coast, to stay at the cutest B&B just outside of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

It wasn't going to be a honeymoon, but it was going to be damn well close, as Marston planned to propose. And with the small, black velvet box tucked in his very scaled back sock drawer, there was no way he wanted Mrs. Dodson as a witness.

Even as nice as she was, or seemed to be, over the phone, or sweet-faced over Zoom, he still didn't want her there. Maybe she could come after the New Year, during the brief and always unexpected January thaw.

He wanted to meet her at some point, at the very least at the wedding, which Marston had been planning in his head for weeks. Something small. There was a nice little church in Torrington, and a grange hall for the reception, and two hotels, local places in the small, cute downtown, where the guests could stay.

That is, if Kell said yes.

Maybe all of this was something other couples discussed in advance. Surely, once Kell had said yes—and he would, right?—then he and Kell would plan everything together, right down to the color of the ribbons in the flower girl's hair.

Who would be the flower girl? Clay and Austin, who both worked at the guest ranch, had a little girl, didn't they? Bea, her name was, but maybe she was too old. Marston had no idea the required age range for a flower girl, but they had the internet, and once Kell said yes, they could look it up.

All of these thoughts crowded into Marston's head, filling him, lifting him with a buoyancy that always came when he imagined a future with Kell, or even as he and Kell shared their day-to-day lives.

It was odd feeling so light and happy all the time, odd to wake up with a very beloved Kell in his arms, odd to look up with a sense of contentment from the online document where he recorded the temperature and wind speeds, propane usage, and the report from their daily rounds as they snowshoed around the valley. That's what the two of them were there for, why they'd stayed behind in the valley, to keep an eye on things.

*You're the man for this task, Leland had told him. You and Kell both. You can say no, but I'm hoping you'll say yes. I need someone here so that, come spring, we don't have to start from zero.*

What Leland was worried about, it turned out, was the tenuous hold the structures and plumbing had in the valley. Had the pipes been dug deep enough? Would the wooden platforms, now that the canvas tents had been taken down and stored in the Quonset hut, withstand the winter?

If there were any trees that came down, could Marston and Kell be sure to clear them away? And could they feed and water the horses and cattle that were being kept in the large pasture over the winter?

At first, Marston had figured the valley could take care of itself over the winter, and that the livestock could be kept at the ranch, where there was already staff on hand. But evidently, there was some money to be made from tending the horses and cattle, which belonged to the guest ranch and to other ranches, during the cold winter months, and Marston guessed that Leland figured it would be cheaper to keep on Marston and Kell than to deal with it another way.

*You'll have a nice setup, I assure you, Leland had said. And two guaranteed jobs, either on the ranch or in the valley, come spring.*

The lure of a job so he and Kell wouldn't have to take to the road looking for work meant that, of course, Marston wanted to say yes.

When he and Kell talked it over, Kell had said that whatever Marston wanted was okay with him. Marston had insisted that what Kell wanted was equally important. They had a little spat about it, after which they'd kissed and made up and then some. And agreed to stay in the valley over the winter as caretakers.

The icing on the cake had come in the form of the shelter Leland had provided for them. *It'll be small and humble*, Leland had said. *But it'll keep you safe from the elements.*

Small and humble, it most certainly was, and it was keeping them safe from the rain and the wind, the snow and the cold. But it being a tiny house on wheels, it was so darn cute Marston could hardly bear it.

Never in his life had he imagined living in such a small space and calling it home. Never in his life had he imagined Leland would take the trouble to special order it in time for the first snowfall, rather than having them make do by setting up the Quonset hut for them to live in.

It wasn't his forever home, but it was perfect for two men who wanted as much closeness as life could possibly give them. And, given that the tiny home was just a hair under three hundred square feet, there was a great deal of closeness to be had.

The tiny house sat on a trailer in the lee of the trees just to the east of the parking lot. The fit had been close, but the guy driving the truck that'd hauled it had been a genius, and parked the tiny house without a scratch, either to the structure on wheels or the surrounding trees.

Because of the trees, Marston and Kell had a windbreak to the west and a little private space around the tiny house on the east side, where they'd snagged some extra flagstones to lay a patio. Which, currently, was under two feet of snow, and it was next to this that Marston pulled up the snowmobile, parked it, and turned off the engine.

The silence from the metallic roar of the engine was replaced instantly by the *hush-hush-hush* of the wind in the trees, the soft sloughing sound the snow made as it spun from the branches as if shaking off a white coat in preparation for a second one to come when the blizzard really hit.

He patted Kell's thigh through his thick gloves. The warmth of the tiny house awaited them, once they unloaded the groceries, covered the snowmobile, and shaken the snow from their outerwear before hanging them up.

While Kell dismounted and started hauling things inside the tiny house, Marston took the opportunity to walk around the small structure, checking on the hay bales that bolstered the bottom border, keeping snow and cold from getting beneath the tiny home.

Everything was in order, so he went to the trailer and grabbed the two armfuls of wood, along with the last of what was in the trailer. The wood would go inside the tiny house because, even if they took up room, the wood would dry in the warmth and provide a nice, crackling, albeit small, fire in their little iron stove.

Pausing on the wooden deck, Marston stamped the snow from his boots, and smiled as Kell opened the door for him.

"Hey, you," said Marston. As he put the two cords of wood down, he was welcomed with a cold-nosed kiss, and warm breath on his cheek as Kell hugged him, hugged him hard, as if they'd not seen each other for weeks or maybe years, rather than just a few moments. "Shall I make us some coffee?"

"I'll make it."

But instead of turning to step into their compact galley kitchen, Kell remained with his arms around Marston's neck, pressed up full, as if Marston's outerwear wasn't still dappled with snow, wasn't cold. As if Kell desired only to warm Marston with his own body heat, and to linger as Marston whipped off his gloves and wrapped Kell in his arms. He heard the satisfied oof from Kell, and the sigh, and felt more kisses.

The love Marston felt in that moment, the warmth seeping through him as he bent to unlace his boots and straightened to unsnap his snow pants, combined in a delicious, heady realization that this was his life now.

Sure, the mornings and evenings when they went out to feed and mind the livestock were cold. And yes, the novelty of bringing home groceries on a snowmobile and trailer had quickly worn off. And yes, sometimes he and Kell bumped into each other as they tried to pass each other in the kitchen. And yes, Kell hogged the spot nearest the small, wood-burning stove. And yes, it was a pain in the ass to have to do dishes by hand, like, all the time, because there simply wasn't a dishwasher.

And yes, he could list a dozen other small things that were, at best, irritations or inconveniences. But what did they matter when, as soon as he'd stepped out of his snow pants and hung up his thick, down jacket rated to thirty below, he had an armful of Kell, and a delighted sigh in his ear, and the press of Kell's warm body against him, all up and down.

Everything else simply faded away as he held Kell, and let the feeling of connection resonate all through him, and imagined sending out those vibrations, up and up, till they reached the stars, and spread everywhere in the universe, and to distant galaxies beyond.

Yes, since Kell, Marston could finally believe that love vibrated, vibrated hard and high and fast, and was the most powerful energy in the universe.

"I'm sorry about the blizzard and your mom," he said, giving Kell's cheek a kiss as he set him on his own feet. Still holding on. Still not letting go.

"We'll see her at Christmas, right?" asked Kell. He reached to close the door, then grabbed the two cords of wood to bring them inside, where they could be warm and dry and be perfect for a fire.

"No, not at Christmas." Marston busied himself putting his things away, a must-do task inside any tiny home. Otherwise, the place would quickly become overrun with clutter.

“Remember? We’re going to California at Christmas, just the two of us.”

“That’s right.” Kell planted a quick kiss, then reached to fetch the broom and dustpan to collect all the wood scraps that shed themselves from the two cords of wood. “Don’t know why you’re being so mysterious about it all.”

“It’s supposed to be a surprise,” said Marston.

He’d researched the heck out of all the B&Bs in the area, and picked the most romantic, the cutest one. It had a fireplace, a soaking tub in the sleek bathroom and, outside, a balcony with a hot tub. All the windows and the balcony overlooked the ocean. He was planning on waiting till just before sunset, and then he was going to propose.

The B&B was a little inn called Scripps Inn, and while it wasn’t right on the beach, which would have cost an arm and a leg more than Marston could afford, it was close enough to it and the views were amazing. It was also a long way away from constant temperatures of twenty degrees below zero, a never-ceasing wind howling from the west off Guipago Ridge, and a horizon of trees coated in at least a foot of white snow at all times.

At first, he’d just thought to create a nice little getaway for just the two of them. Up at the ranch, Gabe and Blaze had promised to look after the livestock for a few days, so they were free of obligations to the valley. Then he’d found Scripps Inn, and when he managed to snag their nicest room, a king suite with the hot tub on the balcony overlooking the ocean, his mind suddenly shouted at him, as if desperately trying to wake him up from the soundest sleep.

He saw himself on one knee in front of Kell, holding out a little velvet box—a little velvet box that was open, with a sparkling gold band inside.

In this fanciful dream, Kell, his eyes alight like green jewels, had pressed his palms to his chest as if in an attempt to keep his heart from escaping. And in response to Marston’s question, his voice, of course, being strong and sure, Kell had said yes.

Everything was planned, and all the reservations were made, including upgraded seats on United, an Uber to pick them up from the airport, and a bucket of champagne on ice, upon their arrival, and a bowl of fresh strawberries to go with it.

The only thing that would throw a wrench in the works was if yet another blizzard came, and not only grounded all the planes, but made it impossible to get out of the valley, even on a snowmobile.

That would make a disaster out of the trip, though Marston knew, he truly did, that it didn't mean the proposal wouldn't happen. Still, he wanted it to be perfect so he and Kell could share the memory of that moment.

Dragging himself back to the current moment, Marston focused on the task at hand, which was putting away the groceries, and sweeping the fast-melting snow out through the door that Kell held open for him. Then they could heat up the meatloaf and the Mac-n-cheese and snuggle on the plush couch in front of the TV that hung on the opposite wall. And, also, out of the corner of their eyes, they could watch the snow continue to come down, swirling around as the darkness came down.

When they finished with dinner, and were standing hip-to-hip while doing dishes, he elbows deep in suds, Kell on drying duty, Kell asked, "So do I have to wait for my treat? Or can I have it now?"

For a moment, Marston blinked, wondering how in the hell Kell had guessed about Marston's plans? Then he realized that Kell was focusing on the Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, which were currently stowed in the freezer until they could reach an appropriate amount of frozenness.

"Do we have to save them?" asked Kell as he hung the dishtowel over the little expandable drying rack over the sink. "Or is now good? We could watch some TV and eat them all \_\_\_"

"Now is good," said Marston, pulling Kell in for a good long hug, his heart jumping in his chest.

Tomorrow wasn't a certainty. It never had been. As his chin brushed against Kell's silky dark hair, his arms around Kell's slender waist, he knew that the only moment that mattered was the one they were living in. And that he shouldn't wait. Not for anything, and especially not for love.

"You go sit," he said, urging Kell toward the couch, reaching for the clicker to place it in Kell's hands as though he was handing over a talisman. "And here." He reached inside the freezer and, in two steps, had handed over two long wrappers of Reece's Peanut Butter Cups. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" asked Kell.

His voice carried in the stove-warmed air as Marston took the short flight of steps, four steps, each with a little compartment for storage, up to their bedroom.

Going over to the dresser, he blindly reached beneath his socks for the little velvet box, still in its velvet bag. He pulled out the box and held it to his chest as he breathed deeply in and out, his heart hopping, ears ringing.

Now was good. There was no point in waiting.

If Kell said yes—and surely he would?—then they could plan the wedding together. Even keeping most of the details of their San Diego trip a secret had become a burden to his soul, though it had been a good idea in the beginning.

Now, he wanted Kell's input as to dinner reservations, whether the Uber was too much, and they should just take an airport shuttle, the one that went from the airport to La Jolla Beach. If indeed he'd simply spent too much—

"Marston?"

Marston turned to see Kell standing in the doorway, sock footed, his hands on each side of the open doorway.

"What are you doing up here?" Kell asked. Then, pointing a thumb over his shoulder, he said, "I've paused Netflix for us. Thought we could watch something about aliens."

"Yeah." Marston swallowed, hoping to disguise the roughness in his voice. He could barely catch his breath,

especially as Kell came up to him and reached for Marston's clasped hands.

"A special kind of candy?" asked Kell.

As he unfolded Marston's fingers to reveal the little velvet box, his eyes went wide, two green pools of amazement.

"What is this?" Kell asked, his lips barely moving.

Marston went to his knees, all the air grabbed from his lungs, heart pounding, but his hands were steady as he lifted the box with one hand and opened it with the other.

"Kell Dodson," he said, in a clear voice that didn't quite sound like his own. "Will you marry me? Marry me and make me the happiest man in the whole world?"

A gasp rang in his ears as Kell fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around Marston's neck, hard.

Marston grabbed onto the box to make sure he didn't drop the ring, snapped it shut, and circled both his arms around Kell's waist. Felt Kell's heart thudding, felt the shake in his frame. The kiss on his neck. The dampness of tears.

"Yes, yes, yes," came the whispered shout, so full of gladness and joy that Marston knew, in that instant, that he was right to ask now. To not wait. To let their love and life and happiness begin as soon as possible. Not saving the proposal for the perfect moment because there would never be anything more perfect than right now.

Kell pulled back, not all the way, but so that he could look at Marston while he scrubbed at his eyes with a shaky hand.

"Yes, always yes," he said with a quick kiss on Marston's mouth. "Can I see it? Can I put it on? Will you put it on me?"

Cupping the velvet box in his palm, Marston carefully opened it. Then, gently pulling the ring from its slot, the gold cool against his skin, the inset diamonds sparkling in the light, he put the box down and reached for Kell's hand.

Kell gave it to him.

For a moment, Marston clasped that hand and kissed it and thought of all the happiness that would be theirs to share, from that moment forward. It wouldn't matter about the wedding or the honeymoon, though Marston was looking forward to being in the hot tub overlooking the ocean with Kell. It wouldn't matter, any of it, except that they would do it together.

As he slid the ring on Kell's ring finger, he asked again, "Kell Dodson, will you marry me?"

"Yes, I will marry you, Marston Cleary," said Kell in a clear, strong voice.

The weight of gold now on his finger must have been what made Kell's hand shake as he traced Marston's face with his fingers, a long, slow draw of skin on skin, till at last he brushed his thumb across Marston's lower lip, as Marston often did himself.

"What a lovely man you are," said Kell, a smile dancing in his green eyes. "When is the wedding? When we go to San Diego?"

That could have been perfect, it would have been. The two of them, married on a beach by a barefooted preacher, their toes in the warm sand as the sun went down. But—

"I'd love that," said Marston. He stood up, his arms around Kell's waist, holding him close, even after Kell's feet were firmly on the floor. "But maybe that'd be too soon? Your mom would want to be there and she'd want to bring that new boyfriend I've been hearing about. Plus, we'd want to invite the guys from the ranch and the valley, so—maybe in the spring?"

"We'll plan it together." Kell nodded, then looked over at the silver laptop set snugly on the end of the kitchen counter. "Could we tell her now? Over Zoom?"

This had been the hardest part for Marston, his own personal struggle. Logically, he knew that it wasn't Mrs. Dodson's fault that she'd been unable to find her son while looking for him for two years. But emotionally, the fact that Janet Dodson let her ex-husband beat Kell for six months, and

had agreed to send him to conversion camp, was a harder pill to swallow.

He sometimes had to struggle to interact with her, though he wasn't about to cut her off from her son because that would be cruel, and he wasn't that kind of guy. He'd told Kell about his feelings, hoping Kell would understand, and Kell had. Gently and kindly, he'd listened and nodded, and kissed Marston and folded himself into Marston's arms.

"I think she's struggling too," Kell had said, though what she had to struggle over, Marston had no idea. Janet seemed to have a pretty cush life living off alimony payments from her ex, living under the expansive roof of Aunt Miriam, who, from the bookshelves in the background of their mutual Zoom calls, seemed to be pretty well off.

But he loved Kell more than his own life, so when Kell dashed to set up the laptop on the small kitchen table for the Zoom call, Marston made them coffee, pulled out the sugar and milk to doctor it with, and sat down at the table wearing his very best neutral face.

He was prepared to let Kell lead the conversation, as he usually did, seeing that Aunt Miriam and Janet were more Kell's family than his. As Kell clicked the link and fiddled with the audio and video, Marston was shocked at how tired Janet looked. Her normally tidy dark blond hair was scraped back in a ponytail, and the circles under her eyes, green eyes like Kell had, jumped out at him. She looked exhausted and upset, like he'd never seen her.

"Hello, boys," she said, including Marston, as she always did. "I'm so sorry I can't be there for Thanksgiving, but the weather—"

"Hey, Mom," said Kell, warmth in his voice. "I see you got back home okay."

"I guess the snow's pretty deep there," she said, looking at them each in turn. "Maybe I can come out for New Year's or even in the spring."

“The snow will be even deeper, then,” said Marston, speaking without meaning to, realizing that what the words might be interpreted as: *You will not be able to visit us for a long, long time. Maybe never.*

He stopped himself. The last thing he ever wanted to do was keep her apart from her son, but as Aunt Miriam had been sick at the end of summer and needed Janet’s help, and then it’d gotten busy in the valley, with all the parolees heading to various destinations and futures, and Kell and Marston setting up their tiny house, there’d not been a chance for a visit. Then the snow had started, and all bets were off, and Kell and his mom had not yet had their chance at an in-person reunion.

Janet’s eyes, even through the filter of the Zoom call, glimmered with tears. She truly loved Kell, that much was certain. And through Kell, Marston had learned that Janet had been terrified of her husband, unable to fight back or stop the abuse.

Well, maybe she could have stopped it, or maybe she couldn’t. And maybe Marston was letting his own personal demons getting in the way of his relationship with her. After all, just because Marston’s own mom had been a shitty mom didn’t mean that all moms were that way. Maybe.

“Sometimes,” said Marston, slowly, drawing both Kell and Janet’s attention to him. “There’s a thaw. Around mid-January or so. You could fly out then. We could set up one of the yurts for you. We’ve had several kits delivered, and I think we could get some help making it cozy for you. Or you could stay at a motel in Chugwater. Anyway, we’d love to have you. If you wanted to give it a try.”

Marston felt the intensity of Kell’s gaze, the way his fingers gripped Marston’s wrist, a hard, passionate squeeze that spoke volumes because, as everyone in the room knew, Marston never initiated offers like that.

“And Kell’s got something to tell you,” Marston added.

“I’m looking up what a yurt is,” said Janet, almost at the same time, her eyes a little unfocused as she typed on her keyboard. “Oh. A *yurt*. I see what that is now. I’d love to try

that.” She looked at them again, and now a smile was warming her eyes. “I’d love to. And what is your news, Kell?”

“We’re engaged to be married, Mom,” Kell said, his voice rising with excitement. “Marston’s just proposed—on one knee!—and I’ve said yes.” And then he held up his left hand so the light would glint off the ring.

“Oh.” The word was a gasp, indrawn and quick. Janet’s hands flew to her mouth as if to capture the sound, and her eyes went round, and then she began to cry.

At first, Marston thought she was crying in disappointment, but then he realized she was smiling, wiping away the tears with shaky hands and a small gasp of a laugh.

“Engaged,” she said. “To be married. When’s the wedding? Am I invited?”

“Of course you are, Mom,” said Kell stoutly, leaning forward a bit as if to let the Zoom camera emphasize how much he meant that. “Of course she is. Right, Marston?”

Both of their gazes were locked on Marston, as if he controlled all of this. Which he didn’t. But it became quite evident, as it had in the past, that perhaps he might be standing in the way, or was perceived to be standing in the way, of the happy family that they could be.

Marston was the last person on earth to believe in happy families. Nothing in his life had led him to believe it could be possible. That was until he’d met Kell. Until he’d heard Kell talking to his mom on the phone. Until he’d seen Kell interacting with Janet over Zoom calls. And then witnessed Kell’s soul-deep disappointment when it became evident that the flight bringing her to Wyoming had been cancelled.

And, just as before, when Marston had waited on Highway 313 for Kell to arrive, when he had been surprised by the number of men tumbling out of a single truck simply to greet him with six-packs of beer, he might be pleasantly surprised this time, as well. If he let himself risk it.

“Of *course* you are,” said Marston as stoutly as Kell had. “And when you come out in January, you can help us start

planning. Because, for starters, I don't have a single idea how old a flower girl should be."

"A flower girl?" asked Janet with some confusion, which was only natural, seeing as how Marston had dumped her into the middle of his thoughts.

"Well, there's Bea," he said.

"Bea?"

"She's Clay and Austin's little girl, up at the guest ranch," said Marston. "I think she's seven. Is that too old?"

"A flower girl can be as young or old as you like," said Janet, brightly. Then, more somberly, she asked, "Do you really want me to help?"

"We sure do," said Marston, answering for both of them, nearly tumbled off his seat as Kell hugged him hard. "And bring what's-his-name—I'm sorry, I honestly don't remember, but he should come, too. Will he like staying in a yurt, d'you think?"

"Steve," she said with a laugh. "And I'll ask him. I'm sure he'd love to come with me, if he can get time off work."

"We'll keep an eye on the weather for you." Marston nodded to emphasize this, then, once again, let his mouth run away with the thoughts in his brain, saying them aloud before he was really ready to hear the answer. "And once Kell and I are married, will I call you Mom or Janet?"

She had such big, green eyes, just like Kell had. So deep you could see right down to her soul as she dipped her chin, a little wary, as if she imagined he might not like her answer.

"You could call me Mom," she said, and now those eyes brimmed with tears. She paused to reach for something, which turned out to be a tissue, and as she wiped her nose and her eyes, she said, her voice a bit thick, "I'd be honored—I'd love it if you called me Mom."

"Mom it is," he said, a solemn promise to try to keep his heart open for the goodness that might come. He sometimes felt as though he'd forgotten his own mother's name—Sara?

Sabrina?—and now he wouldn't ever have to remember it. "When we get closer to the thaw in January, we'll figure out whether to put you up in a yurt or a motel, but in the meantime, how's Aunt Miriam?"

In the spring, Aunt Miriam would soon be his aunt-in-law, or maybe, more correctly, she'd be his great aunt-in-law, and maybe she might like to invite her great-nephew and her great-nephew-in-law to her lovely, rambling house overlooking a pond. And maybe she'd let him sit on that large, expansive porch with an iced tea in one hand as he pet one of her Brittany Spaniels with the other.

Then he'd just sit there and absorb the warm summer air into his lungs and perhaps, for the first time in his life, feel as though he belonged. That Kell's family was his and never more would he have to wander the earth alone.

Shaking himself, he laughed under his breath and straightened up, tucking away that particular fantasy for later, and concentrating on the moment that was right in front of him. Him sitting beside Kell, the gold ring glinting off Kell's finger, the Zoom call holding their attention, his new Mom telling them about Aunt Miriam's leg, then listing the things they needed to think about for a wedding, accompanied by the soft woof of a dog in the background, perhaps announcing that it was time for a walk outside.

All of this wrapped around him like a soft, warm blanket.

"Okay, Jenny," said Janet as she bent to kiss the white forehead of a somber and brown-eyed dog who'd put its paws in her lap. "I should go. She needs a walk. They all do."

"We'll catch you later," said Marston, a little glad to have such an emotionally fraught conversation winding down, as he very desperately needed to filter through what had been said, what he felt—was still feeling. And he very much needed to wrap his arms around Kell, and have Kell's arms around him in return, needed to let the silence sink down around them while he counted his blessings, one by one.

"That sounds good," said Janet, her arm expanding into the screen as she reached to click the End Call button. "I'll talk to

you later then, and I'll have more ideas for the wedding.”

“See you, Mom,” said Kell, followed by an echo from Marston. “See you, Mom.”

Kell reached to end the call, then closed the laptop, reaching for Marston, giving him the biggest hug.

“You're amazing,” he said, as they both stood up, their arms around each other as though they meant never to let go. “Just amazing.”

Kell tipped his head back for a kiss and Marston kissed him, gently at first, soaking up the warmth and touch and shiver of connection. Then he held Kell to him and together in the warmth of the tiny house, they rocked together, back and forth, gentle and slow, as the snow came down in soft, white flakes outside the window.

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Thank you for reading!

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# JACKIE'S NEWSLETTER

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# AUTHOR'S NOTES ABOUT THE STORY

The original title for this story was *The Cowboy and the Juvenile Delinquent*, which proved to be too long for the cover, not to mention clunky. Plus, I'd made Kell nineteen years old, and because he'd need to be in an adult prison, for the purposes of the story, he could hardly be considered a juvenile. Plus I wanted the title to follow the template: The Cowboy and the XYZ. So *Outcast* it was.

In the midst of writing this story, a very dear friend, Jeanne, passed away. Her health had been failing for several years, so it wasn't shock, but in spite of that, it disrupted my whole life. It left me questioning all those things you question when someone passes away, left me wondering if I was somehow missing out on my own life.

The day Jeanne passed away, I was the only one close enough to take Bill, her husband, to the hospital so he could say goodbye. Other family members, among them my dear friend Janet, arrived the next day, so they could also say goodbye. After which, arrangements needed to be made, papers signed, and life went on.

But the spell was broken. The day the phone call came from Bill to tell me that Jeanne was unresponsive and that the ambulance had just come to take her to the hospital, I'd been knee-deep in *Outcast*. That was the first of May. As I mourned and questioned everything I'd been doing up to that point with my life, it took me weeks, if not months, to get back into the story.

I finally was able to finish Outcast and thanks to my amazing beta readers, Angela, Amy, and Megan, I was able to shape the story into something very close to what I'd first imagined as I drafted the first outline.

There's something about this story that makes my throat thick to imagine the kind of love that family members share... I hope you enjoy it.

# A LETTER FROM JACKIE

Hello, Reader!

Thank you for reading *The Cowboy and the Outcast*, the third book in my Farthingdale Valley series.

If you enjoyed the book, I would love it if you would let your friends know so they can experience the romance between Marston and Kell.

[Click here to leave a review](#), and if you do, I'd love to read it! You can send the URL to: [Jackienorthauthor@gmail.com](mailto:Jackienorthauthor@gmail.com)

Best Regards and Happy Reading!

*Jackie*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie North has written since grade school and spent years absorbing mainstream romances. Her dream was to write full time and put her English degree to good use.

As fate would have it, she discovered m/m romance and decided that men falling in love with other men was exactly what she wanted to write about.

Her characters are a bit flawed and broken. Some find themselves on the edge of society, and others are lost. All of them deserve a happily ever after, and she makes sure they get it!

She likes long walks on the beach, the smell of lavender and rainstorms, and enjoys sleeping in on snowy mornings.

In her heart, there is peace to be found everywhere, but since in the real world this isn't always true, Jackie writes for love.

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