



A COLEMAN RANCH NOVEL

DANCING
for
DADDY

A. W. SCOTT

Dancing for Daddy

A.W. Scott

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Dear Reader

This is the fourth book in the series. While you could probably pick it up and read it, there are loads of spoilers to the previous books in the series. Please proceed knowing this.

Also, I'm a bit believer in protecting your mental health. Included below is a list of topics that are included in this story. This will hopefully help you decide how to move forward.

Content Information:

- Mentions of grief and loss
- Mention of domestic abuse
- Murder/Violence
- The story starts with a prison setting. This may be upsetting to some.
- Alcoholism and Addiction Discussions

Above all else, I want you to be able to read and enjoy the book without sacrificing your safety.

If you're ready to keep going, turn the page and learn why Harlan was one of the toughest characters I've ever written. The stubborn Daddy had his reasons.

XOXO,

Allie

Prologue

Harlan

THE BUZZER RANG, SIGNALING THE FAMILIAR CLINK OF METAL on metal as the doors drew open. “Don’t come back,” Rusty, one of the nicer guards said as he handed me my belongings.

I gave him a nod. “Don’t plan on it.”

For the first time in three and a half years, I took a deep breath of fresh air as a free man. It was astounding how different it could feel. How different I felt.

I took the walkway down to the parking lot where a couple of other men were headed. In total, six of us were being released today. I was the only one without someone waiting for me.

Or so I’d thought.

“Harlan Rainey?”

His voice was kind, yet firm. Like he knew who I was before I could even confirm it. The man was of average build and looked like he was all cowboy. I was familiar enough with the type to recognize it on sight.

From his hat to his boots, he screamed rancher. And the truck behind him was the icing on the cake. I could spot the dents and rust on it as I approached. They showed the wear and tear the vehicle had been through.

“Yes, sir. How can I help?” I asked the stranger.

“I think you can help just fine. My name is Clancy, and I’m looking for a hand. Was told to come get you.”

Shock tore through me so fast I almost fell over.

“Who called you? I’ve never met anyone named Clancy.”

He chuckled. “That’s alright. I like being unique. Your warden is an old friend of mine. He and I don’t talk much, but he had my number and mentioned you’d likely need a place to go when you got out. It’s nothing fancy, but I got a bed and honest work for you if you want it.”

I hadn’t hesitated to respond. “I’d like that.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d see it my way. Now let’s get you gone from this place. You’re never coming back here, Harlan. This is your fresh start. I’ll help you in every way I can.”

“But why? Why would you help a felon?” The word tasted like ash on my tongue. I nearly grimaced as I said it, despite practicing it to myself since the day I was convicted.

Clancy sighed as he turned to look out at the expanse of road leading away from Arborcrest Penitentiary. There was nothing to see, yet I suspected he wasn’t really focused on the setting at all. He was off somewhere else, his mind lost to memories.

When he spoke next, it was with a grave tone, as if he was exhausted. “Because people deserve to have someone see them for who they truly are. And they deserve to have second chances. This is yours. The why doesn’t really matter.”

“Ok,” I agreed. “Where are we headed?”

We climbed into the cab of the truck. Clancy started the ignition, then grinned. “To the Coleman Ranch, your new home.”

Chapter One

Harlan

Then

“I HEARD THEY GOT SOME NEW GUY TO COME IN FOR THE therapy sessions,” my cellmate said like it was some big secret. Everyone knew about the new guy. He’d been the talk of the town all month long.

My cellmate Bill liked to pretend he had a one-up on the information train that went on in this block. I would usually let him believe he was ahead of the curve, if for nothing else than to get him to shut up, but today wasn’t one of those days.

I didn’t want to interact with anyone at all. I wanted to be alone.

Hard to do when you’re stuck behind concrete walls and barbed wire topped fencing.

“What new therapy?” I asked Bill.

He grinned, eager and ready to share what he had learned. “Something about animals, man. It was on the news or some shit. The warden even had a special grant brought in to cover the costs. We’re the pilot program.”

I hummed as if agreeing with what he said.

Bill continued, not catching the sarcasm. “Yeah, they said that the new guy is supposed to start later this week. There’s a meet and greet thing we all get to go. And then they’re going to select which of us needs the most help. I bet you’ll get picked for sure.”

He froze, having realized the screw up. People didn't talk about me that way here.

They knew better than to insinuate there was anything wrong with me or that I needed more help than anyone else. In the year and a half since I've stepped foot in this prison, I'd been one nasty motherfucker. I got into fights on a regular basis and maimed more than one prisoner when they tried to prove a point by picking a fight with me.

My only saving grace was that the guards really enjoyed watching my fights, so it was rare for me to get disciplined. Probably because I fought dirtier than anyone else. That's what happened when you came from the place I did.

The warden didn't give a shit about fists flying either, so long as his payments kept on coming and no one died on his watch.

No problem for me. I would never murder a man... again.

One accident was enough.

"You know what, Bill? You're probably right. I bet I'll get first pick at whatever animals they'll bring in."

He nodded his head, confused by my agreeable nature. If he had said that at any other time, there would have been a shiv to his neck, and he'd be covered in bruises.

"I'm just wondering if these will be like exotic animals or just house animals, you know? Because if they bring in like a fucking zebra, I'm gonna trip out. But a kitten? Nah, not cool."

His voice turned into a monotonous Charlie Brown sound as he continued debating what would happen. I let myself sink into a Zen state of mind. It's where I would go when he got this way. The place where I had control of everything again, where I could make the decisions about how I spent my time, what I ate, who I was surrounded by.

It was the one thing that saved me from my own impulse when I didn't want to let my control slip. Since Bill was about the best I could ask for as a cellmate, you know, minus his chatter, I would do my best to ignore him until he wore himself out.

I didn't care about what kind of animal they brought or anything else for that matter. None of it would change the fact that I was in prison. Only time would fix that.

One week later

SO, TURNED OUT BILL WAS RIGHT. THE THERAPY THEY insisted we try out was animal therapy, and the new guy was eager to get started.

Orientation was less about meeting the person behind the process and more about seeing how we dealt with the animals while the guards supervised. Some of the men in here were fucked up enough that they would hurt an animal if left alone with it. They got off on killing things or torturing them. Therapy like this wouldn't help them.

But there were others like me who had let their anger get away from them one time too many and suffered the consequences. They'd lost their freedom and their rights as fury took hold, and now they needed to be rehabilitated back to health so that taxpayer's money wouldn't hold them forever.

I was serving a five-year sentence on a felony charge. We'd see how much of the time I'd spend behind bars. Or maybe, if I could get my shit together, I'd get out early.

The problem was that I had no motivation to get out. My family was all gone. And the few people I thought would go to bat for me when I needed it most had fled. The damage to my name had them eager to check out, to pretend they never knew me.

It was no loss for me. I didn't want to be surrounded by fake people any longer. The more real, the better.

With orientation being yesterday, today was when the real therapy started. The few of us who were selected were getting to spend quality time with the animals before going into a one-on-one therapy appointment with our regular psychologist Dr. Mead. I liked him well enough considering he didn't try to

placate me. His evaluation was simple and forthright. He didn't use fluffy language or try to sugarcoat things.

Still, I often found myself struggling to put how I felt into words. The animals were supposed to help with that. The idea was that they would soothe us enough to loosen up.

Shackled at my hands, I followed the guards through the long halls until we reached the newly designed therapy area. It was a 20x20 space with a glass roof. Sunlight poured in, illuminating the greenery someone had planted along with the outdoor style furniture. If you didn't know this was a prison, you would think this was just someone's backyard for how they'd done it up. I'm sure it was part of the illusion to help us relax.

The guards undid my handcuffs and stepped out of the room. Glass lined the wall all along one side to keep me humble enough to know there was no way I would get away with anything. The guards could see me easily.

No big deal, though. My goal was just to make it through this session so I could get back to the kitchen. It was the one good thing about this place, the fact that they'd given me cooking benefits.

Cooking, feeding others, and testing new recipes was a privilege many went without. I somehow accidentally earned the chance to participate when the previous chef got sick. Not even my fighting would pull me off kitchen duty. My food was just that good.

The sound of a door opening drew my gaze. I turned to see... a cow. An actual miniature cow. I had to blink a few times to clear my vision. There was no way this could be the case. The orientation had been with cats and dogs, the boring animals, as Bill had put it.

More surprising was the fact that this calf came with a leash and a sparkly collar. I followed the strap up to the man guiding the animal closer to me. Desire rippled through me as I took him in.

Well, that was new.

He was handsome. I couldn't pinpoint what it was about him that made me think so. I spent my entire life dating women. There was no point in my past where I'd found men attractive.

I came from a small town much further south and while they were progressing, homosexuality was not a welcome notion. Wouldn't have stopped me had I ever felt the inkling, but now there was something happening. My gut stirred and my cock tried to rally. Tried to because my thoughts were more muddled than old man Teller's field after a rainstorm.

When the cow was right beside me and the man was within reaching distance, he stuck his hand out. "You must be Harlan Rainey. My name is Dr. Hawkins. Nice to meet you."

His lyrical voice floated over me, wrapping me in its warmth and making me want things I couldn't have. Long strolls in a park. Ice cream sundaes after dinner. Weekends at the pond fishing. All things I'd grown used to in my former life but hadn't given much thought to since the sentencing.

I shook his offered hand, then immediately pulled back. I wasn't sure what needed to happen next, I just knew it wouldn't be me initiating things. While I loved the idea of getting out early, I wasn't going to bend over backwards to be someone I wasn't. Plus, after this, I had to go see Dr. Teller to talk about my feelings.

"Why don't we have a seat?" Dr. Hawkins said.

I eased into the wicker chair, sinking into the beige cushions without saying a word. It was the most comfortable chair I'd sat in, in nearly two years. I could already feel my walls lowering from just that one tactic.

Damn them.

The doctor sat down across from me in a matching seat. He unclipped the cow from its leash then patted its bottom to let it roam around.

The miniature beast took one look at me and moved right to my side. Its nose bumped against my arm as if it were a dog. I took the hint and ran my hand over its head. The hairs

there were surprisingly soft. I tugged gently at them to get their weight and feel. It was so different from anything I had come into contact within ages.

“Why don’t you tell me a little about yourself, Harlan?” The man across from me spoke casually as if this weren’t a prison, and we weren’t with a fucking cow in the middle of a room designed to ease my mind. He spoke as if I weren’t a criminal convicted of felony charges. He spoke as if I weren’t a murderer.

“Are you a trained therapist?” I asked instead of answering him.

Not missing a beat, he shook his head. “I am not, though I do have certified training in assisting people with animals and calming techniques. My goal here is just to talk to you, get to know you. Our interactions are recorded and will be given to your team who reviews your file when a parole hearing comes up or they want to make adjustments to your arrangements. They’ll look over this information along with the info Dr. Teller shares. The goal is simply to give you a safe space to let it all out.”

I nodded. “So you’re not a therapist?”

He grinned at me, giving me a perfect, bright smile that tugged at those butterflies he’d set loose inside of me. Dr. Hawkins had a sense of purity about him. Like the dark parts of this world hadn’t found him yet.

The types of people who wanted to visit prisons usually fell into two camps. The certifiable whack jobs who, for lack of a better word, were groupies. They wanted to get close and up in the action to see what was going on. Or on the opposite end, you had the religious zealots who believed that they could save everyone so long as they gave them enough love and support, or if they feared damnation enough to get on the straight and narrow.

I’d seen more men saved in the last eighteen months than I ever did sitting in the pews of my family’s congregation. The same congregation that damned me to Hell when things went south.

“It’s fine if you don’t have something to talk about,” Dr. Hawkins said in a soothing tone. “I can ask specific questions if you don’t know where to start, or I can tell you a bit about myself.”

I grunted to let him know that the latter was what I preferred. He understood me and dove into a speech about who he was. His full name was Dr. Griffin Hawkins. He was not fresh out of college, but still green enough around the ears that he saw hope everywhere he looked. His grandfather had been a vet, so he thought it made sense to do the same. He hoped to one day take over his grandfather’s practice. Until then, he was working his way around, learning bits and pieces of what he could do. He volunteered at the local shelter and worked at a major clinic in the city about an hour away. This prison project was something new he’d started on the side. His favorite color was aquamarine.

He was five foot nine and three quarters. He hated shaving but hated having his beard more. He liked to sing Mamma Mia songs in the shower. And his favorite food in the entire world was spaghetti Bolognese.

By the time he finished, I felt as if I’d known him better than I did some of my own family members. I’d spent my entire life around people who I shared blood with, people who had seen me grow up and had been there every step of the way, yet they wouldn’t even be able to tell you my favorite color if asked.

My hands sunk deeper into the animal beside me as I let those thoughts whip through me one right after another.

“Her name is Juliet,” he told me.

“As in Romeo and Juliet?”

Dr. Hawkins nodded eagerly. “Yes, I felt it was only fitting, considering the way her life would one day end. She might not drink poison because of a love that cannot be continued, but she would spend her days working and helping others only to one day be cut down by those she trusted. Animals depend so much upon us humans, and yet we treat them as if they don’t truly matter. Like they’re disposable.

They're all numbers. Pieces we move around feeding ourselves and our families, sometimes bartering them around."

I listened intently as he spoke, familiar with the type of stuff he was talking about. Growing up on a cattle farm meant I saw my fair share of animals being slaughtered. Sometimes for the greater good like feeding a family in winter, and other times simply because there wasn't much else that could be done for them.

"Is there anything you're willing to share with me, Harlan?" He asked right as the door opened and the guards stepped in with their handcuffs prepared to lock me away again. Our time had come to a close, and I hadn't uttered much outside of the few questions about him and Juliet.

I looked him dead in the eyes and said the only thing I could think of. "I make the best spaghetti Bolognese in the world."

His smile grew, it's vibrance damn near rendering me immobile. "I would really like to try it sometime."

His words were punctuated by the click of the handcuffs on my wrists. As I walked away from him, I promised myself I would make him a plate one day, come hell or high water. I needed to prove to the doctor I was a man of my word, no matter how few words they were.

Chapter Two

Griffin

Then

“I JUST WANT TO SAY THANK YOU AGAIN, DR. HAWKINS, FOR bringing me on. This project is so revolutionary, and I’m excited to be one of the first to assist,” Jose chattered nervously as we made it through the first security checkpoint at Arborcrest Penitentiary’s back entrance.

I’ve got Juliet on her leash beside me, along with a bag of treats for her since we intend to be here for a while.

“It’s no biggie, Jose,” I told him, sensing his need for me to reassure him. This was our fifth visit together, and he still felt like he needed to thank me each time. He has been shadowing me to decide if this was something he wanted to do more permanently. Like a reverse ninety-day probationary period when you’re a new hire at a job.

Not everyone was built to interact with prisoners. You say the wrong thing or insinuate ideas that could cause issues and its upheaval.

Thankfully, Jose was more aware than others I’d interviewed. The process of finding him had been long and hard. I needed to have someone who could help me extend the program nationwide. After seeing the amazing benefits of our work in such a short time, we knew the pilot was a success.

A few of the inmates were already getting accolades added to their files and mentions of parole being pushed forward for good behavior. That was all great news considering my focus was building a program that could be reconstructed across the

country. The American penitentiary system was flawed in so many ways. There were backdoor deals and unfortunate rulings in cases that should have never gone down.

My goal with the animal therapy had always been to ease those burdens for people affected. I'd begun with Arborcrest because, for one, it was close to me. That gave it a leg up in my mind. The other reason was because their warden was the most open about cooperating with us when I brought the idea forward. It only took him two months to get the paperwork pushed through and signed off. From there, it's been amazing.

A year ago, I walked into this place with wild hopes and dreams. Now I stood with an assistant I was training to take over for me one day while planning how I could replicate and build another version of this in other states.

Our work with the animals was meant to soothe the men. I wasn't a licensed therapist, and I never claimed to be one. I merely knew that animals, especially sweet, loving ones like Juliet, could be the thing to help when nothing else seemed to.

Dr. Teller, the actual therapist, would bring the men in after our visit to talk through their feelings once their walls were down. Once he'd even come in during the animal therapy session, but the two things happening at the same time tended to put the men too deep into their heads. They would clam up and not share anything, like they feared their traumas would hurt Juliet too.

I was all for accommodating whatever was needed, even if that meant longer days on site. These men deserved a chance, and I was willing to help get them there.

"Good to see you, Dr. Hawkins," Warden Payne shouted once we made it into the inner workings of the prison. He reached down to pat Juliet on the head as he always did. He gave Jose and me both a firm handshake, then went about giving us an update on how everyone had been since our last visit almost two months ago.

As much as I tried to come out regularly, sometimes things got in the way. The patients I saw at the clinic and the domestic calls I had to make for the large animals ate up loads

of my time. And even though I had a great relationship with the facility, I still had to plan things out in advance so they could help coordinate with Dr. Teller and the rest of the team.

Warden Payne explained that two men had gone up for parole since the last time we'd been here. Both were approved with ease. The parole board was excited to see the reformation they would have outside of the prison system. To further their success, I promised that my information would be on hand so that the men could come visit the clinics anytime they needed to if they felt the animals could settle their worries.

“Well, I don't want to keep you any longer,” the warden said after about another fifteen minutes of catching up. “I just wanted to tell you the good news before you went in.”

I smiled as I gave him a polite nod. “Yes sir. I appreciate that. Did you adjust the schedule as I requested?”

The look he gave me hinted that he might know why I requested said change, but he didn't call me out on it. Instead, he pulled out a sheet of paper from the stand beside him. The officers around us waited patiently for us to finish and since they knew that this list was the end of our chat, I saw them hovering for the controls to guide the warden back to his office.

“This is your schedule of patients, Dr. Hawkins. I've got all of them here just as you wished for. Are you ready to take the reins, Jose?” he joked.

Jose appeared a little squeamish at the idea, though he gave his best rallying support with a “Yes, sir.”

I chuckled at the interaction as I looked over the list. All the names were inmates I was familiar with. No one came into the program until they had been through an orientation and shown not to be aggressive to the animals. There were some who didn't need my help at all. Their crimes were not so severe that therapy was even a suggestion. They were merely biding their time behind these big walls until their freedom was secured.

It was the people in between the ones who weren't so soft that they didn't need therapy but not so hard that they were in need of or couldn't be trusted. They were what I focused on.

The further I went down the list, the more my pulse raced. I was searching for one particular name. When I spotted it, I was able to take a deep breath. The time slot showed it was close enough to the dinner hour that I'd be able to convince him to let me in the kitchen after our session. I'd been asking for it ever since he first slipped me a plate of spaghetti Bolognese.

Granted, it was a day-old meal because of how our schedule worked, but somehow Harlan Rainey had known I was coming, and he'd not only made my favorite food, but he'd had the guards wrap it up for me and then reheat it before bringing it out during our session.

I'd had the greatest pleasure of my life eating the perfection that was his cooking. Every bite held notes of a flavor I had never experienced at that level. It was a shame that he was stuck in these walls with a talent that strong.

I've been a fiend for it ever since, going so far as to plead with Warden Payne to let Harlan save food the night before I showed up. I didn't care if it was spaghetti Bolognese again or not. The man could make toast for all I cared, and I would be the first one clamoring for a bite.

They said the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. I felt like a living embodiment of that analogy.

That's not to say that I was in love with Harlan, but I couldn't deny the attraction there. From the moment I stepped into the room with Juliet leading the way, I knew that he was different. His eyes held a sort of sorrow and anger that couldn't be faked. His body was wound tight like he was waiting for a blow, and his movements were so unsure. There were depths to the man. Layers I couldn't even begin to understand.

The more we talked, the more I realized his story was much like my own in the beginning. We'd both grown up on farmland. Country backwoods types of situations. We'd both

had family and then lost touch with them over time. His for obvious reasons, me because my parents were too busy running off to explore the world to care.

At least I'd had my grandfather to guide and influence my choices. He kept me in one place, motivating me to get into this career path by giving me an example of how good life could be. I'm forever grateful to him.

Had I not been left with him, I might have grown up like Harlan, a big old cornbread, country boy with a little too much anger from the chips on my shoulder.

Somehow, destiny had brought us together in the oddest of ways. I wouldn't look that gift horse in the mouth. And I sure as hell was going to take advantage of it. Especially if it involved such good food.

"Everything looks great, Warden. Thank you so much for your help," I told him genuinely.

He whistled as he turned to walk away down the hall towards his office. There was no need for him to say anything else. He'd done his part; now I would do mine.

Once he was behind the next set of doors, we were ushered forward through the complex to the therapy room.

Jose grabbed the seat I normally took and settled in to work. I unleashed Juliet, then went to lean in the corner of the room. For today, I was going to let Jose lead things to start. I would take over later to close out the day. It was the reverse of what we normally did, but since I was going to cut out at the end, I figured it was best.

Jose knew my plan and had already arranged to drive Juliet back while leaving his personal car for me to use. We would trade off later in the city. He was so thankful for the option to come with me and do this project that he never questioned why I needed to stay.

Hours passed slowly as inmate after inmate came in and spoke. Some spilled their heart out the moment they laid their hands into Juliet's soft fur. Others held tight to their secrets and only spoke of mundane things. Most didn't want

information about the outside world, so they didn't ask questions back.

I understood and respected their need to be insulated. Coveting what you couldn't have was a dangerous game. Occasionally, some would want to know things like sports stats or whether their favorite player had been traded since they'd been arrested. I didn't mind all that because it was pretty boring.

A boring day was a good day. It was the busy, eventful visits that meant trouble was afoot.

Most of my time was spent daydreaming as I tried to guess what food Harlan was going to make for me. I contemplated how I would convince him to let me into the kitchen to watch and how I would try to hide my infatuation with him during that time. I knew if anyone looked at my face hard enough, they would see it written plain as day. The way I couldn't help but stare at his muscles as they flexed or how the pulse of my neck would beat rapidly when he got close. Would they see me sway towards him, desperate for our bodies to brush together?

We weren't allowed to hug inmates or touch them directly. It was considered a safety issue. If someone got a wild hair to choke out another human, they'd rather it be another inmate, someone on their roster of control, rather than a civilian like myself or Jose.

It didn't stop me from wishing I could. I wanted to wrap my arms around Harlan and hold him tight to me. I wanted his worries to drift away as we simply existed together in a space unmoored and unscathed by everything that had happened to him.

I didn't know all the details. Only that whatever Harlan had done, it had hurt someone else.

The guards thought he was going to try to poison me the first time he showed up with food. When I mentioned that getting poison in prison was a difficult task with how well they took care of things, their pride allowed me to eat. Time after time, I'd proven to them that Harlan had no ill will against me.

Eventually, they realized he wasn't as dangerous as they had somehow assumed.

I took over a few visits before Harlan was due to come in. Jose stepped out of the room to grab a bite with the warden. It was something that they had come to do with a few of the guards in the warden's back office. I didn't question it and didn't need to. If Jose endeared himself to the warden, then that set up an even better option for when he would one day take over this facility.

I had no intention of staying. Not when I knew I would take over my grandfather's practice one day.

Right before Harlan came into the room, I took a few solid deep breaths. I needed to contain my excitement at seeing him. He would be appalled at how he had become such a huge part of my life in the short time I'd known him. One year paled in comparison to the many that had come before it, yet Harlan Rainey had become the focal point of all that time. The more I knew about him, the more I longed to know.

Harlan came into the room quietly as he always did. The guards unhooked his wrists at the door and pushed him inside before shutting him in.

He strode to me confidently, like any other man would outside of this confined space. He passed where I was seated to grab the chair across from me, immediately greeting Juliet with open affection. This soft curve of his lips told me how happy he was by the visit. Her little body wiggled and scooted closer. If she could have sat in his lap, she would have. For all the toughness that Harlan possessed, I had a feeling he would let her.

"Good evening, Doc," he said in that deep, satisfying tone. It sent waves of lust through me. Made me crave what I couldn't have. What I desperately wanted more of. Him. I just wanted him.

"Good evening, Harlan. How are you?"

He chuckled at the question. "The same as I always am. I'm here. What about you?"

I knew the question was coming. In fact, I could have easily scripted the first part of our conversation. It was always the same. With how much he preferred listening to me talk during our visits, I had prepared myself to pivot today's visit to be different.

“Hypothetically, if I were to say that you were my last patient of the day so that I could come watch you cook in the kitchen, would you let me help you?”

His hands moving over Juliet stopped as his gaze bore into mine. “You want to help me cook?”

I fought not to bite my lip. I didn't want to give off any type of flirtation. No matter how much I wanted him, we could never be. Not with our situation, and not with the fact that I had never gotten any type of vibe from Harlan that he was interested in men.

When his eyes sparkled in my direction, it was always in humor, never in desire. When his body leaned closer, it was always to ask a question or to clear up confusion about something we were talking about. It was never because he wanted to be close to me. Never because he longed to feel my body against his.

“Your food is always such a treat. I had hoped to see you in action to see how the master does it.” I shrugged as I tried to keep my cool.

His smile grew. It was so wide. Wider than I'd ever seen it.

I felt like I'd won a fucking Olympic gold medal. Like I'd overcome every obstacle and beat out everyone else who claimed to be the best in the world. I had achieved what no one else could.

“I wouldn't say that I'm a master in the kitchen, but I would love to have your assistance. I don't usually let many people help me,” he admitted.

I tilted my head. “Then how do you feed everyone? That's a lot of people all at once.”

He turned to look away, his gaze unfocused. “Lunchtime is served by the normal kitchen staff. While they work, I do the

prep for dinner. I get as much of it ready as I can. And then whenever it's time for me to go cook, like now, I only have to stick things in the oven or put it all together. Most people don't realize how simple cooking can be. They're too caught up in everything else in life."

"But you're not," I said confidently.

He gave me a brief nod. "Yes, I would say that I'm not. Being here takes away all the distractions."

His tone had gone cool, like he was debating ending the conversation entirely, or as if he regretted sharing with me.

I wanted to keep him engaged, to keep him going. I managed to do so by asking him about what was planned for dinner. He shared with me what he already completed and then explained what was left to do. By the time the session ended, and Jose came to retrieve Juliet, I felt ready to be an extra set of hands in the kitchen rather than a spectator like I'd originally planned.

Jose waved goodbye without even a backwards glance. Then it was just me and Harlan. The guards put his cuffs back on him at the door and then they led us both towards the kitchen.

It was a place I had never been in the year that I'd been working here. I was a bit let down when it looked like every kitchen from every prison I've ever seen on television. Big pots set all around. There was one area that was obviously a prep station. I saw a set of knives locked away in a case. Big cooler doors off to the side held more ingredients, according to what Harlan had already shared.

Harlan slid on an apron as soon as his cuffs were removed, and my knees damn near buckled. I was going to have to watch some Food Network later to see if it was only this man who turned me on or if I had suddenly developed an apron fetish.

He tossed me a spare one, which I slid over my head and tied around my waist. We washed our hands then he turned to me with a lazy grin.

“Are you ready, Doc?”

I gave him a soft smile in return as I nodded. I didn't know what I was ready for, but if he was going to be there along the way, then so help me, I would follow.

Chapter Three

Harlan

Then

DR. HAWKINS CONFUSED ME. HE WAS A MIX OF SOFT YET strong and he was inquisitive to a fault. I often found myself wanting to share my deepest secrets with him simply because I knew it would make a smile light up his face at my openness, or that he would be eager to ease my pain from the troubles I'd faced. This man could make me feel things others had tried and failed to do all my life.

I was shocked that he offered to stick around after my session to eat. Or rather to help with the cooking. Not because I didn't think it was something he would do, but more because he'd never once mentioned wanting to.

I knew he was always fascinated by my food, sure. And he'd more than once told me about how much of a shame it was that others couldn't experience it. But it never had gone past that, and I thought it never would.

I didn't let many people into the kitchen while I worked. The guards usually stood close by when the knives were out, though after that, they mostly left me alone until it came time for other inmates to come in to help carry food out.

Sometimes the guards themselves would carry it out for me. I know what you're thinking. Why would prison guards help carry out food? When promised their favorite dessert, a guard would do just about anything for some of my cooking.

Nervous energy filled me as we worked together. Not because I was concerned about how the food would turn out. It

was more that I wanted to impress him. I'd always wanted to impress him. From the moment he first showed up to now, I've done everything I could to show the doctor just how talented I was.

It was a weird thing, seeking someone else's approval. I hadn't done it since I was a child, so it caught me completely off guard when I felt the urge to do so with Dr. Hawkins.

As the rush of making dinner eased, I sat at the counter with the doctor to eat our own meal. It was a nice private setup; one I was surprised the guards gave us considering how protective they were of the vet. He'd been under scrutiny every time he visited. I didn't know if it was because of an incident somewhere else, or because of the lack of trust with some of the other people in the program.

I tried to keep my mind away from the idea of anyone else getting time with the doctor. It made things easier when I had to tell him goodbye if I pretended the visit to me was his only one.

"What do you think of the process?" I asked him, my mood far too excited to censor myself like I usually did with him. Cooking always opened me up, leaving me vulnerable and giddy. I could tell from his shocked expression that my question was unexpected. His smile widened once the shock wore off.

"It was amazing. You have a skill I don't think I've ever seen in real life before. Your skill is next level. You deserve to be working in some fancy hotel or feeding celebrities. I don't know. Whatever it is fancy chefs do."

I shook my head as I laughed. "I'm sure that's someone's dream but not mine. I would much rather be somewhere more personal where I can get to know everyone. That's always been my goal; sticking close to the people that matter the most."

He hummed as he nodded around the bite of biscuits and gravy. It wasn't something I made often, but everyone usually went nuts over it. Biscuits from scratch would do that to a

man. The fascination with breakfast for dinner was one that spanned across all ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds.

Plus, breakfast here wasn't all that great. I only bargained for dinner duty and the prep time at lunch. The rest was state issued food that got shipped flash frozen from some plant.

"Do we get dessert too? Or is it only a bribe for the guards?" Doc asked me when he was done inhaling his food.

I chuckled, then went to the counter to uncover two plates of cake samples. I'd asked him two visits ago what his favorite dessert was out of curiosity. When he said cake, I was elated because that's something I knew backwards and forwards. I'd made several different kinds, too, since he said he couldn't ever settle on one flavor.

"Harlan," he breathed out, his voice strained like he was trying to hold back. From what, I wasn't sure.

I fought against my urge to tell him to let go, to trust me. To know that I wouldn't let whatever was happening here fall apart. That I would keep us afloat.

It was foolish, the notion that I had any power in this dynamic. Even more foolish that I considered myself able to make him such promises.

Without anything left to say, we ate our cakes, then washed dishes side by side. Once everything was loaded into the massive industrial washer, I took a moment to simply enjoy having the doctor with me.

"Harlan," he whispered softly, his gaze moving from mine to the door. I didn't know what it was he was going to say, and I was concerned that he was going to do something to get himself in trouble. Something that would ruin the program I could tell he adored deeply.

I shook my head. "Whatever you're thinking, I can't. I'm fine here. There's no need to worry about me. If you're going to risk trying to get me out of here or something, you shouldn't."

His eyes widened. "You thought I was about to try to bail you out?"

I nodded slowly, realizing that maybe my assumption was false.

He grimaced. "I'm really bad at this if that's what you're thinking. No, I'm not trying to bail you out. I was trying to hint that.... I don't know how to say this. And I don't know how to ask it either."

I waited patiently for him to continue. Whatever had him riled up involved me, though I couldn't imagine what it was.

Dr. Hawkins stood swiftly, then turned to pace across the room. Back and forth he went muttering to himself. Without being able to hear him, I sunk into my own thoughts.

The guards had left us alone. When the knives were locked up, there wasn't much I could get into. They tended to give me lots of leeway. And since the good doctor was with me behind the scenes, they knew there wasn't a chance of escape or injury. I hadn't ever hurt him. And I never would.

Since I started therapy with him all those months ago, my temper had lessened greatly. I no longer picked fights just because I could. My focus was on keeping to myself and ignoring all the noise.

It's not to say that some people didn't try to come after me. It's just that they weren't successful.

After another minute of his pacing, my own frustration grew. I stood up, stepping into his path. He bumped into my chest, and rather than let him stumble back, I grabbed him. My hands automatically went to his waist, as if were my nature to touch him there. When he looked up at me, every thought I'd had before rushed away.

The depth of which the green in his eyes swirled around veins of brown made the hazel pop. I could get lost in them for hours. There was something new in his gaze too. Something more.

My cock hardened, compelled to chase whatever my subconscious was picking up on. It felt as if time stood still for hours, even though it was only seconds before my mouth descended and his rose. We met in the middle, sharing a kiss

so powerful it nearly dropped me harder than any punch I'd ever taken.

The kiss moved through me, manifesting visions of us tangled together, our bodies on fire for one another. I yanked my mouth from his, overwhelmed by the sensation. His mouth hung open, glistening and puffy. His eyes were glazed, his body taut, as if ready for an attack.

I looked him over from head to toe. Not with disgust but interest. So much interest.

Since the first day he showed up, I had been questioning what I knew of my sexuality. A lot of my decisions in life had been by default. I lived in a small, one-stoplight type town where boys didn't date boys. You had to be a nice, strapping young man who went to church and took out the first girl who batted her eyelashes at you. You made your parents proud by playing a sport, typically football. And from there you got married, had a couple of kids, and did the American Dream thing.

Staring at the man I just kissed, the first man I'd ever kissed, that vision changed.

"What was that?" he asked.

My breaths were coming in heavy. So heavy, anyone who walked in at that exact moment might think I'd just run a marathon or pumped out tons of push-ups.

I couldn't answer him. The words were stuck in my throat and the urge to repeat myself was at the tip of the iceberg of my patience.

"Harlan!" His firm drawl drew me back. "What was that? I thought..." he paused as he rubbed his hands over his face quickly. "I can't... I thought..."

Frustration built within me. My cock was still hard, though the hesitancy he presented made me question how long it would stay that way.

"What did you think, Doc?" I demanded; my voice raspy with my anger.

His eyes popped open, having closed as he whispered words to himself. I couldn't hear but knew they were like a prayer of salvation. Or maybe a prayer to understand.

He took a deep breath, looked me dead in the eyes, and said, "I thought you were straight, Harlan. You've never once mentioned liking a man or dating one."

I scoffed, unable to hold it in. "And what? You thought because you brought a cute animal in here and loosened me up that I was just gonna pour my heart out to you? That I was gonna tell you all about my sexuality and who I liked to fuck? Is that what this has been for you?"

He looked taken aback by my words. Stepping forward slowly, he bridged the gap between us. "I don't know what it is, Harlan. You tell me. This is the most you've ever said to me in one sitting. Hell, today you've spoken more than you have in the last year."

My fists clenched as I demanded my body to remain still. Don't grab him. Don't pull him close. Don't kiss him again. Just don't, Harlan.

Done with all the pretense, I let him have the truth. Or at least this truth. "Let's discuss it, Dr. Hawkins," I said with all the sarcasm I could muster. "Why didn't I tell you about my sexuality?"

For one, it's none of your goddamn business. I had no reason to share that. And number two, up until ten minutes ago, I was straight as could be. No wait, I'll say up until a year ago is a better timeline. Before you walked into that room on that first day, I had never looked at a man and thought about how he would feel beneath me or on top of me. I'd never pictured him naked and panting my name as he begged for more. All the visions I'd ever had of any sexual encounter were with women, as was my experience. Then you came along."

He gaped at me; his jaw dropped. "You'd never... before me?"

I shook my head. “I never wanted to. You knocked me on my ass, Doc. And you have every visit since. I don’t have a definition for you. It wasn’t — you just don’t like fucking talking about shit where I come from. What’s the point?”

He threw his hands in the air. “What’s the point? The point is that I would have known. I would have not felt like I was going insane because all I wanted to do was kiss you and touch you and now I have, and it’s...”

I stared him down, my eyes pleading for him to continue. “It’s what?”

“It’s maddening,” he whispered.

I don’t know if it was the plea in his tone, or the way his body sagged with relief for having admitted his attraction to me after all this time, but I took advantage. My arms wrapped around him, tugging him tight as my mouth descended upon his.

This kiss wasn’t like the one before. This one was electric. It ignited everything in me, sparking through my veins. Every feeling from his skin on my fingertips to his mouth against mine enhanced the pleasure I felt. His hands gripped at my jumpsuit, as if he wanted to pull me even closer. There was no space between us. Nothing could fit through, yet he wanted more. I wanted more.

I moved my hands from his waist to grip his head. I needed to hold him still. I needed to taste him properly. It had been years since I had touched another person in this way, and the last was a fleeting memory. One I very rarely ever recalled on.

Life in prison meant no privacy. If I went to touch myself in any way that seemed sexual, I opened myself up for not just scrutiny, but for someone to offer to fix it for me. As much as I had adjusted to everything else, I had never had the desire to become someone’s bitch or make them my own.

But the doc had me in a chokehold. I would do anything this man demanded. Pride be damned. Punishments forgotten.

Freedom was here in his arms, with his tongue lapping against mine and his breaths synching with my own. That’s all

that mattered.

He pulled away all too quickly. Before I could ask him what he was doing, his hands moved to undo my jumpsuit. I looked around, careful to see if anyone would notice us. Thankfully, there wasn't a soul in sight. It was as if we'd been completely left alone in that exact moment, on that exact day, and in that exact room to get away with murder.

Or at least what felt like murder.

It was so scandalous. Scandalous because while he wasn't actually a therapist, I could be considered a patient. He was a civilian, and I was a prisoner. An inmate, a ward of the state on loan to do their bidding until my time had been served, and they judged me as no longer being a menace to society.

None of that mattered when the doc dropped to his knees, tugged my cock free, and widened his lips to accept me. He let me sink all the way to the base, his gag reflex nonexistent. My eyes rolled back in my head. I had to reach out for the counter beside us to stop from falling over and taking us both down.

When I finally got a hold of myself, I looked down to see him just waiting there, his mouth wrapped around me and his eyes bright with humor. Not because he was making fun of me, but because I think for the first time, I was truly seeing him how he wanted me to. Unabashedly ravenous for me, the same as I had been for him. Our mutual pining had come to a head, and we only had minutes to explore it.

I pulled my hips back, teasing him. He chased my cock, fighting to keep me buried in his throat. It was so greedy; I couldn't stop a smile from forming.

He sighed around my cock, and the feel and vibration of it had my free hand reaching out to clench his hair. I tugged slightly, tilting him back a bit.

"You're gonna take care of me, Doc." He blinked at me. "Blink twice for yes, once for no." He blinked twice. "I'll repeat — Are you gonna take care of me, Doc?" He blinked twice. "It's been a long time," I admitted as I ran my fingers through his hair. The method had become a soothing

technique. He wasn't Juliet, but I had even more affection towards him than I did the therapy animal.

"You like being down there for me, don't you?" I asked him. Two blinks. "You're gonna have to take every single drop. We can't make a mess. Do you understand?" He blinked twice again. "If at any point you want me to stop, you only need to tap my leg twice. Now hold on tight."

I waited as his hands wrapped around the backs of my thighs and his thumbs stroked against my muscles. The second he was in place, I pulled back and slammed forward. That lack of a gag reflex proved to hold steady as I built and kept a punishing pace against his mouth.

I wanted him to feel this later. Every time he swallowed, he'd think back to this moment, him on his knees as I fed him my cock.

As my orgasm built, I pictured the doctor and me outside of this prison, living life like we were in an alternate universe. One that didn't involve me being a felon and him being what I'd consider a goody two shoes. I pictured it all, from buying a house together to my fucking him into the mattress to christen the space. The vision of us in bed together, him pleading with me to let him come, sent me sailing. I came with a muted growl, conscious that being too loud would give us away.

As promised, the doc eagerly took every bit of what I gave him. He chased each drop and held on to me like he couldn't get enough. When I finally finished, he pulled back, leaving one hand on my thigh and the other reaching forward to wrap around my length. He held my cock steady as his mouth ran over the tip, licking and kissing slowly, making sure to get every drop.

He sat back on his heels, giving me a view I'd remember for the rest of my days. I couldn't imagine a better mental picture. I knew that no matter what happened in the future, this would remain one of the highlights of my sexual experience. No woman would ever compare. And I didn't think I'd ever find a man I'd want as bad as I want this one.

Dr. Hawkins stood and helped reposition my jumpsuit until nothing was amiss. No one would have a single clue that he had just gobbled up my cock and sucked me dry.

Not even a minute after he got us situated, the guards opened the door. We shared a look, knowing just how close we had come to being caught. But also, within that look, was the knowledge that this wouldn't be the only time.

It couldn't. We wouldn't let it be.

Whatever this thing was between me and the doctor, it needed further exploring. And since I was going to be here for the foreseeable future, he knew exactly where to find me.

Chapter Four

Griffin

PRESENT

I didn't regret much in life. My choices had all been intentional from the moment I was old enough to pay my own bills. Everything was to get to the point of being the one to take over Hidden Valley Animal Rescue for my grandfather. Nothing else mattered much.

At least, that's how it was supposed to be.

My feelings changed a bit when I met the tall, grumpy man named Harlan Rainey. He was the surprise of a lifetime when I got the prison rehab program going all those years ago. It was something I'd thought of on my own one night. I had no idea it would come to fruition. No clue it would bring me to him.

When my grandfather called me to come home to discuss taking over the business, I had no clue Harlan would go up for parole or that they would fast track it. I had no idea that by the time I went back to that prison the next month, he'd been released.

I've licked my wounds pretty much since then, not taking too much time to evaluate why one man did such a number on me. My time was split between the clinic in town, the calls I had to make to the ranches, and the rehab program that was still running. There wasn't time for much outside of that. Not enough to find someone new to obsess over.

"I can't understand why he won't just come to the store like anyone else," Mr. Cagle said into his phone as I treated his miniature yorkie for the sixth time in the last three months.

The poor pup was just old. Nothing in my medical kit could fix that. I'd tried explaining it to him many times, but he was convinced there was more to the story.

I focused on the pup on my exam table while the call continued. I was only half listening when I heard a name that stopped me in my tracks.

“Harlan shouldn't act all high and mighty like our store is too good for him to come into...”

Time slowed to a damn near stop. I was back in that prison, my gaze looking up at him as we fooled around. Then I was pressed against a wall as our bodies rubbed together. And then bent over the prep table. Image after image came from the year I spent giving myself so completely to Harlan Rainey. Every visit was something new. We took our time exploring one another, the guards and warden completely clueless about how much freedom they granted us in that kitchen.

The moment Mr. Cagle ended his call, I began fishing. “Sounds like you got your hands full with that customer,” I said nonchalantly.

He chuckled across the counter from me. “Yeah, I do. It's hard owning a grocery store out in these parts, but add in people who make things more complicated, and you've got my situation with the Coleman Ranch.”

I filtered through my list of places I'd been so far. The Coleman Ranch wasn't one. Not that it really meant anything. Most ranchers had at least one hand on staff with enough basic knowledge to take care of the small stuff. They would only call me out for the big things. Broken bones. Deep wounds. Sickness that couldn't be explained. Difficult births. Stuff like that.

“I haven't been out to those parts. What makes them so different?” My question was layered. I hoped he would tell me about the ranch, but that he'd also expand on his mention of Harlan. My Harlan. Because I had no doubt that was who it was working at the ranch.

Don't ask me how I knew. My gut maybe. Just a feeling I couldn't shake.

But sure as I knew I wanted to be a vet, and that Harlan was going to change my life after that first kiss, I knew he was here in the same small town I'd set up shop in after coming out to help my grandfather almost three years ago. He only retired this past year after working with me for the last two to get me up to date on everything he could.

"They're a special bunch. Clancy Coleman owned the place up until recently, God rest his soul. His wife and one son died ages ago. The other son left to do heaven knows what while his father stayed here grieving. Right before Clancy got sick, Atticus, the runaway son, shows back up to take over. Then Atticus shacks up with one of the hands and that starts all kinds of stuff. Now, I'm not phobic or nothing, but how the hell they got all the gay men in this county on one ranch is beside me. I wouldn't be surprised if all of them were gay and just waiting until the town settles more."

I held back my laugh at his tone. He claimed to not be homophobic, yet he was appalled that these men had managed to find each other as well as some like-minded individuals. The closed-minded nature of my clientele never ceased to amaze me. Part of me wanted to admit I was gay just to see his reaction. I only just held back.

"And what about the grocery store that makes it different? I figured that's what had you the most upset." I egged him on, hoping he'd elaborate.

Mr. Cagle nodded rapidly. "Yes, they are different there too. They used to have a chef out there — a woman — who would come shop at the store like normal. She didn't really do much out of the normal. But then, when Clancy passed, she couldn't bear to stay on the ranch anymore. Her heart was broken at losing a friend, so she took off to move closer to her family. That's when Harlan took over."

"This Harlan fellow doesn't come in like normal I'm guessing?"

“Not at all. He sends one of the hands down to get stuff most of the time. And he’s been having me order all these spices and stuff to stock at the store. I told him the last time he called that I wasn’t no online ordering place and if he wanted all that stuff to go to the computer. None of my regular customers buy the extras of what he requests. It’s all just taking up valuable space on my shelves, you know?”

I agreed with him to keep him going. “That makes sense. So no more custom orders for Harlan the cook?”

“Nope. He hasn’t contacted me since and the last time his guy came down, he shopped like normal. Spent only half what he usually did, but I figured that made sense without the spices and fancy stuff.”

“Hmm... well then. Makes sense.” I rubbed my hand along the pup on the table, thankful she was docile enough to let me check her out without a fuss. “As for your baby here, she’s doing good. Her bumps are normal given her age. I’ll prescribe a cream to help if you want. Apply it twice a day and it won’t irritate her quite as much.”

“Thanks, Dr. Hawkins. You’re doing real fine work here. Your granddaddy would be proud.” With that, he ambled out of the room, leaving me with a conundrum of how I’d find myself invited to the Coleman Ranch in the near future.

TURNED OUT I DIDN’T NEED TO BE INVITED TO THE RANCH TO get a good look at Harlan. I was on my way to the post office when I spotted a familiar figure parked in a truck outside of the grocery store.

With all the courage I could muster, I walked right up to the passenger door, opened it, and slid onto the bench seat. “Long time, no see,” I teased as I went for an easy opening.

Harlan had been looking out the window when I opened the door. I guess he figured I was whoever he was waiting on because he didn’t jump at my entrance. His head did a slow

turn until his gaze was locked on me. Only then did I get a reaction.

“Griffin,” he whispered, his tone full of confusion.

“That would be me. How are you, Harlan? It’s good to see you.” My smile was wide and sincere despite the nerves that rushed through me.

He shook his head, then closed his eyes. “You can’t be here. No. You... you have to go.”

Shocked at his abrupt tone, I leaned back into the door. My body was frozen, unable to take in the bitterness I heard.

“I’m sorry for barging in, I guess. Wanted to say hi since I only just heard you —”

“It doesn’t matter,” he interrupted. “None of it matters. You have to go. Corey will be back soon.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to throw a fit and demand he listen to me.

It wasn’t like me to lose my cool. I was the calm, collected man who used charm to ease people’s worry over their animals. I was the friend you could talk to who would keep a level head to help you see all the sides of a story. I wasn’t some hotheaded asshole who didn’t understand no meant no.

So I got out of the truck.

And I walked away.

And I wondered... what the hell happened to Harlan in all this time? But also, how could I get him to see that I wasn’t a threat?

Because that’s the way it came across. Like he was worried I had the intention of hurting him in some way. I just couldn’t figure out what way that was.

MY DAILY THOUGHTS SHIFTED FROM WORK TO HARLAN. I bounced between the two focal points of my life now that I

knew the man I was still hung up on lived closer than ever. There were no concrete walls between us now. No guards or handcuffs. We could pick up where we left off. Maybe even explore deeper and have something real.

If only he didn't hate me. Or fear me. Whichever was the case.

Months went by before I got the call to come out to the ranch for a nail in a cow's foot. Dolly, the adorable little thing, was a trooper and let me help her without much fuss. One of the ranch hands, Sean, was who called me. And since he seemed green about everything, I used the opportunity to confirm Harlan was still the cook at the ranch. Then I even went so far as to invite myself to stay for dinner instead of taking payment for the visit like I normally would.

There is nothing normal about how I feel about Harlan.

Even so, when I got to the ranch, I flirted with Sean a bit to keep up pretenses. Atticus made it clear when he showed up that my teasing wasn't warranted. He wanted it known that Sean was his and though he didn't come right out to claim him; it was obvious to me there's something more going on there.

Whatever it was that had Harlan not wanting me in his truck all those months ago, I doubt it's changed much. And I doubt he's mentioned me to his coworkers in any type of way.

Atticus and Sean led me to the house for dinner. I was amazed at the setup the Coleman family had. You could tell from looking around that this place had been here for ages, though it was still in good shape. The animals also appeared well cared for and there was nothing but smiles on every face I passed. No matter what Mr. Cagle alluded to, the people of the Coleman Ranch were happy, and that's what mattered most in my opinion.

When we walked into the house, there was a generous setup of food. The theme was decidedly Mexican, with everything from tacos and enchiladas to tostados and taquitos — all homemade.

I was convinced I'd reached some alternate universe. These were some of my favorite foods and having them made by the man I loved was a dream. Though Harlan had no idea of the depths of my feelings for him. Not really.

"This looks delicious Harlan," I told him as I grabbed a plate and followed the line of men. He was tucked away to the side of the room, watching, like he needed to witness how and what people were drawn to most.

As for me, I held nothing back. My stomach was eager to be filled with the familiar tastes of Harlan's food. It might have been years since I had any, yet with one bite, I was thrown back into the past. The flavors burst on my tongue, leaving me damn near panting for more.

Conversation picked up once everyone was seated. I threw in bits and pieces as I could, most of it about animals I've tended to and such. Even so, I didn't slow down my eating. I've never found food quite like Harlan makes. Having access to it again had me ravenous.

"You sure can put some food back, can't you, Doc?" one of the hands asked when I stood to load up a second plate.

I paused for a moment before cleaning my face off. Who knows how I looked to these men, given they didn't know the truth about why I was so eager to keep eating? I decided to cover my tracks with a partial truth.

"With the hours I keep, it's rare for me to get a full meal. It's usually snack bars and convenience foods until someone takes pity on me with something home cooked. Harlan's food has always been the best, so I guess I was making up for old times' sake."

"Old times' sake? You two know each other?"

Shit. I'd fucked up.

Before I could say a word, Harlan stood from where he'd settled all the way on the other end of the table. "That was another time. Eat up, Doc. I'll pack you something to go."

It was a peace offering of sorts. He was going to give me food to take with me, but he was also making it very clear he

didn't want me to extend my stay.

I finished what little food I managed to put on my plate, then stuck around to chat for another half hour. As I went to leave, Harlan grabbed the piles of food he'd made for me and walked me out to my truck.

When it was just the two of us, he cornered me by the driver's door. "I don't know what you're trying to do, but you need to stop. That part of my life is over. I'm done. Move on, Doc. I sure have."

I watched him walk away as my heart shattered in my chest.

Chapter Five

Harlan

A year later

THE HARD PART ABOUT LYING WASN'T THE LIE ITSELF. IT WAS the maintenance needed to keep the lie going. The stories and pieces were easy to build. You needed motivation for the lie to have a base. From there, you'd expand by keeping it close enough to the truth to be believable while not giving it all away. From there, it was a matter of embellishment. Even the smallest of kids could lie well if given enough of an example to know how. And adults, well, we were masters at it.

Maintaining a lie meant having to keep up with the timeline in your head. You had to know how many years, months, and days had passed. You had to remember the places and events as if they'd truly happened the way you said. It was hard for most people to keep it up.

Yet somehow, I'd managed to keep up the ruse to the men here at the Coleman Ranch for years. Not once had they suspected the man they worked with of being anything more than a grumpy ranch hand. Then, after Sue left to be with her family, I was nothing more than a grumpy cook.

Never did they look at me and think: **felon.**

Never did they wonder if I'd killed a man with my bare hands.

Spoiler: I had. And if given the chance to go back, I'd have probably done it the same way all over again.

I learned a valuable lesson the night I took Gary's life. And the years after, the ones spent behind bars, going to trial, and

then getting out on parole, showed me even more. I saw what the majority of people never would and never could. The disdain when someone found out about your past. The way they'd go from casual and jovial to downright rude and frightened.

Clancy has known the reason behind my actions. That my sister, God rest her soul, was married to an asshole in our small town. He didn't think twice about hitting her or making her feel like she was beneath him in every way possible. While my sister hid the abuse well, she couldn't hide when I'd shown up at their house as a surprise the day before her birthday. I'd come to whisk her away only to find her severely beaten and barely able to answer the door.

My rage had been instant back then. I was always a hothead and the moment Cecilia appeared with those bruises I saw red. Her husband barely made it out of his recliner before I laid into him. My fists hit him over and over, despite my sister's pleas. The asshole was too drunk to fight back, and in turn, was helpless against me.

By the time I broke from the haze, I was covered in blood and the man I'd once considered my brother-in-law was dead beneath me. My sister passed out in the midst of the fight, and when the police arrived with my 911 call for help, they found me with two dead bodies and a story they couldn't corroborate.

Clancy looked at me that day and said, "That's your past, Harlan. It doesn't have to be your future. Not here. You live your truth here the way it should have been."

"You're telling me to lie," I'd asked.

He shook his head. "Not really. That's up to you. Be as open or as closed off as you want. But I don't want this haunting you anymore. I'm giving you a second chance. Don't make me regret it."

From then on out, I'd worked hard to shed the before. I put away the memories of my family, of my life before the ranch. And I built up a story that didn't involve me going to prison. It

didn't involve me killing a man in a rage or losing my baby sister because I'd been too late to save her.

Maintaining the lies was harder than I expected it to be, but I'd done it. For years, I'd led everyone to believe what I wanted them to.

And now it was all going to blow up with the appearance of one man: **Dr. Griffin Hawkins.**

The man haunted my dreams. He had ever since I'd been granted my quick parole hearing. The news had come out of left field after not a single mention of me getting out early. When everything was finalized, and I was able to leave prison for the first time in years as a free man, I didn't look back. I pushed him out of my mind, despite the idea of breaking my own heart.

Griffin had been a surprise while I was locked away. He was open and eager to know me for who I was, not for the man I'd been behind bars. I told him bits and pieces of my story, though I kept most of the gruesome side to myself. And in return, he had given me kindness, along with experiences I'd never considered. He gave his body to me so freely to use and to mold how I wanted. He never once complained about the roughness or how I would have to push him away and pretend it never happened after our forbidden time together.

It was beautiful despite its nature. And when I left, I tucked it away as Clancy had given me permission to. I knew that nothing would ever come of it. It took a while for me to realize how severely fucked up that was.

To put away someone who had become such an instrumental part of my life was foolish. I should have known that all secrets come into the light eventually.

The entire reason I was put away was because of secrets. Had I not shown up on my sister's doorstep to surprise her early, she would have covered the bruises like she had every other time. I would have never known about her asshole husband's desire to use her as a punching bag.

Or maybe I would have. She probably still would have died that night because the beating she took was so bad she had internal bleeding long before I showed up.

So yeah, I knew what keeping secrets did. I knew what suppressing the truth could bring out later. And still, I'd done it.

Now Griffin was here. He was in the same small town as me and there were no concrete walls or guards to keep us apart. There were no time limits.

When he showed up here at the ranch over a year ago, I'd been caught off guard. My heart damn near beat out of my chest at the sight of him. The fear of being found out was enough to turn me into an even bigger asshole than I normally was.

Griffin letting the others know we had met in the past had been a tease to some of the guys. They had wanted to know how, and when I shut Griffin up that night he came for dinner, they knew it was something big.

I'd been conscious of his presence in town ever since. When people spoke with him, it was in his role as veterinarian and not who he was to me. I'd put off enough fuck-you vibes that the guys had stopped asking about the connection between us.

Even when Bobby Allen was called out to go look at horses that had been abused, I still didn't get the fifth degree about him. Griffin maintained his distance from me like I'd demanded. I only caught him in passing as I brought out treats from the house on our market day.

I isolated myself, keeping closed off lest I spill the beans, or more significantly, I lose control. Because Dr. Griffin Hawkins was just as captivating as the day I first met him. His body was, if I were to believe my eyes, in even better shape now than it had been then. Time had been good to him. And I wanted to unwrap him like the gift I knew he was. I knew what his hands and mouth could do. How his body felt when I sunk into it. I could even hear his moans at night when I lay in bed trying not to think of him.

Keeping my mind off him was a full-time job.

Cooking had always been my passion. Prison gave me an avenue to enhance my skills. And when I got out and got the job with Clancy, I took to it like a duck to water.

It was great to have people appreciate my food, but at the same time, the movements were so repetitious and so automatic now that my mind wandered more times than not. I could bake an entire pie or chop all the vegetables for a stew without any thought as to what I was doing, which in turn led me to think about Griffin more times than not.

I had been doing just that when Corey came into the kitchen to ask me if I wanted to go to the Scrambler with everyone. Normally, I turned them down. Heading to a bar that boasted of loud music and line dancing wasn't really my favorite way to spend my downtime. That was usually curled up with a book in my room trying to escape from the reality I knew.

But something about tonight felt different. I needed to get out of my own head. I needed to leave the kitchen for a few hours, so maybe Dr. Griffin Hawkins wouldn't have me all wrapped up around him.

I gave Corey a brief nod. "Sure, I'll go."

His eyes widened at my easily agreeable tone. I knew he'd only come to ask out of kindness. He was probably told by the others that it wasn't polite to not invite me even though they were sure I wouldn't go. Joke was on them though.

He went off to share the news with whoever had coordinated the night as I finished cleaning things up. It was late enough in the evening that I knew we didn't have long before we would be going out. I went about getting myself cleaned up in the bunkhouse, taking a quick shower and then throwing on the first thing I found. A pair of jeans and a thin button-up shirt in a deep navy blue would have to do.

I threw on a baseball cap to cover my hair, not wanting to style it, then I slipped on a pair of boots, pocketed my wallet and phone, and went to meet the others.

Maybe listening to them ramble about whatever the hell was going on in their lives would distract me from my own. Besides, I built a reputation for being the quiet one. They wouldn't expect me to share. Not unless they got a clue about something.

I found everyone waiting in the main area of the bunkhouse. I settled onto one of the chairs and listened as they prattled on while waiting for the group to be ready.

Once everyone was good to go, we loaded up into the truck and took off for the Scrambler. It was a bit of a drive, so I let myself relax in the seat as Corey and Travis bickered over movies. It wasn't often that we had downtime to do movie marathons, but occasionally Sean would convince us to take it easy.

On those nights we would all pile up, either in the big house or the bunkhouse depending on how many people wanted to be involved, and we would turn on whatever movies the men had agreed to.

Corey and Travis were currently debating about what the next movie should be. Though I didn't have an opinion, I listened raptly because it took my mind off my own issues. Back and forth they went, arguing over whether they should watch Avatar or Maze Runner.

Both movies had some type of science fiction element to them, but one had big blue aliens and the other was kind of suspense race against time thing from what they said. I hadn't seen either. I was impartial. The conversation finally came to a head when everyone agreed that Maze Runner was the choice. Corey had wanted backup in his fight, so he recruited for a collective opinion. Once it was decided, they went quiet.

We were close enough to the Scrambler that I didn't get too far into my memories of Griffin. My mind was hung up on the way his hair felt in my hands as I stroked my fingers through it. I pictured him on his knees before me. My cock hardened at the memory, and I had to shake my head to get myself to calm down.

We parked and headed inside. As if by some choreographed routine, the group gathered around a table as soon as we cleared the door. I went off with Corey to get drinks. It seemed the easiest way to keep busy while I figured out the way the night would go.

I wasn't going to try to take anyone home. That wasn't my intention. I just needed a night to not think so much.

When we got back, the group had settled into chattering about something or other. I let myself relax while everyone talked around me. As time passed, I could feel the tension drain away. It had been a good idea to come out tonight. Despite my own inner turmoil, it was nice to see the men around me finding their happiness. Sean and Atticus being the first, and then Beau and Jackson.

Now Bobby Allen had Elton, a man he brought to the ranch all beaten and bruised. It had taken everything in me not to go off the handle to avenge him. Bobby Allen told me he had it handled, and that Elton was his. I wasn't going to argue with him, plus my parole didn't really allow me to get myself into trouble.

With Clancy gone, there wasn't anyone else who knew my secret. I had no doubt Gerald had an inkling, not because he looked at me differently, but because he and Clancy were so connected before his passing.

Still, me being upset at Elton's presence only had to do with the wounds the poor man had suffered. His love for Bobby Allen and their affection for one another was instant.

Being out with them to celebrate friendship and life was a much-needed experience. Or so I thought up until the moment someone asked, "Is that Dr. Hawkins?"

My head whipped in the direction they pointed. All the blood in my body went south as my cock hardened quickly. I nearly fell over at the vision of Griffin, my Griffin, out on the dance floor, his hips rolling to the beat of the music. His eyes were closed, and his hands were raised high. He paid no attention to anyone around him. He was completely lost in the feeling of the music.

As I watched him, I felt other eyes on his performance. Not just those of my friends but other people in the bar. Men and women alike were curious, and some looked keen to approach him.

I growled at the thought. No! None of them could have him. *But what could I do?* I told the man over a year ago that we were done and to pretend like he didn't know me. In all that time, he had done as I said. He didn't come to any more dinners and, as far as I knew, his visits to the ranch were few and far between.

So why was I suddenly wanting to go over there, pull him into me, and kiss him so that no one else would dare approach? Why couldn't I control my desires anymore?

The Scrambler was the hub of this part of the country. Every single person who hooked up here was talked about and gossiped about. If I did what I wanted, no one would be able to question my feelings for the doctor.

I fought against the urge, as I told myself to let it go. I was doing good up until I saw a woman who had been eyeing him whisper to her friends and stand up from her table as if to approach him. I took off like a shot. I was a laser locked on its target ready to take it out.

I didn't hear or see anyone else around me. My focus was only on Griffin.

When I approached and grabbed his arm, he jolted at the contact, his eyes opening and locking on me. "What the hell?" he asked angrily. "Harlan?"

"Why are you out here doing this?"

He pushed me back. "Doing what? I'm just dancing."

I shook my head at him. "It's not just dancing, and you know it, Griffin." He shivered at my use of his first name. "You've got everyone in this bar salivating over you. Is that what you wanted?"

The lust that had been in his eyes turned dark. "Fuck you, Harlan. You don't have a right to say a single word to me about my choices."

He turned to storm out of the building. I followed, not giving a care as to how the scene looked. Let them think I had a bone to pick with the man. I did. Though they had no clue what kind of bone it was.

Outside, he stormed across the parking lot. I followed him step by step. The further out we got, the less noise there was from the bar and the darker everything became. He stopped next to a truck. I recognized it from his last visit to the ranch.

He whipped around. “Stop following me. There’s nothing to say. You made your point clear. I’ll just leave.”

“Why were you dancing like that?” I asked as I stepped closer. My body was drawn to his just as it had been all those years ago.

He backed up, leaning away from me and against the door. Trapped like prey, he stared me down, his expression still full of fire despite his position.

“I was dancing like that because I wanted to blow off some steam, Harlan. I’d had a rough week, and I just wanted a few minutes of peace. No one else was complaining about my dancing.”

I scoffed. “Of course, they weren’t. They were too busy eye fucking you. Half those people in there would take you to bed if you’d say yes.”

A smirk pulled across his features. “Then maybe I should go back inside. Maybe I should find someone to spend the night with, someone who won’t complain about my dancing or about even knowing me in front of other people.”

His words tore through the last of my restraint. I barreled forward, my body pressing against his.

“You will do no such thing, Griffin.”

There was still a spark in his eye. He wasn’t done teasing me yet. “Oh yeah. And why is that?”

“Because I fucking said so! And because no one else gets you. No one. You want to dance for someone, you dance for me,” I demanded a second before my mouth closed over his,

and I took what I had been wanting since the last time I saw him.

Chapter Six

Griffin

YOU WOULD THINK WITH ALL THE TIME THAT HAD PASSED, I would have forgotten what Harlan felt like. Years without his touch, yet somehow, I recognize the familiarity of it.

I sank into the kiss, my body languid as the anger that had been roaring to life vanished.

I wanted him to kiss me forever. I wanted him to mold his body to mine, to sweep us away and forget the entire last year we'd spent apart. I wanted this to be the reaction that he gave me that day at the ranch when I showed up. This was the reunion we deserved. The connection that I'd craved.

It's why despite all the dates I tried to go on, I'd never been able to move farther than a handshake or a hug from other men.

Well, that and a few other reasons. Now wasn't the time to think of those.

Harlan's hands held my face steady, tilting me this way and that so he could devour me how he pleased. I let him have his way with me, keeping my hands at my side. I was afraid to disturb him. Whatever moment he'd sunk into, whatever restraint he'd broken, would come back to life if I put my hands on him.

Plus, we were in public, and I knew that Harlan had a thing for me touching him. The second I did; he would demand I strip and bend over. He would take me without thought of where we were or who he was with, or the fact that this town gossiped more than any other place I'd ever been.

Just thinking of that had my body stiffening. He felt the change, and pulled back with a gasp. I was trapped, his gaze locked with mine. There was nothing to hide the fact that he wanted me, and I wanted him. That all-consuming desire we faced in that prison all those years ago still remained. It hadn't faded with time. It seemed that, maybe, it had actually gotten more intense.

"Harlan," I whispered. His name was a plea. I was trying to bargain with him. *Truce*. My unspoken words floated between us.

He dropped his hands as he tilted his head back. His gaze took in the dark sky littered with stars.

I'd spent many a night in my backyard looking up at those stars, wishing on every single one that shot across the sky that life could be different. That everything that had happened would have gone some other way. Maybe if I had been there when he went up for parole, I could have told him that I wanted more than to sneak around. I could have brought him home with me, offered him a place to stay, and helped him with the transition. Maybe if time and distance hadn't kept us apart, I would have understood why the man who had been so gentle and kind with me could be so harsh and despondent now.

When his head came back down, the fire in his eyes had only dimmed slightly. I could still see the hunger there. I still felt his hardness pressed against me.

"Griffin," he said, my name with a rumble that I had adored.

I faltered when he didn't continue after saying my name. Past me might have stepped forward and instigated things. I might have dropped my pants and let him take me there in that parking lot, or I might have demanded he get in my truck and come home with me.

But that was before I'd spent our time apart learning more about myself and what I wanted. I didn't ever want to be caught in a situation again like I had been with Harlan where there were no definitions or parameters set for a relationship.

As I was doing all my self-reflection, I came to realize there was more to me than just what I had known. I was gay, of course, but there was something else that had become a huge part of me.

I stumbled upon age play late one night while working from home. My computer screen went from a detailed spreadsheet of business transactions for my grandfather to a website covered in animal cartoons. There were cows and chickens, even a little horse.

The smile I let loose was unabashed. I felt a kinship with the designer. Whether it was just their love of animals or the fact that they were so fucking cute, I couldn't see straight. It was as I started to read through the page that I realized where I'd wound up. The blog was one that was still bookmarked on my computer for when I felt lonely. The discussion of pacifiers and bottles, and how having someone to care for you was okay, changed my life.

Harlan showing up in my world a year ago made a part of me long to share what I had been learning with him. I thought maybe he'd be willing to try. Maybe I could be brave enough that he would step into the role of Daddy so that I could understand just how much regression I felt comfortable with.

But then he turned me away. He wanted me to pretend like I didn't know who he was. And I tried, truly. I had gone on dates with other men and researched kink clubs to see how I could go about making friends who were little.

I'd had zero success with moving on, and now standing here with Harlan, I felt even smaller. I couldn't even bring myself to ask what happened next because the way he took control of the kiss and the way he chased me set the little in me alive.

At my silence, Harlan released a harsh breath. He pulled his hands away from me and stuck them in his pockets. "I didn't come out here to attack you. I didn't like all the attention you were getting," he admitted.

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. "You didn't like the attention I was getting in the bar?" I asked for

the sake of clarity.

He gave me a firm nod as his gaze turned towards the building in the distance. “They were all circling you like vultures. They looked as if they would pounce and steal you if given the chance.”

“Steal me?”

“Yes,” he said. “Steal you from me. I don’t want your attention on them. They don’t deserve to have you. They would never be able to treat you the way you should be treated.”

My hands went to my hips. “And you do? Are you trying to say that you treat me right, Harlan? If I remember correctly, you told me to ‘get lost and forget about you.’ You said to pretend that I didn’t know who you were and that all those times we’d had together were nothing.”

One of his hands came out of his pocket and ran along his jaw. I could see the shadow of stubble where a beard would be growing by morning if he didn’t take care of it. I wanted to run my hands across it. I wanted to feel it move against my chest as his mouth traced along my neck and jaw. I wanted to feel it along my thigh as his mouth hovered over my cock, teasing me like he’d done in the past.

There was so much that I wanted, and I didn’t think any of it was going to happen. In fact, I knew it wouldn’t. Despite Harlan feeling this surge of jealousy, he didn’t want me around.

Worst part was that I didn’t know why. I had a feeling it was because of where I’d met him and how I knew him. But he had to have known that I wouldn’t say a word about that to anyone. No one knew about my prison project here. They just knew about the clinic.

When I took over my grandfather’s clinic, I decided to keep my role with the clinic separate from all other projects. I didn’t need the small-town gossip train to run rampant.

It was amazing how much disdain there was for the penal system. Even when trying to help others, people would look

down on me or tell me it was a hopeless cause, and that I was wasting my efforts and money when they found out. There were some that did support but a lot more misunderstood what was happening behind those walls. They saw criminals and villains, murderers and molesters.

They forgot that these people were someone's family. They were brothers, mothers, fathers, and daughters. They forgot that some of these people were parents who had young children. Maybe they were defending someone weaker than themselves, or they got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time and weren't even guilty.

It was a cause that was dear to my heart. And after Harlan, I was even more determined to help rehabilitate those that people others had given up on.

"What am I supposed to do now, Harlan?" I asked when he still didn't speak.

"You told me to leave, and I did. And I'm out tonight just to enjoy myself, yet you storm over to me like I'm some cheating husband caught red-handed. You chased me out here and you kissed me."

The last words were broken as a sob caught in my throat. Agony ripped through me knowing that this would be our last kiss. That the heated words of anger would be how I remembered him instead of the last time we were together at Arborcrest. At least that memory had been a happy one.

I shook my head as I tried to clear my thoughts. Harlan moved forward, his body lining up with mine again. He gripped my hips tightly as my hands went to his chest. Despite knowing I should, I couldn't find the strength to actually push him away.

Or maybe it was the fact that I didn't want to. I wanted him close, holding me as we stayed in this half limbo of lust.

"Do you have a place here in town?" he asked me.

I nodded slowly. "I do. When I moved here, I got a little house out on some land. Nothing like the ranch you're on, but

I'm secluded enough that my neighbors and I don't see each other often."

He nodded briefly, then reached beside me to open the door. "Get in. We're leaving. You're gonna drive us to this house of yours, and we're going to talk."

I swallowed thickly, the demand in his tone leaving no room for me to misunderstand. The little inside me recognized that, moving instantly to do as he said. Harlan walked around the tailgate of my truck and climbed into the cab. He pulled out his phone and started texting someone.

At my stare, he shared, "I'm telling the guys that I found a different way home. They won't mind since I don't usually stick around this long anyway."

It was the most I'd heard him speak in ages. Not since those therapy appointments where he would share bits and pieces of himself while avoiding heavy topics.

"Put on your seatbelt," he said firmly as he tapped the red button where the belt would go.

I reached for it and snapped it into place without question. Then I turned the ignition and pulled away. The trip home was quiet. Neither Harlan nor I spoke. Me because I really didn't know what to say. Him likely because that was just his nature. Harlan hadn't been big on talking before, but his actions always spoke volumes. The fact that he left the rest of his friends and climbed into my truck to come to my house told me that we're gonna have to come to some type of truce. Maybe he had read my mind. Maybe he knew that I would be willing to bend over backwards, to turn myself inside out, just to make him happy.

At my place, I did the hospitable thing of offering him a drink. He turned me down for anything alcoholic but did ask if I would brew some coffee. I went about making enough for both of us, seeing as I'd had a couple of beers earlier in the night, and I didn't want there to be any trace of that in my system for this conversation. Most of it was gone, though the lingering buzz had to head out. I needed a clear head.

With everything done just the right way, I sat down on the couch beside Harlan after easing the cups on the coffee table. He picked his up and took a sip, humming in appreciation. I made it halfway through my cup before my patience evaporated.

“Harlan, why are we here? Why are you here? None of this is making any sense.”

He set his cup on the table, then turned on the couch to face me. “When I went up for parole, I had nothing and no one I could turn to.”

I had to bite my tongue. Not true, I shouted in my mind. Me! You had me.

Instead of saying that aloud, I nodded my head as I urged him to continue. I knew that him sharing this was going to give me some kind of answer to why he’d suddenly done a 180 on me. Or so I hoped.

“As I was saying, when I was on my way out, I thought I’d have to search high and low for jobs and a place to stay. I’d had enough money sitting in a savings account that I would be able to get a hotel for a few nights while I hunted. But none of that happened. Instead, I walked outside to find Clancy Coleman waiting for me with a smile, a job offer, and a place to live.”

A smile came then, as if he were remembering something. I longed to keep that look on his face. It was one of my favorite looks of his. It tied right up there with the look of pleasure on his face when he was buried inside me.

“What happened next?” I asked when he didn’t continue.

He shook himself as if pulling back from the memory. “With Clancy I was upfront. I told him everything about my past and the whys of it all. He basically told me that he had no problem with it and that I could tell the others as much or as little as I wanted, but he would never judge me for whatever decision I made because he understood how difficult it was to keep a secret.

“I decided not to tell anyone that I had served time behind bars. I made up a story about my past, one that didn’t include the bad things that happened. I worked as a hand for a little bit, and then when Clancy passed and the cook for the ranch left, I saw an opportunity, and I approached Atticus to take over. He was more than happy to not have to hunt anyone down to feed his men, while also trying to plan his father’s funeral. It was Clancy’s final gift to me, I think, because the man knew how much I loved cooking, but he couldn’t bring himself to let go of the woman who’d been there for so long.”

He paused as if to take a deep breath while his gaze went over my shoulder.

“And it’s not that I’m scared to tell them now, but there’s a certain level of trust at the ranch. It’s not my place to say or out anyone, but I have a feeling from dinner you recognize that Sean and Atticus are together?”

I nodded. “Yes, I had been teasing Sean before dinner when I first came to visit. Atticus took it as flirting. He quickly put me in my place.”

Harlan groaned, as if the news of that wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“Anyway,” he said, “there’s more. There are more couples than just them on the ranch. We have several people who have gotten together, and it’s an unconventional place. They’ve entrusted me with their secrets and telling them now feels like I’ve betrayed them in some way.”

“That’s understandable,” I told him. “It feels like it’s a one-sided friendship. They might not take it well.”

He scoffed. “Yeah. And I definitely don’t want the Daddies to gang up on me.”

I froze at the word. “Did you just say Daddies?”

His gaze moved from the spot he was looking at over my shoulder back to me. I watched him swallow slowly as he gave a nod. “I did. That’s the thing about the ranch. We’re a safe haven for people. Whether they’re gay or hurt or struggling, Clancy, the previous owner, made sure that people had a home.

And Atticus, in his father's wake, has taken up the mantle of doing so. When he and Sean admitted they had a relationship, they also shared that Atticus was Sean's Daddy. Not in the biological sense of course. More the kinky kind of way."

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I was intrigued. I was curious. I didn't really know what to say.

I went with, "Is everyone on the ranch a Daddy with a little?" as I racked my brain to remember the dinner we'd had a year before. I tried to put all the faces together with people, but I knew that so much time had passed that there were likely others in their place or maybe dynamics have shifted.

Harlan shrugged. "I mean, I don't know about everyone, but we would likely say there's an unusual number of men who find themselves to be dominant and caring for a little."

Confidence bolstered me at the ease with which he started to speak. I leaned forward, eyes bright. "What about you, Harlan? Are you a Daddy too?"

Chapter Seven

Harlan

THE WAY GRIFFIN ASKED ME IF I WAS A DADDY SENT ALARM bells ringing in my head. His body leaned close to mine, and his eyes lit with enthusiasm.

Was he excited because he was hoping the answer was no? Or was this a panic-stricken look, and he was worried that there was someone else? Maybe I was interpreting it the wrong way completely, and he meant something entirely different?

“To be honest, I hadn’t given it all that much thought.”

Liar.

Okay, I tried not to give it too much thought. I was surrounded by men who often either forgot or didn’t care who heard them speaking to one another. Because I was the quiet, grumpy man in the kitchen, they would stick around and talk freely as if I weren’t there.

I’d heard the phrases Daddy and boy and little more times in the last two years or so than in all of my years prior. The first time I heard it, I immediately went to my room and looked up what it meant. I wanted to know if there was some type of code that I wasn’t understanding or if maybe what I thought it meant was true.

I researched age play that night and every night since it’s been on my mind. Things like, would I want to be a Daddy, or would I want someone to take care of me? That one had an obvious answer. If ever there was a person I wanted to be involved with on this level, I would be the Daddy. I liked

having control over my life too much to give that power to someone else.

Being in prison took away those freedoms. I couldn't decide when to wake up or when to go to bed. I didn't even get to pick what I ate until I took over in the kitchen. Having a regimented schedule eased the sting of being there, but it didn't take the pain away. Now that I was free, I made all the decisions for my life whenever possible. I still stuck to a structured day. It was just me calling the shots now.

Wanting to be a Daddy, or considering it rather, I realized that meant I needed to picture what my perfect partner would be like. Would they be someone who dressed so little they needed diapers and bottles? Or would they be someone who was more of a middle that I would just hang out with and take care of in a lesser role since their needs wouldn't be as frequent as a little?

I tossed the idea around for ages until I settled on the idea that my perfect partner would be someone that I gelled with because of who they were and less about what type of regression they practiced.

Every time I tried to picture it; I only saw Griffin. I wanted it to be him. I wanted him to call me Daddy, to look at me and see someone who cared for him and was there. It threw off my focus, making me wish for something I couldn't have.

I hated the memory of us separating after he came back into my life a year ago. Despite sending him away, I still pictured him as the one to be my little.

And now, he sat before me asking if I was a Daddy, clueless to what that meant to me.

My fingers tugged at the fabric on the back of his couch. I needed some type of physical distraction to make it through the conversation. "Am I a Daddy because I have the experience of being a Daddy? No, I'm not. Do I think that I would be a good Daddy with the right person? Absolutely."

He leaned even closer, his head going to the back of the couch as his body sank into the cushions.

“You’re serious?” he asked.

“I am. With the men around me being so open about their relationships, I was curious to know more. I’ve looked into it, though I’ve never pursued someone. I guess I figured that my person would show up like theirs had.”

“You’ll have to tell me their stories one day,” he told me. “They sound like they’re quite interesting.”

I stopped playing with the couch. “They are and it’s probably best to you hear it all straight from them. There are details I don’t know that would probably make them better.”

A silence grew between us. It was filled with tension, as if we were seconds away from the spark igniting. Griffin was the first to speak. “Do you think that maybe... maybe we don’t have to hate each other? Maybe I just keep your secret and we could be friends.”

The way his face scrunched at the word told me friends wasn’t really ideal for him. It wasn’t for me either. Especially not after seeing how curious he was about the Daddy lifestyle.

“I don’t want to be your friend.”

His expression sank. “Oh, okay, then I understand. I can drive you back to the ranch if you’d like.”

He stood to do just that, but I grabbed his hand to stop him.

“I don’t want to be your friend, Griffin because well, because I don’t fuck my friends.”

His jaw dropped open. “Excuse me?”

I scrubbed my free hand over my face as I fought to make my words make sense.

“We’ve had sex before. And while I’m not opposed to the whole being friends with someone you’ve slept with idea, I’m not that good at it. And I don’t want to not have the opportunity to sleep with you again if I can.” I trailed off, realizing I was still being confusing.

Griffin sat back down on the couch, his body closer than before. “What are you saying?” he asked slowly. “Do you

want to date me?”

With him as close as he was, I couldn't resist touching him. I slid my hand up his arm from where I'd been holding his wrist and moved over his shoulder. I traced up his neck to cup his jaw.

“I'm terrified of the truth coming out. But I'm more afraid of watching you walk away from me like you did at the bar tonight. I don't want to shut you out of my life again. I want more. I want to try...”

“To try what?” his body drifted forward.

I leaned in to meet him halfway. “Would you let me be your Daddy? Would you try a relationship outside of the confines we had before? I can't say that I'll do a good job, or I'll even know how to. But I'd really like to try—”

I'm cut off when his mouth pressed against mine. His kiss was firm for a moment before he sighed and released the tightness in his hold. I felt him relax as he opened for me.

I took the chance to grab his waist and pull him onto my lap. Griffin straddled me, legs spread across my thighs as his mouth worked over mine.

It was a ravenous kiss, one that spoke of a hunger we had suppressed for far too long.

As our lips separated, he panted and moaned. I trailed my mouth over his jaw and down the column of his neck as my hands worked his shirt up.

“Harlan,” he moaned, his body arching as his hips thrust forward. I got his shirt free and then grabbed his hips to hold him still.

“Is that what you call me?” I asked, my tone firm.

He gave me a wide-eyed stare. “No, Daddy, it isn't.”

My smile was instantaneous. There was no holding back the joy I felt at hearing that five-letter word come from his lips. A word that held new meaning for us. It gave us a new chance at something. Something that wasn't tainted by its location or the life I had at the time. It was new, and it was us.

“What would you like, Buttons?” I asked.

He scrunched his nose at me. “Buttons?”

I squeezed his hips as I inched him forward. “Yes, Buttons. Because you’re cute as a button. And because I would much prefer to keep you naked all the time. No buttons on shirts. No buttons on clothes. Just you always naked and ready for me.”

I tilted his hips forward, then pushed him back, grinding together just enough to keep us both hard and on edge. Once he understood my choice of nickname, and he knew to call me Daddy, I pushed Griffin off my lap to strip his jeans off him.

It took a minute to get us both properly naked. Bare and straddling my waist again, I watched a saucy grin take over my boy’s face.

“I like you like this,” I told him honestly.

“Like what, Daddy?”

“Naked and at my mercy.” I held my palm up. “Now lick Daddy’s hand. Get it nice and wet.”

He did as I said, taking his time to cover every inch. When he finished, I lined up our cocks and wrapped my fingers around both.

“Show me how bad you want Daddy, Buttons. Make us both come,” I demanded.

He shivered at my tone, then did as I asked. His hands held onto my shoulders as his thighs worked to push him back and forth. It was a small motion, one so minuscule, it wouldn’t have been much in any other situation. But in ours, it was powerful. The friction and the wetness from my hand was perfect. I squeezed tighter, eager to draw our orgasms forward.

“That’s it,” I told him when I felt his cock pulse in my grip. “Let go for Daddy.”

Griffin arched back; his eyes closed as pleasure swam through him. I kept my eyes open, grunting through the pleasure as I took him in. All the times that we were together before, it was always rushed. We could never strip completely

like we were now and never was the setting one safe enough for us to relax after but time changed things.

He cried out as his cum painted our chests. I felt my own body break right after, adding to the mix and making us look more wrecked than before.

Griffin fell forward into my arms, smashing the mess between us without a care in the world. He hummed contentedly as his mouth moved to my neck, sucking fiercely against the skin. I knew without looking there would be a mark there. I basked in that truth. I wanted to wear his marks, wanted to carry him around with me until I could see him again.

I had no intention of hiding my relationship from everyone at the ranch, but I wasn't going to parade him around either. Not until we ironed out all the details of how this relationship would go.

Sex between us had always been easy. It was everything else that came after that was difficult.

I suspected there would be challenges. I was willing to work through them all if it meant Griffin would be mine.

Chapter Eight

Griffin

A WEEK LATER, I WAS THINKING ABOUT HARLAN WHEN MY phone rang with a familiar ringtone. I grinned as I excused myself to my office. I leaned back in my chair as I answered Jose's call.

“How's it going, stranger?”

When I had taken over my grandfather's business, I gave Jose control of the program's day-to-day operations. At that point, he had been by my side long enough to take the helm. In my opinion, he was the obvious choice.

“It's been busy. Things have picked up since we acquired more animals and expanded locations, but man we're helping so many of these guys. The increase in parole grants has gone up fourteen percent in the last year.”

Chills went down my spine as I thought of my part in all this. Men were not only getting their freedom back, but they were also learning to regulate their feelings and emotions. Hopefully they would continue the process after getting released. We had set up stations outside the prisons where the men could go when they were stressed. Rather than getting in a bar fight or letting that anger loose on an innocent bystander, they could drive to the nearest location to sit and pet the animal of their choosing for an endless amount of time. It was a no cost, no commitment solution for them.

“Well, it's good to hear from you, man, but I imagine you didn't call me just to say that you were busy or throw out data to me,” I joked.

His sigh was the first signal something was wrong. Something that would likely upset me.

“You remember Juliet?” He asked.

I scoffed. “Of course I remember her.”

She was our baby. Our pilot cow. Juliet had been the first animal we’d chosen for the program. She’d been with us the longest. And she was the reason I got to meet Harlan in the first place. Her sweet, gentle disposition was just enough to convince the parole board and the warden that I knew what I was doing.

For as much talent as I boasted, I wouldn’t have been able to do what I did without her. Jose dropped the next bit of news on me quickly.

“She got hurt, Griffin. There was a scuffle at the location she was assigned to. One of the guards didn’t like that the inmate was getting attention. There had been words exchanged in the past or something, and when he was alone with me and Juliet in the therapy room, the guard thought it was okay to attack. I guess he figured I wouldn’t say a damn word, which is ridiculous considering what I was there to do.”

His tone told me he was still furious about it. Understandable considering I could feel my own rage rising to the surface.

It was one thing for the men who had damaged pasts to lash out. Their violent crimes were what led them there in the first place. But to have a guard, someone who had been entrusted to care for these people and to guide them, someone who was supposed to keep order amongst the chaos, to attack and prey upon those weaker than him was despicable.

“What happened?” I asked, unable to hide my desperate tone.

“She got caught in the crossfire of blows. The prisoner was just trying to protect himself. The guard didn’t seem to care. She’s got a broken leg.”

I whined. A broken leg on a miniature cow was tough to navigate. People never wanted to take the time out to let them

heal properly. And it was often that the cow would never be the same after, usually in the form of a limp and limited mobility.

“God dammit,” I said as I slammed my fist on my desk.

A knock came at my door. It opened to reveal Suzy, one of the front desk clerks.

“Are you okay sir?” she asked, her eyes wide and worried.

“I’m fine Suzy. Just got a bit of bad news. Please tell my patient I’ll be there in just a moment.”

She furrowed her brow. “You don’t have any more patients this afternoon, sir. You had mentioned wanting to run some errands.”

I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath. She was right. I had cleared my afternoon schedule in hopes that I could convince Harlan to cook me dinner again. Instead, I was dealing with this terrible news and wondering what I could do to fix it.

“Thank you, Suzy. I’ll be done here soon.”

She nodded her head then slunk away.

Jose chuckled over the line.

“It’s not like you to lose your temper, Griffin. I understand why though. Juliet has always been your baby.”

“She has,” I admitted. “I’ve loved her like she was my own pet. Tell me that you’re not gonna put her down. Tell me I have a chance to keep her.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dare do that to you. It’s the reason I called. I wanted to tell you the news, but also see if there was any possibly way we could bring her out to you. I would let her rest up here, but I don’t need anyone getting a wild hair and thinking they’re doing the company a favor.”

I grunted, knowing exactly what he meant. “Let me make a few phone calls and talk to some people. I don’t have much land though I have an idea of where she could go.”

It was not the ideal choice. Bringing Juliet to the Coleman ranch would unearth feelings in Harlan that I'm sure he'd worked hard to suppress. Of all the people in the county that I had worked with, I trusted the Coleman Ranch the most. Atticus and Gerald were running a tight ship there. Their kindness and understanding, along with their propensity to take in the wounded and struggling, told me that they would see Juliet for what she was — an advantage.

They wouldn't simply dismiss her because of her injury. That alone was enough to take the risk. Harlan and I would find our footing again. Even if he was angry at me, I couldn't risk Juliet being put down. On the off chance he held sentimental value with her, he would be devastated knowing I'd made the call to let her go.

Jose's voice drew me back to the moment. "Sounds good. Just let me know as soon as you can. For now, she's all snuggled up with a big blanket and all the snacks the girl could want by my desk."

I chuckled at the picture he painted. I had no doubt she was enjoying all the attention she got. We ended the call shortly after, and I went about wrapping up my day. It would do me well to call the ranch before driving there.

I feared a phone call would be too much of a head start in the worry department. If they were anything like me and wondered if there was bad news coming, then they might think I was going to say something horrible. They might presume that there was some disease spreading around their cattle or that some issue had risen, when really all I needed was their help and support with Juliet.

The drive to the ranch was quick. It felt like I blinked and then I was there.

I parked and went in search of the man who could make the big decisions. Before I could get inside the house, I heard a whistle come from behind me. I turned around to see Corey striding over. He was an attractive young guy. Maybe in another lifetime where I didn't have Harlan, I would have considered pursuing him.

To put it simply, Corey wasn't the man I wanted as my Daddy. I didn't even know if he was the type to take a dominant role, nor would I find out.

"What's up, Doc? I didn't think anyone had called you today," he said purposefully.

I shook my head. "No one called. I'm here on a somewhat personal matter. I need Atticus's help. Or maybe Gerald's if Atticus isn't around?"

"Gerald is... indisposed at the moment. You'll have to forgive him. Atticus is inside though. I saw him going in just a little bit ago. You let us know if there's anything we can do to help, alright?"

His teasing nature was gone, giving way to a look of worry.

"I promise I'll say something if there's anything you can do to help. I just need Atticus right now."

He tipped his cowboy hat to me, then strutted away. I watched him leave for a moment before turning to go up the steps of the porch. My three quick raps against the door echoed in the stillness of the morning. I could hear men working in the distance, but it was otherwise quiet.

Atticus opened the door with a smile. "Hey there, Dr. Hawkins," he greeted me. "Come on in."

I smiled at him as I moved through the doorway. "Hey Atticus. It's good to see you and you can just call me Griffin. I prefer it actually."

For so much of my day, I had to wear a professional hat. I had to be Dr. Hawkins, grandson of the former Dr. Hawkins. There was a notability about it that made my last name almost too formal for my taste. I much preferred to be Griffin.

"All right, Griffin it is. Are you hungry? It's a bit late for lunch, but I'm sure there were some leftovers."

I shook my head knowing I couldn't eat. "Actually, no. I'm here because I wanted to talk to you about something. It's

personal, but it kind of has to do with business. I don't really know how to quantify it."

He took in my shaking hands and shifty eyes with veiled understanding. "Come have a seat at the dining room table. We'll talk about it."

I followed him through the house into the kitchen and over to the table. I caught the back of Harlan working on dishes at the sink. At the sound of our steps, he turned to look our way. His eyes on Atticus were familiar and friendly, but when they shifted to me, there was confusion there. Like he didn't know why I was at the ranch, and he was curious to see how it played out.

"Have a seat right here and tell me what you need, doc... I mean Griffin."

I laughed at the slip. "I'm here because I need someone to take in a wounded animal. This animal would be put down for this injury otherwise, and I don't want to see that for them. They're important to me. I would be more than willing to pay you for allowing them to stay here and to cover their costs of food. It's just that I don't have space for her right now and she needs eyes on her throughout the day."

Atticus hummed as if understanding. "Can you tell me more about her and what happened? I'd like to know before I commit to anything."

I swallowed thickly as I considered how to explain this without giving any secrets away. I settled on the truth while keeping their specifics of who was fighting away from him.

"I have a side project that I've been involved in, and we use animals for therapy. There was an argument that happened near one of our animals, and she got caught in the struggle. She has a broken leg but from what I've been told, her spirits are high."

"What type of animal is she?" Atticus pushed for more details.

"She's a miniature cow. Technically a teacup. Her name is Juliet."

A crash sounded across the room from where Harlan was working. Atticus and I whipped our heads that way to look at him.

“Are you okay?” Atticus spoke first.

I knew he wasn't. I could tell by the tightness in his body and the pained expression in his eyes.

“Say yes, Atticus,” he demanded, his tone leaving no room. “Say yes, and I'll take care of her myself. I'll even pay for it. You won't have to think of her at all.”

Once again, I underestimated Harlan. From his request, Juliet obviously meant as much to him as she ever did. Tears welled in my eyes as I thought about how the reunion between the two of them would go.

She'd always favored Harlan. I don't know if it was because she could sense how much I was attracted to him and grew close with him, or if it was because he was truly and obviously one of the people who should have never been there.

Yet, because of his sentencing, Juliet and I came into his life. And it looked like we were coming back. The three of us would be together again.

Atticus glanced from Harlan to me. “I'm not quite sure what's going on here,” he started, “but if Harlan feels strongly about it, then I'm gonna say yes. I was already going to, though now I'm more interested in the backstory. I can't wait to meet her. Especially since you said she's sweet. Does she take to others well? I know Sean and the other boys would probably be interested in playing with her if possible once she's healed.”

I grinned widely. “She's the sweetest creature you'll ever meet. She loves cuddles and to be hand fed. Those men are going to be sick to their stomachs at her sweetness.”

He laughed. “Sounds perfect to me. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go find my boy and tell him the good news. You just let me know when she's coming, and we'll have a place made up for her.” He stood and rushed from the room, eager to go tell Sean.

It was nice to see him so excited about it. Plus, it confirmed my thoughts about the Daddy/boy relationship the two of them had. Even after my discussion with Harlan, it was still up in the air about who played what roles on this ranch.

Harlan moved to the wall of cleaning instruments hung on a large metal rack. He picked up the broom and dustpan, then cleaned the coffee mug he dropped. Once it was all done, he came to sit beside me at the table. His hand reached out to take mine, shaking the entire way.

“Is it really her?” he asked.

The tears I had been holding back fell. “It is her. Jose called me to say that she had been hurt. A guard attacked someone without care of her or the fact that Jose would not condone the act.”

His eyes squeezed tight as his fingers curled around mine. It wasn't a tight grip. Rather it was as if to comfort me. His thumb stroked over my skin gently. “We're gonna bring her home and take good care of her, aren't we, Griffin?”

“Yes,” I whispered not pointing out the use of we or home.

“Good, because our girl deserves the best. I've been wondering what happened to her all these years. Since you came back into my life, I've fought asking outright. Now I get to have her back in my life. Juliet's always been family. It's only right that she'd be here with us too.”

Again, I wondered over his choice of words. Family and home felt like forever to me. I knew from my own life experience and what happened to Harlan that it wasn't always the case.

Chapter Nine

Harlan

THE LAST SIX DAYS HAVE BEEN NOTHING BUT ME ANXIOUSLY waiting for news about Juliet. Griffin promised me he would let me know as soon as she was on her way. This morning when I got his text telling me that today was the day, I was overjoyed.

I loved Juliet more than I had any right to considering she wasn't mine. During my time in the program, she was one of the things I looked forward to most. Having her back in my life was a dream come true.

I wanted to provide her with a safe space like she'd always done for me. That's why as soon as the text came in, I was rushing to find Atticus to ask for the day off. This time, I wanted to enjoy having her as a part of my life without any time constraints or guards staring down our backs.

When I found Atticus, he was in his makeshift office squinting at paperwork. I knocked on the door. "Got a second boss?" I asked.

I tried to keep my tone light, though I failed miserably. He put his papers down, his gaze turning my way to look me over.

"Sure thing. What you got?"

Before I could say a word, Sean bumped into me. I knew it was him from the squeal he let loose.

"Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry, Harlan. I didn't see you there."

I chuckled at how embarrassed he looked for not paying attention. Moving to the side to let him slip around me, I

shook my head. “No worries. I’m fine.”

Sean moved over to Atticus slowly, like he was afraid to bump into anything else. Once he was within reach, Atticus pulled him down into his lap and held him close. The two had been affectionate since it came out that they were together. Most times it didn’t bother me, but in this instance, I only saw what I didn’t have. I realized I wanted more. A future of my own like that with Griffin.

“What were you needing Harlan?” Atticus asked, drawing my gaze from where I’d been staring off into space.

I shook myself as I stepped forward into the room. “I wanted to ask if I can have the rest of the day off. I prepped some food yesterday because I thought today might be the day.”

Sean began clapping his hands. “Is it Juliet? Is it the cow?”

I couldn’t help the grin I unleashed as I gave a quick nod. “It is. Griffin just texted to tell me she’s coming today, and I want to make sure I’m ready to help get her settled.”

I also intended to spend some time with Griffin afterwards, but they didn’t need to know that. In all the time I’d been working on the ranch, I’d never requested a day off outside of the mandatory ones they’d schedule for me. This meant today was a pretty big deal.

I could tell from the way Atticus stared me down that he understood. “You might want to show someone how to heat the food up so we’re not all left to starve. Otherwise, I’m good with it. You take the time you need, Harlan,” he said softly.

Sean, for once, didn’t catch on to his Daddy’s temperament. He was too excited as he mumbled about Juliet and if she might like him.

“Juliet loves everyone,” I admitted.

“I’ve never seen her turn away a kind hand.” I realized my mistake a second after I said the words.

“How do you know Juliet?” Sean asked.

Atticus tilted his head in curiosity too. I could tell neither of them would let it go, so I took a deep breath and closed the door.

“How much did your father tell you about me coming to the ranch? Did you have a chance to talk before he passed?”

He shook his head. “No, there were more important things going on. No offense. He never once mentioned you or anything. Is there something I should know?”

His tone wasn't judgmental, and I didn't feel like he was trying to put me in my place. It was more cautious, like he could tell that something was there.

I hadn't intended to tell anyone. In fact, I was going to take the secret to my grave. By slipping about Juliet, I realized one very important fact I had neglected: *I had no reason to hide anymore.*

When I first came onto the ranch, it had been an unknown place with unknown people. I'd been wanting to remain low key because a lot of people heard the word felon and made the worst snap judgment. They would assume I was going to go off the handle and be a danger to them.

I began to explain my story piece by piece from the beginning. With every word I spoke, Sean's face crumbled until he was crying against Atticus's chest. I felt horrible, but I kept going until I got to Clancy and his kindness.

Atticus smiled softly as he shook his head. “That sounds just like my pops. Always ready to give people a second chance. Hell, he gave me a hundred of them as a kid growing up. Especially with how I left things. Why didn't you ever say anything before?”

“I just got used to not talking about it. Clancy didn't mention it after that day he picked me up. I saw no reason to,” I admitted. “If Griffin hadn't shown up and then Juliet, I might never have said a word.”

Since I'd explained Griffin's therapy to them, they understood how everything connected. They didn't ask me if

he and I had a relationship outside of that, but I hinted at it enough. I felt like they saw between the lines.

“Well, now that that’s all settled, you go ahead and get ready to reunite with Juliet. Grab one of the hands you think will do right by your food and then you’re free to go.”

I gave a tight nod as I moved to leave. Before I could step out, Sean yelled, “Wait.”

I looked over my shoulder, then watched as he stood slowly and came across the room to give me a tight hug. It wasn’t like the kind we’ve had before. I knew that it was his way of showing me that nothing had changed. That he still trusted me.

“Thanks, Sean,” I said softly as I hugged him back.

When we pulled apart, I whipped around and rushed to find someone, anyone who could take over my duties for the day and into the evening. If I was going to take the rest of the day off, I would be spending it with Juliet and then Griffin.

I was halfway to the bunkhouse when I caught sight of a familiar figure in the distance. Corey. The man loved to eat. Given how often he snuck into my kitchen, I knew he had the motivation to learn how to reheat everything properly. I jogged over to him, eager to get ready for Juliet.

He heard me approaching and greeted me with a smile. “Hey, Harlan. Fancy seeing you out here. I’m used to you and an apron covered in flour,” he joked.

I laughed along with him as I shook my head. “Not today. I’m taking the afternoon off.”

He froze, gaping at me. “You’re doing what? No, that’s not possible. You can’t. How are we going to eat? I won’t survive. I can’t skip a meal.”

“That’s enough out of you. The point is that I need someone to take over dinner duty. Lunch is already prepped. I have dinner food in the freezer. You just need to heat it up.”

He was nodding quickly as if he was soaking in the information. “Can we like write this down or something? I feel

like I'm gonna forget it all as soon as you walk away."

I looked at what he was doing and realized he'd been in the middle of getting ready to go feed the animals.

"Why don't I show you really quick, then you can get back to work? This won't take long, and it won't put you behind schedule. I swear it. Atticus knows why I have to take the time off, and I'm sure he'll be happy to help you with dishing it all out."

He shrugged. "It's fine. I can always call Holt or one of the others too if I need extra hands."

Things had been busy over the last few months. With Elton coming on board and the face-off with his father, an actual king from a tiny country overseas, we were bonded as a unit more than ever.

Still, there were a few people who came and went from the ranch as needed during the season. Lars had had to go home to help his mother get settled in a retirement center. He hadn't made it back yet, and we were still wondering if he was coming or not.

"Follow me. This won't take long."

I quickly walked back to the main house, ready to get it all done. When we got there, he listened carefully as I went over all the instructions for the food. The joking I was used to from him disappeared since he wanted to make sure he didn't mess up everyone's dinner. I appreciated the focus because I would never hear the end of it if things went wrong. That much was true.

By the time I was done, my phone in my pocket had gone off three times. I pulled it out to see two pictures of Griffin and Juliet along with a text letting me know he was on his way. I went out front to wait, knowing I probably still had another half hour ahead of me, but not being able to quell the excitement.

In the time since finding out about Juliet, I'd been doing even more research about being a Daddy for Griffin. I knew I wasn't the typical type of man that would fill the role. I

enjoyed little things just like Griffin did, though I preferred to be the one controlling it all. I preferred to care for him the majority of the time.

Sure, there were moments where I wanted to snuggle as much as he did, but in the end, I still needed to be calling the shots.

We hadn't had a chance to go on a date or anything yet thanks to Griffin's schedule and my need to be on the ranch. I hoped that would change with Juliet's arrival. We could center ourselves around her with him coming to the ranch sometimes and occasionally me loading our girl up to go over to his place.

Whatever it took to make this little trio I was now considering my family work.

I didn't want children in real life. Not the human kind.

Jackson's son was enough for me. Being a pseudo uncle was cool. I got to give the kid back at night, yet I was also considered awesome enough to sit down and share a snack with or to occasionally help with babysitting.

Granted, babysitting for Jackson meant that we were all babysitting. We'd pile into the bunkhouse with Dakota and watch movies while Jackson took Beau out for the evening.

Speaking of which, once I got through with the instructions, I asked Corey where Beau and Jackson were since I hadn't seen them. "I think they both missed breakfast."

He blushed as his eyes darted towards the door. "The two of them were a bit hung up this morning in their room."

I knew Corey's wall was connected to the room they shared in the bunkhouse. From the blush he wore, I had to guess he might have heard a thing or two from the couple.

"Well then, at least they're happy together. I was just curious because I was thinking of everyone here and how Juliet will react." I knew Sean had spread the news about the cow coming. Corey was well aware of who I meant when I said her name.

“I’ve got you covered. You worry about your girl, and I’ll worry about the food. But please know I’m taking an extra serving for my services.” He spoke in a formal tone as if he were hosting a business meeting, not demanding extra food for helping watch a timer.

I ignored his teasing, thankful that he would just take over for me. Bobby Allen had Elton to focus on and Holt was still helping fill the gaps around the ranch since Lars left. While I could have asked Travis or Sean or even Beau, the littles on the ranch didn’t always remember to pay attention to things. I’d rather not have burned the main house down or ruined the food.

As I waited on the porch, I felt a sense of peace. There was a rightness knowing that everything I’d wanted was finally back with me. I just had to make sure they stuck around. I had to hold on to them with both hands.

Almost thirty minutes exactly from the moment he texted that he was on his way, Griffin parked his truck in front of the house. I stood from the steps slowly, my heart going a million miles an hour with how excited I was.

Griffin climbed out of the truck and grinned at me. “You ready to see our girl?”

I nodded, then watched as he went to the trailer hooked up to the back of his truck. He eased the door down and a second later, I heard the sound of wheels. Wheels? It threw me for a moment until Griffin came around the side where I could see them. Juliet was strapped into a wagon, blankets wrapped all around her and a little sun hat on her head.

Tears welled in my eyes immediately. I walked over to meet them halfway, dropping down beside the wagon.

“Juliet,” I whispered roughly.

The moment I touched her, I broke. Tears poured down my face as she nuzzled against me. Whether she remembered me or not was to be seen, but the welcome was appreciated.

Juliet was home, and for the first time since I arrived on the Coleman Ranch, it felt like maybe I was too.

Chapter Ten

Griffin

WATCHING HARLAN REUNITE WITH JULIET WAS MAGICAL. THE grumpy façade that he wore so boldly faded away as he caught sight of her. My hand remained holding the handle of the wagon as I watched them with tears in my eyes. The image would be forever burned in my memory.

When I decided and recognized age play as being something I was more interested in, I secretly had Harlan in mind. The man was every wet dream I'd ever had come to life. Experiencing the sort of relationship we had told me what I did and didn't want in life. Adding in a Daddy dynamic heightened the attraction.

While some partners preferred a Daddy who was strict and orderly, I wanted one who could be that way at times but would also be gentle and open. I loved that Harlan could shed tears at the sight of the animal he used to use for therapy. I loved that he was quick to jump in to help save her life the moment he found out about it.

He didn't try to hide behind some toxic masculinity bullshit. People were constantly trying to be what they thought someone else needed rather than themselves.

When it came to me, he'd never pretended to be anything other than who he was: A man who could cook better than any top-rated chef and a man who tended to keep to himself but loved harder than anyone I've ever known.

"She missed you," I said when I finally found my voice.

"I missed her as well."

His eyes were locked on her, not sparing me a glance.

I almost got jealous. I wanted to demand he show me some attention too, but then Juliet turned her head my way and gave me a lopsided grin that I couldn't ignore. I kneeled down beside Harlan to talk to her too.

My hand scratched under her chin, one of her favorite moves. "You're such a good girl, Juliet. And now you're back with the one you love most."

Harlan chuckled. "I love her just as much, if not more. Thank you for bringing her here."

I looked up to meet his gaze. Tears swam in his eyes too. I reached over to wipe them away. He rubbed the back of his hand against his other eye as he tried to play it off.

"Didn't mean to get so emotional about this. It's just... wow, I didn't expect to feel so overwhelmed."

I shook my head. "There's no need to apologize for anything. Your emotions and feelings are valid."

"But does that make me a good Daddy? If I break down and cry too, how am I supposed to help care for you? If I'm —"

I placed my finger to his lips to stop him.

"None of that. You are the perfect Daddy for me just how you are. I don't need you to always be put together. If you need to cry, cry. If you want to laugh, laugh. You wouldn't dare tell me I couldn't cry right?"

He nodded. My finger was still pressed to his mouth, so he couldn't respond.

I went on, "Exactly. So if you're not going to call me a crybaby, then I'm not going to tell you that Daddy's can't cry. We're still navigating all this. With our schedules, we haven't really had a chance to talk about it."

It was something that had plagued me. During the few minutes before bed each night, I thought about how another day passed without us getting to talk things out. I wanted to

get his opinion on where we stood. I needed to figure out how the future looked for him and if I was a part of it.

So far, things had been tentative between us. It was anyone's guess how it would go once we had more time together. I hoped that we would find our way back to what we had before. Or maybe build something even better. I just knew that letting him go wasn't an option.

"I actually wanted to talk to you about that," he said. "I asked Atticus if I could have the rest of the day off. And since I prepped breakfast stuff too, I could be inclined to spend the night with you if don't mind."

"What about Juliet?"

"She could either go with us or we could stay here. I don't care where we are, as long as we're together. Does she need constant care and attention, or is she good once she's somewhere safe?"

I looked down at Juliet as I answered him. "She's good by herself for short amounts of time. I wouldn't leave her for a day or two and I prefer to check on her every few hours."

"Okay, that's good. Means she doesn't have to move into my bedroom at the bunkhouse. I don't mind going in and out to check on her."

I choked out a laugh, then covered my mouth. When I pulled it down, my jaw was dropped. "Did you just make a joke, Daddy?"

He shrugged. "Some might call it a dad joke even."

His words made me lose it. I shook with laughter as I held tight to my stomach. He joined in, obviously amused by my reaction.

It was the most free I'd ever seen him. I knew what he looked like in the throes of passion, and I'd seen him defeated when discussing his past, but this was an entirely different Harlan, and I was obsessed. There was nothing sexier.

"What do you want to do with our evening?" I asked him, curious to know if he'd made any plans.

“Well, first I wanted to know where we would be and then go from there. If you wanted us to go to your place, then I was going to make you dinner. And then maybe — ”

I cut him off again. “Yep, that’s the one! We’re gonna do that! Help me roll Juliet back inside. Do you need to get a bag? Just in case you decide to spend the night.”

He laughed again. “Is food really the only thing I’m good for?”

I stood above him where he was crouched on the ground. I gave him a perusal then adjusted my crotch very obviously. “It’s not the only thing.”

My voice was deep, and I saw the moment the humor left his eyes in favor of passion. I wanted to chase that feeling.

There hadn’t been anyone else since him. I never connected with anyone. And I think subconsciously, I preferred it that way because it allowed me to keep the memory of us a vivid picture in my mind.

In fact, the memory was enough to send me over the edge on its own. If I didn’t calm down, there’d be a mess to deal with.

Harlan must have sensed as much because he stood slowly, then stepped closer to me, his body pressing against mine. His hand moved over mine where I was still holding myself, and he squeezed tightly. It didn’t hurt, but it was obvious he was taking ownership.

“Does my boy need some attention?” he growled.

I let my head fall back, exposing my neck with a low moan. “Please, Daddy.”

His mouth moved to the exposed skin and hovered slightly. His breath puffed against me, sending tingles through my body. He slowly moved slowly up the column of my neck to my ear where he whispered, “I’ll take care of you soon. Get Juliet loaded. I’ll be right back.”

With that instruction, he pivoted and jogged towards the bunkhouse. I was left there with our girl, my body in

overdrive, begging for relief.

“Come on, sweetie. Let’s get you settled again,” I said as I spun her around and wheeled her into the trailer. I hooked her wagon back into place and closed the doors.

Surprisingly, no one came to see what I was doing. It was like they had given Harlan the space he needed. Besides, I knew the men, and they knew me. This wasn’t some new introduction situation. Still, I was thankful the reunion had gone off without a hitch and that Harlan had the forethought to get time off to spend with us.

I didn’t mind Juliet being in my house for the evening either. The issue was that I couldn’t take care of her long term.

Harlan came back in less than five minutes with a bag in tow. He tossed it in the backseat, then climbed in beside me.

“Drive us home.”

Again, I didn’t dare mention which word he used. If he wanted to see my place as home, I would gladly accept it.

I’d drive him out to the ranch every single day if it meant more time with him. Besides, it wasn’t like my house was far. I was between him and the town.

As I backed the trailer up and got us turned around, Harlan searched for a radio station. He stopped when he landed on a George Strait tune. I recognized it, but I couldn’t remember from where.

Harlan grabbed my hand and asked, “Do you remember the night after our first time together?”

The memory hit then.

“This is the song. The one we danced to that night,” I said, and he grinned at me. I didn’t miss the irony that we used to dance together, and then my dancing at the Scrambler was the final straw that broke the camel’s back.

“It is. I was shocked that they’d allowed a radio in the kitchen back when you were there. And then you put on that country station as we cleaned, and it felt a little less like a prison and more like a home. For this song to be playing now

as we head off with Juliet, I have to admit it's got me a little choked up," he said, wiping away more tears.

"It's okay, Daddy," I told him confidently. "Sometimes we have big feelings, and we need to let them out. If we bury them, they just get bigger and bigger until they go — " I used our hands to make an exploding motion.

He laughed again at my silliness, then peppered me with questions about Juliet the rest of the way home. He wanted to know how my exam of her went and what the path to healing was going to be like. I admitted to him that it was anyone's guess as to how she would do. She had her age and a loving support system on her side.

"We are going to do everything we can to get her back in tiptop shape," Harlan agreed.

He wanted to be there every step of the way, which I loved. When I pulled up to my house, he turned away from me to take in the place I called home. I kept quiet, waiting for him to say something. When he finally did, I nearly wept at his words.

"It looks like you."

I'd never been paid a higher compliment about the place. I wanted somewhere that felt like home. Somewhere I could relax and let go. A place where I could escape the clinic hours and just be myself.

It was also a hideaway place I came to when my thoughts got too turbulent, and I needed to breathe. When it got dark, I could just look up at the stars and my worries always seemed to lessen.

At my silence, he took the lead. "Why don't we go inside? I imagine there's more that you want to show me, and we need to get Juliet settled. Her throne awaits."

At his teasing, the tension in my body dissipated.

"Yes, it does. Let's go get our queen adjusted to her new home."

Chapter Eleven

Harlan

ONCE WE GOT JULIET SET UP FOR THE EVENING, I WENT ABOUT taking care of Griffin the best way I knew how: *feeding him*.

Though the role of Daddy was still new to me, I knew that there was nothing he loved more than my cooking. I took pride in that and decided to make one of his favorites. When he saw the ingredients, he was pleased. The smile that lit up his face told me he knew exactly what I had done. And he was fully on board.

“What can I do to help?” He asked, bouncing in his chair. He was cozied up to the counter, leaning over like he couldn’t wait for me to get done. Too bad for him, I had just barely started.

I laughed. “You can stay right there. I actually got you some stuff. It’s in my bag.” I nodded my head towards the duffel bag that was left by the door. “Why don’t you take a look? My hands are currently tied up.”

I raised the knife in my hand in his direction showing how I was a mess. Plus, I kind of wanted to watch his reaction as he realized what I had for him.

He wasted no time in going over to the bag and bringing it back to his chair. He unzipped it carefully, making sure I was in his line of sight. He knew how much I loved watching him.

I knew the moment he saw what I tucked away. He pulled out the thick coloring book with the safari animals on the front like he just found the lost City of Atlantis. His expression was full of excitement and wonder.

He flipped through the pages. “This is awesome, Daddy.”

“That’s not the only thing.”

His eyes widened as he dove back in to search for the rest of his treasure. He pulled out a box of crayons so big it took two hands to support it. I’d been shocked when I saw it online. When I was a kid, you couldn’t get that many in a single box. Now you could have every color under the sun at your fingertips in one package.

“Wow,” he said, his fingers opening the box and digging through. “So many of them!”

I nodded as I scooped up the onions and put them in the pan of oil. The food sizzled as the aroma took to the air. “There’s still more.”

He continued pulling out item after item until he reached my clothes.

Not only was there a coloring book and crayons, but I’d also included a set of pajamas for him with little miniature farm animals all over it and a sippy cup that I had customized with ‘Dr. Cutie’ on it. That one had only made it in the mail yesterday, so I was thankful for its timing.

Aside from that, it was just little odds and ends. Things I suspected he would like, but I hadn’t been sure of. He took to it all excitedly, happy for each and everything I gave him.

Griffin was never hard to please when we’d been together before. It was just a matter of knowing who he was. He always talked about how cozy his night clothes were or how excited he was to relax and do something mindless when he got home. I know we never discussed a Daddy/little relationship back then, but all the signs were there. It was obvious now in everything he did. In every mannerism.

He wasn’t helpless. My boy could take care of himself with the best of them. But he enjoyed being cared for. He thrived when there was someone there to show him he mattered, to make him feel loved and appreciated.

That was my job moving forward. I’d given up on keeping him a secret any longer. I didn’t want to have a life that didn’t

include Griffin Hawkins in it.

I'd spent years behind bars wondering if I'd ever get my freedom back. And when I did get out, I was relieved. For a short time anyway. The lack of Griffin in my life showed that maybe freedom wasn't the only thing I wanted.

My boy settled at the counter with his new crayons and coloring book as I continued to make dinner. He hummed under his breath, his colors moving over the paper as I chopped, sauteed, and blended the ingredients.

By the time I finished cooking, he had two full pictures ready for me. I ooh'd and ah'd over them, then tucked them away so they wouldn't get dirty while we ate. I had every intention of framing them and putting them up in my bedroom the first chance I got. I might not live with Griffin now, but I was going to have pieces of him with me whenever I couldn't be around. That much I promised myself.

"It's time to eat," I said.

He nodded as he tucked all his new items away. When he returned, we sat side by side. I cut up his food, then filled up his new sippy cup with cold water as I set it in front of him.

"Go ahead and eat," I urged.

He watched me curiously for a moment before he dove in. I took a few bites of my own until the restlessness ate away at me.

"I want to talk to you while you eat. You don't have to stop. Just nod or shake your head for your answers. Okay?"

He nodded eagerly as he shoveled another bite of food in.

"Take your time, Buttons. There's plenty of food left and there's nothing stopping you from getting what you need."

He smiled as he nodded again, then took a much slower bite.

"Okay, so what I need to know is how far do you want to take things? Would you like to wear diapers or pull-ups? Do you want to use them? Are sippy cups as low as you'll go, or would you prefer a bottle? I know a lot of this is testing the

waters with us, but I would like to establish some basic routine items with you.”

He swallowed his bite and then batted his lashes at me. “I love routine, Daddy.”

Unable to resist any longer, I kissed him gently. “I know you do, and I do too. That’s what I’m trying to figure out. So, I’m gonna ask you one by one and you’ll either nod or shake your head. Do you like the sippy cup?”

He took a bite of food and gave a nod.

“How do you feel about bottles? Yes or no?”

A slow nod was his reply.

“Okay, so you’re interested but not sure.”

The nod this time was much quicker.

“Good. We can try them. How do you feel about pull-ups?”

He scrunched his nose.

“That’s a solid no. I’m guessing no diapers either then?”

He shook his head rapidly as his eyes widened.

“Let’s back up some more then. How about underwear like briefs? Would you be opposed to some tighty whities?”

I watched as his body melted, as if he felt relief. I ran my finger along his jaw. My own food remained neglected because of how infatuated I was with him.

“I’m going to say that’s a definite yes. Would I be right?”

He nodded, then swallowed before speaking. “Can I have some with animals on them too? Not just white ones, please.”

I ran my hands through his hair. “Of course, Buttons. I will get you all different kinds. There’ll be here before you know it and then we can get you settled. You don’t own any now?”

He shook his head, then reached for another bite only to realize his plate was empty. The look he gave it as if it had betrayed him had me laughing.

I lifted his plate, then shifted mine over.

“Go ahead. I’m not all that hungry anymore.”

He looked over at me, his eyes zeroing in on my stomach. “I can’t hear it, but I bet it’s hungry. You have to eat too, Daddy.”

“Very well then. I’ll get another serving on this plate. How about that?”

He smiled as he went about eating what I had not finished. I went around the counter and made another plate, this portion only about half of the one before.

I wasn’t lying when I said I wasn’t all that hungry. This was more me appeasing him. I was too excited about having Juliet there, too eager to learn more about my boy.

I had to set up a routine. I wanted this to become something we did, if not nightly, then at least every time we got together. Having to stop to ask questions was burdensome. Once we knew what we didn’t like, I could just move fluidly and be the Daddy he deserved.

We finished dinner without too much fuss, our eating having ended the conversation. When we wrapped up, I sent him to go wash his hands and face in the bathroom as I cleaned up the kitchen.

His arms wrapped around my back as his cheek pressed into the space between my shoulder blades when he came back. “I like having you here, Daddy,” he said softly.

I finished drying the last dish then spun around in his arms. I wrapped him up tightly as I pressed a kiss to the crown of his head. “I like being here too. I never allowed myself to imagine that this could happen. Now that it’s here, it feels like a dream come true. I keep waiting to wake up and be stuck in that cell all over again.”

His arms tightened around my waist. “You’re not there, Daddy. You’re here with me. You’re out and free and we’re together again. Just as it should have been all along.”

I closed my eyes tightly as I dropped my head to his. I needed the reassurance, the feel of his touch. It was just enough to keep me from losing my cool. I'd cried enough already.

Sitting on the couch with my boy, I pulled up the streaming service he had on his home screen. "What movie would you like to watch?"

He shrugged as he took in the options. "Anything is fine, Daddy."

Him saying that title was a distraction that sent my cock roaring to life. I didn't need to focus on that though if I wanted to get us settled and relaxed.

My boy gave no sign of wanting to pick anything until I reached the kids' section. Then he began to squirm as if what he saw on the screen enticed him, but he wasn't sure how deep into his little side he wanted to go. I was thankful I knew enough about him to pick up on the cues he was trying to keep from me.

The moment I saw his hands fidgeting, I knew that this show was the one he wanted most. It was something about a little blue dog and from the way even Juliet perked up, I could tell that this was something I needed to put on.

He protested for just a moment. "Are you sure? I don't want to make you watch something you don't like."

I shrugged, mimicking his movements from before. "Baby, I don't watch much TV as it is. I spend most of my time in the kitchen or avoiding people."

He frowned. "You don't have to avoid people anymore, Daddy."

I gave him a nod. "I know I don't. Just an old habit. When you spend so much time with limited access to things, you tend to see that as your new norm."

"That makes sense," he said as he leaned back against me.

As the show started and the blue dog came on screen, I watched him light up. He sang along with the songs word for

word.

When I began to chuckle at one of the lyrics, he dipped his head to hide the blush. “Don’t do that. I’m laughing because it’s so cute. Also, don’t think I didn’t realize you tried to deny yourself from watching something you obviously love. That’s something we’re going to work on overcoming together.”

“It’s still very new, Daddy.”

“So is that title, but you seem to be doing fine with it.”

“Yeah, well, you always acted like a Daddy before. That doesn’t feel as new.” His tone was more bratty than usual.

“Is that so? I’ll just have to keep this attitude of yours in mind for the next time someone asks me if they can have some cookies.”

He frowned. “No daddy. You can’t possibly hold the cookies hostage.”

“I didn’t say I would.”

He climbed on my lap, his gaze pleading. “Daddy, you cannot threaten the cookies. It’s not fair.”

My boy had a sweet tooth. Though that seemed to be the case with most of the boys I’d met. All the ones on the ranch sure did. I couldn’t keep cookies in the house for anything. They’d be gone just hours after they cooled.

I kissed him softly, as I promised him, “The cookies are safe for now. Let’s get back to your show.”

We laid there watching tv together until he started yawning, and I could tell he was close to falling asleep. My boy was all tuckered out, and I wasn’t going to force him to stay up when the idea of holding him in bed was such an amazing idea.

“Time for bed,” I told him.

He whined as if he didn’t want to go despite his eyes closing and his body swaying when he stood.

“You’re dead on your feet, baby. There’s no way out of this.”

He grumbled a bit more, then took my hand when I guided him from the living room to the bedroom. The house was simple enough that I was able to find my way around without his help. In his room, I stripped him of his day clothes. Then I left him on the bed in just his underwear as I went back to grab the pajamas I brought for him.

The safari outfit was too big of a temptation to pass up when I had seen it online. It looked like something he'd wear.

When I came back to the room, he was already in the shower cleaning himself off. I stripped quickly to join him.

In the stall, I gave him a stern look. "Next time you let Daddy clean you up."

He bit his lip as he nodded. "Sorry. I thought I was helping speed things up."

"Not if you take away my chance to care for you."

I let him finish his routine as I cleaned myself quickly too. Both of us were hard, but considering he was still close to passing out, I didn't want to push any further. Sex would come later. Right now, we were testing the pieces of our routine.

We dried off, then went back into the bedroom. I slipped on a pair of boxers, then grabbed his new outfit.

My boy sighed deeply as I slipped the material over his head. He repeated the noise when the cute little shorts went over his bottom. Once I got the underwear he preferred, he'd be one very content little, which was all I could ask for and all I wanted.

He climbed into bed first, then turned around and sat on his knees, motioning for me to come. "Daddy," he demanded in his half-awake tone.

I buried my laugh at how he sounded. I didn't want him to think that it was his little side that had me amused because it wasn't. It was the way he'd gone from so put together to vulnerable and soft for me. That's what did me in, what made me so thankful that we'd found each other again.

This feeling that I had with him was one that I would never be able to replicate. Not with anyone else. It wasn't even on my radar before him.

Griffin was it for me. I knew it back whenever our relationship wasn't allowed and having him back in my arms now was just further proof. I would spend the rest of my days making sure he didn't regret taking a chance on me, on us.

Chapter Twelve

Griffin

YESTERDAY WAS THE BEST DAY IMAGINABLE. I GOT TO SPEND my morning doing the work that I love, and then in the afternoon I was able to reunite Juliet and Harlan. To top it all off, Harlan surprised me with the evening off so we could all spend time together.

Poor Juliet was worn out from all her exams and medicine that she snoozed herself into an early bedtime while Harlan, or rather, Daddy, and I snuggled up watching tv together. It was by far the most relaxing day I've ever had. I wanted a repeat of it as soon as humanly possible.

I didn't know if Daddy was on the same page as me or not. I couldn't tell if his heart was doing backflips every time we got together. Hopefully so. I needed him to stick around, needed him to let me in all the way.

We were so close to figuring it all out. I could tell.

As I thought about Daddy, I laid in the bed stroking my hands over my new pajamas. That had been yet another surprise. Coloring books, crayons, and pajamas. Daddy might be new to all this, but his instincts were right on point.

Speaking of instincts, mine told me that I had to let Daddy work through his emotions slowly. His trust was damaged by his past and he needed me to show him that I wasn't going to leave him behind like so many other people had. He needed to be able to cry and scream and vent knowing I wouldn't take it personally. None of it was about me. I knew that already. But

still, moving forward, it was something I knew I'd have to reassure him of.

A hand slid up my hip as my thoughts wandered into what our plans for the day would be. I kept still, waiting to see what would come next. When he moved around my waist to grip my hard length, I melted deeper into the mattress.

“Morning, love. What have we here?” His voice rasped against my skin as his mouth hovered close but not close enough.

I grunted as I shifted my hips forward. Friction. I needed friction.

“Daddy,” I whimpered. “Please.”

He pressed his lips against my skin as he hummed. The vibration moved through me, driving the need to come higher.

“What does my love need? To come? Do you want to fall apart in my arms? Do you need Daddy’s touch to get you there?” He stroked me faster and harder with each question, as if demanding an answer through my body’s reaction.

I was unable to speak, unable to move. Everything in me came alive at the dominance he displayed, at the confidence radiating from him.

“You’re close aren’t you?” he asked when I sucked in a breath.

I was. I hovered right on the edge but not quite there.

Come, I demanded. Give up.

The internal debate forced my hand. I came with a shout, my body tight as the release coated the sheet beside me.

Daddy stroked me through it all as he whispered words of support. “That’s it... good work, love... so beautiful when you fall to pieces... missed you.”

“Missed you too.” I mumbled the words as I sank into the pillow. Sleep was trying to pull me back under with a vengeance. I fought against it, my eyes closed, but my body alert.

I listened as Daddy climbed from the bed. From the echo of his steps, I could tell he went into the bathroom. Part of me hated that he'd gotten me off without anything in return. I needed to rectify that. It had been years since I'd had him inside me, yet I could feel the ache as if it were yesterday.

When he came back into the room, I popped one eye open. He grinned down at me, his head shaking as he moved to my side of the bed.

"Gotta clean you up, love. You made a mess." He reached out with the wet towel, running it over my length and then over the sheet to get everything left behind.

I noticed his cock was still hard as he stood. Gone was the tiredness I'd felt only moments before. My body wanted his, and there was no slowing me down.

"Daddy. I want," I said, making his eyes go wide. My little side rose to the surface, surprising us both.

"What do you want?" He stroked himself with one hand as the other tossed the towel toward the laundry hamper in the corner. I heard the wet thud but didn't turn to see if he'd made it. I was too captivated by his movements and the hunger they drew out in me.

Not waiting to ask me again, Daddy stepped closer. His cock hovered in front of my mouth, tempting me with every stroke he gave it.

"Take what you want," Daddy whispered as he pressed the crown against my bottom lip. "Daddy says it's ok. Do what you want, my love."

I wasted no more time. My hand reached up, batting his away as I took over. As I stroked, I lapped against the tip, drinking in what had slipped free while trying my damndest to have him give me more.

"That's it. Stroke Daddy good." Fingers wove through my hair, tugging at the strands and motivating me to do more, to give more.

Because that was really what I was doing. I wasn't taking so much as giving. Giving Daddy pleasure. Giving myself the

one thing I wanted most at that moment. Giving into the pull between us. It was all connected and each choice I made brought us closer together, solidifying this new relationship.

I took him in my mouth, swallowing around him as I squeezed the base. He groaned; pleasure evident in the sound. My ego grew with it, and soon enough, I was bobbing my head like a fucking porn star. No one in the history of the world was as hungry for it as I was. No one wanted to pleasure their partner as much as I did.

I sucked his cock like my rent was due and he was some sleazy landlord demanding payment. But instead of hating it, I thrived with the taste of him on my tongue.

Before I could sink deeper into the bliss that was sucking Daddy's cock, I was yanked back. "Nooooo!" I whined.

There was a dark chuckle above me, then I was pushed further back onto the bed. "Don't worry, baby. Daddy is going to make you feel good too."

His words felt like a taunt, yet they held promise. I moved how he directed me, shifting until I was on my back with my knees lifted. Exposed to him in every way, there was no hiding any longer. I was open and bared for Daddy, my hole his for the taking.

"Lube?" he asked with a raised brow.

I pointed to the nightstand. "Top drawer."

Leaning over, he got the lube and a condom, two things I'd only recently put in there in the hopes they'd get used. Once he had his supplies, he returned his focus to my body.

I watched as Daddy opened the lube, squirted some onto me and then his finger, and then rubbed along my hole. It felt so good. Like he was teasing me for the good parts ahead.

"Gonna get you ready for me. Then I'm going to take what's mine, so you don't forget who I am."

Shaking my head, I pouted at him. "I could never forget you, Daddy. I never have and never will."

It wasn't poetic or eloquent. I was just speaking the words of my heart. The words that held my truth.

His face softened, vulnerability shining through. "I was going to fuck you quickly so we could get our day started. But now... now I need you nice and slow. I want you to feel how much I've missed you. You need to know how deeply ingrained you are into my life, into my being. Maybe next time I can plow you into the mattress like I intended."

My laugh came out as a choked cry when his finger slipped deeper inside me. He pumped a few times; each move slow and steady like he was focused on the task. Focused on my pleasure. It was heady to know just how enamored he was with me and how it mirrored my own longing.

I watched as he pulled free. A protest nearly poured out of me, but it stopped when I watched him add another finger. He pressed ahead, pushing me further and higher than before. I felt my body clench around the digits.

"You're going to be the death of me. I feel how tight you are, and all I can imagine is how you'll grip my cock once I have you prepped and ready. Fuck," he bit off the end with a curse.

"I'm ready now," I cried out. "Please, Daddy. Give it to me. I need you."

Need.

It was that word that did it. I knew because before being Daddy, Harlan always succumbed to it. He wanted me to want him, sure. But when I'd get to the point where I said I needed him, he would always fold.

I'd honestly forgotten just how much it affected him. There was no mistaking it now though. Not with the growl that rumbled deep from his chest or the way he pulled his hands free and immediately suited up.

Watching him slip on the condom felt like the biggest tease of all. We were moments away, mere seconds, from him being inside me. Something I'd dreamed of and wished for all these years was coming true.

As he lined up with my hole, I saw the same realization roll over his face. His expression warmed as his movements slowed.

“Ready?”

I nodded at his question. “Yes, Daddy. Please don’t wait anymore.”

His crown pushed at my entrance, the pressure on the edge of painful. I fought to relax. I focused on bearing down. That was what was needed. I had to open myself to him.

And open I had. My body, my heart, and my soul were his to have. Everything belonged to Harlan now.

The deeper he went, the more connected I felt and the easier it was for my body to let him in. The bite of pain swiftly shifted to pleasure, nearly bringing a whiplash effect.

“Daddy,” I moaned when he hit my prostate. I quivered as I struggled to find the next words.

Again. More. Harder. Please.

“I know, my love. I know. Let Daddy take care of it all.” His hands grabbed the back of my thighs where I’d been holding on for dear life. “I’ll take it from here.”

God, did he take it. His grip was unrelenting as he gave a slow roll of his hips. Forward and back, over and over. It was seductive and alluring, everything I’d missed about him.

My orgasm came out of left field, striking me with its force so hard, I swore I saw stars. I gasped for air, the pleasure submerging me beneath its waves as it stole my breath. It was beautiful in all the ways I remember, yet better.

Better because we were together again.

Better because we weren’t stuck sneaking around.

Better because there was a future ahead of us, one without limitations.

I was so lost in my release I almost missed Daddy falling apart. It was the pressure on my legs that gave him away. My

eyes, having closed, flew open. I didn't want to miss a moment of his reaction.

And god... it was worth watching. The rippling of his muscles was art personified. The way he stared into me gave me chills. The grip he had on me told me he'd never let me go again, an idea I had zero complaints about.

It took a few minutes for our breathing to even out. Daddy released his hold on my legs, which allowed me to drop them down. As I settled into the bed to stretch out, he climbed free to throw away the condom.

I laid there, happy and fulfilled for the first time in years. It was more than the sex. It was the bond we'd shared flaring back to life. It was knowing he felt for me the same way I did him.

“Alright, my love. Enough with the bed. We've got to get up and get you fed.”

Part of me wanted to pout and beg to stay in the bed. But another part of me knew better than to turn down his food. So, I did as he asked, and I climbed from the bed.

He gave me the biggest smile I'd ever seen and said, “Good boy.”

Oh, my heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Harlan

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT WHEN LIFE STARTED GOING WELL, there would be a wrench thrown in the mix. Mine came just days after one of the best dates of my life, if I could even call it that.

My relationship with Griffin was growing more and more each day. Between the texts we sent each other and the time we managed to spend together around our working hours, the foundation for something lasting was forming. I was equal parts thrilled and nervous for what that meant.

And because of my own relationship changes, I hadn't been paying as much attention to the people around the ranch. At least, I hadn't until they made me pay attention.

Namely Gerald and his lack of a partner.

I was mixing up the mix for the quiches I had planned for breakfast early one morning when he stumbled in smelling like the bottom of a whiskey barrel. He tripped over his own feet, then leaned on the counter while panting like some kind of marathon racer.

Putting down my mixing bowl, I slung my towel over my shoulder and slowly approached him. "Gerald?"

His head snapped up to me, his gaze surprisingly alert. "Harlan," he grumbled.

"What are you doing here this early? Were you looking for food?"

I knew the answer wasn't probably what I was suggesting. He'd clearly been drinking himself into a stupor. It surprised me to see him in such a way given how put together he'd been the entire time I'd known him. Once Clancy passed, the Gerald I'd known had slipped away to reveal this new, much more forlorn version.

"Not food. Came to go to bed."

I shook my head. "You sleep down in the bunkhouse, Gerald. You came up to the main house."

Part of me wondered if he was just turned around. If maybe he climbed out of whatever taxi he'd poured himself into after drinking too much and then he ambled in here thinking it was the bunkhouse.

That hope was shattered when his face turned from teasing drunk to devastated. Anguish filled his features as tears ran down his face.

"Woah, woah. Easy there, G. What's all this?" I patted his shoulder, uncomfortable with how I should proceed.

Did he need a hug? Did I give him food? Was there some other type of offering I could give to alleviate his feelings?

"He's gone," Gerald whimpered as his face fell into his hands.

It hit me then, the answer to everything. He's gone. Clancy was gone. And Gerald hadn't been the same since.

I knew the two were close. There were many a morning I caught the two of them together when I'd take my morning stroll around the ranch. See, those early morning routines of being woken up by guards meant I often found myself restless before dawn. I'd taken to walking when Clancy suggested it once and it had been part of my day since.

It's how I knew Gerald didn't make an early trip to the main house like he always claimed when someone asked why he was up so early. It's also how I knew Clancy meant more to him. I'd seen the two embraced in a kiss so passionate I had frozen then and there in the dirt unable to look away. I wasn't

aroused or anything. No, I'd been lost in memories of a time I'd held someone the same way.

So yeah, I understood the desire to get rip roaring drunk and cry over a love lost. But I didn't know about the kind of permanent loss like Gerald was dealing with. Death was a deeper cut than simply breaking up with someone. There was always a possibility of a second chance with the latter. Sean and Atticus were proof of that, and I hoped my relationship with Dr. Hawkins was headed in the same direction.

"Gerald," I said cautiously as I moved to put an arm around him. "I'm so sorry."

The rest of my words died as he wailed and dropped into my arms. His shoulders shook as a sob tore through him. He was falling apart, the pieces of him fragmenting as the grief he'd tried to suppress poured free.

I patted his back unable to think of anything else. Over his shoulder, I saw Sean and Atticus come downstairs. Their wide eyes took in the scene and immediately knew what was going on. Sean covered his mouth, sadness evident in his own teary expression. Atticus stepped forward; his jaw tight as he worked to keep his cool.

"Gerald?"

At the sound of his voice, the man in my arms froze. "No, no, no, no, no. You're not supposed to be here. Not awake. Not here. It's too much. Too painful."

The more he babbled, the less sense he made. I still had hold of him, only because his weight was on me. I feared that he'd collapse to the ground if I tried to loosen my grip, and I couldn't see how that would help the situation any.

Atticus came forward until he was able to support Gerald's other side. He slipped under the man's arm then nodded for me to do the same.

"We're going to take you back to bed, Gerald. It's going to be ok. We can talk about this later," Atticus said, his voice soft and calming. "Let's put one foot in front of the other. That's all you've got to do today."

Gerald's head tilted toward Atticus. "That's it? That's all I've got to do today?"

The other man nodded; his brow furrowed despite the forced smile he wore. "Sure thing, Gerald. Just make it to bed and you're good to go. You can sleep all day. I'll have someone come check on you."

"Yeah, that's good. I'd like that." I could hear the exhaustion in Gerald's voice as he replied. His eyes were getting heavy, the alcohol and the tears putting him to sleep even as he stumbled out the back door.

Thankfully it was still way too early for anyone else to be up, so we were able to get Gerald into his room and tucked away without much of a fuss. I looked around his space, my heart breaking as I saw how much of Clancy still surrounded him. His room was damn near a shrine to the former ranch owner.

"Let's go," Atticus whispered to me. "Sean's probably still crying up at the house. I need to check on him."

I nodded as I followed him out of the room. Before we could leave, a voice called out to us. "He was drunk again, wasn't he?"

We turned to see Corey standing with a resigned look. "He was," Atticus answered.

"This happening a lot more?"

Corey gave a nod at my question. "I didn't know what to do about it or who to tell. I'm worried about him. He's struggling, and it seems the more people find relationships, the worse it gets. I'm not blaming anybody else. It's just what I'm seeing."

Atticus and I had moved closer to speak with Corey low enough not to wake the others. The bunkhouse wasn't known for its ability to keep conversations from spreading so we kept it to a whisper.

"Do you mind helping keep an eye on him for the next little bit? Maybe get a bucket in there so when he does puke, we don't have more of a mess to clean up."

“Sure thing, boss. I’ve done it before, and I can do it again.” Corey nodded one last time, then turned toward Gerald’s door. I watched as he slipped inside, then I left to follow Atticus back to the main house.

Once we were inside, Sean came running over. “Daddy! Oh my gosh. Is he ok? What else happened? I didn’t want to be in the way.”

Atticus kissed him softly. “You’re never in the way. And it’s as settled as it’s going to be right now. We got him in bed, then Corey caught us on the way out and said that this wasn’t the first time it had happened. Apparently, Gerald’s been hurting right under our noses.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” I told him once I guessed where his next thoughts were headed.

“How can I not, Harlan? He’s in pain and there’s nothing we can do. I should have seen it sooner. I knew how close he and my pops were. I guess I just chose to ignore it.”

Sean rubbed Atticus’s back as he shook his head. “It’s not something Gerald has wanted to talk about though. There isn’t anything you can do for someone who is closing themselves off from any help.”

“Sean is right. You had to give him some space and time to himself. I think now might be the time for you to consider doing a bit more though. Because I feel like he’s really close to a downward spiral that’s going to end in devastation.”

“You’re right. You both are. It’s just hard to not see that. When Dad passed, and we found out about the debt, I felt like a failure. The markets changed all that, and now that we run well each month, I felt like it was a sign that I was doing the right thing. It was like there was finally something going right after such a huge loss. Now, I’m not sure if it was just a distraction on my part.”

I dropped my towel on the counter as I sat on a stool and motioned for Atticus to join me. My boss needed some tough love. Clearly, I’d have to be the one to give it. No way would Sean be able to with how much this had affected him too.

“First things first, you did the right thing with the market. It’s absolutely what Clancy would have done if he’d had more time and input. You saved this place, Atticus. Don’t demean that accomplishment. Secondly, you didn’t use anything as a distraction. You were making business decisions and navigating your new role as the head of this ranch. Gerald is a grown man who could have told one of us, any of us, that he needed a shoulder to cry on. Whether literally or figuratively, we’d have been there. Any one of us would have dropped our stuff to be by his side. Know why?”

Atticus swallowed thickly, his eyes glistening as he squeezed Sean’s hand. “Why?”

“Because Clancy showed us all how to care for one another. Because he taught us that the people on this ranch were your family, and you don’t turn your back on them when they need you. Just like you came home right on time, Gerald is now in need of a little help from us all. We’ll do what we can and get him set straight. It won’t be easy.”

“But it will be worth it,” Sean finished. “I’m in to help however I need to.”

“See, even your boy gets it,” I teased. The pair chuckled as they wiped their eyes. I gave them a moment as I stood and went back to my food.

It wasn’t long before I heard them tinkering with the coffee pot and then Sean was taking off to head upstairs. Atticus settled at the counter on a stool, his gaze on me.

“Thank you, Harlan. For being here and for being the voice of reason. Every day I find something new I didn’t know about. It constantly reminds me that my pops did this alone for so long. I don’t know how he managed.”

I shook my head as I poured the mix into the pans. Placing them in the ovens, I turned to look at my boss and friend.

“He didn’t do it alone though. He had Gerald and the rest of us. Gerald more so, of course, but still. We’re a team, a family. When something doesn’t work, you come to us, and we find a way. You don’t have to shoulder it alone.”

“When did you get so wise?” he teased.

“Probably somewhere around the time I got my head out of my own ass and realized Dr. Hawkins was mine.”

“His is, is he?”

I grinned at my friend. “Yeah, he is. Just gotta prove to him that I’m worth it.”

“Harlan,” Atticus started, “I have a feeling he already knows. Maybe it’s that you need to prove to yourself that you’re worth it.”

With that, he left me alone in the kitchen to head upstairs. I stared at the empty stool for far too long, his words washing over me as I tried to shake myself from their hold. In the end, I couldn’t. Atticus was right. I needed to believe I was worth it regardless of what anyone else thought.

Chapter Fourteen

Griffin

DADDY

Are you going to come to the market?

I'm not sure yet. I usually did before this thing with us. I think it would be weird if I didn't.

I don't want you to miss out. I was hoping you'd come along to help me out in the kitchen. Like old times?

I'd love that. What all are we making?

That has yet to be finalized. I've got to see what the store has in stock in bulk. Or maybe I'll make a drive to the city to shop. Would you come along if I needed the help?

Are you sure you need my help or is Daddy just lonely? Do you miss me?

I always miss you.

And any time spent with you is worth it. Let me know if so. I'm going on Friday.

I STARED DOWN AT THE MESSAGE GRINNING MADLY. THERE WAS nothing like getting a message from Daddy in the morning. And ones like these were even better because I knew it meant he was thinking of me as much as I was thinking of him. Which, to be honest, was pretty much all the time. If I wasn't elbow deep in animal issues, then it was all Daddy all the time.

“Your smiles keep getting wider and wider each day. Do I even want to ask?” Robin said as he leaned on the door of my office.

Tucking my phone in the desk, I shrugged. “It’s not anything groundbreaking. My partner messaged me to see if I could help him shop for the market this weekend. He’s trying to set up a menu.”

“Harlan’s food is by far the best part of the weekend from what I hear. I haven’t tried any yet.”

I gaped at him, then reined it in once I realized he hadn’t been around long enough to know that the market was a must experience event for the food alone. People traveled far and wide for Daddy’s cooking. He’d easily win one of those reality shows if he didn’t hate the attention so much.

“You have to come this weekend. There’s no if, ands, or buts about it.”

“Deal. Now about the shopping... when did he need to go?”

I waved his question away. “He said something about Friday, but we’ve got a full day scheduled. I’ll have to tell him I’ll help next time.”

“Nuh uh. No way. You’re going, Griffin. I’m not going to have that man making food all sad because you weren’t there. He has to be happy. Happy cook, happy food.” Robin said it as if it were the most obvious thing.

“And what about the patients, huh? Can you suddenly clone yourself to do it all alone?”

He turned down the hall and disappeared without another word. I waited for a second to see if he was about to come back but decided not to waste time. I looked over the charts of the animals I had to go out to visit this afternoon instead. Each of the large animals needed shots and checkups. It was best I knew the material before I got to them.

I was focused on a colt’s paperwork when Robin stumbled back into the room. “Ok, so we called everyone with Friday

appointments and half of them more than agreed to change out if it meant there would be better food.”

“You told them all about me and Harlan?!?”

I nearly fell out of my chair at the news. While we weren’t a secret on the ranch, we hadn’t gone around town gallivanting about it. I didn’t even know if anyone knew Harlan was bisexual. Had he just been outed because of me?

“Woah, woah. Easy there, boss. I’m not outing either of you. I merely mentioned that they needed help at the ranch with some things and that if they couldn’t borrow you, they might resort to using Harlan instead. And then I insinuated that it might drag him away from his cooking duties. And well, the rest was a piece of cake.” He smirked like he’d just crafted the most elaborate ruse of all time.

“Robin, you’re ridiculous.”

“Yes, but now you get to take the day to go shop with your man and help him prep whatever magical meal stuff he needs to. And none of the cases were so important that they couldn’t wait. Look at that. Problem solving and me, we’re besties.”

I chuckled at his teasing tone. “Get on out of here. I’ve got paperwork to finish us.”

“And a partner to call to tell them you’ll help, right? Don’t let all my hard work be in vain.” He put his hands together like a prayer as he stuck his bottom lip out, pouting dramatically.

“Enough out of you! I’ll call him after you close my door.”

He saluted me, then promptly shut the door without another word. I shook my head as I dialed up Daddy on my cell.

“Well, this is a nice surprise. How are you, Buttons?”

I blushed at the nickname. It still sent tingles down my spine.

“I’m good, Daddy. I was calling because it looks like I will be able to help you after all.”

“Oh, I figured so.”

“How’s that?” I asked as a sinking feeling hit my stomach.

“I just had three calls back-to-back asking what help was needed on the ranch so I would be able to have time to cook. Seems your coworker made it sound like there was a desperate need for more ranch hands. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Groaning, I dove into the tale with him. I explained why Robin did what he did, and then I apologized for making things difficult.

“Don’t think like that, Buttons. I’m not mad at all. Amused, sure, but not mad. I made sure to tell the last person that they could spread the word that there’d be plenty to eat and that we had loads of help. Then I disconnected the landline since that’s where they all kept dialing.”

I giggled at the vision he gave me. I could see it all so clearly. Daddy was good at finding solutions like that.

“Then I guess I’ll see you on Friday.” It was Tuesday, and despite wanting to see him sooner, I wouldn’t assume.

Daddy huffed over the line. “You’ll see me in a few hours. I’ve got plans for you tonight.”

Just then, I heard a voice call his name in the background. “Everything ok?”

“Sure thing. Just nosy men trying to know who I’m talking to. I’ve got to let you go before they get any more annoying.”

“Good luck with that. See you tonight?”

“See you tonight.”

The call ended, leaving my whispered “love you” to echo in the quiet of my office. I couldn’t wait for the day I could say it to him, and he would return it.

Friday

“WHAT ALL ARE WE GETTING, DADDY?” I ASKED AS HE SWUNG our intertwined hands back and forth. It was a silly move that kept me on the edge of breaking into a fit of laughter.

He pulled out a folded piece of paper from his front pocket. “I’ve got a list right here. I planned to make double what I usually do since you’re going to help me prep. Four hands are better than two after all.”

“That they are,” I agreed as we stepped inside the massive grocery store.

We’d driven nearly an hour to get to the closest big grocery store after Harlan realized the volume of food he needed just wouldn’t work coming from the local place. He’d been worried about emptying the shelves for those who truly needed the ingredients and might not have the means to travel further.

His kind heart was just another reason I loved him so much. He always thought of stuff like that, despite most people keeping quiet about shortages if it meant Harlan was feeding them.

“First things first, flour. We’ll get all the dry ingredients, then we’ll move on to veggies and meats. Then dairy too. Can’t forget all the eggs and milk we’ll need.”

I nodded as I went to grab a cart. Daddy intercepted me with a shake of his head.

“But Daddy,” I whispered as I moved closer so no one else would hear me.

“No buts. Daddy pushes the big cart. You help me get the items to put inside. Think of it like a puzzle. You’ve got to make it all fit.”

I looked at the empty basket and then the list he’d unfolded. My eyes bulged at how much stuff was listed. Yeah, it would be a puzzle alright.

“Ok, Daddy. But only because I love a good puzzle.”

He kissed the side of my head. I repeat, he kissed me... in public. Guess he didn’t care who knew about us after all.

“I’m glad you see it my way, Buttons. Now let’s get going. The sooner we’re back on the ranch, the sooner we get prep done. And the sooner the prep is done, the sooner we can play.”

I perked up at the word “play.” Playing with Daddy could be anything from time spent little or even sexy times. I loved both, so there was no stopping my focus. We moved through each section of the store strategically, my mind only on getting us in and out as quickly as possible. I could see Daddy giving me teasing looks, but I didn’t dare stop to rise to the bait. Not when time was of the essence.

It took less time than I expected it would, likely from my drive to get it all done. Daddy paid the cashier, who kept eyeing us both. I imagine my polo shirt and slacks were a big juxtaposition to Daddy’s cowboy hat, flannel, and tight wranglers.

On the drive back, Daddy let me cuddle with him the whole way. I wore my seatbelt of course, but I stayed tucked to his side as I basked in the time spent together. We didn’t need to talk, didn’t need to hash out things. It was the closeness that provided us with all we need.

At the big house, we unloaded as a team, moving in and out with precision. Daddy showed me where to line everything up, then we got to work. A phone turned on some music part way through, leaving the sounds of old country radio to fill the space. We chopped, diced, and mixed until we had everything ready that we could do.

Daddy took the trays of casseroles out of the freezer and put them in the oven to warm up as he dragged me from the kitchen into the washroom. “What are you doing, Daddy?”

He gave me a naughty look. “My boy has been so good today helping me with everything. You didn’t complain one bit. Now I need to reward you before everyone makes it up for dinner.”

I went to ask what that meant but stopped when his hands moved to my hips and lifted — yes, lifted — me from the

ground. I was placed on top of the washing machine, then Daddy was working my pants free.

“Oh,” I breathed out as he moved me around to free my cock. I hadn’t been hard when he started, but you could sure bet I was there now. I leaned back on my hands as I watched him stroke me.

“Keep your eyes on me and keep quiet. No one else gets your sounds but me.”

With that declaration, he took me to my base, his lips meeting his hand. I hissed as pleasure tore through me. I’d never understand how he could make me feel so good so fast. Nothing ever turned me on like Harlan did, and he delivered tenfold.

His mouth worked me quickly as his hand squeezed me through the rapidly growing desire I felt. I was close as hell to coming, and we’d only just gotten started. That’s the kind of effect he had on me.

“Daddy,” I whimpered when I felt his hand release me and move to my balls. He teased them lightly, then slid underneath. A mix of excitement and need moved through me. I knew where he was headed. As soon as his finger teased my hole, I lost the battle against holding my orgasm back.

Cum shot down Daddy’s throat as I pulsed between his lips. He closed his eyes, humming as he sucked it down. He kept going until I was a shaking mess, my body so sensitive I could barely keep it together.

“That’s such a good Buttons. You let me reward you without making too much noise and you gave me all that precious cum.” He nuzzled along my jaw in a move so sweet I felt my heart burst.

I wanted to say it then. I wanted to shout at him “I LOVE YOU DADDY,” so he’d know how deep in this I was.

But I couldn’t. Not yet. I needed to know he wouldn’t be scared away. Because losing him again wasn’t an option.

Chapter Fifteen

Harlan

MARKET DAY WAS ALWAYS BUSY. FROM THE SETUP PORTION that usually started the night before and then picked up the next morning, to the chaos of the kitchen as we juggled feeding everyone breakfast and me making the stuff we would sell during the event.

There was a system to it all. We had to work as a team, and since my boy was so willing and eager to help, I used him to get things straightened out. He made the sandwiches and wrapped them as I stuck to desserts. Together, we had the work done in half the time it took me alone. That left us plenty of time to get a head start on the second batch.

I stopped us at one point so I could make sure my Buttons was fed and content. He smiled at me as I force fed him croissants I'd made. It wasn't until he was done that he told me they were the best he'd ever had.

"Good," I said. "I want to be the best of everything for you."

He smiled as he kissed me softly. "You already are, Daddy. No need to try. Just be you. That's all I've ever wanted."

His words hit me deeply, settling some unspoken shame I'd been holding on to all these years. Like maybe my past wasn't good enough for him. Because there wasn't anything hidden from my boy. He knew every horrible, dark detail. And yet, he wanted me as I was.

"Let's get this packed up so we can enjoy the market a bit. I'm usually cooped up in here and miss out on the actual event

part.”

“You say that like there’s something else that happens?” His gaze was all too knowing.

I chuckled as I went back to work. “There is, though most people don’t know about it. The Daddies and littles have a bonfire at the end of the night to celebrate another job well done. They also bring out a bouncy castle, which is a huge hit for many of the guys.”

“A bouncy castle?”

The awe in his tone told me he really liked the idea. I hadn’t mentioned it to him before today because I wanted his attention on me, not the fun that could be had later. But I wasn’t a complete asshole. I knew he would appreciate a little fun time later too.

“Yes, Buttons. A bouncy castle ready and waiting for you to play in if you want. It would be a good time for you to spend time with the other littles.”

He smiled at me then, so open and eager. I could see the adult side of him slipping away as the thought of playing with friends made his little side creep out.

“Ok, Daddy. We bounce later.” He went back to working, except now there was a lightness that hadn’t been there before. His little hips were moving side to side, as if he were listening to music no one else could hear. And his smile, well, it was at full wattage for the rest of the time we packed food.

When we finally finished, I pulled him to my chest and kissed him hard. I traced his lips with my tongue, begging for permission to enter. He submitted with ease, giving me all of him. I kissed him for a long time. Longer than I intended when I started.

“Wow. Good kisses,” he said softly once I let him go.

I chuckled. “Come on, Buttons. Let’s go find some trouble to get in to.”

HOURS LATER, WE WERE ALL WORN OUT AND THANKFUL FOR the day to be over with. It was another successful night, with the total adding to the funds for the ranch and lining everyone's pockets enough to keep us content. None of us wanted to be filthy rich. So long as we had a place to live, food to eat, and honest work, we were good to go. Or rather, good to stay.

When the bonfire started, I set up shop on a cooler and brought my boy down onto my lap as well. He tried to fight, but when I whispered in his ear that I'd reward his good behavior later, he stilled and let me hold him.

Gerald begged off early, claiming he wanted to sleep. I wasn't sure if it was that or if all the couples were too much to watch.

The others kept eyes on us, and though they didn't say anything outright, I knew they understood what was happening. Hell, most of them had the same kind of relationship. Regardless, I was thankful they didn't push or question my boy too much. I didn't need him clamming up on me when I was so close to getting him to fall in love with me.

"Thanks for looking at the horses while you were here," Elton said to my boy as we sat there waiting for the bouncy castle to blow up.

"It was nothing. All in a day's work." I tugged him closer at the response, thankful he took to my friends so well.

"No, really. I'd have worried all day about them if you hadn't. My anxiety takes over sometimes. It helps when others take me seriously and listen. I spent so long not being listened to, you know?"

My boy reached over the small space between us and took Elton's hand. "I don't know firsthand, no, but I've been with others who have had their voice silenced and it's a horrible feeling. Feel free to call me anytime something like that

happens and I'll come help. I love animals, obviously. Plus, if I'm here, I get to see Da — Harlan. I can see Harlan.”

Elton's smile was soft and understanding. He'd heard the near slip, one of many for the night. Knowing what it was like to have to hide his secrets in his past life, he didn't push my boy to share anything further. To that, I was grateful. Bobby Allen gave me a knowing look from where he sat on the other side of Elton. He'd been quiet all night, though he never let Elton out of sight. I couldn't imagine him ever doing so after the situation that had gone down with the former prince's family.

“Bouncy castle is a go!” Sean yelled from beside the monstrosity.

All the littles in the group stood and rushed over to jump. It was always so adorable to watch. I dropped my arms to give Griffin the chance to join them, but he didn't move. His wide eyes took in the group before turning to me.

“I'm scared, Daddy. What if they don't like me?” He whispered.

I brushed my hand along his jaw. “What's not to like about you, Buttons? Besides, Elton was just thanking you for checking his horses. He likes you a whole lot right now. And Sean is pretty keen on having more people around to help with ranch stuff. I know Travis and Beau like you too, though they each have different ways of showing it.”

He sighed as he bit his top lip. I almost didn't stop him since the move was so fucking adorable. But I didn't want him to tear up his skin and knowing how nervous he was, I couldn't rule it out as a possibility.

“Do you want to ask the other Daddies their opinions? You don't have to address them as Daddy if you don't want to, but maybe they can help.”

I watched as he gathered his nerve, then turned to the men who'd been ignoring our private conversation. My boy cleared his throat, which effectively silenced them all.

“Umm... oh. Ok. Uh, I was wondering if you could tell me if they’re going to like me and how I can be their friend?” His words came out in a rush as he tried to get it all out.

Leaning around him, I raised my brows at the rest of the men there to signal that I needed backup. We had built a sort of unspoken language since the boys started coming around. For example, I couldn’t say the d-word (dessert) without it turning into disarray. Now we had a look, and that was the signal.

Jackson was the first to speak. “My Beau likes to make new friends. He’s been hesitant with you because he couldn’t tell what type of person you were.” He held up his hand before Griffin could reply. “That’s not to say you have to tell any of us anything. He’s just a curious fella and sometimes I have to remind him not to push others. But yes, he’ll think you’re super cool once he knows he can talk to you more.”

Next came Bobby Allen. “Elton already thinks you’re amazing. It was Dr. Hawkins this and Griffin that all afternoon once you saw the horses. There’s no wrong you can do in his eyes now.”

Corey shrugged as he tossed out, “I know it ain’t my place, but I have no doubt the boys will love you.” He’d stayed put to spend time with us Daddies when all the other littles had run off. Since he didn’t have a partner, it was anyone’s guess what type of person he would end up with. I had my money on the fact that he was a Daddy too. Watching him with Gerald told me he had the right disposition for it when he wanted to be serious.

Holt tipped his beer towards where we sat. “My Travis is a touch shy, but he loves with his whole goddamn heart. So long as you promised to show him kindness and understanding, he’ll have your back until the end of time.”

A round of ‘hear, hear’ went up from the group in agreement with those words. Travis really was the softest of us all, and quite frankly, I think we all protected him fiercely because of it.

Atticus spoke last, his eyes trained on the bouncy castle for a long moment before he turned back to look at my boy. “When Sean came around, I wasn’t out. I had been trying to take over the ranch with my pops sick, and I didn’t think it was the right time to try to add coming out to all of that. My hiding hurt Sean and put a strain on a lot of things around here. Through it all, I learned that the most important thing I could do for myself and for this group here was to be my authentic self. Whether that meant dating a man or admitting I was a Daddy to the best boy around, no offense gentleman,” he added when the group grumbled good-naturedly. “The point is, once I accepted who I was and ran with it, I had a much better life, and I knew for a fact that everyone liked me for me, not the version I’d pretended to be. What’s your true self, Dr. Hawkins? That’s who we’d love to know and become friends with. And we’ll support you for whatever version of you that is.”

My boy sniffed as he wiped his eyes. His heart was on his sleeve, and it was pouring out the pain and fear he’d been holding on to.

“I’m... I’m sometimes little,” he admitted to the group.

“That’s great,” said Corey.

“Awesome,” came from Holt.

Bobby Allen called out, “Hell yes!” while Jackson added a loud, “Whoop!”

Atticus merely smiled as he mouthed, “Thank you,” to my boy. I felt my own emotions rise at that. If anyone could prove how opening up could lead to happily ever after, Atticus was the one to do it.

“Can I go play now, Daddy?” my boy asked once the group finished cheering for him.

“Of course, Buttons. Go make some new bonds with your friends. I’ll be right here watching.”

He kissed my cheek, then took off at a jog. I watched as he stopped by the netting and waved excitedly at everyone. There was a high-pitched collective squeal, and the next thing I saw

was Griffin shucking his boots and slipping through the opening of the door.

“He’s good for you,” Atticus said. His comment drew my attention away for a second before I went back to watching the group. In the dark of the night, I couldn’t make out which shadow was which, but I knew the sound of my boy’s laugh. It was echoing in the night mixing with the others. I smiled at the sound.

“Yeah, he is, boss. He’s the best damn thing to ever happen to me.”

Chapter Sixteen

Griffin

“YES, BOY. TAKE THAT COCK. SHOW ME HOW HUNGRY YOU are for it,” Daddy growled as I sucked and licked at his hard length. A few minutes ago, I’d woken him up to a surprise blowjob, one of my better ideas. He’d let me lead for a short while before taking over. Now I was a mess and desperate to make him feel good as spit coated everything from my face and chest to his cock and thighs. There was no part of him I hadn’t explored with my tongue.

“Daddy,” I whined as I went to reach for my cock again. He’d already told me no once. It was just so hard. Literally.

I felt his hands on my head a second before he pulled me off. My whine and his laugh tangled together as he lifted me from the floor and moved us onto the bed. I stayed hovering on my knees as he laid on his back.

Daddy propped his head up with a pillow. “Come here, Buttons. I want your ass on my face and your mouth on my cock.”

My gasp was auditory. “You want me to sit on your face?”

“How else am I gonna tongue fuck your ass? Now get moving. You’re not gonna come from sitting there.”

Wanna bet? I probably could if I stared at him hard enough. The man was so perfectly sculpted. Time had only enhanced the amazing physique he’d had back then.

I crawled closer to him, ignoring the unease I felt at the thought of actually sitting on his face. If Daddy told me it would feel good, then I needed to trust him. He’d always

proven himself to be honest about things like that. Plus, he'd teased my ass years ago. I vaguely remembered it, but I had enough of an inkling to know to accept him.

My legs straddled his chest as I sank back onto his face. I hovered slightly, unsure what to do next. This was all new, and I didn't want to hurt him.

"That's it. Now suck on Daddy's cock so I can empty and fuck you as long and as hard as I want," he demanded.

I shivered at the heat behind the words as I did what he said. My left hand pressed into the mattress by his thigh as I used my right to hold his cock steady. My tongue teased along the tip for one, two, three laps around, then I slipped all the way down. I breathed in through my nose as I sank into the feeling of power giving head always gave.

"Mmmmm," Daddy moaned as I swallowed against his length. I thought I was the one giving all the pleasure until I felt his tongue trace around the edge of my hole. He'd spread my ass wide, giving himself the perfect view of everything.

I tried to focus on him, really, I did. But then his tongue speared inside of me, and all hope was lost.

His cock became more of a pacifier as it muffled all the noises I made. That was a good thing since we were supposed to be joining everyone for dinner in an hour. Harlan had left the food in the oven for Sean and Atticus to watch since they were going over bank statements in the kitchen. It left plenty of time for us to squeeze in a quickie.

Except Daddy wanted to draw out my pleasure. He liked having his boy a panting mess. He wanted me to beg for him to fuck me, and like always, I knew I would. He could have whatever he wanted so long as I got to feel him inside me.

His hold on my legs tightened as he held me right where he wanted. I was a mess, my rhythm nothing sexy or experienced. I'd lost my will to focus with the intensity at which he was going at my ass.

When he added a finger, my orgasm sped forward. I loved his tongue on me, but nothing could get me off like his fingers

and cock could.

“Daddy...”

“Yes, Buttons? What does my boy need?” He said it so casually, like we were deciding snack options rather than me being on the edge of my orgasm while his finger pressed in and out of me. “You’re not talking. Is there something wrong?”

“No! No, Daddy! Not wrong. It’s right. So, so right. Feels good.” My words turned to a mumble as I tried and failed to push back onto his fingers. The move earned me a slap to the ass, which only heightened the pleasure I was feeling.

Daddy added another finger to the mix as he increased his pace. I sucked him harder then, my determination returning. If he was going to drive me wild, then I’d damn sure return the favor.

He chuckled as he nibbled at the space where my ass and thigh met. “Look at you working so hard. You must really want Daddy’s cock, huh, Buttons?”

I nodded to his words, but then it turned to a squeal when he rolled us over. I thanked my lucky stars I hadn’t bitten down or anything. The man was brave for pulling such an act.

“Need to fuck you,” Daddy growled as he yanked his fingers free and slipped his cock from my mouth. I whimpered at the loss from both ends, my body feeling empty.

Before I could complain, he had me on my back as his cock teased my hole. I was so relaxed, so calm, that he slid in with ease. There was nothing like feeling Daddy slip inside me. We’d fucked numerous times and in numerous places since reuniting. I didn’t care where we were or who was around. If Daddy’s dick was on the menu, then we were finding some privacy, and I was getting served.

“Daddy. Give it to me.” I slammed my hand on the bed as I tried to give my best bossy face. From the grin he gave me, I could tell it hadn’t worked.

“You want it all?”

I nodded. “Every inch.”

The confidence I had slipped away when his hands tightened on my leg. “Hold tight,” he said a second before slamming forward.

My breath was knocked loose. In all the times we’d been together, Daddy had never fucked me like this. We’d had fast and we’d had slow. There was missionary and doggy style. Hell, we’d done it standing up.

But fast AND hard? That was new.

And fuck me harder, it was perfect.

“Da...dd...dd...yyy...” I said as he continued to pound into me like he couldn’t get deep enough.

“Fuck. I love hearing you call me that, Buttons. Love knowing I’m who you depend on. Love knowing I’m who you trust. Love knowing I’m the only one who gets you like this. I just fucking love you.”

The second I heard those words I came like my life was dependent on my orgasm. It was a rush, shooting out of me and covering my chest as my eyes remained locked on Daddy.

“Fuck, baby. You’re so goddamn tight. I can’t... I won’t...”

“I love you too, Daddy.” I brushed my thumb across his cheek as I spoke.

There was a second of silence, then he roared like a wild animal. I was sure that anyone who was within a few feet of the bunkhouse would know what we’d been doing. Not that I cared much. Let them hear. My Daddy said he loved me, and I’m not sorry one bit.

He pulled out slowly, then laid down beside me on the bed. I suddenly became shy, the words we’d shared stealing my confidence once faced with us talking post sex.

“You don’t get to hide from me, Buttons. You said it back and that counts. I might have done it in the moment, but I meant every word. I’ve loved you since the first time you

walked into a kitchen with me, and I'm going to love you for many more years to come if you'll let me."

"Let you? Daddy, that's all I've ever wanted. You're it for me. My Daddy. My favorite cook. My bedtime cuddle bug. All of it." I grinned up at him as I let him see the love I felt in my eyes. All my walls were down and there was nothing that could stand in our way now.

My stomach chose that moment to growl. I covered it with my hands, embarrassed at the noise.

Daddy chuckled as he kissed my forehead. "Let's get that monster inside you fed, huh, Buttons. Then we can feed the rest of the men."

He pulled out a pack of wipes and began to methodically clean every inch of cum on my body. I almost fell asleep at the delicate touch, but I held off long enough for him to finish.

Once redressed, we exited his room to head back to the main house. The second we stepped into the main area of the bunkhouse we were met with knowing grins. Then, as a group, they slow clapped and cheered. I turned red as could be but kept my head high.

Daddy shook his head as he wrapped me in his arms. "Enough of that foolishness. You keep it up and you're banned from dinner."

The room went dead quiet as not a single man wanted to test Daddy's loyalty.

DINNER BECAME AN ALL-OUT AFFAIR OF TEASING ME AND Daddy for our pre-dinner activities. We took it in stride, neither of us too bothered by it.

"I remember those days," Beau remarked. "It was all so new, and I couldn't get enough of Jackson. I wanted to spend every waking moment I could pinned beside him."

Jackson chuckled as he tucked Beau into his side. “He’s right. I felt the same way. No judgment for you two.”

“None at all. We promise,” Travis said with a pleading gaze.

“I’m not offended. Harlan loves me and that’s all that matters.” My admission brought a round of *oohs* and *ahhs* from the men. Daddy grinned at me between bites of food, proud that I’d stood up for myself with the teasing.

Conversation turned to each couple explaining how they met. Since I was new to the group, they wanted me to feel welcome and like I was part of their circle. I appreciated that, but even more so, I was thankful for the men Harlan had surrounding him.

When we first met, he was so closed off and unhappy. I’d been lucky if he even cracked a smile during some visits, much less laugh. Sitting with him now at the dinner table, I heard him laugh more than once over the span of a few minutes. It was the most wonderful gift to witness for a man who more than deserved it.

“How did you two meet? I think that’s the next best question.” The question came from Holt. He was grinning as if he’d put us on the spot to share some meet cute. He had no clue the question was like a loaded gun.

I looked to Harlan, my gaze questioning. I would follow his lead no matter what he chose. He and I were a team. Nothing, not even new friendships, would change that.

He shocked the room, me included, when he chuckled and said, “Funny thing, that. Griffin and I met while I was doing a stint at Arborcrest Penitentiary. He was doing animal therapy work, and I was one of his first project... candidates? Members? Buttons, what’s the word I’m looking for?”

“Participants. You were a participant,” I whispered, awe and love filling me with his bravery.

“Yeah, that’s it. Well, yep. That’s the story. He came in and I got to meet Juliet. It was love at first sight pretty much for both of them. I started cooking for him, and the rest is what it

is. We reconnected that night at the Scrambler when he was teasing me on the dance floor.”

I gasped. “I didn’t even know you were there!”

“Sure, you didn’t,” Atticus winked at me and with that tiny motion, I knew it would all be ok. If his boss didn’t care, then who were the other men to judge Harlan?

Chapter Seventeen

Harlan

THE GUYS TOOK IT BETTER THAN EXPECTED. THEY DIDN'T question me right away or look away in disgust. Somehow, that made it all easier. I confessed the truth of what had put me behind bars all those years ago, and I admitted that it was probably the best thing for me back then.

“I'd never have known how fake the people around me were without having been sentenced and sent away. For as much as my family prayed that I'd be saved from it all, the truth is, it set me free. Without that time, I wouldn't have any of you. I can't imagine that life. I don't want to,” I admitted.

Atticus picked up on parts of the story too, asking, “My pops knew, didn't he? I knew he was friends with a warden. Figured the coincidence is too close.”

I gave him a smile. “Sure is too close. The warden called Clancy to tell him I was getting out. He basically demanded your pops give me a job here at the ranch. I didn't know the man really liked me all that much until then.”

“Sounds about right,” he replied with a laugh. “Pops loved taking people in. It was his way.”

“Sure was. How do you think I got here?” Travis's teasing lightened the mood and gave us the chance to move on to discuss other things. Things like the future and where we were all headed.

“The market is doing great. There's more stuff we can do though. Things we haven't thought of.” That was Sean, his business brain in overdrive like always.

“Tell us, oh, Captain. What did you have in mind?” Beau’s teasing made Sean stick his tongue out at the other man. Their Daddies stopped the bickering before it could get out of control.

Sean pointed to me first. “For starters, you could make hot plates. Like full size ones. I’ve seen people tear into the finger food. Could you imagine what they’ll do for a hot plate with all the fixings?”

I shook my head. “I’m not equipped for all that. You’re talking about needing hot trays and burners to keep food warm. I’d also need containers to send food out in and utensils.”

“Yep. I’ve already factored in that cost. And the projections of what we could bring in... Let’s just say we could do whatever we want from there. We could fund an entire pasture of bouncy houses.”

“A PASTURE?!?!?” Elton’s squeal drew everyone’s eyes. “A pasture is big, right, Daddy? Like really, really big. We could have so much fun.”

Bobby Allen smirked at his boy’s joy. “Yes, it is big. And no, we can’t get a pasture of them. You boys would never get another minute of work done in your life. Don’t even think about giving me the puppy dog eyes either.”

Elton stopped midway through making the face. He crossed his arms and turned to face the group. “New topic. I’m sad now.”

His little side was precious, and it had me glancing over at my own to see what he was thinking. Instead of jumping in to share his opinion, he was leaning back in his seat with a grin that said he couldn’t imagine anywhere else he’d rather be.

“You look like the cat that ate the canary,” I whispered in his ear.

He shook his head. “Just a lot of fun to watch. I’ve never been a part of this kind of dynamic.”

“Well, welcome. This is us now. I’m sure it will only grow with time.”

“What about Sean’s idea?” He asked, his eyes locked on mine. “Do you really think you couldn’t do it? I know you. You fed all those men at the prison with ease. This is nothing to you, Daddy.”

It was his confidence in me that did it. He made me see that while it was a big task, I’d already done something like it and more. Plus, he’d be here to help me along the way. I wouldn’t be alone.

I interrupted the bickering between the others to address Sean. “I’ll do it. There will need to be loads of planning and a proper budget. We may need to buy more equipment too.”

Sean bounced in his seat. “Oh, this is going to be awesome. We have plenty of time before the next market to figure it all out. I’m so excited for the opportunity to do this. Plus, if it doesn’t work, we can always just scale back down. No harm, no foul.”

The rest of the conversation shifted to his ideas about vendor tables from some of Atticus’s friends in the city. There was a particular focus on a woodworker who built custom furniture and some tattoo artists.

“You really think we can do tattoos outside with all that dirt and dust kicking around?” Beau asked Sean curiously. “I’m not saying it’s a bad idea. It’s more like the sanitary side of it concerns me.”

“Being a stepdaddy has changed you,” Corey teased. “Before you shacked up with Jackson, you wouldn’t have given germs a second thought.”

Beau shrugged. “You’re right. I probably wouldn’t have. It’s not been my normal mindset before having a tiny tot around who likes to touch all the things. I mean he was digging in cow shit —”

“And enough of that. Let’s get back on topic. My kid isn’t the highlight of the day,” Jackson interrupted.

Griffin leaned over to whisper, “Do you want kids someday?”

I was so taken aback by the question that it took me a full minute to process it. By the time I came to, my boy was leaning back in his seat, gaze turned away from me as he tried to keep it together.

Tugging him back to me, I kissed his neck as I answered truthfully. “It hasn’t been on my radar for a while, Buttons, but I think you’d be a great dad. Like Steve Irwin, but less Aussie and a different accent.”

That sent him into a fit of giggles that drew the attention of the rest of the table. At their raised brows, I explained that I made a joke about him being the country-fied US version of the infamous Irwin.

“Oh yeah! Totally see that,” Travis shouted as the others agreed.

Griffin calmed enough to thank everyone for the compliment despite “Not being that cool.”

When the impromptu meeting finally ended, I swept my boy away to his place so we could have a peaceful night. I didn’t think any of the guys would interrupt us if we got up to something again, but I knew my Buttons was likely going to feel self-conscious about sex at the ranch until the teasing died down. That or until someone else got caught and drew attention away from us.

At his place, my boy was as carefree as he wanted. I watched him go to his room and pull out a pair of new tighty whities I’d ordered him along with a shirt and shorts set covered in horses. He turned to face me, then pointed at the items.

“Bath and then you dress me please, Daddy?”

“Of course, Buttons. I’d love to. Let’s get you all cleaned up.”

I led him from the bedroom into the bathroom and had him sit on the toilet. He stayed still as I drew the water, but he got antsy the moment I pulled out his bucket of toys.

“Which two would you like tonight?”

He pouted at my question. “Only two?”

“Of course, baby. I know you’re worn out so too many toys might distract you. And if you’re distracted, you won’t play. This time is so you can relax before sleep, and not get worked up and angry.” I was using a blend of answers, though he didn’t question it. I got a nod in reply as his pout slipped away.

“You’re right, Daddy. Too many choices would be bad. Let’s do... dolphin and hippo.” He clapped excitedly as I pulled the figures from the basket and dropped them in the bubble filled water.

I gasped as they sunk. “Shoot! They’re disappeared. I guess we’ll need to hire someone to find them.”

“No, Daddy! Not hire. Me! I can find them. I’m the best at search and rescue.”

“Are you? Well, then, we should get you ready to go diving. Up you go,” I waved my hand for him to stand.

I took my time stripping him of his shirt and socks. Then I took his pants, leaving him only in a pair of boxers. They were his go-to ‘big’ underwear that helped him stay away from a little mindset. Or rather, they eased the frequency of his switching. As I’d noticed, the more time we spent together, the easier it was for him to let me lead him and he’d sink into my Buttons, the boy I loved with all my Daddy heart.

“Can’t go searching or rescuing like this. Off they go.” I tugged his underwear, then knelt at his feet to slip them off. “There we go. You’re all ready. Hold Daddy’s hand, then you can play while I get the bed ready.”

He nodded and followed my lead, slowly sinking into the water until bubbles reached up to his chest. From there, he dug for the animals I’d hidden. He pretended to struggle for a minute, his tongue stuck out between his lips and his brow furrowed. Then suddenly he shifted, and his eyes lit up.

“I found them, Daddy! See! I’m the bestest searcher ever.”

“You sure are, Buttons. Be good for Daddy.”

He giggled. “Always Daddy.”

I left him to play as I went to make sure we’d locked up and that everything was shut down for the night. Once I knew we were secure, I went to lay out his clothes in the bedroom. I made sure they were lined up perfectly in order, then I grabbed a book from the shelf to read to him. I knew he’d want something with animals, so I took my time searching for the perfect one.

Settled on that, I went back to the bathroom to check on him. I laughed when I caught sight of my boy. He was covered head to toe in the bubbles, looking like the cutest monster I’d ever seen.

“Oh, no! What happened here? Was there a bubble attack?”

His eyes widened as he gave a slow nod. “It was so scary, Daddy. They came out of nowhere. I was just trying to keep the hippo from eating the dolphin, then BOOM I was surrounded. I had to fight my way out.”

Pressing a hand to my chest, I eased myself down to sit on the side of the tub. It was one of those deep soaking tubs, which meant that while he had loads of room, I had to shift a little to keep myself on the edge.

“I’m so glad you made it out ok. Next time, shout for Daddy and I’ll come help you fight. No boy should have to slay such evil creatures alone.”

He giggled while fighting to keep a straight face. “I will, Daddy. I know you’ll protect me.”

I would. He and I both knew it. There was nothing that could come between us anymore. Not now that I’ve got him with me and claimed him as mine.

“Let’s get you clean, then we’ve got to get ready for bed. I have a story to read picked out already.”

“A story!? Daddy, why didn’t you start with that? We gotta hurry up and get clean. I need a story.”

He reached for the washcloth on the towel rack. With how slippery it was, he nearly flew out of the tub.

“Easy there,” I said as I caught him and eased him back into the water. “Bubble monsters have to let Daddy take the lead. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“But you’re not going fast enough, Daddy,” he whined.

I chuckled as I shook my head. “You said you’d be good for me. That means listening when I say you need to do something. Now hold tight so I can get you clean.”

He sat perfectly still, his body taut as I grabbed the cloth he’d been going after. I wet the fabric, then squeezed soap on it. He didn’t move a muscle the entire time. I took great pleasure in it, especially since I knew it would only take me a little bit to get him all cleaned up.

Sure enough, ten minutes later, he was clean and out of the tub waiting for me to dry him off. “I did good, didn’t I?”

The question was said with a hint of vulnerability in it. My Buttons, my boy, was wanting me to reassure him. That I could do.

“You were perfect! The best bubble monster around. And now you’re all clean.” I went about drying his body limb by limb. I purposefully ignored his hard cock since we weren’t focused on that tonight. He wanted to be spoiled as his little self. There would be time for the rest later.

In the bedroom, I led him to lay across the comforter. “Legs up,” I said as I grabbed the underwear.

I slid them up his lean legs and over that pert little ass. His cock was still hard, so I had to grab it to tuck it away. He jolted at my touch and whimpered.

“I know, Buttons. Now isn’t the time though. Don’t you want your story?”

He nodded rapidly. “Story! Story!”

The rest of his clothes went on with ease, and soon enough we were leaning back against the pillows as I cracked open a book about a young boy who goes on safari only to find out all

the wild animals are his family and friends. It's a cute story full of humorous moments that sent my boy into giggles over and over again.

Near the end, his laughter became softer until I got no reply at all to my silly voices. I looked down to see him asleep on my chest.

“Oh, Buttons. You sweet, sweet boy. I love you so much.” I placed a kiss on his forehead, content to hold him in my arms just a bit longer before I took my own shower and cleaned up. This was everything I'd ever dreamed of for us.

And to think it all started with a cow on a leash.

Chapter Eighteen

Griffin

“YOU’RE GLOWING, DOCTOR. IF YOU WERE A WOMAN, THEN I’d say you must be pregnant. What’s the cause? Love? Spite? Give me the tea.” Robin said as he closed my office door behind him.

We were on lunch, and I’d just taken a bite of the massive sandwich Daddy had made me this morning when I dropped him off at the ranch. He told me to wait in the drive for ten minutes, then he returned with both breakfast and lunch wrapped up for me. I nearly cried at the thoughtfulness of the action. Food was Harlan’s love language. It’s how he showed people he cared. Giving me two meals today showed how highly he thought of me.

“You’re doing it again. That look that screams “So This is Love”” he hummed the last part.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts as I swallowed the bite of food. “You’re nosier than I thought you’d be. To answer you, I am in love. And my partner made me this delicious meal, so if you don’t mind...”

Robin didn’t get up to leave like I hinted at. He just stayed in his seat as he thought up whatever next question he’d ask.

“I’m happy for you then. Love is a beautiful thing. Not everyone gets to experience it. Maybe I’ll get my own happily ever after one day. For now, I’ll live vicariously through you and my brother.”

“Your brother? Is he in a new relationship? I’m struggling to remember him.”

Robin didn't take offense at my words. He shrugged. "It's not new necessarily. They're engaged to be married. Have been for a while. They just set a date for a couple of months from now. It will be exciting to see how it all plays out."

"That is exciting. What kind of wedding couple are they? Do they do the chic and fancy, or will it be a western wedding?" It was anyone's guess. I knew his brother was close by in the city, though he didn't come out to visit Robin often. Apparently, he was 'allergic' to country living. Robin said it was more that he hated sweating and loved his designer clothing.

"I honestly have no idea. I met the bride twice in the last five years. She's a bit of a... well, let's just say she isn't all that pleasant. He and I disagreed on their relationship, which led to us not speaking much for nearly a year. Now that we're good again, I keep all opinions of Madame Evil to myself."

I snorted at the nickname. "She can't be that bad."

"Whatever you're thinking, she's worse. But if my brother is happy, then who am I to take that from him? Let him be content in his engagement bliss."

"Definitely not a western wedding from the vibes you're giving off. What's her name? I'll look up her social media." I whipped my phone out, curiosity getting the better of me.

"Danielle Archer. I'll link you to her profile. Hold on." I watched as he pulled up the details and sent it over.

I clicked the link the second it popped up. My jaw nearly dropped from what I saw. Danielle was stunning. Like beauty queen gorgeous. But her eyes were dead. I recognized the look from some of the men I helped counsel over the years. There's a darkness there.

"Wow. Um..."

"Yeah, I know. You can see the evil too, can't you?"

I winced as I set my phone down. It was open on a photo of Robin's brother and Danielle. "I don't know her."

"But you see it?" He pressed.

“I see something. I don’t want to comment on it. Hopefully your brother is happy with her. Will you need to take off for the wedding?”

Robin shook his head as he grinned at my deflection. “Probably. Maybe. I don’t know. He has to tell me the details once she settles on a number of bridesmaids and the size of the invites. If push comes to shove, then I’ll just book the few days around it and I’ll owe you a vacation later.”

“Deal!” I said as I slammed my hand on the desk like I was an auctioneer.

Before either of us could say another word, there was a knock at the door. Then another lighter knock. And then four random knocks of various strength.

Robin gave me a strange look as he went to open the door. “Hi, how can I help you?” he asked the person on the other side.

A familiar voice answered, “We’re here to see Griffin. He’s our friend.”

Another piped in with, “One of our best friends. We work with his —”

“COME IN!” I shouted before Travis could finish whatever he was about to say.

The group pushed through the door past Robin who was staring me down like I had lost it. To him, I probably had. I didn’t get visitors at the clinic. It wasn’t for any reason other than me wanting to keep my personal and professional lives as separate as possible.

Now, it seemed impossible. Harlan and I were the definition of crossing lines. Even now, there was some overlap because of the work I did for the Coleman Ranch.

“There you are!” Sean beamed at me as he walked in, arm-in-arm with Beau. Travis scurried behind them, followed closely by Elton and Corey. I raised my brow at the last one.

“I’m here to supervise and drive. It’s the only way the trip could be approved.”

Beau leaned over my desk, completely ignoring Corey's taunt. "Who is this? He's a snack, though the chick on his arm is a bit scary."

The group gathered around my phone to stare at the picture I'd left open. Robin walked over with amusement in his features as if to say "see? they get it".

"That's my brother and his fiancée. I was just telling Griffin here the news about them setting a date."

"Hmmm..." there was a collective quiet to the group. It was so unlike them; I couldn't figure out what the difference was. Maybe there really was something to the energy Danielle gave off. Or maybe it was something else entirely.

Corey seemed the most enthralled by the photo. He stared at it hard, his gaze never wavering even as I reached for the device. As I tugged it away, he looked up at me, his eyes unfocused. He blinked a few times, his expression clearing to reveal the normally goofy person I knew him for.

"Sorry about that. Where were we? Have you guys asked him yet?"

"Asked me what?"

Elton stepped forward then. "We wanted to know if you'd come to a party with us."

"Yes, a party at the ranch. Perhaps with a certain post-market item involved," Sean added with an exaggerated wink.

Robin chuckled. "I feel like you're all talking in code. How about I leave so you can speak freely? We'll talk more about the glow later, Griffin."

With that, it was just me, Corey, and all the Littles of the Coleman Ranch. "I'm guessing this is a little party?"

"Yes! With all the little things you could imagine. Atty said we had freedom to do whatever we wanted." Travis's expression was giddy. He spun in a circle as he cheered.

I giggled, my little side slipping forward despite the setting. "That wasn't smart of him."

“You’re telling me! I warned Daddy he didn’t know what the collective little power was capable of.” Sean shrugged. “Too bad for him. I have a feeling it will be a good time no matter what. So you’re in?”

“Put me down. I’ve never gotten to play with other littles except that day after the market. Heck, I didn’t embrace my little side completely until Daddy.” It was the most open I’d been with my little side since Harlan and I solidified our dynamic. Despite hanging around the other men, there was still a part of me that reserved itself for only when Daddy was around.

But seeing the others so free, seeing the joy on their face at the idea of a party, had my own energy rising. It was like an infection spreading through us all — though not yucky. Good. Like when someone smiles at you and then you smile. Maybe that’s a better way to describe it.

I was brought from my weird thoughts when Beau waved his hands in my face. “Hey! We had one more question before we go.”

“Sorry. Got distracted. What did you need?”

They all shared looks before Beau answered for the group. “Food.”

With that single word, I knew what they wanted. “Daddy would be honored to feed us all. Any specific requests?”

The group cheered as Sean leaned over to say, “I’ll text it to you.” He had to get close for me to hear over the noise of the others.

“Sounds good. Thanks for thinking of me.”

He smirked as the noise died down. “You’re one of us. Of course we’d invite you.”

“Plus, your Daddy is the food man. We can’t have a party without snacks!” Beau threw in before waving and opening the door.

As fast as they’d arrived, the group disappeared back down the hall. I opened my texting app to reach out to Daddy to

warn him before they made it back to the ranch.

Daddy! I was just invited to a party.

DADDY

Really? That's wonderful, Buttons. Anyone I know?

Well, yes, actually. Beau, Sean, Elton, and Travis showed up to invite me. Corey drove them here.

That explains why Bobby Allen came storming in here earlier looking for his boy. Elton is going to end up in time out for sneaking away.

Whoops. Not my monkey, not my circus, Daddy. They invited me, but I kind of promised you'd help with food. Will you? Pretty please?

Hmmmm

I don't know, Buttons. You didn't even ask before you volunteered my help. What if I hadn't been able to help?

What if I promise to help? You like it when I help you, right? We can spend time together and you're not alone working.

Oh, baby, you're too kind to offer. But that's not all I want. You're going to stay the night with me at the ranch again tonight. Go by your house to get a bag, then head my way.

What would you say if I said I already had a bag packed?

Then I'd say you're a good boy who came to work prepared. Did you miss me, Buttons?

I did, Daddy. I need my snuggles.

My work schedule had been rough for the last week. Daddy and I only got a few stolen hours here and there. Plus, when I did show up, I was always exhausted.

But I'd slept all night last night. I was rested, I missed him, and I was horny as hell.

Promise me something?

Depends. Is it illegal or something I can't get easily?

Your cock might be long but it's not illegal, Daddy.

Oh, I see. You can have me whenever you'd like. I'll take you out to the fucking hay loft if we need privacy or something. You'll get me as hard or as fast as you need. Is that what my boy wants? Daddy's cock stuffing him full?

I groaned as my cock went hard. A naughty thought came to mind. I took a snapshot of my crotch, then sent it off.

Look what you did, Daddy. I've got a problem now. How do I fix it?

You don't. That's mine to play with later tonight. You're going to finish your food, then you're going to go back to work. And tonight, when you get to me, I'll suck you dry before I slide my cock inside you and fuck you just how you want. How does that sound?

I like the last part. I'm not a fan of waiting.

I'll make it worth it. Now be good and go eat. Love you. XO

Love you too, Daddy. XXXX

Chapter Nineteen

Harlan

“HEY HARLAN, CAN I BORROW YOU FOR A MINUTE?” ATTICUS stood in the doorway of the kitchen, a grim look on his face.

“Sure thing, boss. What’s up?”

He waved for me to follow him, then we took off for the bunkhouse. I was surprised by the change of location, but I figured there would be answers soon enough. There wasn’t anything for me to be fearful of. I’d been a model employee and despite keeping my time served a secret, the truth of the matter is that I didn’t step out of line one bit.

At the bunkhouse, Atticus knocked hard twice, then walked inside. The rest of the ranch hands were there too, each looking worse for wear.

“Pick a spot, Harlan. Anywhere is fine.”

I sat between Holt and Jackson. Both men greeted me with head nods, then turned back to their partners. All the littles appeared worried except for Sean. Of everyone, he was the saddest. That sent up red flags in my mind. All I could think of was when Clancy told us he was sick.

No. Not Atticus too.

“Before anyone freaks, it’s not anything to do with me or the ranch as a whole. I’m in good health. Money is good. This is about one person in particular.”

Eyes traveled around the room looking for the culprit of this impromptu meeting. I didn’t see anyone looking guilty,

but I also noticed that one person in particular was missing. Just as I thought his name, Atticus spoke again.

“Gerald,” he said, tone grave. “He’s been hurting for a long time now. Losing my pops did a number on him. Grief is difficult to navigate on its own. Adding in unhealthy coping mechanisms tends to make it worse.”

“This is about his drinking, isn’t it?” Corey asked.

Atticus nodded as he scrubbed a hand over his face. “I don’t want to call it an intervention, but dammit, it feels like that’s the only way to say it. He needs help. Help I don’t think we’re able to give.”

“I looked up rehab places.” Sean’s voice was soft but firm. He wasn’t looking at any of us though. His eyes were on the floor.

“So what? We send him away and hope they bring the old Gerald back?” Beau crossed his arms, frustration bleeding from him.

Sean shrugged; gaze still downcast. “I don’t know what else to do. He’s too far gone.”

“He’s been drinking a lot, sure. But what’s changed?” Holt interjected.

Bobby Allen hummed in agreement. “One of you saw something. Something that scared you.”

Sean closed his eyes tight as he nodded. Atticus wrapped himself around the other man like he was trying to protect him from the truth.

“Can someone tell us? I want to help. We can’t if we don’t know.” Elton’s voice of reason pulled Sean back in.

“Last night I heard loud music in the driveway. I went down to look, and I found Gerald in the driver’s seat of the work truck. He’d been stopped out front, engine still running. I saw the tire tracks from where he drove it up from the barn. They were swerved all around.”

My gut sank. I knew what his next words would be. Fuck. This was harder than I imagined.

“He was drunk. He’d been driving around the ranch drunk and could have hurt any of us. He could have hurt himself. I don’t want to do this. I don’t know what else to do though,” Sean’s voice turned to a whisper at the end, his exhaustion clear.

I ran my hands down my legs, nerves eating me alive. “I think it’s the only way. We’re not counselors who are equipped to do this. And as much as something like AA might help, he needs to be immersed in a program. He needs to face his grief and understand all the emotions he’s been dealing with. He may not be the old Gerald again, but at least he’ll be less inclined to self-harm.”

The group mulled over my words. It was nice to be able to speak up and lend perspective. I felt like maybe my words helped them see the need for this.

“Since no one is actively objecting or throwing out another solution, this is what we’re going to go with. I figured the best time to intervene is before he has another chance to hurt himself.” Atticus made eye contact with everyone in the room.

Travis’s hand went up. “Where is he now?”

“Sleeping off his hangover in the barn office. We put him in his room after the incident, but he only slept for a short while because I caught him lugging around some vodka a few hours later. I took it from him, then suggested he sleep it off.” Sean looked up, his red-rimmed eyes showing what a tough night it had been for him.

“Then he came to get me. I’ve been trying to think of alternatives all morning, but I’m out of ideas. Sean found a place a few hours away that had openings. There’s enough money to cover it. In fact, when I called my buddy Rhett to borrow a ranch hand to replace Gerald, he told me he and his husband Ean would just pay for the treatment outright. He said that it would be what Pops would want.” Atticus’s shoulders shook with his choked words.

Pain spread through the room, hitting us all square in the chest. The loss of Clancy. The return of Atticus. Watching the

transfer of the Coleman Ranch after Clancy's passing. And now Gerald suffering for his lost love.

“When he wakes up, we'll all get together again to talk to him. Hopefully we can convince him to go. If not, they have involuntary options to get him the help he needs.”

Sean's words formed as a sort of dismissal. Everyone went back to whatever they'd been doing when Atticus summoned them. I took off for the kitchen, though I made a stop at Gerald's room. Atticus followed behind, likely knowing what I had in mind.

“I didn't want to ask,” he started.

“But you knew I'd be the right person for the job.” I pushed the bed forward and began digging around behind the headboard. I came back with four empty vodka bottles.

Handing them off to Atticus, I went back to searching. Under the bed. In the closet. Dresser drawers. On bookshelves and in boots. Everywhere someone could hide even the smallest amount of alcohol, I rooted for it.

When I finished, we'd found twenty empty bottles and eleven partially full ones. Each was a slap in the face. There had to have been signs we missed along the way. Things we didn't see because we either didn't want to or because he hid them so well.

“I've got to get back to it. Let me know when it's time,” I said to Atticus as he and Sean stared hard at the glass bottles lining the counter.

“Sure thing. Thanks for your help, Harlan.”

I DON'T THINK ANYONE IS EVER READY TO HAVE TO CONFRONT their friend about addiction. It's a tricky subject in general to discuss but add in the grief we all knew Gerald was battling, and it was a minefield.

“What’s going on?” Gerald asked when all of us walked into the room. “Something happen?”

We all sat in the same places we’d been in earlier in the day. It was the slightest bit of comfort to not be stumbling over one another at least.

Atticus stood and went into the kitchen area. He came back with a box and set it on the floor in front of Gerald. I watched as his face paled. Before he could speak, Atticus left and returned with another box.

“It’s not...”

“But it is, Gerald. What do you remember from last night?” Sean asked him.

He shook his head, his features turning down in confusion. “You and I were talking. I’d had a bit to drink, and you said I should sleep in. Told me not to worry about it.”

Sean shook his head. “That’s not exactly what happened. You’d been drinking a lot and got behind the wheel.”

Gerald’s jaw dropped. “No. That’s not possible. I wouldn’t... I didn’t...” He looked around the room as if to confirm everyone was alive and safe.

“Sean and I pulled you out of that truck and put you to bed in your room. A few hours later, you were stumbling around with more alcohol in your system. You don’t remember any of that?” Atticus spoke gently, his tone free of judgment. If we wanted Gerald to be open to this idea, we didn’t need to point the blame at him. He had to believe this was all meant to help.

“It’s all a blur. None of that sounds familiar. I didn’t think I had a problem. I just... Sometimes I can’t sleep.”

Atticus nodded along. “How often is sometimes?”

“A few times a week. But even when I do sleep, I wake up to nightmares.”

“Nightmares about my pops?”

Gerald flinched like Atticus had hit him. Sean’s eyes watered as his hand covered his mouth. The other littles in the

room looked just as torn up.

This was our friend. He was our family. And he was hurting so goddamn bad that he'd turned to alcohol to soothe the pain.

"I can't talk about him, Atticus. I don't have the strength. Not now," Gerald pleaded.

The other man slid closer to Gerald. He squatted down to put himself in his line of sight, then he spoke the words I knew would be the true test of the night.

"We've found a place that will help you. They specialize in grief and addiction. It's a full-time thing, so we'd have to pack you some clothes and stuff. I'll drive you myself, or you can get someone else to take you if you want."

Gerald covered his face as a sob ripped from his throat. His pain bled out as his shoulders shook violently. Atticus rushed forward, wrapping him in his arms. Sean moved next, his hands joining in. One by one, the men of the Coleman Ranch stepped up to add to the dog pile that had become this hug.

We stayed that way for several minutes before pulling apart. Gerald accepted the tissues someone handed him then nodded at Atticus.

"I'll go. Hurting someone would only add to this feeling," he motioned to his chest. "I can't let that happen. When do we leave?"

"As soon as you can pack a bag."

"Then let me get started. Corey, do you mind driving me? I could use some mindless chatter," Gerald teased.

Corey nodded with a grin. "I've been researching all kinds of stuff lately. You're going to love what I've got this time."

The group laughed as Gerald took off for his room. He left the door open, giving us plenty of room to see him as he worked.

"I'll send you the address, Corey. It's pretty much a straight drive there and back. All you'll do is help him sign in,

then head back. I've already spoken to the doctor on staff today and given him the details," Atticus instructed.

"I can do that. No worries, boss. He'll get there in one piece. You guys gonna be able to handle this place with us gone?"

Atticus shook his head. "We'll make it work. I'm not afraid to put some time in. Plus, Rhett said he might have someone to send me. Not a normal ranch hand from his place, but an old friend of his that needs someplace to chill. And apparently the guy is stacked with muscles, so he'll come in handy for all the manual labor."

"Of course he knows some bodybuilder type. City folk," Corey scoffed.

"He owns a ranch, silly," Travis teased.

To that, Corey pointed at the little who was tucked into his Daddy's side. "He does, but he also owns a tattoo place and is married to a movie star. We can't exactly call him full country now, can we?"

When no one continued to argue, Corey beamed like he'd won a million dollars. We all knew it best to let him think he'd won a discussion than to get him riled up. He could go on for hours if you let him.

Gerald came out of the room before Corey could gloat too bad. "I'm ready."

With one last round of hugs, we watched as the pair climbed into the cab of Corey's truck and drove away. It felt like the end, but we all knew it was also the beginning. We just had to hold out hope that this was the right move.

Chapter Twenty

Griffin

IF SOMEONE HAD ASKED ME A YEAR AGO IF I'D BE SPENDING all my free time at the Coleman Ranch helping Harlan cook and getting to know the men he called family, I'd have laughed in their face. No way was I going to give the big idiot anymore of my time after he sent me away so harshly.

Yet... time has proven how wrong I was.

In the days since Gerald went to rehab, the rest of the ranch hands have banded together. I've watched grown men break into tears for their friend, their empathy on overdrive. I've seen them get angry and work themselves into exhaustion. And I've seen them love — my word how they've loved one another.

“Hey, Doc. How's it going?” Atticus ambled up next to me where I was giving Juliet a bath. Our girl was well on the way to recovery, but there were still some things she shouldn't be doing. Climbing in the bathtub being one of them.

“I'm good, Atticus. How about you?”

He shrugged as he reached down to pet the soapy cow. “I'm fine. Wanted to talk to you for a minute.”

I couldn't help the way my body froze. From what Harlan told me, the last time ‘talk to you’ was used, they'd been staging an intervention. I might not have been involved directly since I didn't know Gerald, but I was smart enough to pick up that Atticus had more on his mind than to talk about the weather.

Turning the water down, I let the hose trickle over Juliet as I faced the man beside me. “How can I help you?”

“None of that. I’m here with good news. Or at least I’d considered it good.” His grin eased the tension in my shoulders.

“OK. I’m all ears. What’s up?”

“You and Harlan are pretty serious now. Looking like maybe a forever kind of deal?”

I nodded. “He’s it for me. I don’t want anyone else, and I don’t think he does either.”

“Trust me, he doesn’t. That man has been hung up on you since the day I showed up here. He was closed off and grouchy. Now he smiles at people and does stuff just because. It’s the damndest thing.”

“Love will do that to a person,” I agreed.

“Tell me about it. Anyway, I wanted to offer you a part of the land. My pops tried to make this place a refuge of sorts while he was alive. I’d like to continue the notion. No reason for you and Harlan to be stuck sneaking around when you could just have your own little plot.”

“You’re serious, Atticus? That’s... that’s a really big deal. How much do you want for it?”

He shook his head. “Not a dime. We’ll hash it out so you’ll legally own it. Consider it an early wedding present.”

I couldn’t believe what he was saying. This had to be a dream. It was too good to be true.

Juliet bumped my leg with her nose as if to remind me not to forget about her. Like that could ever happen.

“I’ve got to tell Harlan. He’s going to be so, hell, I don’t know how he’ll be. He loves this place. I can’t imagine him wanting to be anywhere else,” I told him. It was the truth too. Harlan had found sanctuary on the ranch. If he could stay until his last breath, then he would.

“Want me to take over finishing up with this little lady? Or maybe I should send Harlan out here to you? It’d be easier for you to celebrate in a stall than in the main house right now.” With a wink, he left me there gaping at his words.

A few minutes later, Harlan came jogging over. I’d finished up Juliet enough to know she was clean, and I’d put her in the small pen we built for her inside one of the unused stalls.

“Buttons! Atticus said you had to talk to me about something. Is everything ok? Are you hurt?” His hands ran over me, tickling me into a fit of giggles. The worry on his face melted once he realized I was fine.

“I’m ok, Daddy. Atticus gave me some good news, and I wanted to tell you right away.”

He frowned. “Then why not come tell me inside? Why bring me all the way down here?”

Blushing, I explained, “Because Atticus thought we might want to celebrate, and he knew the house was too busy.” I emphasized celebrate so he knew what I was hinting at.

Daddy laughed as he pulled me into a hug. “Ok, I’ll accept all that. What’s the good news?”

“He wants to section off part of the land for us. He’s offering us a permanent home here on the ranch.”

Harlan went quiet as his muscles bunched, tightening around me. “That motherfucker.”

“Huh?”

He pulled back as he tilted his head to the sky. “He’s determined to make me cry today. I can’t — no, I won’t give him the benefit of seeing me get in my feelings.”

“So, you’re happy?” I needed him to clarify. If he didn’t want to live here, then we’d find another way. But I had a strong suspicion this was the only place that had ever felt like home to him. I wanted him to continue feeling that way, especially if it meant we got to be close to everyone.

“I’m beyond happy, Buttons. This is amazing news. Almost as good as the time I first saw you. Nothing ever beats that though.”

“Is that right, Daddy?”

He tugged me to his chest as his lips descended over mine. “That’s right,” he whispered.

Swept up in his teasing, I missed the fact that he’d been moving us across the barn into the office. He shut the door behind us, then locked it for good measure.

“We’re going to build a house together.” He pressed me into the desk. “And when it’s done, I’ll be able to fuck you as much as I want, as hard as I want, and in any room that I want.”

I shivered as he bit the space where my neck and shoulder met. He’d recently discovered how sensitive that spot could be, and he used it every chance he got.

“Daddy,” I whimpered as I rubbed my hardness against him. “Help me. It’s pointy again.”

He chuckled as he reached down to cup me. I jolted at the way his meaty palm pressed over my jeans. It was just enough pressure to feel good, but not so much that I’d feel any real relief.

“We can’t have this now, can we? No one else gets to see my boy hard but me.” He yanked at my jeans, working swiftly to free me from the confines.

Once it was loose enough, he slipped them down, along with my underwear, in one fluid motion. The shock of cold air in the room had me crying out as I arched into him.

He groaned once he saw how my cock was already leaking for him. It was a mess, yet he hadn’t even really gotten started.

I kept my hands on the edge of the desk. He’d backed me up to it when he led us here. The wood was rough under my hands, but it gave me something else to focus on besides the feeling of being so exposed.

Logically, I knew Daddy wasn't doing anything to hurt me or make fun of me. Still, my body didn't know what to do when he merely sat there watching me instead of getting on with the celebration.

“Daddy...”

“I'm sorry, Buttons. Sometimes I have to just look at you. It amazes me that we're here, that I get to have you and be intimate with you. I'll get back to showing you how excited I am.”

I wanted to tell him that I understood. That I was also amazed at how life had turned out and that his sincerity only made me love him more.

Instead, I squeaked as his hand wrapped around my length. It turned to a moan when he leaned down and spat right on my cock. I repeat — he spat on me. Now, any other instance of this would be rude. I'd want to tell the person off and pick a fight.

But I knew why Daddy did it. The makeshift lubricant eased the feel of his rough palm moving down my length.

He stroked me without saying a word. There was no need. Not with the way I couldn't stop moaning.

“Look at how hard you are for me, Buttons. Seeing you aroused for me, knowing you want me as much as I want you, never gets old.” His voice was almost a growl with how he gritted his teeth. I could see how tight he was working to keep his control.

Reaching out, I stroked the side of his jaw. “Too tight, Daddy. You're going to crack a tooth.”

He shook his head. “Even as I try to show you pleasure, you're worried about me. God, you're magnificent. I don't deserve you.”

“You're the only one I want. Get over it,” I teased.

“Getting sassy, baby. Did you forget who holds the power?”

I went to backtalk him again, but his hand tightened as his other went to cup my balls. My eyes rolled back as my orgasm pulled forward with momentum.

“That’s it. Let go. Come for Daddy. I’ve got you.”

His assurances gave me the permission I needed. Cum shot free, coating his hand and splashing to the dirt floor between us. I looked down at the mess, grinning so hard my cheeks hurt.

“We’re not done yet, Buttons. I need inside you for my part of the celebration. That was just the appetizer.” He spun me around before I could reply. He bent me over the desk then dove face first into opening me up.

Tongue and fingers, he focused on the task like someone hoping to hit the dean’s list. Draped across the desk, I couldn’t do anything but let him do as he wished. It all felt good, and in the post-sex haze of my first orgasm, I was weak.

We’d discussed contraception a while back during one of the many times we’d snuck off to have sex but forgot a condom. After getting tested, we agreed that condoms weren’t something either of us wanted anymore.

This wasn’t the first time he’d gone bare, but something about the level of eagerness he showed made it feel bigger than the others. He was frantic, his movements rapid like he thought we’d run out of time.

His enthusiasm didn’t change once he was inside me. It only added to his wild focus.

Thrust after thrust, he fucked me like a man coming home from war. I didn’t dare complain, especially not since I felt more loved and cared for in that moment than ever. Keeping your cool as you made love to your partner was one thing. Trusting that they can take your rough edges, that you were safe to let down your guard, yeah that was euphoric shit for me.

“Daddy,” I asked when I felt his grip on my hips tighten. I knew he was close.

He slowed slightly; his gaze worried as he waited for me to turn.

Looking over my shoulder, I gave him my best puppy dog expression. “Will you please come in me?”

His motions stopped instantly. The fire in his eyes returned with force.

“You want my cum?” I nodded briskly. “Then my cum is what you’ll get.”

Daddy took my words as a challenge. If I’d thought he wanted me badly before, I’d been off the mark. He drove in and out of my hole harder and faster than ever. I gasped and whined at the feel, my own erection having returned with all his attention.

“That’s it, Buttons. Squeeze me, baby. Pull that cum out of Daddy. Drain me,” he grunted. His body slammed forward twice more before he bellowed with his release.

I came again, though not near as much as the first time. It was muted against his cries, and I accepted the peace that came from feeling utterly used.

He pulled out gently, then kissed up my spine as he massaged my muscles. It was the perfect end to the most appropriate celebration for our new house. I couldn’t wait to build and share a home with this man.

Epilogue

Harlan

Three Months Later

IT WAS A SPECIAL DAY. NOT JUST BECAUSE IT WAS THE DAY OF the market, but also because it was supposed to be the day Gerald came home.

We were all a nervous wreck for his arrival. Between the way the littles couldn't seem to sit still this week and the tension of all the Daddies, it was obvious no one had a clue as to how things would go.

Gerald had refused to speak with anyone during his time away. He didn't want to be a burden or so he said. I think it had more to do with not wanting to be reminded of the ranch as a whole. The few times Atticus got updates from him, he claimed to be doing well and he'd say he was looking forward to coming home.

"Don't think about it too much," I told Corey, who had been pacing the table with me.

The new hot plate system was a mega hit. We'd not only doubled our money, but we also had more visitors thanks to the promise of a hot meal. I'd had to double the recipe, and then double that batch again.

"What else am I supposed to think about? He's our friend. And I feel more than a little guilty about the situation. I should have said something sooner. You know, before he climbed behind the wheel of a truck and drove under the influence."

I turned to face him when there was a break in customers. "There's more to it than that. What else is going on?"

Corey was one of the guys who'd been at the ranch for a while. I didn't know exactly how long, but there was only a short period of like two months in all the years I'd been here when he wasn't around. And that was only to go handle stuff with his family. Since then, he's been as loyal to the Colemans as I have.

"It's nothing, ok? I'm just a touch nervous."

"Nervous about what?" I pressed for more information. I refused to let anyone else suffer in silence when all it would take was a little communication to bridge the gap.

"Hi there, young men. I'd love two hot plates, please?" An older woman extended her money across the table.

Corey took the opening to end our chat as he focused on her. I made the plates, my mind still stuck on his strange behavior. If it didn't have to do with Gerald, then what had he managed to get himself into?

Business continued to move steadily as the day progressed. I made plates and went inside to check on the next batch of food on repeat. It seemed the process was never ending.

When the final siren went off to signal the end of the day, I slumped in relief. We'd just served the last of the food. It was such a close call to running out. I had no clue how I'd be able to keep up with the demand if it continued to grow.

"Um, excuse me," a deep voice said as he approached the table.

I whined in a very un-Daddy-like way. Griffin, who had switched out with Corey earlier this afternoon, giggled from beside me.

"I'm so sorry, but we're out of food." I looked up to find a behemoth of a man. I mean, he was huge in every way.

He blushed as he pulled something from his pocket. "I'm actually not here for the food. I'm looking for Corey."

It was like the clouds parted and sunlight shined directly on us. Clarity hit at his words.

"You're here for Corey? Did he know you were coming?"

The man shook his head, then nodded. He seemed to be stumbling over himself, and it was so adorable given his size. I didn't know what to make of how nervous he was.

"I told him I'd try to come, but I didn't confirm anything. I hope it's not too much trouble that I'm here."

I waved away his worry. "He's around here somewhere. And you're no bother. In fact, do you have a place to stay tonight? If not, we've got a spare bedroom for you. We typically do a little afterparty for everyone. You could stick around for that too."

His eyes widened. "Um, I don't know. He may not want me to. It's totally fine..."

"Ashley?" Corey called from behind me. I turned in time to see his shock mirror the man across the table from me. Griffin took it all in with a grin. He winked at me as he pulled me out of the way.

"Corey," Ashley breathed. "You're here."

"And so are you."

For all his teasing and humor, Corey appeared truly shaken by this man's appearance. My Daddy senses went wild. Something about this was very strange.

"How do you two know each other?" At my question, they turned my way.

Ashley rubbed the back of his head. "Um, well —"

"We've known each other for a while. We just hadn't met in person yet," Corey rushed out. "But he's here now."

There was awe in his tone the second time. Like he really couldn't believe it. I didn't detect fear or frustration. Only curiosity.

"Maybe we should leave them be, Daddy," Griffin whispered. Even though his voice had been soft, I felt Ashley's eyes turn our way.

Rather than point it out or explain it away, I gave the man a firm nod. "The offer to stay still stands. We don't send

people away here. It's basically a bunch of strays who made their own family. You're welcome to stick around."

"Thanks..."

"Harlan. And this is my boy, Griffin." He shook my hand with a grip that was softer than I expected from a man of his size.

"I'm Ashley, but you already know that." His blush eased the tension again. "I don't really know what to do next."

"We're going to head out. You two stay here. I can come clean up when you're done." I gave Corey a look as if to tell him not to send his guest away. He returned the glance with his own 'duh' expression.

As Griffin and I left the pair, my boy looked about ready to jump out his skin. "Did you see that? Total little vibes from Ashley. And Corey? OHMYGOD! He was staring at the man like he could just eat him up."

"There was definitely something going on between them." I didn't tell my boy that I agreed with him wholeheartedly. Some things weren't as they seemed. Our relationship began that way, and even now most people wouldn't look at us and think I was Griffin's Daddy. Assuming someone's dynamic did none of us any good.

I'm sure it will all come out at some point. Corey wasn't the type who was good at keeping secrets.

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which features Corey's story.

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Meeting his Daddy Teaser

Corey

I WAS THE BEST AT KEEPING SECRETS.

Not all secrets, of course. Just the really, really good ones.

Like how I'd managed to have a pen pal for eight years without anyone knowing.

He was meant to be someone I could tell my deepest thoughts to. I could pour my heart out on the page, and there would be no consequence since he was half a planet away.

But then he wasn't.

He was here, at the Coleman Ranch, staring at me like he wanted things I didn't know if I could give him.

Preorder the story here: [Meeting his Daddy](#).