



I **S** **O**
in search of

AN AFTER OSCAR NOVEL

LUCY LENNOX &
MOLLY MADDOX

ISO: IN SEARCH OF

LUCY LENNOX
MOLLY MADDOX

Copyright © 2023 by Lucy Lennox and Molly Maddox

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Image: Wander Aguiar

Cover Design: Cate Ashwood Designs

Editing: One Love Editing

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Letter from Lucy & Molly](#)

[About Molly Maddox](#)

[Also by Molly Maddox](#)

[About Lucy Lennox](#)

BOONE

I watched the beat-up truck fishtail, spitting up gravel before peeling off down the ranch drive toward the highway.

“Well, shit,” I muttered, turning to Jed. “There goes another one.” Even my dog seemed to let out a sigh.

My foreman wasn't too happy with me, as evidenced by the firm set of his grizzled jaw. “Third one in as many months. When you gonna stop hiring people who have ambition? And what the hell kind of cowhand expects a promotion after three months?” He spit on the dirt. “Idiot.”

I threw up my hands. “How was I supposed to know? I hired him as a hand. I paid him good money for the work. Why the hell did he take the job if he didn't want it, huh? Tell me that. Now I've got a hundred head of cattle, and I'm going to be shorthanded.”

Jed stared at the shrinking dust cloud. “Mm.”

“*Fuck,*” I cursed, pulling off my hat and running a frustrated hand through my hair. I blew out a breath as I propped a foot on the fence circling the horse ring and glanced toward the mountains in the distance. Most days, I loved working this ranch, but other days, I wanted nothing more than to saddle my horse and ride for the horizon, never looking back.

Today was one of those days.

I twisted my head to the side in an effort to ease the tightness along my shoulders. “Find me another hand,” I told

Jed. “Hell, find me three more hands if you can. Damned Walt Hosser keeps snapping up all the good ones now he’s got those three daughters of his coming of age.” I shook my head and reached down to ruffle the fur on Birdie’s head. “Those cowboys all think they’re going to convince one of the girls to fall in love with them and they’ll inherit a cattle ranch. Stupid fuckers.”

Jed joined me at the fence, a sly smile on his face. “You can’t tell me Miranda Hosser isn’t a pretty little thing. Takes after her mama. Don’t know about the other two because I can’t hardly see past that red hair.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You always did have a thing for Walt’s wife.”

Jed squinted over toward the machine shed, which was the direction of the Hosser Ranch. “Kissed her once. That woman’s as cold as a fish, but god a’mighty, she’s something to look at.”

“Well, maybe their girls are just as cold, and those cowboys will be looking for another place to pull a paycheck,” I muttered.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Jed said. “Rumor is that Walt’s promising some pretty hefty bonuses this year. Where he’s gettin’ the money from, lord only knows.”

I shook my head. “He’s gonna run that place into the ground if he isn’t careful.”

Jed shrugged. “Would that be so bad? Then you’d be able to buy the place up and double the size of your ranch.”

I snorted. “And have Walt accuse me of stealing the rest of his land? No, thank you.” To say there was bad blood between Walt and me was an understatement. Years back, he’d gotten into financial trouble and approached me about buying some of his acreage so he could pay off his debts. It had seemed like an easy, straightforward deal until Walt started accusing me of dirty dealing and stealing what was rightfully his.

Usually I just ignored him, but these days, it was impossible to ignore the shortage of hands available to work or

that it was Walt who was causing the shortage. It was hard not to see it as an intentional ploy to cause me problems.

I kicked off the fence and tugged my hat back onto my head. “Meanwhile, I’m going to get my stuff packed,” I said, nodding toward the main house. “Get Victory saddled if you don’t mind. I’d better get an earlier start than I’d planned if I’m going by myself.”

Jed reached for my shoulder and clapped a rough hand on it. “I’ll come with.”

I shook my head, not at all surprised by the offer. “Nah. You go on to the wedding. I’ll be okay. I’ll take Hiram with me. Let him know, will you? The two of us should be able to handle it fine. It’ll just mean more work when we get back.”

“We ain’t afraid of hard work,” Jed said in his lazy drawl.

“Lucky for me,” I told him. It was the truth. Jed was one of a dying breed, an old-school cowboy who’d been born and raised to work a ranch. He could have retired years ago, and I’d offered to carve off a small piece of my land for him to settle on, but he’d refused. Said he didn’t know what he’d do with himself without a full day’s hard work.

“Be sure to kiss your niece for me and wish her well,” I added, starting back toward the main house. Birdie padded along behind me. “And tell your sister not to be a stranger,” I called over my shoulder. “She promised me a visit this year.”

“She’ll just spend the whole time trying to marry you off,” he shouted.

“You mean trying to get *you* married off,” I reminded him.

“That too,” he said with a laugh. “That woman needs to find a new hobby.”

I chuckled as I made my way across the dusty yard. Just as I climbed the steps up to the wide porch, my cell phone rang. “Boone here,” I said before kicking my boots on the mud scraper by the door. Birdie continued past me into the house, most likely intent on convincing someone inside to give her a treat.

“Have I ever mentioned how much I enjoy that grumbly growl of yours? It does things to me, Boone.” The teasing voice on the other end of the line was like a cool, clean breeze on a muggy day.

I smiled, the tension along my shoulders instantly easing. “Oscar, Jesus. Where the hell have you been? I haven’t talked to you in a dog’s age.”

“You name it, I’ve been there,” Oscar said. “And tomorrow, I’m off again.” I sunk into one of the worn rocking chairs lining the porch. There was way too much on my to-do list to sit around lallygagging, and every minute I wasn’t doing something, the list was growing longer. But this was Oscar. I always had time for Oscar.

“Tell me,” I said. I was always eager to hear Oscar’s stories. You’d think that given how wildly our lives had diverged in the years since we’d grown up, we’d have drifted apart, but if anything, it was the exact opposite. Despite building himself a fast-paced life as a self-made multibillionaire, Oscar grounded me. He was a part of my past. He probably knew me better than any other human being in the world. Even a brief attempt at dating in our youth hadn’t been enough to sour our friendship.

“Well, first, I’m heading out to the Maldives in a few days with a couple I met at a party last week. They were looking for a third for a week in the sun. Can’t say I’m up for all that, but I do have a closet full of new bathing suits just desperate to be paraded around in front of a couple of cute guys. I’m trying to decide if I want to wax everything or go natural. I’m getting a little old to make the effort, if I’m being honest.”

It was difficult to hear him over the background noise of the city streets through the phone. Honks and shouts vying for everyone’s attention. Just hearing the audible chaos got my hackles up. It was one of the reasons things between Oscar and me would have never worked. He loved the bustle; I loved the solitude. But I cared about him and always would, so it was damned good to hear he was doing all right and living life to the fullest.

“Bet you look sexy either way,” I said. And it was true. He’d sent me enough photos over the years that I knew exactly what he looked like in his smallest bathing suits. “You still seeing that flight attendant?”

There was a moment of silence. “Flight attendant...? I’ve never...” He trailed off.

“Mile-high club?” I reminded him.

He snorted a laugh. “That doesn’t narrow it down much. I’m a platinum member of that club. I’m the spokesperson, for god’s sake.”

I shook my head. Oscar went through men like I went through hay and feed. “He was the one who did that thing,” I prodded. “With his—ahem, *you know...*” I didn’t finish the statement, not necessarily wanting to go into specifics. Though that had never stopped Oscar from sharing such details. He lived to make me blush with stories of his exploits.

“Oh, wait. Jordan? Jesus. That was like a thousand years ago.”

“You were totally into him.”

He let out a dismissive *pshaw*. “I dated him for literally five minutes.”

I chuckled as I pushed a foot against the porch railing, setting my rocking chair in motion. “Can you even call it *dating* if the only thing you remember about the guy was his one particular... talent? I think I’m beginning to understand why you have so many exes, babe.”

The minute the teasing words were out of my mouth, I regretted them, especially when I was met with a strained silence that I struggled to fill. “Shit, Oscar. I’m sorry. I was joking. I—”

“No, no, you’re right,” he said, cutting me off. “In fact, I came to a similar conclusion myself some time ago. I’m a good friend, and a very good—one might even say *magnificent*—sexual partner, but I am simply not cut out for romantic relationships.” The brittleness in his tone was clear. I closed my eyes and imagined his attempt to keep his chin from

wobbling. My sweet Oscar. He had such a big personality it was sometimes easy to forget that his skin wasn't nearly as thick as he liked to pretend it was and that his brash exterior hid a bruised and tender heart. I wished I lived close enough that I could fold him into a hug.

"That's not true, and you know it," I admonished. "You haven't met the right man, that's all."

It was true. Oscar was a hell of a catch, and it surprised me that none of the men he'd dated had snapped him up permanently... although, given Oscar's past, I sometimes wondered if he purposely dated men he knew weren't the right fit to save himself from pain when things didn't work out. "You might try finding a guy you actually want to have a conversation with outside of sex. And 'my yacht or yours' is not a conversation. I'm talking actual, meaningful connection —"

"Yes, I understand the concept," he said dryly. He paused for a long moment, and when he spoke again, he sounded uncharacteristically hesitant. "But if I *were* to make a connection like that... well, a man with my track record would have to be a fool to expect that it could ever be more than friendship, wouldn't he? The risk-benefit analysis would practically guarantee heartbreak and disappointment for at least one of the parties involved if they let themselves hope for more."

I frowned. For a moment, I wondered if he wasn't speaking hypothetically and was actually thinking about someone special—but I quickly dismissed the notion. Oscar never hesitated to share or even *overshare* details about his love life. If there had been something to tell, he would have told me.

Instead, I prompted gently, "For all the men you've dated, have you ever really been in love, Oscar?"

"No," he admitted, voice soft with melancholy. "But I did get really close. Once."

"Ohhh, is that what you were getting at?" I grinned, finally understanding his mood. "Are we back to this?"

“Back to—?”

Every once in a while, when Oscar got lonely, he became nostalgic, wondering what our relationship might have looked like if our paths hadn't diverged so wildly, even though both of us knew the answer. “You thinking of leaving New York and moving out to Wyoming permanently so you can join me on long cattle drives with no internet and spend your evenings listening to the crickets chirp on the porch? I hear the Feed and Seed just got their spring collection in. They've switched it up and added a new plaid to the mix.” He made a choking noise, and I chuckled. “Plus, PeeWee's got the composter all tuned up. I'm sure he'd love to teach you how to turn some shit.”

Oscar audibly shuddered. “Horrrifying. No, I don't want any of that.”

“And you don't really want me either,” I reminded him gently. “Not as anything more than a best friend. I don't even know where the Maldives are, okay? And you... you're a shining star the entire world deserves to know.”

He snorted. “Pfft. *Obviously*. Frank tells me so all the time.”

I smiled, thinking of his pet hedgehog. “If anyone would know, it would be Frank,” I agreed. “Keep putting your heart out there, and eventually, the right person will grab it and keep it safe for you.”

He barked out a laugh. “Jesus, listen to you. Since when are you mister romantic, Boone Hammond?”

I placed a hand on my chest, pretending to be offended. “Hey, I can be romantic if I want to. I just don't get the opportunity all that often. If there was time left in my day, and by some miracle, the right man happened to land on my doorstep, I'd be plenty romantic. But seeing as how I live in the middle of fucking Wyoming and keep doing the work of several men at once, that ain't happening anytime soon.”

Oscar clucked his tongue. “Always with the excuses.”

“Not excuses, just the truth. Besides, I have a standing nightly date with my hand and a bottle of that fancy lube you

sent me. Once a month, I upgrade it to a visit into Casper for a bona fide human hookup.”

He made a derisive sound. “I can just imagine the kind of boys on offer in Casper, Wyoming. It’s gotta be the same damned cowboy each month.”

I thought of the three or four guys I usually rotated through. He wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t like how boring and staid he made it sound. Even if it was true—and honestly, it was—it wasn’t like there was anything I could do about it. Plus, it worked for me. I didn’t need the disruption and distraction of a relationship. I didn’t have the time for shit like that. “You’re forgetting that cowboys have muscles for days,” I teased. “And hand calluses that feel mighty fine on a man’s ___”

“Stop,” he cried, sounding seriously wounded. “My manicure is curdling just hearing that word.”

I laughed. Oscar was such a colorful person, it made me happy just to talk to him for a few minutes. Unfortunately, a few minutes was all I had. “Listen, I have to go. I have a hundred head of cattle that need to be moved, and I’ve lost two hands this week.”

Thankfully, I could hear the smile in his voice when he responded. “How are you going to hold the reins on your horse?”

It took me a minute to get the joke. “Har, har. You know very well I mean ranch hands. These boys have aspirations of grandeur when all I want is someone with a heartbeat and four working limbs. Leave the brains and ambition at home. Don’t suppose you have an ex-boyfriend somewhere in your past looking for work?”

I’d thrown the question out as a joke. Oscar traveled in a super-elite set with men who owned yachts, planes, and houses in the Hamptons. He probably hadn’t met someone capable of manual labor in years. And he certainly hadn’t dated them.

His voice sounded funny when he finally answered, “Actually... You know what? Now that I think about it, I

might. Would an ex of an ex suit your purposes?”

“I was joking,” I told him as I pushed to my feet and started into the house so I could pack my things and hit the trail.

“No, wait. Hear me out.” He was definitely scheming. I knew the sound well since it had usually preceded me getting detention or grounded as a kid. Whatever he was cooking up was probably trouble.

“Nope.” I gave a quick wave to Norma, the ranch’s cook and all-around indispensable housekeeper, before ducking into my bedroom. “I don’t need some fancy-ass city boy showing up here hoping to take a tumble with a cowboy,” I told Oscar. “There’s no time for that, not to mention no cowboy to tumble. I sure as shit won’t fuck one of my own hands.”

The sentence repeated in my head as Oscar began to cackle. “That’s not what you said a minute ago,” he singsonged. “Listen, the guy I’m thinking of *is* a fancy-ass city boy. But he needs a lesson on working in the real world, and I can’t think of a better place to learn hard work than on a heap of cow shit.”

“I appreciate your description of my multimillion-dollar cattle operation,” I muttered as I grabbed a couple of clean shirts, socks, and underwear out of my dresser drawers. “You’re a true friend.”

“Since when have you ever needed an ego stroke? Seriously, Boone, hear me out about this. You remember my ex James? Well, he dated this guy named Richard for years and always swore the man had potential if he could just figure his shit out. Personally, I was never very convinced because Richard always came across as a privileged ass to me—”

“Sounds like exactly the kind of guy I *don’t* need around here.”

“—but even though James is engaged now, he still has a soft spot for the guy. He asked me to help Richard out, and you hiring him just temporarily—let’s say, for a month—would be the perfect solution. A win-win. James would be

happy that Richard had an opportunity, and I'd be happy imagining Richard up to his knees in horse shit."

I frowned. "I don't see how *I* win in this situation."

"You get your extra hand. Plus, you'd be doing me a favor, and I would owe you one. A big one."

I snorted. Oscar was loyal to a fault, even when it came to his exes, which was probably why he'd remained on friendly terms with nearly every guy he'd dated over the years. But his desire to help James and me didn't mean that his suggestion was in Richard's best interest... or mine, ultimately.

"Thanks, but no, thanks. I don't need any favors. What I need is someone willing to do some work around here. Why don't you come and slum it for a while? You act all prissy, but I know you can actually put your muscles where your mouth is, if properly motivated." And it wasn't as though Oscar wasn't familiar with farm work. He'd grown up in the same rural Texas town as I had, after all.

"Oh, and I would," he said airily, lying through his teeth. "I totally would... if I hadn't already made this very important, er... *social commitment*... at a world-renowned resort. It's a luxury villa in the water, Boone. I can hardly say no to that."

"Of course not," I said dryly. It really did amaze me sometimes how completely different Oscar's life was from my own. "I don't want your rich friends playing cowboy. Forget I said anything about needing a ranch hand."

I finished packing my bag and made my way back to the kitchen, where Norma had left me a plate covered in plastic wrap next to a soft-sided cooler packed for the overnight trip. After sticking the plate into the microwave, I grabbed a cold soda from the fridge.

Oscar's laugh was light and happy, back to the fun-loving man I knew. "All right, suit yourself. But if anything changes, let me know."

"It won't." I grabbed the plate out of the microwave and sat down to eat quickly. Hiram and I needed to get on the trail

soon if we were going to get where we needed to before nightfall. “Gotta go, babe.”

There was a pause and a sigh. “I miss you, Boone,” he said, that wistful nostalgia in his voice once again.

Oscar lived a damned good life surrounded by beautiful people. He shined like a vibrant star, and everyone gathered around him to bask in his warmth. But he was always giving of himself to others, and I wondered if anyone was filling him back up. I resolved to be a better, more present friend.

“Let’s try harder to keep in touch,” I told him.

“You never could get enough of me.”

I chuckled. “Gotta go,” I repeated. “Someone has to do a real day’s work around here, and it’s not gonna be you.”

“So true. Later, Ranch Daddy,” he said in a flirty tone.

I hung up laughing, but my smile didn’t last long. When I got out to the stable, I found Hiram doubled over by a giant trash barrel, puking his guts out.

Jed looked at me with a shake of his head. “Lower-right pain, boss. Looks like maybe his appendix. Better get him to the hospital.”

While I commiserated with the man, I seriously didn’t have time for this shit. I gritted my teeth and pulled my phone back out.

Fine, I texted Oscar. You win. I’ll hire Richard. Get him out here. After a few seconds, I added, I’m going to regret this aren’t I?

Oscar’s response was immediate and did nothing to ease my doubts. *I’m not sure you’ll regret it. Richard on the other hand...*

RICHARD

I stepped into the Thirsty Dragon, spotted my ex, and immediately turned on my heel to leave.

“Richard!” James’s voice shouted over the din of the evening crowd. “Over here.”

I squeezed my eyes closed and sighed. Could I pretend I hadn’t heard him? It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see James. I did. I always did. He was one of the best men I knew. But that was also why I didn’t actually want to see him. No one made me feel like a good-for-nothing piece of shit more than my perfect sweetheart of an ex.

“Dick!” a second familiar, but much less welcome, voice called with fake glee. “Just the man I wanted to see.”

Correction. There was one person who made me feel even shittier about myself, and that was James’s friend (and onetime boyfriend) Oscar. Normally I didn’t give a shit what people thought about me, but Oscar managed to get under my skin. The whole time James and I had been dating, Oscar had made it clear that he thought James deserved better. And even though James and I were no longer together, I still felt like I needed to prove myself to him.

Now that I’d quit working for my father and my bank account was dangerously close to double digits, I wasn’t in much of a position to prove anything to anyone, but Oscar’s presence was still enough to make me suck in a breath and force myself to turn back around.

I wouldn't give Oscar Overton the satisfaction of watching me slink away like a coward. *Over my cold, dead body.*

"Hey, guys," I said, forcing a radiant smile. "I'm just here picking up some takeout." I gestured to the bar like I was going to grab my food and go, but James waved me over and stood to hold his arms out for a hug.

If there was one thing I needed more than my cheat-day bacon-and-cheddar burger, it was a hug from a friend. I wove my way through the overflowing tables and walked into James's arms. I held on tightly. The familiar scent of his cologne wrapped around me, and the strong, sturdy feel of him almost made my eyes smart.

Damn James for being so perfect I'd had no choice but to remain friends with him even after we broke up.

I reluctantly pulled away before I begged him to take me home with him and hold me all night—something I wasn't sure his boyfriend would appreciate.

"Where's Sawyer?" I asked, plastering on a flirty grin. "I thought the two of you were inseparable these days."

At the mention of his man, James went all soft-eyed. "He's back on the Cape dealing with some construction issues, as usual. The Sea Sprite is set to open in May. I came to the city to finalize some legal paperwork on the house." He held out a chair at their table. "Join us. I thought you were in Capri?"

I glanced over to the bar, which was noticeably empty of my to-go order. It would be awkward and rude for me to decline James's offer just to then go stand at the bar alone to wait.

"I was," I said, reluctantly sliding into the extra chair. "But then Mondo had to come back to the city for a family thing. Since I was riding on his plane, I had to come too."

James's face crinkled in sympathy. "Sorry. I know how much you love it there."

Oscar snorted. "Who doesn't? I mean, c'mon."

I ignored him. “I do, but I don’t. I mean, I do. Of course I do. I always have. But this time, all I could think about was the fact I was freeloading. Not that Mondo cares or even noticed.”

What I didn’t add was that I’d been bored. For the first time in years, the parties were getting old, and the gossip among all of the cute boys around the pool had been shallow and annoying. Getting back to the noise and anonymity of the city had seemed like the perfect fix. Only... now that I was here, it wasn’t as comfortable as I’d hoped. For one thing, I was staying with my friend Sacha, whose idea of a quiet night in included thirty friends, an open bar, and loud music.

I really, really needed to find a job so I could stop couch surfing and find my own place.

“Besides,” I continued, “I need to get back to my job search. I left Dad’s company for a reason, you know?” The reason had been twofold. First, because my father was a controlling bastard, and second, because I was unable to give a single shit about real estate development.

“How’s that going?” James asked, his expression sincere. James knew more than anyone how soul crushing it had been for me to work for the family business. My father had high expectations, ones that I never seemed to meet, no matter how hard I tried. Eventually, I’d given up trying, content to rake in the money while doing little work. Unfortunately, that had been soul crushing in its own way, leaving me empty and directionless.

James was the one who’d encouraged me to quit. To figure out what I really wanted to do with my life and follow my passion. The only problem was I hadn’t quite figured out just yet what that passion was. I was just as aimless as I’d been months before, except now I was a whole lot poorer too.

It didn’t help that my father had declined to give me a reference or to pull strings with his contacts. He’d been furious when I’d left and had told me that if I wanted to forge my own path in life, I was welcome to, but I was going to have to do it on my own.

But I didn't want to tell James all of that. He was probably the one person I knew who believed in me wholeheartedly. I didn't want to disappoint him. Plus, fuck if I was going to admit how difficult the job search had been in front of Oscar.

I shrugged. "I've got a few leads." Just vague enough that it wasn't a complete lie. "In fact, I've even gotten a job offer." I didn't mention that it had been with a well-known photographer who specialized in artsy nude shots, and I wasn't entirely sure it hadn't been a come-on line, but Oscar didn't need to know that.

James's face lit up with a big smile. "That's fantastic, Richard," he said, placing a hand on mine and squeezing.

I shifted uncomfortably. James was genuinely happy for me, and I felt a stab of guilt for misleading him. "I'm not sure it's the best fit though," I mumbled. "I'm still weighing my options."

"Of course you are." Oscar's voice was more condescending than empathetic.

I glared at him. "If you have something to say, say it."

Oscar studied me. "You really want me to?"

No.

"Yes."

"You don't actually want a job," he said simply. "You want a handout."

Ouch. I sucked in a breath. His words galled me, probably because they had the harsh ring of truth about them. But, to be fair, who actually wanted to *work* for a living?

But Oscar wasn't finished. "When was the last time you actually worked hard for something? I'm guessing you've never broken a sweat for a job, and that includes hauling your ass on top of a copy machine to make copies of your bare butt."

I opened my mouth to argue that I didn't know how to work a copy machine well enough to make copies of my butt, but I realized that would just prove his point.

“I know how to work hard,” I told Oscar. I hated how defensive I sounded. I glanced at the bar, desperately hoping to see my order ready, but there was still nothing.

He smiled, and something about his expression made me wonder if I’d just stepped into a trap. “Prove it.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you,” I snapped. It felt damn good to finally say those words, even if they felt like a lie.

Oscar shrugged and glanced at his perfectly manicured nails. “Suit yourself. It’s just when James called earlier and asked if I could help you with your job hunt—”

I spun to face James. “You asked *Oscar* to help me?” My cheeks burned with indignation and a hint of embarrassment.

He at least looked apologetic. “I’m the one who convinced you to quit your job, Richard. I feel responsible for helping you get back on your feet. But all of my contacts are from when I worked for your father, so they wouldn’t be that useful. Oscar knows practically everyone, and I thought he could be a good resource.”

It was hard to be angry when he sounded so damn reasonable, and I knew he was just trying to be helpful. Still, taking help from Oscar felt a little like taking help from my father.

“Plus, I happen to have a friend who’s hiring,” Oscar added. “An ex of mine, actually.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Is there anyone you haven’t dated?”

His grin was pointed. “Only those who aren’t worth dating.”

I opened my mouth, more than ready to tell him exactly why I’d never date someone like him, when James laid a hand on each of our arms. “Be nice.”

I ground my teeth together and blew out a breath. The reality was that even though Oscar wasn’t my favorite person in the world, he did seem to know everyone. His friends list was the Who’s Who of the most influential business people in

the country, if not the world. And I was getting desperate. “What kind of job?”

I didn't like the calculating sparkle in Oscar's eyes. “It's physical labor. You might break a nail.”

James shot him a look. “Stop being a dick.”

I glared at Oscar, then pointedly down at his manicured hands. “You think I can't get my hands dirty? I spent three whole days in Capri holding Speya Verner's hair back over the toilet while she was in denial about her pregnancy.”

Oscar smiled brightly. “Then clearly, you'll be fine. My friend owns a cattle ranch. Very similar to vomit, I'm sure. He needs a cowhand.”

James's head tilted in confusion while my entire jaw dropped. There was no way I'd heard him correctly. “Huh?”

“You heard me.” He was clearly enjoying this. “Boone needs an able body to help on his ranch temporarily. This would be a great way to show you're willing to work hard, and the pay is damned good, considering it includes room and board.”

Boone? The rancher's name was Boone? Was he a hundred years old with a stalk of hay between his teeth? “You're pulling my leg,” I muttered before reaching for James's glass of wine and taking a swig.

Oscar shook his head. “Nope. Besides, there's nothing hotter than a ranch full of shirtless cowboys sweating and hauling shit around all day. Trust me on this.”

“No, thanks,” I said a little too primly.

Oscar's mouth widened into a knowing smile. “Just as I thought.”

“Fuck off.”

I flagged the server, and while I inquired about the status of my to-go order, I overheard James hiss under his breath to Oscar, “Richard is my friend. Stop being an asshole and actually help him out.”

“I *am* helping. He needs a little tough love, James. Besides, you’re the one who told me he needs to find himself away from the city and from his father, right? Working for Boone might be just the chance he needs to figure out what he wants.”

James made a muffled sound of agreement, and it smarted to know they’d been talking about me when I wasn’t around. But he wasn’t wrong. Part of me did want to leave the city and my father far behind me. I just didn’t want to have to go to a *cattle ranch* to do it. Hard work was one thing; cattle ranching was another.

After the server left to check on my food, Oscar let out a sigh and turned to study me for a few beats. “Listen, I’ll make you a deal,” he finally said.

“What deal?” I asked.

He leaned his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his laced fingers, his eyes boring into mine. “Boone is a good friend of mine, and he’s in a bind. He legitimately needs the help, which means you’d be doing me a favor if you took the job. You spend one full month working hard for Boone on the Silver Fork Ranch in Wyoming, and in exchange, I’ll get you an interview anywhere you want. *And* I’ll include a personal recommendation.”

I stared at him. I wanted so badly to blurt out, *Not only no, but hell no*, but Oscar was one of the most wealthy, influential, and well-respected businessmen I knew. With his help, I could write my own ticket practically anywhere in the city, in practically any industry I wanted... once I figured out what industry that was, of course. And more than losing the opportunities he could open up, turning down his offer would prove him right, and I refused to do such a thing.

“I’m hardly qualified to be a *cowhand*.” I tried not to sound like the words made my lips curl up in derision. All I could think was my father’s knowing smirk when he found out. *Oh, how the mighty have fallen*.

Oscar waved his slender fingers as if it didn’t matter. “Boone said he needs someone willing to do hard work around

the ranch. No brains needed. In fact, they're seen as a hindrance in this case, so you're good to go."

James chastised him for the jibe, but I wasn't paying much attention. Instead, I was actually considering the offer. I'd been honest when I'd said physical work didn't bother me... at least in theory. I had no idea what ranch work really entailed, of course, but Oscar's earlier comment made me picture shirtless cowboys throwing hay bales around for fun. If that was what it was like... how hard could "hard work" really be? Surely nothing that seeing a personal trainer five days a week on top of Pilates and yoga to stay limber wouldn't prepare me for. I was a healthy male in my twenties, for god's sake.

Plus, he'd said it included room and board, and I was tired of couch surfing. Having my own place sounded pretty good right about now. Especially if I didn't have to pay for it.

But really, more than anything else, I really, really just wanted to wipe that damn smirk off Oscar's face.

"I'll do it," I said, firming my chin to keep from looking as unsure as I felt.

It was worth it just to see the genuine surprise in Oscar's expression. For a minute, I thought I saw a flash of respect in his eyes. "Do you mean that? Or are you going to come up with some sort of excuse the second you leave here?"

My cheeks burned. The thought might have crossed my mind, but I wasn't going to let him know that. "I mean it."

James leaned toward me, his expression concerned. "Richard, Oscar's just pushing your buttons. He'd be glad to help you without any conditions." He turned to glare at his friend. "Right, Oscar?"

I could tell from James's voice that he wasn't sure I could do it either. That stung more than any of Oscar's barbs.

I didn't give Oscar a chance to respond. "No, I said I'll do it, and I will. One month helping your friend, then you help me find a real job. That's the deal."

Oscar nodded. "That's the deal. Work for Boone for a month, and I'll know you're someone I can stake my

reputation on. And if you don't last a month... well, that will tell me everything I need to know about you and your work ethic."

I opened my mouth, prepared to tell him exactly where he could shove his reputation, when the server arrived with my order. I thanked her and took my bag. By then, James had also stood. "I'll walk you out." It was clear he was trying to prevent the situation between Oscar and me from growing any more tense.

Oscar looked up at me from his seat, his eyes sparkling with mischief. It was clear he still doubted me, but I was determined to prove him—and James and everyone else—wrong.

"Send the details to my—" I was about to say secretary when I remembered that I didn't have a secretary anymore. "Cell phone," I added lamely. "James has my number."

James hooked his arm through mine and steered me from the restaurant before Oscar had a chance to respond. Once we were outside, James turned and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Oscar means well. He really does."

I choked on a laugh. "Yeah, right."

His forehead creased in concern. "Do you want me to tell him to back off?"

Yes. Except I couldn't imagine anything more embarrassing than having James go intervene with Oscar on my behalf. *Again.* "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

I nodded, but he didn't look convinced. I decided to change the subject. "Have you had any thoughts about this year's IceCon costume?"

His eyes lit up. "You have no idea. I want to go big this year. And when I say big, I mean—" He spread his hands wide, waving his fingers. He quirked an eyebrow. "You think you have it in you?"

I'd been helping design and construct James's IceCon and other sci-fi convention costumes for years, ever since we started dating. They'd gone over so well that several of his friends had begun to come to me for their costumes as well. It was one of my favorite times of year, when I got to indulge in my love of fashion and design without limits. "Send me your thoughts, and I'll start sketching some ideas. I've already been thinking of ways to coordinate yours and Sawyer's costumes. Plus, I've been doing some research into some super cutting-edge fabrics that I can't wait to incorporate. The two of you are going to look hot."

"I want us to be the belles of the ball," James said with a sigh.

I winked. "And you will be, I promise."

He tilted his head to the side, considering me. "Have you ever thought of pursuing that for a living?"

I laughed. "I don't think there's a huge market for sci-fi convention costume designers. But if there is, sign me up."

I was kidding. He apparently wasn't. "I'm serious. You love doing it, and you're *so* good at it."

"My father would just love that. 'Hey, meet my son, the big gay geeky costume designer.'" I shuddered at the look of disappointment I could already imagine in his eyes. "No, thank you."

He frowned. "You need to stop worrying about what your father thinks."

"I know, I know." I'd heard it all before, especially from him, but it was easier said than done. "I quit my job, didn't I? Baby steps."

"True. I'm proud of you, Richard. You know that?" His voice had gone soft and tender.

"Thank you." I leaned in to press a kiss on James's cheek. "Tell Sawyer I said hello. Happiness looks good on you," I murmured before turning to leave.

After stopping to grab a few bottles of cheap wine, my takeout bag was ten times heavier than it had been at the Thirsty Dragon. I tried not to think about how annoying it was to carry heavy bags home from the restaurant, but I had to admit it was a reminder that while I may be *capable* of hard work, I certainly didn't *enjoy* it.

"Fuck," I muttered, shifting the bags again to get a better grip. Who was I kidding? I would never make it on a ranch. I'd let my ego do all the talking when what I really needed was a cushy office job, preferably near a Starbucks and a really decent deli. I needed the kind of job where I could be the guy who wore quirky, colorful business socks each day. The receptionists would titter and treat me like their gay bestie, and I would always have someone to gossip with.

Surely I had enough friends here in the city to call on for help. Not that many of them actually worked for a living... Even so, that was better than working on a ranch, for fuck's sake.

Fine. Tomorrow morning, I'd tell Oscar to shove his stupid ranch job in a pile of horse manure where it belonged. He'd take great delight in saying, "I told you so," and holding it over my head, but I would just have to suck it up.

I looked up as I heard a bark of laughter ahead. People dressed in club attire spilled out of Sacha's apartment building, laughing and chatting happily. Hopefully, that meant the place would soon be empty, and I could retreat to the guest room and crawl into bed. My dinner was begging to be followed by a few episodes of something on Netflix and at least half of this wine.

But when I got to Sacha's place, I realized the overflow outside had only been the people who couldn't actually physically fit inside the apartment itself. It was shoulder to shoulder, and the music was blasting out of speakers seemingly everywhere.

I kept my head down, trying to avoid notice as I slipped through the crowd and down the hallway to my room. With a sigh of relief, I pushed the door open, only to cough in surprise

at what awaited me: a tangle of bodies on the unmade bed. They were all naked. I was pretty sure most of them were men, though it was impossible to tell. I couldn't even tell how many there were, given how entwined and writhing they were.

I quickly pulled the door shut and leaned my head against it. I was tired, still jet-lagged from the Capri trip, and desperate for a quiet place to sleep. But my money—or what was left of it—certainly wasn't enough to cover a night in a city hotel. I retreated glumly toward the living room.

“Come join us, boo bear!” Sacha's voice trilled from somewhere among the throng. “There's Richard, everyone!”

After plastering on a smile, I nodded in Sacha's general direction and shouldered my way to the kitchen, where I could at least find a glass for my wine.

I poured a deep glass and unpacked my burger. After taking the first decadent bite, I felt the buzz of my phone in my pocket.

Oscar: *Boone will be expecting you on the ranch tomorrow.*

My eyes widened. *Tomorrow?*

A second text came through, providing an address. I sighed and shoved the phone back into my pocket to deal with later. The burger sat heavily in my stomach, but I finished it anyway between slaps on the back and friendly hello's from people I knew.

My father's voice ran through my head like an annoying chyron at the bottom of the screen during the news. *You don't have what it takes to make it on your own. You've never worked hard a day in your life; you don't even know what it takes to succeed... to earn your keep. You're fucking worthless is what you are.*

I took too deep of a gulp of wine and choked on it when someone else slapped me on the back. The music got even louder, and people began to scream over top of it to be heard. Sacha yelled to someone to invite another group of people over to “make a night of it.”

Usually, I would have been right there next to him, singing and laughing—the life of the party. This was the kind of scene I used to live for: bodies packed together, energy brimming, an endless stream of new and interesting people. I just didn't have the heart for it all the way I used to.

I ran a hand down my face. James had once told me not to let my father or money define who I was or what I wanted. The problem was, without my father and his money, I didn't know who I was, and I certainly wasn't sure what I wanted.

But I knew it wasn't this: night after night of endless parties and empty days. Couch surfing from friend to friend, just as directionless as before.

What was my endgame?

I pulled out my phone and swallowed my pride.

Richard: *Can I borrow money for a plane ticket to Wyoming?*

He made me wait a full half hour before responding.

Oscar: *I'll do you one better. Meet my pilot at Teterboro tomorrow at eight.*

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Here went nothing.

BOONE

The day was finally slowing down. I was covered in shit, blood, and sweat, so exhausted from a night out on the trail that my brain had stopped making sense, and I was relying on muscle memory to keep me upright, but I told myself it was fine. I was only five minutes from being able to step into my big, blessed shower and throw myself into bed.

Then Hank Picoe's faded orange truck came bumping down the drive.

"What the hell?" I muttered.

Jed squinted in the truck's direction. "You order any marijuana, boss?" he teased. "I hear tell the man can hook you up. Along with Amway, Tupperware, and whatever the hell else he can get his hands on to keep from having to get a real job."

"You don't think he wants work, do you?" I asked wearily. Hank was a nice guy but not the most reliable sort. Still... I was desperate enough to consider it after the day I'd had. Being shorthanded was starting to wear me way too thin, which was fine, but it was weighing heavily on Jed now too. And when someone as unruffleable as my foreman got ruffled, it was time to take drastic action.

As soon as the half-broke truck squealed to a stop, the passenger door flew open, and a stranger hopped out, talking a mile a minute. Birdie's tail started thumping wildly, but she didn't bother standing up and investigating. The patch of cool

grass under the shade of a nearby tree was too sweet to abandon.

“Thank you so much for your assistance, Mr. Picoe.” Hardee’s wrappers tumbled out of the truck behind the man like they were trying to jump ship and save themselves. The stranger ignored them and carefully picked his way across the gravel to the tidy patch of green grass in front of the house, where he brushed himself off. “It was very kind of you. I’d assumed arrangements would have been made for me, but no matter.” At this point, he noticed Jed and me standing nearby, watching the events unfold. He cleared his throat. “I guess that’s not the kind of service provided out here in...” He looked around at the vistas surrounding us on all sides. The Wind River Mountains stood to the west, the Bighorns to the north, and the Absorokas nestled between them farther off toward the horizon. “... Wyoming?” he finished with less certainty than one would expect.

The man was tall and fit with wide shoulders and lean hips that I couldn’t fail to notice, even in my tired state. His hair was a wavy blond, tousled from the drive from town with the window rolled down, and his skin was a deep tan from days spent outside in the sun. Given his physique and appearance, I might have mistaken him for an honest-to-god cowboy. But then I took note of his clothes. Pristine blue jeans with a crisp crease down the front as though they’d been recently ironed, a tight white long-sleeve T-shirt that molded to the slender muscles in his arms, and a sleeveless suede coat lined with shearling and decorated with tassels.

It was his boots that really gave him away: they were bright red and black calf hair, like someone had dipped a baby calf in a vat of Kool-Aid and then made ankle boots out of it. They looked soft and comfortable and wholly inadequate to life on a ranch. There wasn’t even a speck of dirt on them. Those boots hadn’t seen a day of hard work in their life.

The owner of the boots set his hands on his hips and glanced from me to Jed, to Birdie, to the truck with Hank in it, before coming back to me.

“The strong, silent type, I see,” he muttered under his breath before shooting me a thousand-watt smile. “Can I get some help with my things? Perhaps you have someone who...” He waved a hand at the truck expectantly.

I lifted an eyebrow. I had no idea what *things* the man needed help with, but he was damn fine to look at.

When I didn’t immediately jump to assist, he made an impatient noise. “Or a trolley, perhaps?”

I lifted my other eyebrow.

“Perhaps not,” he said with a sigh. “Fine. I *am* capable of hard work, no matter what certain people think.” The man moved around the back of the truck and pulled ineffectively at the tailgate. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t budge, given that it was dented all to hell. He stepped back, eyeing the truck like it was a puzzle that needed solving. “Excuse me,” he finally said as Hank lumbered from the driver’s seat. “Is there, like, a ladder or a step stool I might be able to make use of?”

Hank laughed. Beside me, Jed snorted.

The newcomer scowled at them before attempting to climb onto the rear bumper. Except that his jeans were so tight he could barely lift his leg high enough.

Jed shifted beside me as if he might move to help the man, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. The stranger was a pleasant distraction from my clusterfuck of a day. I wanted to see what he would do next... and I was also really enjoying the way his exertions molded his too-tight jeans to his ass, accentuating the curve of his cheeks. It was a mighty fine view.

I watched him in tired fascination until Hank approached to shake my hand, blocking my view.

“Good to see you, man. Congrats on the expansion. Tommy Prescott mentioned you’re adding a couple of hundred head to the herd. Business must be good.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

We stood side by side, watching as the stranger tested his weight on the truck's bumper and then hopped around on one foot, trying to get enough momentum to vault up into the truck bed. He finally made it on the fourth try, and I had to suppress the urge to applaud.

"Who's this, then?" I asked, nodding toward the guy. "Friend of yours?"

Hank's eyes widened comically. "Me? Nah, he's here for *you*. I dropped Joe Perkins off at the airport so he could visit his daughter in Kansas City, and this guy was just standing at the curb, surrounded by bags. Asked me if *Mr. Boone* from the Silver Fork had sent me, and I said no, but I offered him a lift anyways. Says his name is Richie."

Richie? I racked my overworked brain, but I couldn't recall anyone by that name. And I definitely wouldn't have forgotten that face, no matter how tired I was.

The man—Richie—hoisted a brown-on-brown print suitcase over the edge of the truck bed and carefully lowered it to the ground. It was followed by three more matching bags of various shapes and sizes. And then two duffles, one a glittery blue and the other an iridescent clear.

I blinked. The man had *luggage*?

"He moving in?" Jed asked beside me. I shook my head wordlessly.

Hank shrugged. "Dunno. Sounded like he's from back east—New York, maybe—and real hoity-toity-like. I thought maybe he was family come for a visit or some such."

New York? Hoity-toity? Suddenly, I remembered the call with Oscar... and his rich friend who needed to be taught a lesson about hard work for a month.

The one I'd forgotten all about because I'd figured he wouldn't actually show up.

I sighed and closed my eyes, my amusement dying as the man went from being a sexy, amusing distraction to yet another problem I had to handle. I did not have time for this shit. Oscar had taken advantage of my temporary warm

feelings of nostalgia by getting me to agree to hiring on a greenhorn, and this man wasn't even a greenhorn. He was... whatever kind of horn was worse than a greenhorn.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Mmhm," Jed agreed. "You got that right."

"Here's the thing..." I started, turning to gently inform my foreman that this guy was his problem, not mine.

Jed held up a callused and dirty hand to cut me off. "No, sir. Don't even think about it. I'm not babysitting some charity project you got going on. I got real work to do. It's fucking calving season, boss."

As if I hadn't been up all night dealing with several difficult deliveries. As if I wasn't currently covered in goddamned blood and various other crap from helping deal with calving issues all day. I was dead on my feet.

Hank watched the guy carefully lower the last of his bags onto the drive. "Well, good luck with all that. Pretty sure you're gonna need it," he said with a chuckle.

"Thanks for giving him a lift, I guess," I said, shaking his hand. Hank swung into his truck and started it back up, the engine rattling and wheezing as he struggled to shift it into gear. He took off back up the driveway, leaving Richie and his luggage collection choking on a cloud of dust and takeout wrappers.

The man bent down to rummage in one of his bags, and when he stood a moment later, he'd covered his blond waves with what appeared to be a cowboy hat—or some New York designer's interpretation of a cowboy hat, anyway.

As I approached, he coughed and pulled a small aerosol can from what looked like a purse dangling from his arm. He closed his eyes and spritzed his face, muttering, "God. I'm going to need a stronger moisturizer if I'm going to be here an entire month. This air is murder on my pores."

Whatever he'd sprayed himself with, it left his skin dewy and glistening, tiny droplets clinging to the tips of his eyelashes and the crease of his plump lips. I took a moment

while his eyes were closed to study his features: wide jaw, angled cheekbones, flawless skin without a trace of wrinkles or sign of wear.

He opened his eyes. They were a deep blue so startling I found myself at a sudden loss for words. I finally forced my gaze away from his and blinked up at the garish cowboy hat he'd perched on his head.

"First off, lose the hat, Richie," I said. "The reflection off the sequins is exacerbating the migraine I already have after not sleeping for three days. Second, grab as much of your stuff as you can carry and follow me. You can get the rest after I show you around."

I turned to head toward the bunkhouse without waiting for him. Birdie huffed and got up to follow. After a few scuffling sounds and a *hmpf*, the stranger spoke up.

"Excuse me. Who do I talk to about the fact that there was no one to greet me at the airport? Also, I'm positively starving. Oscar's flight attendant somehow overlooked the fact I'm on a highly specialized diet my friend Adelyte recommended, and he tried serving me a pasta dish. I had to make do with the salad, and it didn't even have legumes on it, for god's sake."

I walked faster, silently cursing Oscar and shifting him from the friend column into the mortal enemy column in my mind. My temples were pounding, and my own stomach was grumbling from lack of food. But it was because I'd probably burned six thousand calories since lunch only a few hours ago, not because I was ever picky about what was served to me.

"Supper's at six," I called over my shoulder, ignoring what he'd just said. "Show up at the farmhouse kitchen door, and Norma'll fix you up. Not sure if it'll be *keto*, but you'll eat what's served or go hungry. Considering it's a ranch, there's usually plenty of beef on the table regardless."

"I prefer lean meats—"

As if they'd heard him talking about them, a handful of chickens wandered out from behind one of the barns and headed past me toward Richie. Birdie turned her head back as

if considering an impromptu chicken chase, and I shot her a warning glare.

From behind me came a terrified shriek followed by a shrill cry. “Away! Away from me! No! Bad chickens. Bad chickens!” I turned to see Richie prancing away, his iridescent belt bag clutched to his chest.

Jed glanced over at me from the open doorway to the barn but then wisely bit back the bark of laughter threatening to escape his grizzled mouth. I sighed and stomped a foot on the ground, clapping my hands and growling, “Git!” loud enough to scatter the chickens from the newcomer.

“Goodness,” Richie said, fanning himself with a hand. “I wasn’t expecting to be exposed to wildlife so soon after arriving. I thought I’d have more time to prepare myself...”

He trailed off, his gaze sliding past me to where the calving pasture was visible between the bunkhouse and farmhouse. His eyes widened in awe. When I looked at the area, I tended to see heifers, cows, and calves who might need assistance.

I saw *work*.

But I forgot what others saw. It really was like something out of a picture book. The sun was sinking toward the Wind River Mountains in the distance, bathing the ranch in golden light. A gentle breeze blew across the pasture, sending the tips of grass undulating like waves in a calm sea. Heifers and cows dotted the landscape, many with calves nearby or tucked beneath them eating.

“Holy shit,” Richie breathed. “Are those... are those baby cows?” He pressed his hands together over his heart and wandered toward the fence as if in a trance.

I huffed impatiently. I didn’t have time for this. At all. But I couldn’t help but feel a little spark of... *something* at his reaction to my ranch.

After hard days like today, it was easy to forget just how incredible this land was, how amazing this *world* was. Seeing

it through the eyes of someone who'd never been on a working ranch before was a needed reminder.

My internal musings were interrupted by a shocked gasp. "Wait... Why is that cow rolling around like that? And is that... is there something coming out of that animal?" Richie's face had paled, his eyes wide and filled with horror. "What is wrong with... oh. *Ohhh.*" He turned away, the back of his hand pressed to his mouth. "Ew. I can't watch."

I squinted in the direction he'd been gesturing and saw one of the heifers giving birth. "Jed," I hollered. "1103 is calving. Keep an eye on her." I snapped my fingers at Birdie, and she trotted off toward the foreman in case he needed the dog's help.

After nudging a noticeably paler Richie back toward the entrance to the bunkhouse, I mentally rehearsed the set-down I planned on giving Oscar for convincing me to hire this guy. The front door to the bunkhouse opened into a small, neat little kitchen and eating area, though most meals were served family-style in the much larger farmhouse kitchen. To the right was an open living room with a few well-worn leather couches and a big-screen TV hanging on the wall. Straight ahead, a hallway stretched toward the rear of the building. The bare wood planks on the floor were neatly swept, most likely thanks to PeeWee Hatchett, who was a neat freak, thank the lord. He did the same kind of job in the equipment shed, where he ran everything like a tight ship.

"This is where you'll be staying with the other hands," I said, leading him toward the hallway. "Some live in town, but three or four stay here full-time. Temporary hands stay over during calving."

I paused in the doorway to one of the bedrooms. It was bare-bones but tidy, two narrow beds arranged on either side of a window with a view of the calving pasture. A simple wooden table stood between them, an iron lamp perched on top. An old armoire was pushed against the near wall next to a bookcase stacked with a few worn cowboy westerns an old ranch hand had left behind years ago.

“Hmmm...” Richie hummed through pursed lips as he stepped inside and turned, taking it in. “It’s quiet, I’ll give you that. And the whole rustic charm you have going on is definitely a style choice. Perhaps from a century ago, but you certainly embraced the rustic piece of that equation with gusto.”

He perched on the edge of one of the beds, giving it a little bounce. The springs squealed in protest, and his expression soured. He glanced around. “Where are the controls?”

I blinked at him. “Controls?” I honest to god had no idea what he was talking about.

“You know, so I can adjust the firmness? Raise the feet a little. I find that especially important after a long flight.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Helps with the swelling,” he said with a knowing nod.

If I’d maybe slept in the past three days, or if my head hadn’t been pounding from the stress of calving season, I might have lost my cool or even laughed at his naivety, but as it was, I didn’t have the energy to do anything other than stare at him. I reminded myself that I needed the pair of extra hands and that I’d been the one to tell Oscar whoever I hired didn’t need to be smart, just willing to work.

“Regardless,” he said, popping to his feet. “As quaint as this is, do you have anything a little...” He waved a hand in the air. “Brighter? Cheerier? Perhaps with an en suite bathroom?” He gave a pointed look at the small porcelain sink bolted to the wall.

“Bathroom is the last door on the left,” I said in an even voice.

A look of horror crossed his face. “There’s only *one*?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s plenty large. Anyway,” I continued, gesturing down the hallway. “You can grab your stuff and pick a room later. If you have to double up, I suggest avoiding bunking in with Mercy. Everyone else should be fine.”

He shrugged. “I don’t mind sharing with a woman if it means getting a preferable accommodation. I’m gay. It’s

hardly a problem.”

“Mercy Ferrell is a former bull rider who’s had his nose broke more than once and snores like a son of a bitch. It’s what keeps the coyotes away from camp when we’re out running cattle, that’s how I know. But if you’ve got a good pair of earplugs, have at it.”

He lifted his chin. “I’d rather have my own room.”

Of course he would.

“Good luck with that,” I muttered, turning to exit the bunkhouse. If I didn’t hurry up this little tour, I wouldn’t have enough time to shower before supper. If we weren’t so damned shorthanded right now, I wouldn’t even be giving this tour in the first place, but here we were.

Richie scrambled to catch up with me as I reached the open doors of the closest barn. “This here’s the main horse barn. Most likely, Jed’ll start you off mucking stalls in the morning, and...”

I was interrupted by a loud screech of terror. I turned at the sound of a metal pail clanging as it bounced across the cement floor. I found Richie plastered against the wall directly across from Moonbeam’s stall, his hands clapped tightly over his mouth. An empty feed pail rattled as it rolled to a stop nearby.

“What the hell?” I swiped up the pail and hung it back on the hook. Numerous pairs of wide equine eyes stared at the newcomer as a bunch of nosy nellies poked their faces across stall doors to see what was going on. “Damned near scared half the horses in here,” I muttered.

“It bit me!” Richie’s shout was muffled by his hands. He shuddered slightly, his eyes still wide, and I felt a surprising urge to soothe him. To press my lips against the rakish mop of hair and pull him against my chest until his breathing calmed.

I scowled, ignoring the thought, and looked between the docile mare and the city boy. “I highly doubt that. She probably sniffed you because you smell like Hank’s drive-thru burger collection.”

He swallowed and sidestepped farther away, but Pickle's spotted nose stopped his progress. He jumped as soon as Pickle huffed out a warm exhale against the back of Richie's head.

"Oh Jesus god! Make it stop!" He hopped to the middle of the aisle and stared at me in a combination of horror and defiance. "You put them up to this," he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at me. "This is some kind of hazing ritual, isn't it? You're trying to get me to quit before I've even started!"

Instead of being angry and annoyed as hell the way I would have expected, I huffed out a laugh. It was impossible not to. He looked so ridiculous with his shiny shoes and bedazzled hat and designer clothes, so out of place, and yet the expression on his face was fierce. The man had spirit.

"Yes, Richie," I said dryly. "I sat them down an hour ago, and they came up with a plan to breathe terror into you with soft muzzles and curious sniffs, even though no one told me you were actually coming today. Is it working?"

He studied me for a moment. "Sarcasm is the lowest form of humor. It's not my fault Oscar didn't confirm my arrival details... though I can't say I'm surprised." He lifted his chin a fraction. "And my name isn't Richie, it's *Richard*. Not that you've told me your name or anything." I could have sworn I heard a muttered *rude* at the end.

He was right. I sighed and stepped forward, thrusting out my hand. "Boone Hammond. Your new boss."

"Oh." Richard reached out hesitantly and took my hand as if it were covered in dried afterbirth. Which it probably was. The first thing I noticed when his long fingers slipped against mine was how soft they were. Not a single callus or torn cuticle. My mind immediately jumped back to the image of him perched on the edge of the bed, except this time, I was standing in front of him with my pants unbuckled, and he was sliding those soft hands with those long fingers into my boxers, taking me firmly in his grip, his touch like silk.

Because the second thing I noticed about him was how firm his grip was as he grasped my hand. His shirt was tight

enough that I could see lean muscles bunching and moving in his arms, across his chest.

And the third thing I noticed was the way my body reacted. His clean scent—a combination of soap, laundry detergent, shampoo, and cologne—was such a stark contrast to the familiar smell of the barn and my own sweat, I wanted to bury my nose in his throat and inhale deep and long. My cock throbbed at the thought until I cleared my throat and forced myself to step back.

I was damned if I'd allow myself to think that way about my new cowhand... even if that cowhand seemed like he'd last all of negative five minutes on a working ranch.

“If you're done bitching about equine manners, I'll show you the rest of the place,” I gritted out, removing my hat and running my hand through my sweaty, dusty hair.

It might have been my imagination, but I'd swear Richard's eyes followed my movements. That his gaze dropped to the stretch of my work shirt across my chest and the place where the edge of it was coming untucked from my pants.

This was a complication I did not need.

Richard blinked and looked away. “That's fine, but then I really need to eat something. My blood sugar is plummeting, and I tend to get hangry if I go too long between small meals.”

Lord have mercy, I was going to kill Oscar. Kill him.

“Then by all means, let's get this over with,” I said, deciding to cut the tour short and deposit him back at the bunkhouse with only a cursory gesture toward the paddocks, machine shed, and farmhouse kitchen entrance.

He wouldn't need to know any of it.

This spoiled princess wasn't staying.

RICHARD

At dinner, I'd tried not to think of Boone Hammond, mostly because the name Boone for a rancher that hot—and decidedly *not* ancient—made me snicker, and that wasn't exactly the first impression I wanted to make with a bunch of butch cowboys.

Fortunately, I'd found it very easy to distract myself.

Oscar may have done me wrong in many ways with this job—like failing to tell Boone I was arriving, for a start—but what he hadn't lied about was the eye candy. I'd kept my mind occupied by staring in circles around the dinner table like a young pup with a yard full of juicy bones, deciding which strapping fella I'd like to give my *own* juicy bone before this little job experiment was over.

Maybe Harrison Malone. I'd give Malone my bone. *Heh.*

The thought of that followed me into sleep—a sleep that was more like a butter-laden, carb-induced coma, despite the criminally narrow bed in my prison cell of a room, and led to some very, very interesting dreams that I did not want to wake up from—

“Get the fuck up!”

The screaming voice didn't merely *wake* me; it catapulted me headfirst out of a dream and onto a cold, hard floor. For a moment, I was so disoriented I had no idea where I was. I pressed my hands against the ground in the pitch-darkness, feeling the scrape of dirt and dust under my fingertips. Behind me, the rough metal of a bed frame bit into my back, and the

scratch of cheap sheets slid from my shoulder. I sucked in a deep breath, and...

Dear god, the *stench*. Like unwashed animals and manure.

“What the hell is going on in here?” the same voice boomed.

Suddenly, I remembered. Oscar’s deal. The ranch in Wyoming. *Boone*.

An image of the beautiful cowboy flashed in my mind, warming my skin against the cold morning air... though the effect was ruined when the man began cursing me under his breath from somewhere above my head.

With a huff, I tugged down the edge of my silk sleep mask and glared up at him. “Do you mind? I was asleep.”

Boone’s teeth were bared, and his eyes were narrowed to angry slits. “Matter of fact, I do mind. This here is a working ranch. Emphasis on *working*. Did you think we kept office hours around here? When I told you to be at the breakfast table at five, what exactly did that mean to you?”

Those were a lot of questions for so early in the morning. I glanced at my Apple Watch and then back up at him. “It’s five thirty.”

He crossed beefy arms in front of his wide, muscular chest, and a shiver ran down my spine. Somehow, Boone’s anger made him even more good-looking, emphasizing the firm set of his shoulders and the telltale tick of a muscle in his locked jaw. He was in control. *Commanding*. I caught a wispy fragment of the dream I’d been having just moments before—something about me on my knees while Boone showed me exactly what happened to men who couldn’t control their sassy mouths—and had to ruthlessly force it away.

Boone Hammond was not in the running to get my juicy bone... or give me his, as the case might be. Not if the look on his face was anything to go by.

I sat back on my heels and cleared my throat, trying to think fast. “I got things mixed up because of the time difference, that’s all. I’m still on New York time, you see.”

His nostrils flared. “So you were at the breakfast table at five Eastern time? Three o’clock in the morning?”

Shit. Why were time zones so complicated?

I nodded slowly. “Yes. Yes, I was. And since no one was around, I assumed there’d been some sort of miscommunication—probably your fault, but I wasn’t going to hold it against you—and I decided, under the circumstances, the smartest thing to do was to get back in bed and wait for daylight to sort it all out.” I gave him a winning smile.

Boone opened his mouth, clearly intending to continue his scolding, but then he squinted at me and leaned down to see me better, frowning. “What the hell is on your face? And what’s that smell?”

I patted my face and belatedly remembered the anti-wrinkle mask I’d put on. “Oh. The SiO Sparkle BrowLift patch. I’m not sold on it yet. Mondo swears by it, but he still has a full set of Louis Vuitton under his eyes, so I’m not sure he should be the one handing out anti-aging suggestions.”

Boone stared at me like I was speaking Russian.

“Eye bags,” I clarified.

He blinked several times as if he didn’t know what to do with that information. He was cute when he was flustered. I decided I should try to fluster him as much as possible.

He shook his head as though forcing himself back on track. “Get your ass out of bed and into the kitchen for breakfast. You now have seven minutes to chow down before your ass is mucking stalls. Got me?”

As he turned to stride out of the room, I muttered, “I wish I got you. Or at least that tight ass of yours.”

He froze for half a beat before continuing down the hallway with a grunt of displeasure. I smiled to myself at having riled him up, and then I sighed and lay back down on the bed for a minute to catch my breath, twitching my eye mask back into place.

The next thing I knew, I was being woken out of a dead sleep by a drenching of icy-cold water. I sucked in a breath as my body seized from the sudden shock.

“What the fuck?” I screeched, lurching to my feet with my fists raised to fight off my attacker.

“Are you... wearing a nightgown?” a voice asked.

“Shit, son. Ain’t no one ever taught you how to make a fist without breaking a finger?” someone else remarked. “You gotta pull your thumb out.”

“Now, that’s a pun if ever I heard one,” a third person muttered. “Lazy city boy needs to pull his thumb outta his ass and get to work.”

I ripped my sodden eye mask over my head and glared at the pack of feral dogs standing in my room. “Out!” I screamed, still struggling to catch my breath. “Get out of my room!”

It probably would have been more effective had my teeth not been chattering.

The older man I recognized as the foreman, Jed, gave me a look every bit as stern as Boone’s but without an iota of Boone’s sex appeal. “You got three minutes to get your ass outside, ready to work. You missed breakfast, so you better hope you don’t faint before lunch.”

The sexy cowboy I recognized as Harrison looked me up and down with noticeable appreciation. “Naw, not a nightgown, just a real big shirt. Doesn’t hold up to water at all though, does it?”

I glanced down and moved my hands down to cover my junk with a squeak. The white silk was as transparent as cling wrap at this point.

Jed cuffed Harrison lightly on the back of the head and pushed him toward the door. “Move it along. We’ve got work to do and no time to be standing around.” Jed gave me one last hard look, making sure I knew I was included in that statement.

“I’ll have you know, this happens to be a three-hundred-dollar 22 momme silk nightshirt!” I called after them.

As soon as they were gone, I stood for a moment, still waiting for my heart rate to calm and my breathing to return to normal. My breath puffed out in a soft white cloud in the early morning air, and I was already shivering in my wet nightshirt.

God, Oscar would chortle with glee if he could see me now. That thought alone was enough to motivate me to start moving. Grumbling the entire time, I stripped the wet sheets off the bed, washed my face in the sink bolted to the wall, and applied moisturizer and sunscreen.

I took a moment to consider my options before selecting a comfortable but sexy pair of jeans and a Wythe New York moleskin pearl-snap shirt over a Cotton Citizen Presley Tee. It gave just a hint of cowboy with the pearl snaps but was also nice and warm. I could already tell it was freezing outside. Spring must not mean the same thing in Wyoming as it did in New York.

After putting on a Brunello Cucinelli down gilet over the top and sliding my feet into my favorite Alexander McQueen calf-hair boots, I was ready to face the day.

With a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and reminded myself that I could do this before sweeping out of my room and down the hall leading outside. The moment I stepped into the frigid morning air, I hesitated, wondering if I should have also donned a beanie and mittens. Before I had a chance to dither too long about it, Jed began barking at me to follow him into the barn.

The sun hadn’t fully risen yet. These people were crazy.

The entire time Jed explained what he wanted me to do, I had to picture Oscar’s smug face in my mind to keep myself from throwing down my pitchfork, saying, “Thanks, but no, thanks,” and bolting to the airport for the first flight back to New York. I refused to give Oscar the satisfaction of knowing I failed.

It only took me three minutes of shoveling to realize “mucking stalls” was a fancy way of saying “covering oneself in horseshit.” I knew better than to complain to any of the other shit-covered cowboys though. And besides, I told myself, I could be a hard worker if I wanted to be.

After about ten minutes, I realized I *didn't* really want to be, but I soldiered on for another hour and a half before finally remembering that even the lowest-paid hourly workers got a break now and then.

“Excuse me, sir?” I said to Jed. “Where can I grab an iced coffee real quick? This would go a lot faster if I could caffeinate.”

He lifted an overgrown eyebrow at me. “Would it though? Would it, really?”

I laughed at his unexpected Thor reference. “I promise. And I would be forever in your debt.”

He released a reluctant smile and tilted his head in the direction of an open door at the end of the row of horse stalls. “Coffee machine’s in the break room. Grab you a granola bar from the bowl while you’re at it.”

I pressed my filthy, blistering hands together in a prayer gesture and bowed to him before bolting to the promised land. Unfortunately, the coffee there was hardly a Starbucks iced latte. But it was caffeine, and that was what I needed. I doctored a cup as quickly as I could and scarfed down two granola bars before reporting back to my duty station.

When I returned, I noticed a well-worn pair of work gloves propped next to the pitchfork I’d been using. That was an unexpected blessing of gigantic proportions. I’d spent half my work time earlier mentally flipping through hand treatment ideas to make up for the disastrous effects of this manual labor.

Once the gloves were on and I felt fully awake, I began singing to keep myself company. I started with the classics like Elsa’s “Let It Go” and Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” which I’d decided was going to be my mantra for all things

ranch-based. Then, I moved on to altered versions of road trip songs. “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” became “Gurl Just Wants To Be Done” and “Love Shack” became “Poop Shack” after Jed yelled for me to stop calling it a shit shack.

By the time the sun began to set, I thought I might have finally understood the expression “rode hard and put away wet.” I had aches in body parts I hadn’t even known I possessed, and the amount of exhaustion I felt was akin to the nights I’d definitely been rode hard.

Also, I was in desperate need of a shower. Even if it was in a communal bathroom. I was already making my way out of the barn toward the bunkhouse and mentally slathering myself with La Mer when I heard the clang of a metal triangle and someone shouting that it was time for lunch.

My steps faltered. Lunch? But... but... I glanced toward the horizon, expecting to see the sun sinking below the mountains in the distance. Nope. My shoulders fell when I realized I’d been fooled by the sun going temporarily behind a cloud.

It wasn’t sunset. It was only midday.

I whimpered as I dragged my feet across the dirt drive toward the kitchen entrance to the farmhouse. My hands hung numbly from my arms, and my thighs trembled like a nice ass after it had been slapped.

“Please, lord,” I begged under my breath. “Please let there be a nap time after lunch.”

“No such luck, my friend.” One of the cowboys slapped me hard on the back, shooting me forward into the back of another. “Woah, woah, there, Tinkerbelle. Almost keeled right over. You feeling okay?”

I glared over at the man I thought might be named PeeWee. “Tinkerbelle? What, you think everyone in this place needs an embarrassing nickname?”

Two of the other guys laughed and shoved each other. “Shit, yeah. And as long as you’re gonna muck out stalls with

one foot pointed in the air behind you, yours is gonna be Tinkerbell.”

Harrison, the heretofore sexy one, chuckled at his friend’s comment. I shot him the bird, which only made him laugh and reach out to ruffle my hair like a kid. “Now, don’t be sore. You kicked ass out there this morning. Everyone’s mighty impressed with you, Tinkerbell. It was like you waved a magic wand and cleared all the shit from the stalls.”

“I assure you, it was not a magic wand. And if it was, I’m happy to wave it at you after lunch,” I grumbled.

Once inside, Norma reminded everyone to wash up in the utility sink in the mudroom off the kitchen entrance, and since all the other men were bigger and beefier than I was, I stood to the side and let them crowd around the sink first. I took the opportunity to kick my boots off into the large boot trays someone had shown me last night. They were, of course, ruined. Alexander McQueen had never meant for those beauties to muck stalls, but it wasn’t like I had enough money for a pair of junk boots for work. That was the entire reason I was here in the first place.

While I waited my turn at the sink, I glanced around, hoping to catch sight of Boone. Since he was the man in charge, I felt like it was in my best interest to win him over to my good side so I could maybe, just possibly, get a job assignment a little farther away from the excrement.

I spotted him talking to Norma by the kitchen sink. His hip leaned casually against the counter, and his arms were crossed in front of his chest. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, exposing sun-browned forearms covered in golden hair and corded with muscle. His plaid shirt was neatly tucked into blue jeans behind a big metal buckle of some kind. I squinted to see what it was.

“Best thing you’ll eat on this ranch,” Harrison murmured to me before reaching for a paper towel.

“What?” I asked, whipping my head around.

“Those brisket sandwiches you’re drooling over.” He jerked his chin toward the kitchen table. “Best thing Norma makes. Just you wait.”

I looked back, and sure enough, there was a platter between me and Boone stacked high with thick buns overflowing with sliced beef.

That was definitely not what I’d had in mind to eat. But since I was starving, I didn’t have much choice in the matter. “Mm, meat,” I said faintly.

I hadn’t eaten heavy red meat like that since I’d gone through my Paleo phase three years ago. There was no telling what it was going to do to my digestive system. After washing my hands and making my way to the table, I pulled Norma aside and asked her politely if there were any vegetarian options.

“Oh, sure, sweetie,” she said kindly. “The carrots are...” She frowned, tapping a finger against her chin. “Well, now, hold on. No, there’s beef stock in those. Hmm. The green beans might... no. I used bacon fat in those. You could always try...” She blinked in confusion for a moment before dropping the facade and grinning widely at me. “Love it or leave it, hotshot. This here’s a cattle ranch.”

I stared at her as she cackled with laughter and reached for a pitcher of lemonade to refill the glasses that had already been emptied around the table by the thirsty cowboys.

A snicker from the head of the table caught my attention. *Boone*. He was eyeing me intently, his expression inscrutable. I felt a slight flush creep up my neck as his gaze roved over me, taking me in from head to toe.

I realized then that all of them were staring at me. I plastered a smile on my face. “No problem,” I said agreeably, taking the only seat left. “I love cattle. Meat. Cattle meat. Beef, I mean. Love it. Can’t get enough. Sometimes for fun, I like to gnaw on old steak rinds. You don’t happen to have any —”

Boone shoved a platter of glazed carrots in my chest. “Quit yapping and eat before you miss out on lunch too.”

He was right. There was no way I could get through another few hours of physical work without eating a full meal. And I needed to get through the work. I’d be damned if I was going to fail on the very first day. Oscar’s smug face floated in my mind, taunting me.

I was going to work until the day was over... or die trying.

I'd expected Richard to balk at physical labor, but he was clearly trying his hardest.

Too bad his hardest was for shit.

Yes, the man was fit, but he was NYC-exercise-class fit, not the kind of fit that can spend eighteen-hour days hauling feed bags. I appreciated the effort he was making, but I hadn't been lying when I'd told Oscar I needed someone who could get the work done. And if Richie Rich kept going the way he was, he'd be too wrung out to work by morning.

Oscar might appreciate teaching this kid a lesson in hard work, but it would leave me shorthanded, and I didn't need that kind of hassle right now.

I grabbed the keys to both my truck and the largest ranch pickup before crossing the yard to the machine shed. "PeeWee," I said, tossing him the keys to the ranch pickup. "You're supposed to be helping your sister with her move. Get on out of here, and take Harrison and Mercy with you."

Harrison poked his head out from the main barn. "I don't need to help her move."

I shot him a look. "Would you rather take over mucking stalls for the newbie? Because I'm taking him to town with me, and I'm happy for you to shovel that shit."

Harrison sighed and dropped his chin to his chest. "Actually, I'd love to help Kris move. I've been dying to help."

“That’s what I thought,” I said pointedly. I nodded to the barn behind him. “Now, tell the new kid to get his ass out here.”

Harrison gave a sharp whistle over his shoulder. “Tinkerbell! Boss wants you.”

When Richard came out of the barn looking like yesterday’s manure heap, I had to bite my lip against a smirk. If only Oscar could see him now. His designer T-shirt was stretched out and damp with sweat, not to mention covered in flecks of hay and dirt. His pearl-snap shirt was long gone, and there was a giant rip on the leg of his jeans. His fancy boots were toast too, which was what had given me the idea to take him to town.

As much as I disliked the guy, I couldn’t in good conscience allow him to keep working without proper footwear. It was a safety issue, if nothing else.

“Get in the truck,” I grumbled, nodding to my Ford F-150. Birdie’s ears perked up, but I shook my head at her. “Not you. Not today, sweetheart.”

Harrison whistled as he made his way over to the other truck. He eyed my ride with a slow up-down. “She’s taking the fancy ride today, boys.”

Richard’s face crinkled in confusion as he glanced at my personal vehicle. It didn’t look like much from the outside since it was covered in dust and mud, but it was my only splurge in the past few years. For as much time as I spent on the road between here and town, I wanted to be comfortable. The truck had heated leather seats and steering wheel, which was like living in the queen’s palace come wintertime in Wyoming. The dash looked like an iPad, and the ranch hands made fun of me for hooking it all up to my phone and listening to podcasts on it.

I shot Harrison a glare and opened the driver door. Before I closed it, I saw Jed step out of the kitchen door with his insulated coffee mug and a flush to his cheeks. I had my suspicions about why, which would also explain why Norma seemed to be walking with a lighter step recently.

Ain't none of my business so long as they do their jobs.

I sighed and pulled the door closed before turning on the ignition.

“It’s a Ford,” Richard said, clearly confused.

I nodded. “Good boy. Eyeballs are working just fine.”

I turned to look behind me as I backed out, and I noticed Richard’s nostrils flare. “No, I mean... they were acting like this is a fancy car. It’s a Ford pickup truck. Isn’t fancy Ford an oxymoron?”

“Something’s a moron,” I muttered under my breath as I shifted into drive. “Well, it ain’t no Rolls-Royce, but for eighty grand, it sure does a fine job of hauling smart-mouthed elitists hither and yon,” I said a little louder. “But if you want me to get Hank Picoe back out here with his weed mobile, you let me know. He might give you a better ride if you know what I mean.”

Richard’s eyes went wide. “No, thank you,” he said, giving a little shudder at the thought.

We drove in silence for a few minutes. Normally I was just fine with quiet time, but for some reason, the air in the truck thickened until I could barely breathe. I rolled down the window and turned on the radio. Tim McGraw was singing about staying humble, and I snorted before changing the station.

Richard finally batted my hand away and took over the selection. “You have terrible taste,” he said before finding the world’s worst music station. Computerized noises accompanied a deep bass beat that vibrated my ass through the seat. I turned down the volume with a grunt.

And that little prick turned it back up.

I felt the muscles along my neck tighten and a tick to start up in the muscle along my jaw. Clenching my teeth, I reached out and flipped the radio off entirely. “My truck, my rules,” I growled, wondering when in hell I’d turned into a curmudgeon.

“Okay, *dad*.” Richard leaned back and closed his eyes, which meant he didn’t notice when I glanced over at him, taking the chance to look at him close up. His hair was tousled—and not in a purposeful, trendy way—his face had dirt smudges on it, and he smelled like a horse barn, but the man was still the most beautiful human being I’d ever seen.

His skin was ridiculously smooth and perfectly tanned, and his lips were plump and inviting. I bit back a curse. Leave it to Oscar to send me temptation wrapped up in an annoying-ass package.

“You going to tell me where we’re going, or are you just going to scowl and sneer at me the whole time?” he asked without opening his eyes. “I’m cool with either, but I’d love to know how much time we’ll be in the truck so I can catch a quick catnap. Mucking stalls takes it out of a man. Especially this man.”

In truth, that was one of the reasons I’d decided to take him into town with me. I needed to pick up a few odds and ends at the feed and hardware stores, and I’d figured I might as well grab the kid some steel-toe boots while I was at it, but that was really just an excuse, and I knew it. The guy needed a break, and I wasn’t cruel—I knew full well that you couldn’t just jump right into ranch work. A man who’d had everything handed to him on a silver platter couldn’t be expected to work a full day on a ranch without keeling right over.

But at the same time, I wasn’t about to let him off easy or give him any indication I was soft on my ranch hands.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Normally I could make the trip in twenty minutes if I drove with a lead foot, but today, with the weather being so nice and the breeze through the open window playing through the truck, I decided to take my time. “Thirty minutes,” I told him. And then, to prove to myself that my decision to take the longer route into town had nothing to do with giving Richard a break, I added, “Sleep while you can since you’ll be hauling feed bags once we get to the tractor supply.”

It wasn't true. Sue Raintree would have her boys load up the truck for me, but I didn't bother to tell Richard that. He was here to earn his keep, after all, and it wasn't my job to make life easy for someone who'd already spent twenty-odd years living easy.

I'd thought he'd fallen asleep when about ten minutes later, he piped up.

"I wish I could tell my father that I was right. It turns out there *is* work out there for people who don't remember the cause of the First World War. Who knew?"

"The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife," I informed him. "Among other things."

He cracked an eye and rolled his head to look at me. "Yes, but a ranch hand doesn't need to know that." He frowned. "Wait. How did *you* know that?"

I kept my eyes on the empty highway to town. Fields rolled by on either side, empty and wide. In the distance, the mountains hulked along the horizon as always. "They teach shit like that in school. Some of us paid attention."

My teeth ground together as I forced myself not to try and prove anything to this kid. Yes, I went to college. No, I wasn't some ignoramus who'd never left his small farm town.

"I paid attention," Richard said with the slightest hint of... *something* in his voice. "It just wasn't as easy as I would have liked."

Easy, right. Because that's what he expected out of life.

I felt a muscle tick along my jaw.

"Mpfh." I reached for the radio and flipped it on again, changing the input on the dash to connect to my phone so I could play the most recent episode of my favorite ranching podcast. Justin Mills's familiar voice came over the speaker to introduce the topic of increasing the viability of sex-skewed semen in a cow/calf operation. As soon as the words penetrated Richard's brain, I saw his head tilt.

"Is that...?"

“Hush.”

The host explained the partnership between ABS Global and a large ranch up in Montana, but before they could get into the details of the economic return on using this in a large operation, Richard interrupted again.

“Can you just... maybe explain why you’re listening to a podcast about semen?” The teasing smirk on his face was annoying. What was he, a teenage boy?

“Never mind,” I said, knocking the power button to shut the whole damned thing off.

“Don’t be petulant,” Richard said. “Nobody likes a grumpy bastard.”

I turned my head in slow motion to glare at him. “What did you just call me?” Had he forgotten who was the rancher and who was the cowhand?

“Petulant. It means—”

“I know what the hell it means.” I tried not to growl at him, but I failed. “And do you know what *employer* means?”

He flapped a hand in the air. “Pfft. Like you’re going to fire me for speaking my mind. Then who would pitchfork all of your horseshit? And I mean that in the literal sense, not the figurative one. Figurative means—”

I wrenched the steering wheel to pull the truck off the side of the road onto a dirt lane. As soon as we were safely parked, I hopped out of the truck and slammed the driver door, yanking my hat off and running my fingers through my hair.

Had I stayed in that truck one more minute with the spoiled jackass, I would have most likely said something I would have regretted.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I asked myself as I paced in the dirt. “You need a working body, he has a working body. That’s the long and short of it.”

The wind whipped up behind me, which helped cool my temper a little. I felt the thin cotton of my shirt flap around my sides, and the overgrown edges of my hair blew into my face

before I set my hat back on my head. “Hells bells. What is wrong with me today?”

“Sir? Mister Employer, sir?”

I turned to see the wise-ass standing on the running board, resting his arms on the roof of the truck as he peered over at me. The position caused his shirt to ruck up far enough that I could just catch a glimpse of tantalizing skin peeking out above his low-slung jeans. The first thing I noticed was the absence of a happy trail, and I wondered just how far his grooming went.

Just how smooth and bare he might be. And how soft.

I cursed and kicked at the dirt road. That was the real reason this kid was getting under my skin. Because I wanted him.

I just didn't *want* to want him. I had no use for a spoiled little rich kid in my life, or even in my bed, no matter how tantalizingly sexy he was.

I took a deep breath, forcing the tension from my shoulders. Normally, I was known for keeping my cool. It was something I prided myself on after my daddy had run roughshod over everyone his whole damn life. Family, foreman, ranch hands, friends. You name it, he lost his temper at it.

“What?” I bit out carefully.

“If you want to learn more about bull semen, I'll be happy to sit quietly and listen. Heck, maybe I could learn something that would be interesting to me on a personal level.”

The glitter in his eyes teased me from across the truck's wide roof. That little fucker.

Well, two could play at the annoying tease game. I schooled my face to show no sign of a smile. “Yeah, well, I expect you should go ahead and learn since you'll be doing the collecting of it yourself here pretty soon. Insemination season is right around the corner, and you got here at just the right time to help.”

I purposefully eyed his hands resting on the truck's roof. "Man like you with long, slender fingers... bet those things work a treat on a bull cock."

Truth was, that wasn't exactly how we did it, and there was no way in hell I'd let this man near my best bulls in any case, but for the look on Richard's face when I said it? Worth every bit of the lie.

After the shock began to wear off, Richard looked pensive. "Huh. Maybe Dad was right after all. Seems I did learn some shit in college that would come in handy for my job one day."

I bit my tongue to keep from barking out a laugh. The man was entertaining, I'd give him that.

"Get in the damned truck," I muttered, opening my own door and hopping back in.



WHEN WE PULLED INTO TOWN, our first stop was the tack store. "You need new boots," I informed him, climbing out of the truck and starting toward the store.

He clutched at his chest as though I'd shot him. "Sacrilege! These boots are Alexander McQueen!"

I rolled my eyes. "They're a liability."

"They're made in Italy." As if that meant anything in my world.

"Don't care," I said, holding the door open and nudging him inside the store.

"I'll have you know, these are..." The rest of his description sounded like the Charlie Brown teacher. I thought I heard something about a queen, but I didn't much care to pay attention to whatever he was yammering on about.

"Boone Hammond," Shirley said from behind the checkout counter. "Good to see you, sir. How's things out at the Silver Fork? What can I help you with today?"

I tipped my hat to her before taking it off and tapping it against my leg. “Things’re fine. I need to get some steel-toe boots for one of my new hands and maybe some of those peppermint horse treats if you’ve got ’em in stock.”

She nodded and smiled. “Head on back to the boots, and I’ll check. Carson should be working back there if you need sizes that aren’t out.”

We made our way back to the area with the footwear, where the shop assistant was killing time arranging boxes that didn’t need arranging. I recognized Carson Randall from having seen him at the gay bar in Casper, and I steeled myself against his flirtation game. Ever since he’d spotted me there once, he’d been all over me to strike up a “friends with benefits” scenario in which we could take advantage of the slim pickings around here.

I’d politely declined. Several times. The man was twenty if he was a day, and I had no interest in the drama he seemed to surround himself with. Especially in a town as small as ours.

The minute Carson noticed me, a sly grin played around his lips. “Oh heeeyyy, Boooooone,” he said, practically cooing my name. But when his eyes slid past me to land on Richard, his entire body lit up with promise, and suddenly, it was as though I no longer existed.

He stepped past me, head cocked to the side as he looked Richard over. “Who do we have here? You’re new in town, aren’t you?”

Richard returned his smile. “Sure am. Just got into town yesterday from New York.”

I waited until my back was turned to roll my eyes and busied myself with picking out a pair of boots as quickly as I could. When I found a good solid pair of Justin pull-ons with a steel toe, I asked, “What size?”

Richard didn’t respond; he was too busy flirting with Carson. “Hey,” I said, snapping to get his attention. “I said, what size?”

He glanced at the boot in my hand and blinked. “Those are heinous.”

“For real,” Carson muttered. “You wouldn’t catch me dead in—”

I didn’t have time for this shit. “What. Size?”

Richard’s eyes flicked between Carson and me. “Um... Ten, but... can’t I have these instead?” He pointed to a cheap pair of lace-ups.

“Manure and laces don’t mix,” I warned, finding a pair of the Justins in his size.

Carson made a reluctant sound of agreement. “These are good boots. I mean, they’re no McQueens, but who wants to shovel shit in those, right? Here, try ’em on.”

“But I can’t—”

I shoved the box in his gut and turned to find a pair of high-quality cushioned socks to go with them. When I returned with the socks, he still hadn’t taken off his own boots, even though Carson had knelt at his feet to help him.

Richard looked fidgety and nervous. I frowned at him until he leaned in and lowered his voice. “I can’t afford these,” he said softly, pushing the box back into my hands.

I looked at the boots he was wearing, which probably cost more than a new set of tires for my truck and had absolutely no protection from the stomp of a hoof or a rogue piece of dangerous equipment.

I lifted an eyebrow at him. “I thought you had daddy’s money?”

His face pinked, and his jaw tightened. “You thought wrong.”

Interesting. I filed that tidbit of information away to ask Oscar about later.

“I mean, it’s only temporary,” Richard continued, eyes flicking to Carson. “It’s just a matter of being, um... liquid capital challenged at the moment.”

Carson, apparently having heard the exchange, perked up. “Don’t worry, cutie. We’ve been known to barter a time or two if need be.” He winked at Richard and started to walk his fingers up his arm. “I’m sure we could work something out—”

The sight of Carson’s hand on Richard’s bare flesh caused something in me to tighten.

“I’m buying,” I barked, shoving the box into Richard’s arms hard enough that it caused him to take a step back, breaking contact with Carson. His eyes went wide, and I realized I was making an ass out of myself.

“I can’t have you wearing those on the ranch for, uh...” My brain searched for an explanation of my ridiculous behavior. “Liability reasons. So I’ll buy ’em. And when you decide to go back to New York, you can, uh...” Jesus Christ on a cracker, why was this so hard? “Leave ’em for the cowhand who takes your place.”

There. Done.

Carson looked like he was about to protest, but I silenced him with a glare. “We’re good here,” I bit out.

He huffed and wandered off. *Good riddance.*

Richard blinked at me for a long moment before narrowing his eyes. “You don’t think I can do it either, do you? You don’t think I’m going to stick around for the entire month.”

I had serious doubts, but I kept my mouth shut and shoved another pair of socks at him. You could never have too many high-quality pairs of socks, as far as I was concerned. “Doesn’t matter what I think or don’t think, Richard. Put on the damned boots, and let’s get a move on. You’ve got feed bags to haul. You want to prove something, get back to work.”

Thankfully, Shirley hollered at me from the front of the store with the horse treats, which I absolutely did not need since I ordered them in bulk online. But I also didn’t want Richard to know the only reason we’d gone to the tack store was my concern for his precious city-boy feet, so I hurried up to the checkout desk and spent way too much time oohing and

ahhing about how much my already spoiled horses were going to enjoy their mints when I returned to the ranch.

After a few minutes, Richard slid the boot box and socks onto the counter next to me with a mumbled thanks before turning around and busying himself with a nearby rack of fly masks. I paid Shirley and thanked her for everything before stacking the purchases under my arm and following Richard out of the store. We hopped in the truck to drive the few blocks to the feed store, but before I could even put the truck in reverse, Richard was asking more questions.

“Why do they sell BDSM stuff in there?”

It took me a minute for his words to hit my brain, and then I damned near backed into Oliver Jacobs’s plumbing van. “Shit,” I said, slamming on the brakes before shifting into drive and moving out onto the street. “Not all leather strapping is BDSM gear. Around these parts, I’d imagine most of it’s horse tack, especially when you’re in a *tack* store.”

He pursed his lips. “If that’s what you people wanna call it, that’s cool, but I know a puppy-play mask when I see one.”

“Those were *fly masks*. For *horses*. They’re meant to keep the flies from—” I broke off when Richard doubled over with laughter that said he’d been putting me on.

“Oh, god, the look on your face, Boone,” he crowed, wiping tears from his eyes.

I didn’t find it particularly funny. “You’re a child.”

“No, sir. I’m twenty-nine. But that doesn’t mean I can’t also appreciate a good joke. You should try it sometime. Laughter is good for you.” Then he added under his breath, “Orgasms are even better.”

Just the word out of his mouth made my dick perk up and take notice. I cleared my throat and pretended I hadn’t heard it. Maybe changing the subject would help. “So, how do you know Oscar?”

Richard’s smile dropped. “Long story.”

We pulled into the feed store, which gave him a temporary reprieve, but when we got back in the truck after loading it down with the necessary supplies from town, I turned to him again.

“Is thirty minutes on a lonely highway enough time for your long story?”

Richard leaned his seat back and got comfortable, closing his eyes like he was going to actually nap this time. “Fine, but I’m going to need an iced coffee for this. Can you swing me through a Starbucks?”

I hit the blinker and made my way to the McDonald’s drive-thru. When the woman’s voice came over the speaker, Richard opened his eyes, saw where we were, and sighed again.

“Better add chocolate chip cookies if I’m going to lower myself to eat at McDonald’s.”

I gritted my teeth against snapping at this selfish, entitled, snobby bastard.

And then I ordered him the damned cookies.

RICHARD

Boone Hammond was everything I'd *never, ever* wanted...

So why the hell was I attracted to his every grunt and grumble?

I decided it had to be a side effect of exhaustion, so I took a sip of the iced mocha and let the cool sweetness slide down my throat. I hoped the caffeine would perk my brain up and calm my dick down.

"You were going to tell me about how you knew Oscar," Boone prompted. "He mentioned you dated one of his exes."

"Yep." I took another sip of coffee. "I dated his friend James."

Boone turned to me in surprise. "You? You dated James Allen? The straight-laced attorney who... wait." He frowned. "Isn't James around my age?"

I tilted my head at him, my eyes sweeping over his face. That he was older than me was obvious, but his exact age was difficult to pinpoint. His features were rugged, likely from years spent outside in the sun without proper skin protection. There were laugh lines in the corners of his eyes and a dusting of gray in the hair along his temples. My gut cramped with want, but I ignored it. "Depends. How old are you?"

He made a noise of discontent and refrained from responding.

I shrugged. “I guess he’s around your age. Fifty-two,” I said casually, glancing out the window.

From the corner of my eye, I saw his mouth drop open before he spluttered, “I’m forty-one, for god’s sake. And what the hell... wait. James isn’t fifty-two.”

“No, I guess not,” I said with a sniff. “Shame. Men under fifty are *so* immature.”

Boone clenched his jaw. Late-day stubble bristled, making my fingers itch to touch it. I could just imagine the rough scrape of it on my skin, followed by the soothing caress of his lips. I traced the line of his jaw with my eyes, down the corded muscle of his neck to the tantalizing hint of paler skin exposed by the vee of his shirt. I wanted to reach across and flick open the buttons of his shirt, revealing more of him to feast my eyes upon.

I blinked and tried not to mentally undress my *employer*. “Anyway, yes. James and I didn’t have much in common in the end, but...” I let out a breath. “But I really liked him. He was steady and calm and kind. Thoughtful and...” I remembered where I was and the fact I didn’t know Boone at all. He was friends with Oscar, which meant everything I said would probably get back to the man. “And really fucking good in bed. But I digress. The point is I dated him.”

I was going to leave it at that, but I found myself adding, “More than dated him, actually. We lived together. He was... my person. For a while anyway.” Even I heard the slight catch in my voice. I cleared my throat to get rid of it. “And when you’re dating James Allen, Oscar just sort of comes with the package.”

Boone said nothing for a moment, and I worried I’d accidentally given too much away at the end. I felt oddly exposed, my emotions closer to the surface than I usually allowed them.

I was about to say something flippant to change the topic when Boone asked, “Why didn’t it work out with you and James?”

The question surprised me. Boone didn't seem like the kind of man who wanted to know about the love lives of any of his employees, and he surely didn't want to hear my own sad tale. Not even my friends had been interested in discussing the fallout of my breakup with James—to them, it had just meant I was even more available to join them at parties and on trips.

Plus, it was clear what the gruff rancher thought of me, and it was about as flattering as my father's opinions.

How to answer an impossible question?

"Irreconcilable differences," I finally said, deciding less was more in this case.

"Mpfh."

He didn't say anything more, and silence stretched between us again. "You said it yourself," I continued, almost against my will. "He's straight-laced, and I'm... not."

"No," he said, as if even the very idea was laughable. "I can see that much already." He didn't make it sound like a good thing.

I huffed a little, feeling defensive. "Some people find straight-laced boring, you know," I said, crossing my arms. "They want a little spice in their life."

He lifted an eyebrow, clearly amused. "Do they?"

Ugh. Talking to Boone Hammond was like talking to a brick wall. One with a surly attitude.

"They do. Some people want to be around other people, socialize. Joke with friends. Some people want to see more than the four walls of their town house and boring artwork on the walls. Some people want to try new things, challenge themselves, bask in the sun, and..." Once again, I remembered who I was talking to. "Fuck lots of other hot men. James didn't want that. The end."

I felt Boone's eyes on me as the truck made its way over the rutted country highway. As soon as we were past the small town's edge, vast fields of nothing but grass and cows covered

the land as far as the eye could see. In the distance, there were pockets of trees, most following the meandering curve of a river. And beyond that were the mountains sitting rugged on the horizon, formidable and unmoving.

The wind blew in from the open window, and I closed my eyes to breathe it in. Maybe the fresh air of the pristine Wyoming tundra would wash away the pollution I'd grown up breathing in the city—wait, was it a tundra? I wasn't sure. As Boone had helpfully reminded me earlier, I had never been good at paying attention in class. For all I knew, Wyoming was a desert or a plateau. Maybe a prairie. Whatever it called itself, the air was clean and felt so refreshing I couldn't help sucking in giant lungfuls as the truck bounced its way back to the ranch.

After a while, Boone broke his stubborn silence. “No fucking men on the ranch.”

I craned my neck around to stare at him and then deliberately misheard. “I beg to differ. There are quite a few fucking men on your ranch.”

His nostrils flared. “You know what I mean. No shitting where you eat.”

He seemed perturbed, as if he didn't normally have to give this kind of rule to his help. Did he think I was a special case? That I would run on some kind of fornication rampage through his cattle ranch?

“I promise you I never shit where I eat,” I said as calmly as I could. “But I'm not sure I've ever held a job where I didn't at least sleep with three or four coworkers...”

As the red flush began to appear over his shirt collar, I decided to go easy on him. “Relax, cowboy. I'm messing with you again. While I can appreciate the muscles and maleness of some of your fine stock, I have no interest in entanglements at the moment, physical or otherwise. I have one goal here, and fucking your ranch hands isn't it.”

“Then what is?”

Fucking their boss.

I closed my eyes to get my wayward thoughts back in line. “Honest work for honest pay. Plus, proving to Oscar that I can last a month on the ranch and winning the bet we made.”

“I wondered what he’d done to get you out here.” Boone sounded amused.

I hadn’t meant to admit that last part, but once it was out, there wasn’t really anything I could do about it. I took another long draw from the iced coffee before closing my eyes again and enjoying the feel of the sun streaming in with the breeze. After the sweaty, smelly, stuffy work in the horse barn all morning, it was a treat just to lie back and breathe without having to lift a single one of my aching muscles.

We rode in silence for a little while longer. Clearly, Boone was having big thoughts because he was the one who broke the silence again.

“He’s a good man, you know. Oscar.”

I opened my eyes to determine whether he was fucking with me or not. He looked serious.

I shrugged before closing my eyes again. “If you say so.” It was obvious by my dismissive tone of voice that I totally disagreed.

He blew out a breath and tightened a hand around the steering wheel. “No. Seriously. He puts up a front, I think. Doesn’t want people to see his vulnerabilities. His stories aren’t mine to tell, but... his life hasn’t always been easy, you know?”

I thought of the billionaire who seemed to know every influential person on Earth and moved through the highest levels of society like he was above even that. Oscar was untouchable, the kind of wealthy that allowed him to be eccentric and odd in an endearing way—I mean, he carried a pet hedgehog in his pocket, for fuck’s sake, and if that wasn’t eccentricity in a nutshell, I didn’t know what was—and I knew he was an uncompromising champion for the people he chose to be his friends. But for the people he hadn’t chosen...

“If Oscar has vulnerabilities, they must have been on sale at Chanel in Paris,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

A muscle ticked along Boone’s jaw, but he didn’t respond.

In the silence that followed, I rolled my head to look out the window, watching the scenery whiz by in a blur. I hadn’t slept well in weeks. Between partying with my friends, which involved drinking too much and staying up too late, and the stress of fighting with my father, I was running on severe sleep deprivation. One decent night’s sleep in the bunkhouse must not have made a dent because, for some reason, being with Boone made me want to let go and fall deeply asleep again.

Maybe it was his quiet nature or his large, steady presence. Boone seemed like a man who knew the answers to all the questions and didn’t make a fuss over trivial things. It was calming. Comforting. Sort of like James, but different too. James was dependable as a rock, but I always got the feeling that his brain was buzzing, even during our quiet times. Like he was making a giant to-do list or calculating the hours passing when he wasn’t billing a client. Like there was someplace else he’d rather be.

Boone, on the other hand, seemed to be exactly where he wanted to be, doing exactly what he wanted to do. I admired people like that. I didn’t know the man at all, but my first impression was that Boone Hammond was someone you wanted on your side when the shit hit the fan.

And shit hit the fan often in my life.

I put the thoughts out of my mind and tried to rest. God knew there was more shit for me to shovel when we got back to the ranch, and I would need every last bit of energy to make it happen without keeling over.

Except my brain wouldn’t let me sleep. Instead, my thoughts kept churning over what Boone had said about Oscar having vulnerabilities. That wasn’t the kind of observation that came from a casual friendship or hookup; that was the kind of insight that came from truly knowing someone well. Oscar had mentioned dating Boone in the past, but I’d assumed it was more of a fling type of situation—that Boone was just another

notch in Oscar's rather scarred bedpost. In what world did Boone and Oscar become that close?

After about ninety seconds of trying to calm my mind, I blurted out, "How do you know him so well? Oscar, that is."

Boone tapped his fingers against the steering wheel for a moment. It was difficult not to notice the strength in his hands, the scars along the back of his knuckles, and the ropey muscles twisting up his arms.

"We dated in high school," Boone said, matter-of-fact.

The words made me snort. I tried to picture a younger Oscar dating a younger Boone. It didn't compute.

"You dated Oscar in high school?" I repeated. "I mean, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. The man has either dated or fucked every man he's ever met. Except me, of course," I hastily added.

He chuckled lightly and cut his eyes toward me, lifting a brow. "You don't think I'm his type?"

That was putting it mildly. "You two don't even live in the same universe."

Boone shrugged. "We did once upon a time."

I was still struggling to fit this new piece of information into what I knew about Oscar. "But how? I can't exactly picture Oscar getting his Balenciagas dirty on a cattle ranch, no offense."

"Shows what you know. Oscar grew up on a cattle ranch," he said mildly.

I blinked at him, stunned into silence. I mean, obviously, Oscar had to come from somewhere, but I'd just assumed he'd walked out of a Neiman Marcus store one day fully formed and fabulous.

"You're joking."

He shook his head. "I'm not. We grew up together in Texas. I guess you'd call us high school sweethearts."

My voice rose several octaves with incredulity. “Oscar’s from Texas?” I mentally cackled at this new piece of information, one I was pretty sure Oscar purposefully kept to himself, given that I’d never even heard a hint of a Southern drawl grace his voice.

Boone grinned, seeming to enjoy my stunned reaction. “Sure is.”

I fell back against my seat, trying to take everything in. “But you... and Oscar... how? I mean, I know opposites attract and everything, but still.”

“We had more in common back then.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You once harbored a deep love affair for Veuve and Versace?”

He chuckled, but something hardened in the set of his jaw as he said, “Nope. We just shared the same deep-seated desire to get the fuck out of town as soon as we could.”

There was very definitely a story there. “Why?”

Boone shrugged. “Doesn’t everyone want to get away from home when they’re young?” His tone was light, almost flippant, but there was also an undercurrent of defensiveness and warning. It was obvious there was more that he wasn’t interested in sharing.

I thought about pressing the matter, but instead, I found myself nodding. Then I asked, “So what happened? Why didn’t it work out with you and Oscar?”

He laughed again in that deep, sure way. “Same reason I expect you won’t last long out here.”

I turned and glared at him, surprised and a little hurt. *And here I’d thought we were opening up and sharing.* “You mean because you’re quick to judge and slow to give anyone proper credit?” I sniped, folding my arms across my chest.

Boone studied me for a minute before looking back at the road. “Because some people aren’t meant to live their lives hidden away from the world,” he said, almost to himself. “They’re meant for bigger and brighter things, and trying to

keep them to yourself only leaves both of you resentful and bitter in the end.”

I stared at the side of his head, trying to figure out what part of that explanation had been meant to describe me. Maybe none of it. Maybe he'd only been referring to Oscar with his words. But if that was the case, then his melancholy delivery of them had to mean he still had feelings for the man.

The idea should not have made me feel so unsettled and irritable—almost as if I was *jealous* or something, which I certainly wasn't. Yes, Boone was fuckable in that gorgeously rough-and-tumble cowboy sort of way, but the possibility of him carrying a torch for his old flame didn't make him any more or less fuckable. And it wasn't like I was going to *actually* fuck Boone, no matter how fuckable he was—firstly, because he wasn't interested, and secondly, because Oscar would never let me live it down if I proved myself to be a player who slept with his boss.

So why did the thought of Boone still pining after Oscar bother me so much? Other than the obvious fact that Oscar was a douche and that Boone clearly deserved much, much better? And since when did I feel this strange pull toward someone I barely knew, like there was more to it than physical attraction?

I was relieved when Boone pulled off the highway onto the ranch property. The tension in the truck confused the hell out of me.

The moment he put the truck in park, I threw open the door and immediately began unloading the shit from the back. My muscles screamed from overuse, but I ignored the pain.

Birdie had come racing out of the barn as soon as she heard the truck's tires, so she shadowed me back and forth as I carried the bags of special feed into the storage room. After a few trips, I heard Boone's sharp call to another hand to help unload the truck, and within minutes, two other guys were helping carry the load.

We emptied the truck while Boone saddled a huge brown horse named Victory. When he was done, he poked his head

into the barn office before giving a sharp whistle to the dog to join him as he rode off to do rancher things. She took one last look up at me with her heart in her eyes before turning and bolting after her man.

Harrison laughed. “That dog’s taken a shine to you. She don’t like nobody except Boone. The first night I was here, I left my dirty boots on the bunkhouse porch, and she chewed them to shit. Now here she is, looking at you like you have jerky in your pockets.”

“What can I say? I’ve got a way with the ladies,” I said, batting my eyelashes.

Harrison noticed my new boots. “Hey, nice Justins. What happened to your McQueens?”

I was surprised and impressed. “You know Alexander McQueen?”

The cowhand blinked at me in confusion. “Uh, no? But I heard you cry out in the barn earlier that your McQueens deserved better than to step in cow shit all day, so I figured that’s what you called those fancy boots of yours.”

Jed poked his head out of the cramped office in the back of the barn. “If you got time for gabbing, you got time for working. Ain’t you supposed to be mending fence by the south fork, Harrison?”

Harrison winked at me before saluting the old foreman. “Yes, sir. Just making the newbie feel welcome.” He shot me a grin. “See you later, McQueen.”

Jed grumbled something under his breath about goddamn social hour before shooting me a look. “Boone wants you on a horse. Go tell Mercy I said to show you what’s what.”

He disappeared back into his office before I could ask him what the hell he’d meant by that. I looked around at the empty barn. Nothing but various horse noses poking out over stall doors looked back at me.

They looked aggressive and opinionated.

“I suggest all of you act busy if you don’t want to be the victim of my first riding lesson,” I warned them. Tall ears and curious eyes turned my way. As the morning progressed, I’d started thinking of them as sort of sweet and curious, but that had been when they were safely behind their stall doors. Now that I considered having to climb on the back of one, they seemed especially gigantic and threatening.

It had clearly been a ploy to get me to trust them, but I was smarter than that.

My hands began to shake as I made my way back out into the sun to look for the bull rider named Mercy. I’d learned last night at dinner that he was some kind of rodeo star, the kind of man who earned fancy belt buckles for staying on thrashing bulls as long as he could. I remembered watching a movie one time about bull riding, but my memory was fuzzy enough to wonder if maybe it had been porn.

When I found him, Mercy was cleaning out a galvanized tub in one of the horse yards... paddocks... rings... racetracks. Whatever. I couldn’t remember what Boone had called them on the quasi tour he’d given me.

“Hey, Mercy?” I called.

The man’s dark hat came up, keeping his craggy, square-jawed face in shadow. “Yeah?”

“Jed wants you to show me how to ride a horse?” I said, accidentally posing it as a question. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Apparently, the boss wants me to know how to do stuff on a horse, and you’re the lucky fella who gets to teach me.”

I tried grinning as wide as I could, but he still rolled his eyes and let out a groan of annoyance. “Fine. Give me a minute to finish this up.”

“Take as many minutes as you want,” I said breathlessly, hoping he’d take hours and we’d have to finally call it for daylight. There was no freaking way I was going to fare well in a riding lesson when I was terrified of the giant beasts.

While I waited, I wandered over to gaze out at the calving pasture. Mama cows and babies dotted the grass here and there, and I let my mind wander with the peaceful view.

It really was beautiful, and I enjoyed the peace and quiet compared to Sacha's noisy apartment in the city. At least I got a room all to myself here and didn't have to worry about where my next meal was coming from.

Yes, the work was hard as fuck, but it was just for a little while. If my college friend Bailey could tackle CrossFit the way she had after a semester of partying way too hard, I could do this for a month.

I sighed and closed my eyes. The cool breeze felt good on my dirty skin, and the sun warmed my hair. My feet felt cushioned and dry in the new socks and boots Boone had insisted I put on before leaving town, and I had to admit to being a little relieved there wouldn't be any chance of horse shit getting through the laces and tongue like on my other boots.

I hated that he was right, but what did I expect when I didn't know jack about how to be a cowboy?

I took out my phone and snapped a photo of a nearby calf drinking from his much larger mom, but when I went to share the pic, my finger froze over the button.

Who would believe I'd taken it? Absolutely no one.

I turned around and made it a selfie, trying my best to catch the mama and baby in the frame while I made a silly face.

Suddenly, the cow moved out of the way with a hop, dislodging the baby until it stumbled. I turned around to see Boone riding toward me across the pasture. He frowned, pulling his horse to a stop by the fence. "Aren't you supposed to be learning how to ride instead of taking selfies for your Myspace account?"

Myspace?

I opened my mouth to say something snarky about his age, but Mercy came jogging over. "My bad, boss man. Was just

getting ready to show him the ropes. Come on, Richie Rich. Let's get you on a horse."

My teeth crunched with the need to correct Boone, to tell him I'd been admiring his place and everything he had going on here, but it wasn't worth explaining. He clearly wanted to see me as a spoiled city boy, no matter how hard I'd already worked for him.

"Can't wait," I said, flashing a smile at Mercy instead. "Been wanting to learn how to ride a horse my whole life. Why, it's like a dream come true."

I felt the heat of Boone's judgmental stare on my back as I followed the rodeo star back toward the barn.

And when Birdie came racing up beside me, nudging my leg for some pets, I tried not to feel smug that at least someone around here thought I was worth something.

BOONE

It shouldn't have surprised me that the minute Richard thought I was out of sight, he slacked off and started lallygagging around, snapping selfies as if the entire world would end if someone went a day without seeing his face.

Though, I had to admit it was a pretty good face with all that smooth skin and windswept hair. And those lips, always plump and slicked wet from whatever kind of overpriced products he used. I frowned, cutting off that train of thought before it set me down a road I didn't want to travel. Or rather, that I knew I shouldn't travel, whether I wanted to or not.

I needed something to take my mind off the latest hire, so I headed to my office in the main house. For the next hour, I tried to distract myself with updating the spreadsheets I used to track the herd, but after accidentally deleting one of the columns and spending half an hour panicking and trying to restore the data, I gave up before I did any real damage.

Usually, I didn't find it so difficult to focus. Normally, I enjoyed the mindlessness of data entry and the pleasure that came with seeing the status of the ranch operation in black and white.

But this afternoon, my mind was elsewhere, and I knew exactly where it was: outside in the paddock near the barn, where a pampered city boy was supposed to be learning to ride. Though knowing Richard, he was even now trying to talk his way out of the lesson.

As his boss, it was my responsibility to make sure he wasn't shirking his duties, wasn't it? Really, I had no choice but to go out and check in on things—make sure everything was going smoothly. After all, the last thing I wanted was for something to go wrong and for Richard to end up injured.

The thought of something happening to him had me surging to my feet, sending the wheeled chair behind my desk careening across the floor to the wall. As I hastened my way outside, I told myself that the anxiety churning in my gut was only concern about the havoc a workplace accident would wreak on my insurance premiums.

But the sense of relief I experienced the moment I spied Richard standing in the middle of the dirt paddock, looking hale and hearty with his hands fisted on his hips, went way beyond caring about insurance woes.

There was something primal to the way I felt. My need to reassure myself of his well-being was almost physical. A need I hadn't felt for a long time.

I frowned. I'd been through enough in life to learn that needing something you couldn't have only invited heartache. And Richard was the very definition of someone I couldn't have. He was only here for a month. Working on the ranch was a lark, another experience for him to post on social media before moving on. He'd be gone as fast as he'd come, leaving behind a cloud of expensive-scented dust.

The smart thing, I knew, would be to ignore the way my gut churned over Richard and walk away. Find something else to do. Except by then, I'd noticed that half of the ranch was circling the paddock, watching Mercy's lesson like it was a late-afternoon sideshow.

So not only did I have Richard lallygagging whenever he thought I wasn't watching, but he'd managed to rope the rest of the hands into shirking their duties as well? Clearly, as the boss, I couldn't allow that.

Fixing a scowl on my face, I stalked toward the paddock, preparing to remind everyone that this was a working ranch—the operative word being *working*. But as I approached the

ring, I heard Richard ask, “You actually expect me to climb onto that thing?”

The moment I heard the alarm in his voice and saw the way he bit his lip in apprehension, my anger dissipated. Suddenly, I didn’t care about the work that wasn’t getting done. All I wanted to do was vault the fence and go to Richard and run a hand down his shoulder, murmuring in his ear the way I’d calm a skittish horse.

Instead, I forced myself to amble nonchalantly toward where Jed leaned against the fence. “How’s he doing?” I asked under my breath as I took up a spot beside him.

Jed chuckled. “Ain’t been up on a horse yet, if that tells you anything.”

“Horse’s name is Duck,” Mercy said, giving Richard’s apprehension no mind.

“Duck?” Richard squawked incredulously. “His name is *Duck*?”

Mercy kept his head down as he adjusted the stirrups, but I could see the edge of his lips curled up in a smirk. “*Her* name is Duck. She’s a mare.”

Richard folded his arms in front of his chest. His once stylish T-shirt looked even worse than it had before, and his boots already looked less new. Thankfully, his tight, rounded ass was covered up by the overstretched tail of the shirt, or my eyes probably would have landed on it and stayed there.

“Mares are the brown ones with rumpy rash?” Richard asked, unsure.

A few snickers around me went silent as soon as I shot my eyes at the offending men. Mercy kept working on the stirrup, even though the rest of us could tell he was finished with the needed adjustment.

“Mares are the female ones,” Mercy corrected. “The ones with spots on their hindquarters are Appaloosas. They don’t always look like that. But Duck is an Appaloosa. They make good trail riders because they have plenty of endurance.”

Richard seemed to think about this for a moment as he watched Mercy work. “What kind of horse does Boone ride?” he finally asked.

Mercy’s eyes flicked over to me before landing back on Richard. Clearly, he knew I’d arrived to watch.

“Victory is a quarter horse. They’re good at cutting, which means they can work cows. Been bred to be a rancher’s best friend.”

“Not a mare, then?” Richard asked, moving a few steps backward as casually as he could. I began to wonder if his questions were an attempt at stalling.

“No. Victory is a gelding. That means a male who’s been castrated.”

Richard was the only man who winced since the rest of us were used to castration talk. Mercy continued. “Mares are great, but they’re more likely to get dozy when they cycle. I’d imagine Boone prefers not to deal with that. Geldings are more predictable in general, and you don’t have to deal with heat.”

“I don’t think I understood half the things you just said,” Richard muttered.

“P-M-S,” Harrison called from his spot at the rail. “The ladies get moody when they’re—”

Jed took off his hat and smacked Harrison with it. “Shut up. Can’t you see the man’s scared out of his wits? You’re gonna make Duck nervous and scare the kid more.”

Harrison chuckled and grabbed his own hat off the ground from where it had fallen. “Duck doesn’t get nervous. I’d imagine that’s why he picked her.”

I thought it was more likely Mercy picked her because she was only fourteen hands tall. When Richard fell off her, it would be a shorter trip to the ground.

Richard tentatively reached a hand out to her. “H-hey there, D-duck,” he said, trying to act like everything was fine. He gently brushed his fingers against her neck, and her skin

twitched as she let out a snort. Richard let out a yelp and jumped, stumbling back a step.

The other hands laughed, but the fear in Richard's eyes was enough to make me want to throw myself over the rail and stride over to put him at ease. Instead, I clenched my hands into fists and rooted my boots to the ground.

According to Oscar, the whole reason he'd dared Richard to come to the ranch in the first place was because he thought Richard needed to be taught a lesson about the real world. He needed to learn how to work, to know what it was to struggle—even if it was for only a month. I wouldn't be doing Richard any favors by coddling him.

Mercy stood up and wiped his forehead with the back of his arm. "Okay, you ready?"

Richard nodded and then shook his head.

Mercy ignored the latter. "Remember what I told you when you learned how to tack her?"

"She'll hold in a breath to fake being fat?"

I couldn't hold back a smile at that. Duck was the worst of the whole bunch at needing multiple girth cinches.

Mercy chuckled. "Well, that. But more important, stay relaxed no matter what. She can sense your nerves. So, go easy. No sudden moves or noises. No yanking the reins or kicking her flank."

"Shouldn't you be telling *her* those things? She seems a reasonable sort. I'm sure if you just explained—"

Mercy ignored Richard's prattling and urged him closer to the left stirrup. Now that it was time to actually mount the horse, Richard swallowed what he'd been saying and focused on the task at hand with resolute determination.

Just like yesterday, his jeans were ridiculously tight, which made it difficult to lift his leg high enough to get his boot into the stirrup. For a moment, he hopped around on one foot, trying to regain his balance, and I couldn't help but stare at the

way those jeans hugged every inch of his thighs, outlining the cut of his muscles.

Before my imagination could run away with the image, he was on the horse, his butt firmly in the saddle and his hands holding the reins in a death grip. He sat frozen, as if terrified to move even a muscle.

“What now?” he hissed through clenched teeth, apparently afraid that even talking too loudly might startle the sweet, old mare into a rampage.

“Relax,” Mercy reminded him. “Talk to her. It’s not much different from learning how to handle a puppy when you were a kid.”

“I wasn’t allowed to have pets,” Richard said absently while shifting slightly in the saddle. “My father claimed having animals in the house was exceptionally vulgar.” He’d spoken the last two words with a mock high-brow accent, tipping his nose in the air and looking down at Mercy. Then he shrugged. “My sister learned to ride horses, but I was away at boarding school by then.”

He seemed to realize he’d shared more than he’d meant to. His eyes flicked to the rest of us before focusing back on Mercy. “Which was fine since that’s where I learned to ride another kind of stallion,” he added with a wink, clearly slipping back into the role of a jokester.

Harrison hooted, and PeeWee cackled, the sudden noise causing Duck to shift her weight.

Richard yelped, every muscle in his body going rigid. “Easy, girl,” he said tightly. He squeezed his eyes shut. “Relax,” he chided himself. Blowing out a breath, he leaned forward and placed a hand against the mare’s neck.

“Good Duck,” he murmured. “Nice Duck. I’m very relaxed, big girl. We’re going to stay nice and easy, right? Hear how relaxed I am? Feel how gentle I can be?” His voice was soft and regulated. I had to strain to hear it. “You’d never know I don’t know jack shit about animals.”

After a moment, Mercy began to lead Duck in a slow walk. Richard tensed, and I wanted to call to him to stay relaxed, but I kept my mouth shut and let Mercy handle it. There wasn't anyone better on a saddle than the former bull rider, and he was also known for his endless well of patience.

Apparently bored now that Richard was becoming more acquainted with the saddle, PeeWee wandered over to ask a question about a pallet fork he'd been working on repairing. I kept my eyes on Richard, only half listening. Belatedly, I realized that PeeWee had asked me a question, though I had no idea what it was. Something about difficulty sourcing parts that I really didn't care about in that particular moment.

"Just buy a new one," I told him.

"A new pallet fork?" he asked incredulously. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed him glance toward Jed, who only shrugged.

The mechanic opened his mouth to say something, but Jed cut him off with a hand on his shoulder. "You want him to change his mind?"

PeeWee snapped his mouth shut. "No, sir." And with that, he turned and hustled toward the machine shed.

Jed stood beside me for a moment, saying nothing while we watched Mercy give Duck more rein. Richard seemed to have relaxed slightly, his legs hanging looser, his heels pushed down.

"It's not like you to lay down money for something new when you don't have to," Jed finally said.

I shrugged. "If PeeWee says the old one can't be fixed, then it can't be fixed."

Jed didn't respond. I could sense him looking at me, but I kept my eyes on Richard.

"Why are you teaching this city boy how to ride a horse when you know full well he's gonna be out of here in a few weeks?" he asked. "The kid looks like he's about to shit himself. On Duck, for Christ's sake."

His words needled me. I didn't need a reminder that Richard's time here was temporary. Mostly because I didn't like the pang of loneliness at the thought of him leaving. It made absolutely zero sense why I gave a shit about this entitled kid I'd met less than a full day ago. "You find me the hands we need, and I won't have to teach Ariana Grande over there how to herd cattle," I hissed.

The silence that fell between us made me instantly regret my words. I expected Jed to push back. He'd been part foreman, part father to me for over fifteen years.

Instead, he snickered. "Well, well. I see the lay of the land now."

I ground my teeth together. "You don't see shit," I grumbled.

"Maybe you need an overnight in Casper," he suggested. I could hear the grin in his voice.

If I thought simply getting laid would erase Richard from my thoughts, I'd have left for the city an hour ago. But the idea of driving all that way for a casual fuck with some random cowboy didn't tempt me at all. In fact, it elicited the opposite reaction—the thought of touching another man cooled the heat that had been collecting in my gut ever since Richard had arrived at the ranch. "Maybe you need to shut the hell up."

"Or maybe you just need an overnight in the bunkhouse," Jed mused, scratching his grizzled whiskers. "Get it out of your system before calving really gets underway."

I watched the muscles of Richard's legs bunch through the snug fit of his jeans. He'd grown more comfortable in the saddle, letting his hips roll with the shifting of Duck's bulk underneath him.

It was impossible not to imagine Richard straddling me instead, his knees pressed to the ground on either side of my hips, his fingers clutched in the thatch of hair on my chest. Or would I be the one riding him? Pushing him onto his hands and knees, pressing my palm between his shoulder blades and

then trailing down his spine, easing open those plump ass cheeks...

I shifted, lifting a foot to rest it on the lowest rung of the fence, hoping to hide the growing tightness in my jeans. My knuckles were white from where I gripped the top rail, nails digging into the weathered wood.

Jed leaned a little closer and lowered his voice. "I still think you oughta give Tommy another look. Man's got it bad for you, and that's no bullshit."

I grunted and thought of the good-looking rancher who ran a dairy operation on the other side of town. Nothing about him tempted me. Especially not today. "You know how I feel about locals. This town is too small for bad blood, especially when we have a business partnership of sorts with the man."

Jed rolled his eyes. "A bulk purchasing agreement is hardly a business partnership. Besides, he's a good man. Avoids drama, same as you."

While I appreciated the fact this old cowboy respected my sexuality and had gotten more comfortable talking about it over the years, I still recognized his tendency to fall prey to the "he's gay and you're gay so you should go out" mentality. I didn't want to embarrass him by pointing it out, but it still rankled.

Instead, I said, "The man goes to church every Sunday morning and Wednesday night. That's not my scene."

Jed knew I'd been brought up in a strict religious house in Texas and had the scars to prove it. He shrugged. "Didn't say you needed to marry the man."

"That's the problem," I pointed out. "He's the marrying kind. I'm not. I know better than to mess around with a guy who has feelings."

Before Jed could continue his argument, I added, "Maybe I'll take your suggestion and head to Casper after calving season." I hoped that maybe throwing the man a bone might bring this awkward conversation to an end. I glanced over at

him. “And maybe you can come with me and find yourself a nice woman.”

His eyes bugged out for the briefest moment before he cleared his throat and shrugged. “Maybe.” The word came out a little strangled.

I barked out a laugh and slapped him on the shoulder. “You know I don’t give a shit about you and Norma, right?”

Red streaks worked their way up the foreman’s neck as he sputtered. “Me and Norma? *Pah.*”

Before I could rib Jed any further about his budding relationship, Birdie nudged my leg and let out a low whine. I looked down at her and followed her eyes to where Richard had dismounted Duck in some kind of way that had left one foot tangled in the stirrup. He hopped to keep his balance until, finally, his boot came free, and he tumbled back onto his ass in the dirt, scrambling away from the horse’s legs as quickly as he could.

I didn’t even realize I’d been holding my breath until Richard stole a glance in my direction. His expression was fleeting and difficult to read. There was none of his usual light-hearted self-assuredness. Instead, there was something vulnerable, like he was looking to see if I’d noticed his flubbed dismount and, if so, was I disappointed.

It was almost as if he was seeking some sort of approval from me, which was ridiculous. I’d never met a man so comfortable in his own skin. Richard was who he was and didn’t apologize for it. Why would he give a shit what I thought about him?

I frowned at the thought and shook my head. Of course he wouldn’t care what I thought. I was no one to him—a means to an end. Soon enough, he’d leave as fast as he’d come and never give me or the ranch a second thought.

And why the hell did that thought feel like such a punch to the gut?

It was only then that I realized Jed was staring at me, a knowing look on his face. “You sure you want to wait that

long before your trip to Casper?”

I scowled even harder. “Back to work,” I snapped, harsher than necessary. I swung my gaze around to take in the other hands propped against the fence, enjoying the show. “All of you.”

I didn’t spare a glance back at Richard as I stalked toward the barn. I couldn’t afford to. He’d already invaded my thoughts enough for the day, and I needed to get some distance—clear my head.

I saddled Victory quickly and efficiently before pointing him toward the north pasture and giving him a nudge with my knees. He sensed my need to blow off steam and leaped at the chance to run hard and free.

And for a while, it worked. The wind in my face, the land opening up around me, the air crisp and pure—it was always a reminder that the world was bigger than one person and their problems.

Unfortunately, those problems were still waiting for me when I rode back to the ranch a couple of hours later, except that now I also felt guilty for not helping with the late feed. I showered in time for dinner and was happy to see Norma’s meatloaf and mashed potatoes laid out on the table when I arrived. I was even able to convince myself—*almost*—that it was the meatloaf that made my chest squeeze and not the sight of Richard sitting toward the other end of the table, the tips of his shower-damp hair curling along the back of his neck. I waited for him to glance up at me, give me some sort of acknowledgment, but his entire focus was on his food and remained that way while the other hands chattered around him.

It wasn’t until near the end of the meal that I realized the reason for his unusual silence. Richard rested his head on one hand while he ate, and his eyes seemed to slide halfway closed periodically before opening wide again. I watched him for a few minutes before realizing he was literally falling asleep at the table.

I glanced over at Norma, who’d noticed the same thing. She shot me a wink and said something softly to him. He

straightened and shook his head, taking another bite of his food before his eyes slid closed again. Norma had just enough time to pull his plate away before he slumped forward and laid his face against the place mat.

All talk stopped as the hands stared at him. And then the snickering began. I could tell from the tone of everyone's voices that they found it kind of endearing.

"Gotta give him props for doing everything that was asked of him," Jed said with a nod.

Even PeeWee snorted in agreement at that. Harrison reached out and ran a hand through Richard's hair, which set my teeth on edge. "He's a good guy," he said fondly. "Never complained once except to the horses."

Jed chuckled and said something about how Richard could make friends with a wall. Apparently, he'd been talking to the horses all morning while he mucked stalls.

Hiram glanced over at me. "Why'd you hire someone from the city anyway? Poor kid didn't even know what a curry comb was till I showed him." As soon as the question was out of his mouth, he blushed with regret. "Not that I'm second-guessing your decisions, boss. Just wondering."

Jed answered for me. "Ain't nobody looking for work in town. If any of you hear about good hands who need a place, you let us know."

They all nodded their agreement, and Mercy mentioned putting out the word on a rodeo internet group he was in.

Harrison looked over at me. "Want me and Hiram to get him to the bunkhouse?"

I opened my mouth to accept his offer, but instead, I said, "Nah, I'll do it. You guys go on."

Everyone stood to help Norma clear the table except Jed, who lingered in the doorway. "You know, we're behind on updating the spreadsheets on the herd."

I thought of the stack of notes sitting by my computer and the spreadsheet I'd bungled earlier today. "I know." I pressed

my fingers to the bridge of my nose, feeling the tension spreading along my shoulders. There was too much work and not enough workers. "I'll get to it tomorrow if I can."

Jed nodded toward Richard. "I was thinking we could get him to do it. I'm sure a city boy like that probably knows his way around a computer. I could show him how tomorrow after lunch. I figure a few hours a day in the office doing data entry would probably suffice, don't you think?"

He gave me a knowing look, and I realized he wasn't making the suggestion just because he thought Richard could do the job. He was coming up with an excuse to give Richard a break from physical labor, the same way I had by taking him into town this afternoon while also keeping him working.

"Good idea," I told him.

Jed smiled and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me alone with Richard. I looked over at him, still fast asleep in his spot. It struck me how young he looked with his eyes closed and his face relaxed. And how innocent. Which caused me to snort because Richard awake was nothing close to innocent with all his saucy innuendos and dirty jokes.

Seeing him like this, though, made me realize how much I didn't know about him. And how I wanted to learn more.

I shook my head at the thought. He was temporary, I reminded myself. Plus, he was my employee. He was off-limits. With a sigh, I stood and moved to where he sat.

"Come on, cowboy," I said softly, shaking his shoulder a bit.

"Mnff," he murmured. "Don't wanna."

"Trust me when I tell you, sleeping on this hard table won't do you any favors. You'll be as sore as a bucked-off bull rider come morning if you don't get to bed."

He lifted his head with great effort and blinked up at me. He was wide open in that moment, none of the usual bravado and swagger. "So sleepy," he murmured.

“I know,” I said gently. “Let’s get you to bed.” He let me slide an arm under his shoulder and around his back as I helped him stand. That had been a mistake. The moment he was on his feet, he slumped against me, the entire side of his body pressing against mine. I could feel the heat radiating from him, the way his muscles tightened and shifted as he tried to find his balance.

He stumbled a step, and I pulled his arm across my shoulders to steady him. That only served to press him closer against me. Despite whatever fancy deodorant and overpriced beauty products he wore, I could still smell the hint of hay and horse on his skin. It was a familiar scent, one that caused my gut to twist.

I’d gotten him halfway to the door when he tugged against me. “Have to thank Norma for the hamburgers,” he mumbled.

Norma overheard him and got a laugh out of that one. “That was meatloaf, sweetie.”

Richard was so dead on his feet I wasn’t even sure he heard. I led him out through the mudroom, grabbing his boots on the way. Outside, the air was crisp and cool, with remnants of daylight still faintly glowing below the horizon in the distance. Above, the stars had come out, the pinpricks of light sharp and bright.

Richard nuzzled closer against me, his warmth seeping through my clothes. I gritted my teeth, trying not to notice how good he felt, how well his body fit mine. Like this, it was impossible to keep my imagination from going down those roads I’d avoided earlier in the day. Roads that led to Richard naked beneath me, his soft hands and lush mouth wrapped around my cock.

I swallowed a groan and picked up my pace, but this only caused Richard to stumble, forcing me to slow down again. Once inside the bunkhouse, Birdie trotted ahead of us, nosing open the door to his room. Clearly she already knew the way.

Following after her, I led Richard straight to the bed. As he turned to sit, he winced, grabbing for the trapezius muscle

along his shoulder. “Ah, fuck. I think I used muscles we don’t have in New York. Is that possible?”

His voice was rough with exhaustion, and his eyelids were still drooping. Without thinking, I reached out and massaged the stiff line of his shoulders. Richard groaned and closed his eyes, dropping his chin to his chest.

I imagined how easy it would be to slip my hands under his shirt, just to make it easier to work his sore muscles, but simply putting my hands on his neck was already almost unbearably erotic. I used my thumbs to ease away the knots of tension while my work-rough fingertips dragged against his smooth, tan skin.

When I found a particularly tender spot, Richard groaned even louder. “Marry me,” he murmured under his breath.

I chuckled awkwardly and pulled away, realizing suddenly how very out of bounds I was. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to...”

Want you? Touch you? Get hard for you?

Richard’s face tilted back up, and his eyes met mine. He looked so sweet, so vulnerable in that moment that I had an unmistakable desire to trail my hands into his hair and pull him against me. Not even to kiss—though that desire was there as well—but to lie down next to him and hold him while he slept.

“Get some rest,” I said in a gruff voice. “Morning comes early around here.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine as he nodded slowly. There was something there, something I didn’t want to define. Hunger, maybe. Or... hell. It was probably simple exhaustion.

“Lie back,” I said softly, pulling the covers back and nudging him to lie down. “Sleep.”

He did as he was told, and once he was settled, I stood and started for the door.

“Sorry.” His voice was so soft I wasn’t sure he’d even spoken. I assumed I must have just misheard when he added, “Promise I’ll do better.”

My heart squeezed into a tight ball. He sounded so dejected. So unlike the confident and cocky Richard who'd waltzed onto my ranch the day before. I cleared my throat. "You did good, Rich," I told him. "Real good. You worked hard."

He snorted, his eyes still closed. "Scared of... duck."

It took me a minute to realize he was talking about his riding lesson. "Nah, she's a good girl. You did all right."

A faint smile traced the corners of his lips, followed quickly by a long sigh and then a soft snore. He'd fallen asleep. I stood for a moment, watching him. He really was a beautiful man—soft curls and perfect skin and a strong jaw. Asleep, he looked even younger and more innocent than when he was awake, tossing out bawdy jokes and flirting with everything that moved.

I wanted to move toward him and to push the curls away from his face. Press a kiss to his forehead. I'd even taken a step toward the bed when a rustle of dog tags snapped me from my staring. Birdie jumped up onto the bed and curled against Richard, her chin resting on his leg. "You've got to be kidding," I whispered at her. "You're not allowed on the bed."

Her big eyes blinked up at me without remorse. We both knew I wasn't about to kick her off. If she wanted to be there with him, there wasn't a damned thing I could do to stop her. If I tried to take her back to the house with me, she'd just make a nuisance of herself all night.

Besides, it was better she slept with Richard than I did. At least that's what I told myself as I flicked off the overhead light and started to pull the door shut. I hesitated before closing it all the way. "You did good," I said again in a soft voice I knew he couldn't hear through his dreams.

Then I turned and strode for the exit before I second-guessed myself and did something I'd regret. Once outside, I paused, taking deep breaths of the night air and trying to clear my mind. It didn't help. I could still smell Richard on my clothes. On my hands. Any distance I'd gained from my ride that afternoon was gone.

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath, pulling out my phone and dialing Oscar before I could think better of it.

“Two calls in one week, Boone?” he teased. “I’d ask to what I owed this pleasure, but I guess we both know.” He sighed. “I’ll send the plane back for him.”

I didn’t understand. “The plane?”

“Yes, *my* plane. To pick up Richard. I thought the stubborn ass would last more than a day, if only to win our bet, but maybe I gave him too much credit. Regardless, thanks for giving it a try. I owe you one.”

Something about his flippant tone grated at me. “Actually, Oscar, Richard’s asleep in the bunkhouse. He worked his ass off today.”

There was a beat of silence on the other end, then a laugh. “Doing what? Styling his hair? Making Spotify playlists? Taking selfies?”

I kicked a weed that had sprung up at the edge of the gravel path. Okay, so he wasn’t wrong about the selfies. But still. “Doing everything my other hands do—mucking stalls, hauling feed, forking hay, cleaning troughs. He practically fell asleep in his mashed potatoes at dinner.”

Oscar was quiet for a long moment. “You sure we’re talking about the same guy? Flighty, flirtatious, over-sequined, smarts off at the drop of a hat, never takes anything seriously? That Richard?”

“Yeah.” I pictured the monstrosity of a hat Richard had donned the day before and felt my lips twitch up in reluctant amusement. “That’s the one.”

“Huh. You must have scared the shit out of him then. Or the Wyoming air has something in it. That man’s never given 100 percent to anything, as far as I know.”

I made a noncommittal noise, and after a beat, I forced myself to bring up the real reason I’d made the phone call. “Tell me about him,” I said as nonchalantly as possible. “What’s his story?”

Of course, Oscar, being my oldest and closest friend, saw right through my false indifference. He let out a long sigh. “Don’t get any ideas in your head, Boone. Richard’s a man-eater.”

I wandered toward the fence edging the calving pasture, my eyes automatically assessing the cows most likely to calve next. Even though Hiram was responsible for keeping an eye on them tonight, I still couldn’t help looking out for them myself. “I don’t have ideas,” I lied. “I just realized you were kinda short on facts last time we spoke, and Richard mentioned he dated your friend James—”

“Richard *used* my friend James,” he said with a trace of bitterness in his voice. “Led him on. Told him he wanted to settle down and start a family, same as James, but that he just wasn’t ready yet and needed time, yada yada. James waited around for years before he recognized the truth: Richard was never going to be ready to settle. He’s terrible at commitment.”

I frowned. “That’s harsh.”

Oscar sighed. “But true. Richard’s obsessed with the new and the shiny. Always has been. New cars, new friends, new hobbies. He was the same way in his relationship with James. First, he wanted them to move to a new apartment, then to try a new diet, then to spend every waking moment having quality time together, then to spend *less* time together so they could spend more time with their friends and Richard could party every night. He throws himself into each new idea with both feet, but he sucks at follow-through. As soon as something loses its shine, he gets bored and moves on—” I heard him snap his fingers in the background. “—just like that. I don’t know why he stayed with James so long when they were both unhappy.”

I jammed my free hand in my pocket as my brain replayed Richard’s words from earlier in the day. “*He was... my person. For a while anyway.*”

“Maybe it shouldn’t surprise me Richard’s working hard for you,” Oscar went on. “Ranch life is probably his newest

obsession. He'll go all in on playing cowboy until it's not fun anymore; then he'll bolt."

I didn't want to believe what Oscar was saying. In fact, I *didn't* believe it entirely. Oscar's loyalty to James was clearly coloring his interpretation of events. But over the years, I'd known too many people like the man Oscar was describing to dismiss his view entirely. Some people did seem to hop from one thing to the next, always searching for their purpose without a care for the people they left behind when they moved on. My father had called it "work avoidance," while my mother had called it "finding yourself."

In my mind, I heard Richard's sleep-edged voice promising that he'd do better tomorrow. He hadn't sounded like a guy who didn't care. He sounded like someone who cared very, very deeply.

"But he did stick with James," I pointed out, "so he must have some ability to commit."

I hadn't meant for the words to come out like a question, like a request for reassurance, until Oscar spoke again in a softer tone. "Boone, I know how easy Richard is to like—"

I snorted. "This coming from someone who hates the guy."

"I don't hate him," Oscar protested. "I just don't want you being blindsided and getting hurt like James did. You have to remember, Richard's a baby. He's had everything in his life handed to him on a silver platter. He's never had to work for something like you and I have."

I thought back to growing up in small-town Texas with Oscar and our promise to each other that we'd leave the moment we graduated high school. Unlike Oscar, I'd been raised with money—my family's ranch was one of the largest in the state—but with that money came expectations. I'd been expected to stay in Texas, to do what my father told me, to let him run the ranch as he saw fit, even if I disagreed with his practices, to marry the girl they picked out for me—someone from a good, god-fearing family with land that would expand the size of our ranch.

Needless to say, I wasn't too keen on any of that. So when I left after high school, I did it with the money I'd earned petsitting for neighbors and washing trucks on a nearby ranch. I'd gotten from there to here through nothing but stubbornness and hard work.

That's what made it all the more valuable to me. Because it was *mine*, and I was beholden to no one.

But that didn't mean I resented anyone who had help to get where they were going.

"I just want you to know what you'd be getting into with Richard," Oscar continued.

A sour feeling began to spread through my gut. I didn't like what I was hearing, but wasn't this why I'd called Oscar? Didn't I want to know what kind of man Richard was? Just because I didn't like the answer didn't mean it wasn't true.

"I'm not getting into anything with Richard," I told him. I'd already made that decision earlier in the afternoon. And then again this evening. And again a few minutes ago.

Unfortunately, the decision kept failing to stick.

Oscar blew out a breath that made it clear he didn't believe me. "Even if he somehow makes it through the month, he's not going to stick around, Boone. I'm glad he's working hard for you, but I'm not wrong about him bolting. He agreed to this to prove something, but as soon as he feels like he's done it, he'll take the first plane back to penthouses and twenty-five-dollar cocktails, I promise you."

I thought back to the ridiculous designer gear Richard had been decked out in this morning and to the mountain of skin care products littering the shelves in his small bunk room. Oscar was right. This guy didn't belong on a cattle ranch in nowhere Wyoming any more than I belonged in a Manhattan nightclub.

"Maybe I don't care if he sticks around," I said. "Maybe I just want a quick fuck with a city boy with smooth skin and soft hands."

Oscar barked out a laugh. "Well, that's a different story."

“Good night, Oscar,” I said, a smile in my voice.

“Oh, honey, it’s *always* a good night when I’m involved.”

I hung up to the sound of him laughing. The sound was replaced with the quiet of the ranch at night. The ground settling, the cows shifting, the wind teasing through the brush. This place felt a million miles away from whatever bustling city Oscar was staying in.

And a million miles away from whatever city Richard would run back to once he’d proven whatever it was he needed to prove.

I kicked the toe of my boot against the ground and glanced over my shoulder toward the bunkhouse where Richard slept. Maybe I was just lonely and Jed was right. I needed a night in Casper. I was hard up for sex.

That was all this was.

RICHARD

I woke up the next day with the traces of the most delicious dream still tugging at the edge of my thoughts. It began with Boone running his fingers through my hair, telling me I'd done good. Then he'd started to peel my clothes off. Flicking open the buttons of my shirt one by one, pushing it over my shoulders to bare my chest. Sliding the zipper down on my jeans...

I felt myself growing hard as the remnants of the dream tumbled through my head. God, what I wouldn't give to feel the touch of that man's hands along my skin, the callused ridges of his palms tracing down my back, those strong fingers grabbing my ass.

I groaned and rolled to my side.

That was a mistake.

Every muscle in my body screamed in protest, effectively killing my hard-on. Which was just as well since the thought of the arm strength it would take to jack myself off made me whimper.

How in the world was I going to make it through the day? I wasn't even sure I'd be able to make it out of bed and down the hall to the bathroom.

"Kill me now," I muttered to myself.

Something shifted at the bottom of the bed, and then a warm, furry body crawled up next to me, shoving her cold, wet nose into the palm of my hand. I glanced down to find

Birdie staring at me adoringly, her tail thumping the moment my eyes met hers. I gave her a scratch behind the ears, ignoring the pain even that slight movement caused my sore muscles.

“Will you please send my regards to the boss man and tell him I won’t be in today?” I asked her hopefully.

She rolled to her back, exposing her belly for more rubs. I sighed. “I take that as a no, then.”

Her tail thumped harder in response. Outside in the hallway, I could hear the other hands getting ready to start their day, and I groaned. I was going to have to join them. Which meant I was going to have to move.

I didn’t want to. Then I noticed a bottle of pain reliever sitting on the bedside table next to a tall glass of water. I had no recollection of putting either there the night before. In fact, I had no recollection of even going to bed.

A vague memory floated to the surface of my thoughts: a strong arm circled around my waist, warm body flush against my side, callused hands working the muscles of my neck, a quiet voice telling me I’d done good.

Boone’s voice.

I wondered if he’d been the one to leave the Tylenol for me, knowing I’d be sore. My heart fluttered at the thought that he might care that much about me. Then I chastised myself for being so moony-eyed. As an employee, I was useless if I was too sore to move. He hadn’t cared about me personally; he just wanted to make sure I was able to work today.

Sufficiently chastised, I downed a couple of pills and guzzled the water. It was slow going getting down the hall to the bathroom, but once I finished showering, my muscles had loosened up some, and I was feeling a little better.

In fact, I felt practically light on my feet as I nearly skipped across the yard toward the main house, eager to see Boone and thank him for his thoughtfulness. Okay, so maybe I had the tiniest seed of a crush on my new boss. It wasn’t like I was going to do anything about it, but I couldn’t deny

enjoying having someone so broad and masculine to drool over during my day.

Except Boone wasn't at breakfast. And then he wasn't at lunch. Or dinner. Or breakfast the following day. For several days, my eyes searched for him like laser-guided surveillance cameras, constantly scanning the ranch for the shape of him. Every now and again, I caught a brief glimpse of him or evidence that he'd been around. There'd be an extra plate on the kitchen counter for him, wrapped in foil to keep warm. Or sometimes, there'd be an empty plate by the sink, an indication that he'd already eaten and gotten back to work. And almost every afternoon, I found a stack of fresh notes written in Boone's distinctive scrawl left by the computer in Jed's office, telling me which information on the ranch's unwieldy herd spreadsheets needed to be updated.

If I was lucky, sometimes I'd see Boone from a distance—talking to Jed or making his way to one of the barns. On my fifth night on the ranch, I was making my way across the yard to the main house for dinner when I caught sight of him riding his horse out in one of the pastures, silhouetted against the setting sun. The image was so striking that I slowed my steps and stared.

He was more outline and shadow than substance, a darkness against the brilliant oranges and pinks painting the sky over the distant mountains. As I watched, he pulled off his hat and ran the back of his hand across his forehead. For a moment, he seemed to slump a little, like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. But then he straightened and returned his hat to his head, the strong cowboy once again.

I couldn't resist slipping my phone from my pocket and snapping a picture. My timing was perfect—I caught him just as he urged his horse on, the photo capturing the coil of tension in both man and horse, the perfect symmetry between the two. Victory lurched forward, taking off across the pasture, and within seconds, the pair was out of sight.

I stood staring at the empty pasture, feeling an odd sense of absence. But then my stomach grumbled, and I shrugged and started again toward the main house. Without giving it a

second thought, I posted the image on Instagram with some sort of meaningless caption and the wink emoji that was destined to generate loads of comments.

After nearly a week of Boone-less days, I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of scratching. I groaned, rolling over in bed and pushing my sleep mask up over my forehead. There was another scratch, followed by a soft whine. Birdie, I realized. She was sitting at the door, staring at it as if she could open it through sheer force of will alone.

“What is it, girl?” I asked. “Is Timmy stuck down a well somewhere?” If dogs could roll their eyes, I’m sure she would have. Instead, she let out a huff and pawed at the door again. Clearly, she needed to go out and required my help.

With a sigh, I pushed back the covers and swung my legs out of bed, swallowing a shriek when my feet hit the ice-cold floor. My Gucci slippers had seemed an inspired choice when packing for a month at a ranch, but in reality, they were no match against the freezing cold early mornings. Plus, without staff on hand to clean them, it was a bitch to get mud out of the shearling.

So instead, I shoved my feet into my Justins, grabbed a blanket to wrap around my shoulders, and stumbled after Birdie as she led the way outside.

It wasn’t as dark as I would have expected, given that it was the middle of the night. A few dim bulbs lit the property, and the windows to one of the barns blazed brightly. But the majority of light came from the moon overhead. It wasn’t even full, yet I could see clearly enough to watch as Birdie trotted toward one of the fields and started to sniff around.

It was also bright enough for me to recognize the figure standing at the fence bordering the nearby pasture. Even in shadow, I would recognize Boone—the width of his shoulders tapering down to his narrow waist, the way he’d kicked one foot up on the lowest fence rail.

My pulse ticked up as my insides coiled in anticipation. It had been days since I’d seen him, and I realized I’d missed him. I was about to call out a saucy greeting when I noticed

something about him seemed... *off*. Normally, he was a man in motion, always moving and doing. Always working. Tonight, he stood still, staring into the darkness.

“Everything okay, boss?” I asked, starting toward him.

He startled at my voice, his back going ramrod straight and his shoulders squaring. When he turned toward me in the moonlight, his exhaustion was obvious. He tried a smile, but even that seemed to take effort he didn't have. He was practically dead on his feet, the strain of too much work and too little sleep evident on his face.

I wanted to wrap my arm around him, the same way he'd done for me my second night here, and carry him to bed, but I doubted he'd want that. Instead, I pulled the blanket tighter around myself to hide the effect that thoughts of *Boone* and *bed* had on me.

He frowned. “What are you doing out here so late?”

I gestured to Birdie, and he nodded, understanding.

“What about you?” I asked.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Work,” he said on an exhale. For a moment, I thought he was going to leave it at that, but then he sighed and added, “A cow and two heifers had twins, which is unheard of in one season for us. One set included a freemartin, and Doc Welch, our bovine vet, is slammed right now, what with that fool Walt Hosser biting off more than he can chew.” He let out a breath and lifted one shoulder. “Just means more for me to handle.”

I'd been around the other ranch hands enough to have picked up on the fact that Walt Hosser owned another huge cattle ranch nearby and that he was one of the reasons Boone was shorthanded. And I'd learned from all the data entry I'd been doing that a heifer was a female cow who hadn't had a calf before.

I also knew that Boone looked exhausted, and if he kept going at this pace, he'd collapse. “Anything I can do to help?”

He snorted. “I wish.”

My back went rigid as blood rushed to my cheeks. I'd been working my ass off, not that he'd have noticed since he was never around to see.

Boone noticed my bristling because he immediately reached out a hand and laid it on my arm. "I didn't mean it like that. I know you've been working hard."

With those few simple words, my temper quieted just as quickly as it had risen, and my insides warmed at his compliment. It was a shame I'd left my phone in my room, otherwise I'd have made him repeat that on video so I could send it to Oscar with a "ha!" emoji.

"But you're green still," Boone continued. "I need help from someone who knows their way around parturition."

Since I didn't even know what that word meant, it was obvious I wasn't the guy he needed. "Anything else I can do?" I asked. I realized I meant it. I wasn't just saying the words to curry favor with the boss while secretly hoping he didn't task me with anything. I genuinely wanted to help. I was willing to do extra work if it would ease Boone's burden.

He started to shake his head but then reconsidered. "Actually, would you mind going into town first thing? They're holding some meds for me at the feed store. They usually deliver, but we wouldn't get them until the afternoon and—"

"No problem," I said, cutting him off. "You need it, I'll get it for you."

He looked at me for a moment, his eyes holding mine. His hand still rested on my arm, his touch warm and solid. He squeezed. "Thank you," he said softly.

My body acted on instinct, swaying toward him. The way he was looking at me, the way he was touching me, everything inside me screamed out *kiss him!* But before I could draw close enough, Boone straightened, pulling himself out of reach. His hand fell from my arm.

He cleared his throat, his eyes sliding past me. "I'd best get back to work. G'night." He didn't even wait for a response

before he turned on his heel and started back toward the barn.

Boone was probably right to resist temptation. It wasn't a good idea for the boss to fuck one of his employees, no matter how much the employee wanted it. But that didn't mean I couldn't go back to bed dreaming about it.

The next morning, directly after breakfast, I asked Norma for the keys to one of the trucks and took off toward town. I hadn't driven for a while, but driving the big pickup turned out to be pretty easy on the empty country roads. Bumping along with the wind in my face from the open window gave me a chance to let my mind wander.

Even though I'd been in Wyoming a little over a week, it still felt a little surreal to be surrounded by so much open land. I'd grown up in the city. I was used to buildings and bustle. Sure, I'd spent my share of vacations in remote, exotic locations, but those were always at well-manicured estates or resorts—nothing as rugged and real as this.

I thought about pulling over to snap a selfie and posting it to Instagram. Oscar was one of my many followers, and I felt a good bit of smug satisfaction at the thought of him coming across it. Proof that I was still here and that I hadn't given up.

But as much as I wanted to rub my success in Oscar's face, I knew Boone was depending on me to get that medicine, and it didn't seem right to, as my father would say, faff about.

Or, as Boone would say, lallygag.

Ultimately, I didn't want to give Boone an excuse to be disappointed in me.

It didn't take long before I pulled into town—a little place called Silverhollow that boasted a McDonald's, a Hardee's, a grocery store called Mutt's Market, the tack store, a dollar store, a scary-looking pool hall with no windows and a decided lack of rainbow flag outside, and the feed store I'd already learned was the epicenter of Silverhollow social life. Fortunately, it was impossible to get lost in a place that size, and a minute later, I parked in front of the feed store and hopped out.

The medicine wasn't ready yet, so while I waited, I made a beeline for the diner. I was starving for something, *anything*, besides beef.

"Anywhere you want, handsome," a young woman said from the cash register behind the counter. The place was newer on the inside than it had appeared from the parking lot. A few booths had customers in them, but there was no one at the long counter, so I took a stool and reached for a small laminated menu.

When the young woman made her way over to me, she shot me a grin I returned automatically. "What can I get you?"

"Hi. I'll take this turkey wrap, please, and can I get a side salad instead of fries?"

She gave me a teasing smile. "How about we put lettuce and tomato in that wrap and call it good?"

I looked back down at the menu and realized there were no salad offerings. "Do you have avocado?"

"No, but if you get it to go, you can probably find one at Mutt's and slap it on there," she said with a wink before turning to call the order out to whoever was on the other side of the large open window to the kitchen.

She turned back to pour me a glass of water just as the bell tinkled over the front door. The waitress looked up at the newcomer and smiled. "Hey there, Tyler. How's it going?"

A lanky teenage boy took a stool a few seats over from me. He had messy red hair and a smattering of freckles across his face. Other than his lack of years, he could have passed for any other cowboy around here with a snap-front shirt and worn-in Wranglers raggedly covering a pair of rode-hard cowboy boots.

He let out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair, setting it on end. "Not good. I left."

Her face dropped, and she reached over to pat his hand. "Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry to hear that. Things have gotten that bad, then?"

He nodded. "I just had to get out of there. I couldn't stand it anymore."

She clucked her tongue sympathetically. "What'll you do instead?"

His expression turned hopeful, almost desperately so. "Please tell me Maggie and Don are hiring?"

Her face fell. "Nope. Sorry, cutie. Their niece came over from Kansas City for the summer and took a bunch of shifts. She even got some off me. I'd just as soon have them back if you want to know the truth. Have you tried Mutt's or the feed store?"

He nodded and dropped his chin into his hand after resting an elbow on the counter. "Nothing, nowhere."

"Something will come up. It always does," she said with an encouraging smile. "In the meantime, what can I get you to eat?"

The pink flush of embarrassment worked his way up his neck. "Nothing. Too short on cash at the moment." He started to push himself off the stool just as someone from the kitchen slid my plate onto the window ledge.

There was something so desolate in the kid's voice and the slope of his shoulders that I couldn't just let him leave empty-handed. I tried to meet his eye. "Hey, uh... you want to share mine? I already ate breakfast, so I'm not all that hungry. I just wanted to kill time."

It was true that I'd already eaten, but I was still hungry as hell. Nothing worked up an appetite like ranch work, and I took every opportunity I could to gorge myself. Tyler wasn't the only one short on cash at the moment, but I had enough for this.

He looked at me like I was an old man offering candy. "Uh, no, thanks, sir."

I couldn't hold back a laugh. I reached out a hand to shake. "My name is Richard Dunning. I work for Boone Hammond at the Silver Fork. I promise I'm only offering you half a turkey wrap. Nothing else."

He shook my hand automatically but didn't say anything.

When the woman set the plate in front of me and the kid saw the giant pile of hot french fries next to the wrap, I saw hunger flare in his eyes. What teenage boy could resist extra food?

I nodded at the server and asked for an extra plate. When she set it down, I quickly halved my meal and slid one of the plates over to him. "There you go."

After a few beats, in which I took a bite out of the wrap and almost wept at the non-beef taste of it, the kid moved one stool closer to me. "Thank you. My name is Tyler."

I nodded and kept eating for a minute, trying my best to keep myself from sticking my nose into his business. But keeping to myself had never been my forte. It was part of my charm.

"You a ranch hand?" When I heard the question come out of my own mouth without a verb in the sentence, I wanted to roll my eyes. I hadn't even been here a full week, and I was already talking like a cowboy.

"Yes, sir. Been working cattle since I was four," he said proudly.

"How old are you now?"

"Eighteen. Finishing high school online this semester, and then I'm free."

I thought about that for a moment. Eighteen meant he was an adult who could make his own decisions. I smiled, knowing just how to help this kid, and bonus: I'd be doing Boone a favor at the same time.

"So you know your way around..." I struggled to remember the word Boone had used. "Partrumnfsghghs?" I mumbled the end of the word, hoping it was enough.

He looked at me oddly. "You mean... calving?"

I actually wasn't sure what I meant, so I just nodded.

"I mean, yeah."

I grinned. That was exactly the answer I was hoping for. “Perfect. They’re looking for extra help at the Silver Fork if you want to come see about work.”

The kid’s eyes lit up. “For real? You think they’ll let me hire on for the season?”

I shrugged, playing it cool. “Seems to be plenty of work to go around out there.”

This was a complete understatement. I couldn’t wait to see the look in Boone’s eyes when I showed up with an experienced ranch hand—exactly what he’d been looking for. Of course, there was a selfish angle to me getting Tyler hired on. Maybe if Boone didn’t have to work such long hours all the time, I’d actually get a chance to see him again. Perhaps even spend some time with him. My stomach twisted delightfully at the thought.

Suddenly, I was eager to get back to the ranch. “You have a way out there, or you want to catch a ride with me?”

“Ride with you, if you’re offering,” he said eagerly. “So long as you’re willing to bring me back into town if Boone says no.”

I laughed, remembering just how many times I’d heard everyone gripe about the lack of hands this season on the ranch. “He won’t say no.”

When the server came over to refill my water glass again, I noticed a divot of concern between her eyes. “You sure about that, Ty? Don’t you think you oughta talk to your daddy first?”

The teen’s face darkened, revealing something other than a humble plea for help. “What I do is none of his business anymore.”

Boy, did I know that feeling well, I thought to myself as I pulled cash out of my wallet to cover my meal. I stood up and nodded thanks to the woman behind the counter before turning to the kid. “Let’s go. I have to stop at the feed store, and then we need to get back.”

“You’ll want to take this,” the waitress said, placing a pie box in front of me. “Cherry pie. It’s Boone’s favorite. Trust

me, he'll thank you."

I nodded my appreciation. A new ranch hand and a cherry pie—I was about to become Boone's favorite person in the whole world.

When I was finally on the road back to the ranch with a box of warm cherry pie on Tyler's lap and the cow medicine order in the back seat, I couldn't help but get a little nosy.

"Trouble at home?"

Tyler kept his face turned away from me. "My dad's an asshole. What else is new?"

I wanted to laugh at the irony, but there was too much bitterness when it came to thoughts of my own father. Instead, I said, "Join the club. We would have shirts made, but the collar would be tight enough to choke a man."

Tyler let out a huff of laughter and seemed to relax a bit. He studied me out of the corner of his eye. "When did you hire on?"

"Little over a week ago."

He made a *hm* sound. After a moment, he added, "No offense, but you don't seem like the usual type to work on a ranch."

I laughed. "I think I'd be more offended if you thought I was," I teased. "I'm from New York. I'm more used to corporate meetings than cow shit."

He frowned, clearly confused. "Why the heck did you come here, of all places?"

I opened my mouth to tell him it was temporary, that this was all a kind of lark. I'd accepted a bet from a smarmy asshole, that was all. But then I thought of Boone and the nights he was spending in a cold barn making sure none of his animals suffered during the delivery of their babies.

"I needed a job, and a friend of a friend told me Boone was hiring," I said instead before turning it back on him. "Tell me what happened with your dad."

He kept his eyes out the window as he thought about it for a minute. Finally, he said, “You ever feel like no matter how hard you try, you can’t do anything right?”

I thought about my father and the perpetual look of disappointment in his eyes when he spoke to me. When I was growing up, I’d tried hard to please him, but I’d learned that he was always going to move the goalposts. It wasn’t enough to get good grades; I had to get the *best* grades. It wasn’t enough to be a team player; I had to be MVP. It wasn’t enough to be successful; I had to live up to *his* measure of success.

So yeah, I knew what it was like to feel as though you couldn’t do anything right.

Tyler didn’t wait for me to answer. “I can’t ever do anything good enough for him. He’s always mocking me in front of the hands, and then they tease me when he’s not around. It’s like he can’t see past the boy I was, and he still thinks of me as this awkward kid who trips over his own feet. He’s got a handful of guys who’ve been with him a while now, and I overheard one of them telling another that he thinks my dad’s gonna train him up to take over the ranch one day. I thought it was a joke at first, you know?”

I didn’t say anything, but I could hear the pain in his voice. It hit so close to home I almost felt the slice to my own heart too.

He sucked in a breath. “Anyway, I asked my dad about it, and he didn’t deny it. Said Johnny would be a good boss one day and seemed to have ranching in his blood. Can you believe that? If anyone has ranching in his blood, it’s me. And I don’t know how to work any harder than I already am. I’ve been busting my ass my whole life to prove myself to him.”

That was where the two of us differed. I suddenly realized I’d done no such thing. In fact, I’d pretty much done the opposite. I’d spent so much of my time trying to please my father and failing, I’d eventually given up. Not just that, I’d started fucking off, hoping he would love me regardless of how good I was at school or business.

Of course, this had backfired spectacularly. Not only had my father never gotten on board with the unconditional love thing, I'd shot myself in the foot by failing to become the sort of person I could be proud of. I'd spent so much time focused on my father and what *he* wanted me to be I hadn't really considered what I wanted *myself* to be.

Hell, that was probably part of what had compelled me to accept Oscar's deal too. I wanted to make it on my own to prove to my father that I didn't need him or his money or his business, even if that meant making a bet with Oscar.

I ran a hand down my face, not quite ready to face the implications of that revelation. Besides, this conversation was about Tyler, not me. "I get it," I told him. "Parental relationships can be a bitch."

He snorted in agreement. "When I approached him about some of the digital herd management software I'd been researching, he blew me off. Said I'd never have a head for business and that I should concentrate on the physical stuff instead. He said ranches would always need strong men, and if I kept fit, I could be assured of work for years to come."

I winced. "Meaning, he wasn't expecting you to stick around?"

"I guess. So I mouthed off. And he told me to pack a bag." He gestured at the ratty backpack between his boots. "Then he dropped me in town and sped off."

"Jesus," I muttered. "That's harsh."

Tyler crossed his arms and set his jaw. "I expect he's waiting for me to beg him to take me back, but he's gonna be waiting a long time."

I almost laughed at how similar our situations were, but it also made me feel incredibly immature. The only difference between us was a handful of years, which meant I had been acting like a moody teen with my own father. The truth stung.

We rode the rest of the way to the ranch in silence, both of us preoccupied by thoughts about our fathers. When we reached the turnoff onto the long gravel drive, Tyler began to

tap his fingers against his legs nervously. I remembered what it was like when I'd arrived just a few days ago and how I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I understood how that could make a person jittery.

"Don't worry," I reassured him. "Everyone here is super nice and accepting. They're going to love you."

He blew out a breath as I put the truck in park and threw open the door. Jed and Boone stood together on the nearby porch, deep in conversation. "Just who I was looking for!" I called to them, beaming widely. "I brought you a present."

Both men turned to face me as Tyler tentatively slid from the truck and came around the back to stand a few feet behind me. I spun and spread my hands wide like a game show host. "Cherry pie and a new, very experienced ranch hand who already agreed to sign on." I beamed, waiting for the accolades to rain down upon me.

There was a beat of silence. Tyler shuffled his feet behind me and raised a hand to grip the back of his neck. "Um, hi, Mr. Hammond. Richard said you're short on men and had a spot for me?"

Boone's gaze slid to meet mine. He stared at me for a moment, his eyes narrowing. "He did, did he?"

I'd been hoping for exuberance, maybe a cheer or two at my ranch hand acquisition, which admittedly would have been a little over-the-top. But at the very least, I'd expected a smile and nod of thanks.

Instead, Boone looked like I'd pissed in his lemonade.

Beside him, Jed cleared his throat. He glanced toward Boone, who stood rigidly, jaw clenching.

He was angry, that much was obvious. I should have been terrified by the sight—any sane man would be—but there was something to the set of his shoulders, the storm in his expression, all that bottled energy and emotion, that sent a shiver down my back.

I envisioned his hands circling my wrists, pushing me back until I was pressed against the side of the truck. I pictured his

fingers slipping into my hair, tugging lightly as I dropped to my knees. I imagined the taste of him as he thrust his way into my mouth, filling my throat.

I wanted this man to take me. Here. *Now*.

The idea was wildly inappropriate and ridiculous—I wasn't one to care much about social norms, and even I knew sucking your boss off out in the open in the middle of a working ranch would be frowned upon—yet I was still intensely aware of my hardening cock.

I shifted my weight in an attempt to hide it.

The tension of the moment broke when Tyler scuffed a boot through the dirt. “Told you he wouldn't be interested in hiring me on.” He let out a sigh and thrust the pie box toward me. “This was a mistake. I should just go back home and apologize and see if my dad'll give me my job back.” He sounded so resigned and defeated.

After hearing the way Tyler talked about his father, I couldn't stand the thought of him returning to the ranch with his tail between his legs. He'd done nothing wrong. He'd stood up for himself and set out on his own path. He deserved a chance to prove himself, and I was going to make sure he got it.

I pushed the pie back into Tyler's hands before crossing my arms over my chest and squaring off against Boone. “Were you not bitching just last night about how shorthanded you are?”

He scowled. “I wouldn't call it bitching.”

I lifted a dubious eyebrow. “Are you or are you not looking for experienced hands to hire on?”

He grunted.

“And did you not specifically say you wanted someone with experience in...” I scrambled for the word again. “What was the other word for calving?” I hissed under my breath to Tyler. “The one that starts with a *P*?”

“Parturition?” Tyler asked.

I snapped a finger and turned back to Boone. “You wanted a hand who knew his way around parturition, and that’s exactly what I’ve brought you. You’re welcome.”

Boone continued trying to stare me down, but I simply stared right back, refusing to be cowed. In the end, Boone broke first. He tilted his head toward Jed and said something under his breath I couldn’t hear.

Jed came down off the porch and beckoned for the kid to follow him. “Come on, Tyler. Grab your stuff. We’ll set the pie in the kitchen, and then I’ll show you around.”

Tyler’s face lit up. “Seriously? Sweet!” He grinned at me before grabbing his backpack and scrambling after Jed.

That left Boone and me alone in the yard. I noticed he still hadn’t thanked me. Instead, he snapped, “My office. Now.”

He spun on his heel and marched into the house. My first instinct was to tell him he wasn’t the boss of me, but then I remembered he was, in fact, the boss of me, so I quickly scampered after him.

He led me through the house, past the dining room and kitchen, and down a hallway that presumably led to several bedrooms. His office was in the back of the house with a view out over a wide expanse of pastures. He held the door open, gesturing for me to go in first.

I paused just inside, taking in the room. Unlike Jed’s office in the barn, which was nondescript and functional, Boone’s space had a style that was as sturdy and comforting as the man himself. It was full of rich, polished wood and soft brown leather. Slanted rays of sunlight landed on cluttered piles of paper on his large desk. A slim silver laptop lay closed next to two empty coffee mugs and a scattering of pens and pencils. The rest of the office, however, was neat as a pin. Books sat neatly arranged on deep shelves, and the two leather guest chairs remained perfectly angled in front of the desk.

Boone made an impatient noise behind me, and I held back a sigh. I still had no idea what had crawled up his ass, but I decided to head his anger off at the pass.

“You’re welcome,” I said cheerily, giving him my brightest smile as I dropped into one of the guest chairs and made myself comfortable.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” he asked before even coming around to face me.

Boone had removed his cowboy hat and was doing his usual finger-brushing to repair his permanent case of hat head. The thick golden locks were still attractive, even if they’d been pressed into a hat all day.

The man was gorgeous no matter what condition he was in.

“Errand boy,” I said as nonchalantly as I could. “I think? Or maybe gopher. What do you call it out here? Probably something cattle themed.”

Instead of taking a seat behind the desk, he moved right in front of me to prop a hip on the heavy wooden surface. It meant he was suddenly looming over me, and I could see the purplish bruises of sleepless nights under his eyes. My heart slowed to a different kind of beat, the kind where I wanted to reach out and run a soft thumb under his eyes and beg him to let someone else take the wheel for a while so he could rest.

That was the whole point of asking Tyler to come work at the ranch—to take some of the pressure off Boone. I still didn’t understand what I’d done wrong.

Boone crossed his arms in front of his chest, placing those sexy, muscled, and tanned forearms right in front of my eyes. I stared at the golden hairs and couldn’t help but imagine the rough feel of them under my fingers.

“Do you have any idea who you offered a job to?” There was an edge to his voice, and it caused my back to bristle.

“Yes, his name is Tyler. He’s eighteen and has experience. What’s the problem?” I added defensively. “We’re desperately shorthanded. You said so yourself last night, and Jed won’t stop talking about it.”

He took a breath as if trying to rein in his anger before speaking to a toddler. “His name is Tyler *Hosser*. His father,

Walt, owns the ranch down the road, and to say we aren't on good terms would be an understatement. There's history there, and suffice to say, me hiring on his boy is a surefire way to start a war around here."

Okay, so maybe I hadn't known exactly who I'd been offering a job to and what that might mean, but I also didn't really see why that mattered. There were more important issues at play. "His father kicked him out, Boone. The man dropped his kid off in town with nothing but a change of fucking clothes."

Boone's eyes bored into me as his jaw clenched. "That's none of our business."

"You clearly have no idea what it's like to try and impress a father who doesn't fucking care."

Something flashed in his eyes. "You can't just show up and act like this ranch belongs to you because it doesn't. You don't get to make decisions, Richard. I know you're used to being in charge, but around here, you're a cowhand. Barely even that. You shovel shit."

I felt like I'd been slapped. What he said was true: I was just a cowhand. But I guess somehow over the past few days, I'd begun to think of myself as more than that. I was proud of the ranch and proud of the teeny tiny part I played in its success. I liked being part of the team—one of the guys—feeling like I belonged.

Except I didn't belong. Clearly.

I might work hard, but that wasn't enough.

I wasn't enough.

The realization made me feel hollow inside. It was a familiar feeling, one that usually preceded me finding an excuse to jet off to some exotic location so I could lose myself to endless parties and casual sex.

But if I ran away this time, Oscar would win the bet, and I refused to let that happen.

“Message received. Anything else you need, *boss?*” I practically spit the last word.

Boone let out a bone-weary sigh and rubbed his fingers against his temples. The light streaming through the window cast his face in shadow, emphasizing the dark bruises under his eyes. His exhaustion was evident.

I crossed my arms to keep from reaching for him. Even now, part of me wanted so badly to put my arms around him and let him lean on me. For just a moment, to let someone else help carry the burden.

I was riding a roller coaster of want and hate with him. It made my stomach queasy and my head hurt. I wanted off this ride.

“I just need you to do your job and stop stirring shit up.”

I barked out a laugh and stood. “That’s funny. Because according to you, stirring up shit is exactly what you hired me to do.”

I was horrified to find myself close to tears. I hadn’t realized how much I’d started to care about this job, about this place, until that moment. I turned on my heel and got the hell out of there, barely stopping long enough to stomp back into my boots before throwing myself into the late-afternoon sun and striding toward the horse barn.

Surely there was some shit that needed moving.

BOONE

I stared at the empty doorway to my office. The faint scent of Richard's expensive skin care products lingered in the air just long enough for me to take a single hungry inhale before it disappeared.

"Dammit," I muttered, closing my eyes. I'd clearly handled that wrong.

Richard had obviously recognized a similar struggle between Ty Hosser and himself. *Daddy issues*—a topic I was also intimately familiar with.

I blew out a breath and stood up, running a hand through my hair and wondering how the hell I'd been saddled with a calving season full of drama. It was like living in a damned reality show.

Norma appeared in the empty doorway, a red-checked dish towel in her hands. "Did I see Tyler Hosser out there?"

I sighed and nodded. "He's looking to hire on."

Her eyes widened. "Oh shit."

I let out a huff of laughter. "That about covers it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hire him," I said with a shrug. "He's a seasoned hand who knows what he's doing, and he'll work extra hard since he obviously has something to prove."

"But what about when his daddy finds out?"

“Walt kicked him out. Dropped him in town with nothing but a change of clothes. What am I supposed to do? Let the kid starve?”

Norma’s expression darkened. “That asshole. Why would he do that? Tyler’s a good kid. Hell, he’s a church youth mentor and an Eagle Scout. How is it possible that’s not good enough for Walt?”

“Who knows,” I said, shaking my head. “But you know what they say: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Besides, maybe this will give me the chance to figure out where Walt’s head is at. I’ve heard rumors that he’s been in town again talking about how I stole the ranch from him, and he intends to get it back one way or another.”

Norma thought about that for a moment. “Should we be worried?”

It was a question I’d already been asking myself. “Nah. I don’t think so. Walt’s all bluster. He knows better than to try to come after me.”

She pursed her lips. “I still don’t trust him.”

“Good. You shouldn’t.” The last part of my statement was lost to an enormous yawn.

She gave me a once-over, taking in my rumpled clothes, tousled hair, and red eyes. “When was the last time you slept?”

I shrugged. “Depends. What day is today?” I gave her my most disarming grin, but it was lost on her.

“Come on to the kitchen and let me get some food in you. Then it’s to bed for at least a few hours,” she said, starting off down the hall.

I nodded and followed after her. After several days of nonstop issues and little sleep, I was dead on my feet. Maybe the sleep deprivation hadn’t helped me handle the Richard and Tyler situation as well as I could have, but the fact remained Richard was nothing more than a temporary solution to a long-term problem. My being shorthanded this season was a direct result of Walt Hosser hiring up all the decent hands around

here—more than he'd ever needed before and more than he could need now—in an attempt to make my life hell.

It was working. Calving season was always a lot of work, but I couldn't remember it ever being this grueling.

While Norma reheated a big bowl of chili for me, I washed my hands and downed several glasses of water. I didn't like having to think about the situation with the Hosser Ranch. I'd done my best to keep my head down and keep my own business to myself all these years, but I should have known that kind of blissful ignorance wasn't going to last forever. There was no doubt in my mind my hiring Tyler on was going to finally bring it all to a head.

"How's Richard working out?" Norma asked with a cheeky grin when she set the chili bowl down in front of me.

"Fine," I grunted. Maybe if I shoved a giant spoonful of food in my mouth, she'd take the hint.

"Fine? You mean *fine* like the way his ass looks in those jeans? Or *fine* like those eyes of his would look fine peering up at you from—"

I held my hand up to stop her while I tried my best not to choke. "Good god a'mighty, can't a man eat in peace?"

She laughed and turned away to clean up the dishes she'd used. But I knew she wasn't done.

"He's pretty damned cute," she said over her shoulder. "And sassy too."

"I thought you and Jed had a thing going," I said, deliberately misunderstanding her.

Her neck flushed pink. "You think that's enough to make me back off teasing you, but it's not."

"He's only here another three weeks," I said before taking another mouthful. If I could empty this bowl in the next ten seconds, I could escape to the blessed solitude of my bedroom.

"Who's to say he won't stay longer than that?" She turned back around and wiped her hands on a kitchen towel.

“Pfft. What in the world would he stay for? He’s meant for bigger and better things. City things.”

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “What makes you say that?”

Was she for real? “Uh, everything? I took him into town, and I thought he was going to cry when he learned we didn’t have a Starbucks. And have you seen his clothes? Tell me those clothes don’t cost more than our new baler.”

I didn’t like the way Norma’s eyes seemed to want to cut right through me. I blinked down at my rapidly emptying bowl.

“The boys say he’s a hard worker.”

I said nothing, but I couldn’t help remembering the look of concern in Richard’s eyes earlier that morning when he’d asked what he could do to help lighten my load. His offer had been genuine. That wasn’t the action of someone trying to shirk work.

“And he’s eager to please too,” she continued. “I’ve never seen someone so desperate to hear that he’s doing good. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’s never had anyone on his team before.”

I thought about the way Richard had stood up for Tyler. The minute Tyler had given in and suggested going back home, Richard had turned into a full-blown mama bear. I’d tried staring him down—a technique that usually sent every other ranch hand off to do my bidding—but Richard had stood strong, squaring his shoulders and crossing his arms, giving as good as he got.

He’d been willing to face my anger if it meant standing up for Tyler, and I wondered now if part of the reason why was because he’d never had anyone do the same for him.

I didn’t like how that thought made me feel, so I pushed it aside, along with all the other things I didn’t want to think about.

Unfortunately, Norma hadn’t gotten that memo. “He’s taking to this work like a duck to water,” she continued. “I’m

not sure who it's surprising more: him or us.”

I rolled my eyes. Despite being run off my feet, I'd managed to do a little googling. “His father owns one of the largest commercial real estate holding companies in the world. He's probably never had to work a day in his life, especially not physical labor. I'm sure he's treating this as entertainment more than anything.”

It sounded like Oscar's thoughts were pouring out of my mouth. I didn't know why I was being so uncharitable toward Richard. As if by not acknowledging how hard he was working, I could keep a distance between us. It was much easier to think of him as a spoiled playboy out for a lark rather than a complex man with wants and needs.

Norma leaned her hip against the table. “What do you think brought him here? Jed only said you were doing a favor for a friend.”

Without giving too many details, I explained about Oscar discovering Richard was looking for work. “Pretty sure he wanted a change of scenery, and playing cowboy sounded like fun,” I said dismissively.

Norma tilted her head, studying me in that way of hers. “That's awfully cynical, even for you.”

“What do you mean ‘even for me’?”

She shrugged and took a seat across from me at the big table. “You're a serious person, Boone. You tend to look for problems before they happen.” She held up her hand. “And before you get defensive, I'll admit you have a good reason. You want to be prepared for the worst so you can handle things as they crop up. But I've never known you not to give a man a fair chance. So why are you judging Richard based on where he comes from, the clothes he wears, and maybe who he's friends with? While you've had your hand inside cows for the past week, he's been running feed, riding fence, mucking stalls, and feeding bottle calves, not to mention working on the spreadsheets you asked him to update. There's not a single job he's been asked to do that he hasn't tried his best at. So maybe talk to the man before you decide how you feel about him.”

“Not necessary.” I stood abruptly and took my dishes to the sink. “I know all I need to know about a *temporary* employee. He signed on to work for a month, and in three weeks, he’ll be gone,” I repeated. “Don’t get too attached.”

Her eyebrows rose at that last bit. “You reminding *me* of that? Or yourself?”

“Both of us. He’s still got a lot to learn, and I’ve got too much to do to waste time training a greenhorn who’s just going to take off in the middle of the night without a backward look.”

“Hm. None of the other men are complaining about him. In fact, I’d go so far as to say they like him. So why not leave Richard’s training to them?”

That was the obvious solution, and I hated that I couldn’t make myself agree right away. The trouble was, I liked being around Richard. All week, I’d found myself trying to catch glimpses of him, even while I’d forced myself to stay busy with tasks that kept me out of his way. I’d been acting more like a lovesick teenager rather than the self-made owner of a prosperous cattle ranch.

“Maybe I will,” I said, sounding rather petulant.

She gave me a knowing smirk, making it clear she didn’t believe that one bit, but she didn’t know Richard’s type the way I did. She also hadn’t learned the same painful lesson I had: sometimes caring for someone simply wasn’t enough.

Oscar and I had figured that out years and years ago. We’d tried to make our relationship work as best we could back then, but it had required too much sacrifice. Oscar couldn’t be Oscar out here in the country, and there was no way I could have the life I wanted in New York.

Some things just weren’t meant to be.

Despite the animosity between them, Richard and Oscar were more alike than either of them would ever admit, so unless I wanted to repeat that hard lesson, I needed to take any faint stirrings of desire, or interest, or—god forbid—actual

feelings I'd started having toward Richard and nip them in the bud before they grew or, worse, blossomed.

But even as I told myself this, deep in my heart, I felt something small and hopeful begin to take root, and I worried it might be too late.

RICHARD

My face was on fire as I stormed around the barn, shoving things out of my way before finally settling into the now-familiar motions of filling a cart with horse manure and hauling it out to the dry stacks for composting. Over the past week, I'd stopped needing to block my face with a bandana soaked in anything better-smelling than horse shit, but it still wasn't an enjoyable task.

As I worked, I thought about what kind of scientific advancement could possibly lower the fifty-pound daily poop output of a standard horse so that this job wasn't such a bitch.

"Should keep you all in a pasture so you poop in the fucking grass," I murmured to Victory as I moved to his stall. At this point, I was able to pull each horse out of the stall and attach them to a tie ring in the center aisle before mucking out their stall. Vic was an easygoing guy and clopped lazily forward, nudging my shoulder with his giant nose until he was tied securely to the ring. "No offense," I added. "But you'd probably prefer that anyway, right?"

Jed's voice hollered out of his nearby office. "If you want to be the one to round them up every morning in the pasture, feel free to turn them out, McQueen."

I hadn't thought my voice was loud enough to carry, but I was wrong. "Maybe I will," I called back stubbornly.

The older man chuckled but didn't say anything else. I heard the clicks of his hunt-and-peck typing as I moved around Victory to grab the rake again.

This kind of work wasn't particularly mentally challenging, which left my mind free to churn over my confrontation with Boone. My head spun like I'd thrown frozen fruit in a blender and kicked it up to the highest setting. But instead of getting a nice daiquiri out of the mix, I was left with a chunky, half-frozen glop of resentment and anger.

I'd tried to help. What was Boone's fucking problem? We needed ranch hands, and I'd found him a strong, willing, experienced ranch hand. He should have been grateful, not angry.

"Stupid fucking ungrateful jackass," I muttered.

"That's no way to talk to Arabella," Mercy teased from over my shoulder. "Granted, she almost bit me in the ass yesterday, but she's not ungrateful. Give her one of those mints Boone picked up in town, and you'll see plenty of gratitude."

"I haven't returned to treat-giving after that first attempt," I admitted begrudgingly. Duck may have been a little thing, but she had giant ivory teeth that scared the crap out of me.

Mercy laughed and reached over to ruffle my hair as if we weren't close to the same age. "Start with Daffodil. She barely has any teeth left."

I glanced over at the fat old rescue horse who preferred to live out her retirement under the box fan in a cushy stall instead of in a pasture. Her eyes were hidden behind a fly mask, and her whiskers twitched. "She's hiding an evil underbelly," I said. "Just look at her."

The sound of a decidedly unladylike fart blasted across the space between me and the old mare, quickly followed by red-alert-level fumes.

"Abort! Abort!" Mercy teased before hauling his annoying ass out of the barn. I followed him out and dumped the last cartful of crap onto the appropriate pile before fetching the long thermometer to check the temperature of the compost. I couldn't deny the excited little pulse I got when I realized it

was ready to be turned. It meant I could drive the small tractor with the bucket attachment and use it to turn the pile.

“I’ll show Boone just how much shit I can stir,” I grumbled under my breath as I sauntered toward the machine shed. I was determined to prove to Boone that I wasn’t as useless as he apparently thought I was.

PeeWee turned his blasting music down and shot me a narrow-eyed glare when I entered the machine shed and asked if I could borrow the tractor, even though I’d done it once before already. “Where’s Harrison or Mercy?” he asked.

“Dunno. But I do know that Jed himself taught me how to do this the other day, so I feel pretty confident I know what I’m doing.”

He sighed and mumbled something before tossing me the keys and jerking his head to the far end of the shed. “Put it back the way you found it and make sure there’s no shit on it.”

I drove out of there on that thing like I was the second coming of farmer Christ.

The situation necessitated the proper selfies posted to Instagram, of course, but I made sure the tractor was stopped and in park before I made silly faces and posed behind the wheel. Just as I was sliding the phone back into my pocket, I saw Boone’s scowling face through a window in the kitchen. I put the tractor back into drive and sped off to the shit station at top speed. Whether or not I let out a loud whoop and threw both arms into the air with spirit fingers was nobody’s business but mine.

As soon as I began the methodical process of turning the compost, I heard Boone’s shouted call of my name.

I ignored him.

“Cut it off, goddammit!” he shouted again.

I clenched my teeth and did as he said before turning and bestowing upon him my most beatific smile. “Yes, sir?”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I looked at the compost pile before glancing back at him. “Making dinner?”

His face was a deep, mottled red. The kind of angry that would have made me nervous if I didn’t have a feeling deep down in my soul that Boone would never lift a finger to harm me or anyone else. I didn’t know much about him, but I knew that much.

“You don’t have any idea what you’re doing.”

“Au contraire,” I said, my pleasant tone edged with ice. “I believe you were the one who pointed out my excellent shit-stirring skills.”

His eyes narrowed. “This isn’t just a pile of shit you can play in like a sandbox. It’s a delicate balance of microbes that will actually die if not kept at the proper temperature.”

I looked up to the sky and tapped my chin with a finger. “Really. Hm. That’s weird. I thought it was here for fun.” I shrugged and met his eyes. “I figured three days at a hundred-forty-five degrees means it’s just about right for building a castle.”

He opened his mouth to say more, but my words caught him up short. I lifted an eyebrow before adding, “Also, it’s just about right for stirring a compost pile, if I recall correctly.”

Take that, I thought, relishing the moment.

“Mpfh,” he grunted, putting his hands on his hips and closing his eyes long enough to haul in a deep breath. “I... I, uh...”

“Owe me an apology?” I snapped. “You’re right.”

His jaw moved back and forth, but he didn’t look up at me. “I’m sor—”

Unfortunately, before he was able to get the words out, Boone’s horse, Victory, came sauntering out of the barn without a care in the world and nudged Boone’s pockets, looking for mints.

Boone looked from his horse to me, one eyebrow raised in a silent question we both knew the answer to. I’d been the one

mucking out the barn, which meant I was the last one to move Victory out of his stall, which meant I'd been the one to tie him back.

Or rather, I'd been the one who'd failed to properly tie him back.

I was the reason Vic had escaped.

Boone's apology died on his lips, and his expression returned to a familiar, disappointed scowl.

I hated that scowl. I'd seen a similar one way too often on my father's face growing up. I felt my cheeks heat, a familiar sense of inadequacy beginning to rise inside me.

Usually I'd bat the feeling away with a quip or offhand comment—*deflect deflect deflect* was my motto—but my mind was drawing a blank.

“Boone—” I started to say, knowing I owed him an apology for screwing up... *again*. Except he didn't seem interested in listening. Instead, he shook his head and let out a bone-deep sigh before grabbing Victory's lead and heading back to the barn without another word.

Tyler must have seen what had happened because he came running over to help. “Oh, hey, how did this guy get out? I'll put him back, boss,” he said eagerly. “And then I'll get to work restocking the calving barn.” Boone nodded and handed over the rope to the kid whose knowledge of all things horse and ranch was probably ten times greater than my desire for an Alexander McQueen thistle suit. Which was so, so great.

“Thanks, Tyler,” Boone said, clapping a hand on the kid's shoulder. “You know, despite everything with your dad, I'm glad you're here. It'll be nice to have another hand who knows what he's doing.”

The kid beamed, turning to the barn with a bounce in his step. Boone didn't bother glancing my way before heading back to the house. He didn't need to. We both knew that he'd been speaking to Tyler but that his words had been meant for *me*, the screw-up who couldn't even tie a quick-release knot properly.

My cheeks flared red, a hot coil of shame twisting in my gut as I finished turning the compost with shaking hands. I knew I was lucky Victory had been the horse who'd escaped my bad knot because if it had been Mercy's horse or the big black stallion with the Greek name I could never remember, they would have bolted. We would have spent hours trying to capture them again, and that was assuming they didn't hurt themselves among the fences and equipment. I couldn't even think about what would happen if they made it to the highway.

My mistake could have ended in disaster.

It was a stark reminder that I didn't know what the hell I was doing. Not really. I might have let myself believe I was catching on, I might have been proud of everything I was learning—heck, a small part of me might even have begun to think that I could actually win the bet with Oscar and prove myself to him, my father, and especially Boone—but I'd been fooling myself.

I thought about my confrontation with Boone in his office earlier. He seemed to think I was only capable of shoveling shit, and apparently, I couldn't even do that right.

This wasn't my world. It would never be my world. No matter how hard I worked, how much shit I shoveled, how many cows I helped wrangle, or how many bruises I earned learning to ride, I'd still find a way to screw something up.

It was just who I was.

I'd learned early on that the best way to not disappoint anyone was to make sure no one, especially myself, expected much from me. Somewhere along the way, I'd let myself forget that. I'd tried to break away from my underachieving daddy's boy past, to strike out on my own and prove I could handle myself in the real world, but I hadn't been fooling anyone but myself. Turned out Oscar had been right from the start. I *couldn't* hack it.

The joke was on me.

After I finished with the compost, I cleaned and returned the tractor and checked on Victory. Then I headed to the

bunkhouse to pack my stuff.

Boone had been right; I wasn't cut out for ranch life. This incident was a sign that I belonged back in New York. And if leaving meant I lost the bet with Oscar, so what? I didn't need his connections to get a job interview. If I still couldn't find one on my own, I could... I could ask my dad. All I'd have to do was suck up to him the way he wanted. To try harder to be the person he wanted me to be. To put some real effort into working for the family business.

And after spending ten hours crimping barbed wire on my hands and knees in the spring mud, I knew I was capable of hard labor, so I could sure as shit handle some clean office work with a nice iced coffee on my desk and no manure stench up my nose, right?

I started throwing my stuff into my suitcases. First thing the next morning, I was going to bum a ride off Jed when he went into town for his weekly cinnamon roll splurge. Once I was back in New York, I'd find a friend's couch to crash on while I figured out what to do next. Worst-case scenario, James and his new man owned an entire freaking hotel out on the Cape; they'd surely put me up in a room during the off-season.

After packing everything up, I took a long, hot shower, intending to join the guys for dinner. But when I lay down on my bed for just a minute, that minute turned into ten hours of deep sleep.

I woke early the next morning, even before my alarm went off. Through the window, the sky outside was dark, not even the barest hint of light visible beneath the horizon. I could hear some stirring in the other rooms, but no one was out and about just yet.

I got dressed quickly, pulling on my Alexander McQueen boots before sneaking out of the bunkhouse. It felt strange wearing my old boots as I cut across the gravel driveway toward the horse barn. It was almost like I wore no shoes at all, and it made my feet feel oddly vulnerable.

I paused in the middle of the yard, sucking in a deep breath. The ever-present smell of hay and animal filled my nostrils. It was hard to believe that a little more than a week ago, that stench had almost made me retch. Now there was comfort to it. Familiarity.

I glanced toward the calving barn, light spilling out from under the large doorway. I wondered if Boone was in there. The thought tugged at something inside me. I almost started walking in that direction, wanting to see him one last time before taking off, but I knew that would be a mistake. I wasn't sure I could handle seeing the satisfaction in his eyes when I told him he was right and I was leaving.

Instead, I turned away and shoved my hands in my jeans, ducking my head against the crisp, cool air as I made my way to the horse barn.

Once in the barn, I saw light spilling from Jed's office, and I could hear the slow pecking of his keyboard. I made my way to the doorway, hesitating for a moment. Jed sat hunched over his computer, glasses perched on the edge of his nose and a frown furrowing his weathered forehead.

"Morning," I said.

He jumped, spinning toward me and pressing a hand against his chest. "Jesus fucking hell! Never sneak up on an old man unless you want a corpse on your hands." He turned back to his computer. "What do you want?"

I cleared my throat. "I was hoping you could give me a ride into town."

He kept pecking at the keyboard. "What do you need? I'll pick it up for you."

I shuffled my feet. "No, that's not it. I'm... uh... leaving."

"Leaving what?"

Jesus, why did he have to make this so hard? "Leaving *here*. Going back to New York."

His hands stilled. Slowly, he leaned back in his office chair and swiveled until he was facing me. He spent a long time

appraising me before asking, “Something happen I should know about? The guys giving you a hard time, or—”

“No,” I said, startled by the question. “No, not at all. Everyone’s been lovely. Truly.”

“*Everyone?*” he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

It was obvious he meant Boone. I shrugged. “I mean... more or less.”

He grunted and turned back to the computer. “You got something you gotta get home to?”

I thought about my lack of apartment, lack of a job, and lack of money. “Not exactly.”

“*Someone*, then?”

I thought about my friends. I didn’t even know what continent they might be on, and they certainly weren’t expecting to see me anytime soon. James would be out on the Cape with Sawyer, and I hadn’t heard from my father in weeks.

“I just think it’s time I left, that’s all.” I forced a laugh. “I mean, look at me.” I gestured to my Balenciaga tabloid shirt and Givenchy pink crackled jeans. They didn’t really match my red-and-black boots, but such was life when you were living out of a suitcase. “Do I look like a ranch hand? We all knew the minute I arrived, I wouldn’t be staying long.”

“Then why’d you come at all?”

I lifted a shoulder, suddenly embarrassed. “A friend of a friend told me he didn’t think I could handle the work. I wanted to prove him wrong.”

“Did you?”

This time, my laugh was genuine. “We both know the answer to that.”

“Do we?” It almost sounded like the question was serious, which was preposterous.

I rolled my eyes. “Yesterday alone, I screwed up the simple task of tying up a horse and invited the son of Boone’s

sworn enemy to work at the ranch.”

He waved a hand. “Victory wasn’t going anywhere, and we both know it. She’s too addicted to those sweets Boone always has on him. And offering Tyler a job was a good call. We need the help, and he needs a place to stay and a good mentor. He’ll get both here.”

“Someone should tell Boone that,” I grumbled.

“Tell him yourself. He’s up at Mob Creek. I’ll draw you a map.”

“Is that on the way into town?”

“Nope,” Jed said as he pulled out a blank sheet of paper and began to scribble on it. “Opposite direction entirely. It’s about eight miles east by horse.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“We had some heifers go missing, and Boone’s gone to track them down. Only problem is that he thinks he’s looking for two, but the damn spreadsheet we use to track everything wasn’t up to date, and we’re actually missing three.”

My shoulders slumped. I’d been the one in charge of updating the spreadsheets, so if Boone had bad information, that was something else I’d screwed up. “Sorry, I thought I’d updated everything. I must have messed that up too.”

He scowled at me. “The hell you talking about? It’s because you updated it that I figured out we’re missing three heifers instead of two.”

I lifted my eyebrows in surprise. “Really?”

“Yup. But now someone’s got to go let Boone know, and cell reception’s unpredictable up that way. You best get a move on if you wanna catch up to him.”

A small panic began to brew in my chest. “You want me to ride a horse. Eight miles. Alone. With no idea where I’m going? *Me?*”

He shoved the paper he’d been drawing on at me. “Here’s a map. Now you know where you’re going.”

It looked like nothing more than a few random lines. I couldn't even tell which way was up. "I don't suppose you have an address I can plug in my map app?"

He barked a laugh at that. "Tell Norma where you're going and that you'll be staying there to help Boone, so you might be gone a night or two. She'll pack you food and help you sort through the camping equipment."

A night or two?

"Jed, I wish I could help," I said, holding up my hands. "But I really, really don't think you want me doing this. I'm a menace to anything ranch related. You should send someone qualified—"

"I am." Jed spoke the words like they were a simple fact, though his eyes watched me intently. "I'm sending the man who's given a hundred percent to every task we've asked of him this week and has the blisters to prove it. I'm sending someone I trust to put aside his own plans for a little while so he can help Boone in his hour of need. You telling me you're not that man?"

I opened my mouth to tell Jed exactly where he could put his flowery speech, but I couldn't seem to get the words out. Because the truth was, if I'd be leaving anyway—and I definitely would—part of me wanted to leave knowing I'd made up for my mistakes. That I'd accomplished something, even this one small thing, during my time at the Silver Fork. That maybe Boone might remember me a bit more fondly.

And that was how I ended up on the back of a horse named Branson, headed off to the middle of nowhere on a rescue mission and fervently hoping I wouldn't be the one who needed rescuing.

BOONE

Taking off before first light and watching the sun rise over the eastern edge of the ranch had been exactly what my spirit needed. I felt like I could take a full breath for the first time in days.

I'd slept hard all night and woke up feeling ready to tackle the search for the missing heifers. I was still angry as hell at Richard for his stunt with Tyler, but I realized there was no point in holding on to that anger. After all, when I'd called Richard out for his carelessness with Victory last night, all I'd gotten was a defiant look in return. The kind of look that said my attitude was bullshit and my *temporary* cowhand wouldn't be putting up with it for long.

It was true. He wouldn't. Even if I wanted him to.

And in spite of everything, god almighty, I wanted him to.

As I approached Mob Creek, my favorite offshoot of the Silver Fork River the ranch was named after, I traversed one of the pastures we used for backgrounding—the process of pasturing the herd after weaning so they could put on weight. The stock looked healthy, and I was happy to see plenty of forage available, as well as a full stock tank fed by a dugout up a hill beyond the fence line. After checking the tank and float valve, I began quickly cutting the cattle to see if by any chance the missing heifers were in this lot. Thankfully, our ear tag system made it easier to see at a glance which animals needed a closer look. Birdie yipped and herded, minding my

commands and keeping the group I'd already checked away from the ones I still needed to sort through.

I located one of the missing heifers, who didn't appear close to calving, and made a mental note to radio Jed, then exited the pasture gates to continue on to the pasture closer to Mob Creek. I stopped to drink from my water bottle, and when I was reaching back to stow it in my saddlebag, I thought I heard someone talking.

"I've never been there, mind you, but I've heard it's the next Music City behind Nashville. I can't imagine anyone would want to visit a place in Missouri that's known for country music, but different strokes for different folks, I guess. And it's a fine name for a horse. Honestly, it could be worse. Look at Flapjack. Could Mercy not have named him Blackjack, for god's sake? It would have been a little more impressive than Flapjack. Might as well call the big dude Pancake or Buttermilk. And then it would be shortened to Butter or Cake. And Flapjack would go from being a rodeo star to one of the fat old horses who gossip in the corner stall like Daffodil and Duck. Not that Duck is fat. Shit. Don't tell her I even implied it. Woah. Woah! Oh, okay, fine. That was just a rock. We're fine. You're fine. Good boy. Good horse."

I recognized the voice immediately; I just didn't understand why I was hearing it all the way out here, so far from the ranch. I squeezed my knees against Victory, pushing him toward the voice.

As I came around a cluster of trees, sure enough, there was Richard. He was impossible to miss with that damn sequined cowboy hat on his head. The minute he saw me, he let out a squeak of excitement and practically stood in his stirrups. "Here!" he shouted while waving wildly. "I'm over here! I made it! I found you. Branson, buddy, we're saved."

Beneath him, Branson seemed to give me a look of barely restrained patience. He wasn't used to someone so talkative since PeeWee was the one who rode him most often, and PeeWee wasn't one for idle chat, especially with a horse.

I trotted closer.

“Oh my god, you have no idea how happy I am to see you,” Richard said, barely even drawing a breath before continuing. “Jed said all I had to do was follow the water, but there’s just so much...” He waved a hand. “*Here* out here. I thought for sure I was going to wander until I collapsed, and all anyone would find of me would be three picked-over ribs and a pile of dirty sequins.”

“What exactly are you doing out here?” I asked, interrupting him.

“Right.” He sat taller in the saddle and cleared his throat. “Jed wanted me to tell you there are actually three missing heifers, not two.”

“Yes, I know.”

He frowned. “You... know?”

“Jed radioed to tell me that a couple of hours ago. He didn’t mention you though.”

Richard’s jaw dropped. “Radioed? But... he didn’t mention a radio, only that there was spotty cell service. Why’d he want me to ride all the way out here to deliver the message? My ass has been numb for hours, and let’s not even start in on the chafing on bits that don’t need to be chafed. I doubt there’s enough Megababe Thigh Rescue in the universe that will soothe these gams.”

I remembered Jed noting my interest in Richard the other day by the ring, when Richard had been learning to ride Duck. I wondered if him sending Richard out here was his way of throwing temptation in my path in the hopes I’d get it out of my system.

More than likely though, he just wanted to get Richard out of his hair for a day or two, and this had been the easiest way to go about it. Of course, that meant that Richard was now in *my* hair instead.

And why did that thought send a little thrill through me?

“Well, you’re here now,” I grumbled to hide my excitement. “May as well help. We have heifers to find.”

I turned around and whistled for Birdie, who'd gone all lovey-dovey when she'd heard Richard's voice. She bolted from her spot next to Branson and shot ahead of me on the trail. I nudged Vic into a walk and followed her.

After a few minutes, Chatty Cathy couldn't hold back. "Why aren't these missing ladies in the calving pasture back home?"

Something about him calling my ranch "home" made my chest tight. "They were overlooked when we rounded up all the first-calf heifers. If they were cows with experience, I wouldn't be as worried at the oversight, but until we know how a heifer calves, we have to assume she could have difficulty. Even if they calve successfully, there could be other problems after delivery. It's why we gather all of the pregnant cows and heifers together in the calving pastures before calving begins. So we can keep an eye on them."

"How were these three overlooked? You're kind of known for being meticulous. At least, according to the guys."

The truth of his words gave me another little thrill because he knew this about me and also grated on me because he was right. This kind of lax herd management wasn't like me at all.

"We had a man named Weller who worked as Jed's right hand for almost ten years. He was in charge of the roundup on this part of the ranch while I was working clear over the other side. He'd done it perfectly for years. We worked well together, and he was as loyal and dedicated as they came. After the roundup, he up and quit. Said he'd gotten a much better offer from another operation and couldn't turn it down."

"That sucks."

"It does. But it's life, I suppose. I tried to keep him, but nothing I offered came close to tempting him to stay. After he was gone, it never occurred to me to check his recent work. Yesterday afternoon, Jed was updating our notes on each first-calf heifer to make sure we knew how they were doing, and that's when he realized we had some missing. I assume Weller was just sloppy at the end, but a mistake like this could cost the lives of both heifer and calf."

“Did you call him and ask him about it?”

I shook my head. “No reason to unless I can’t find them out here. And even then, I doubt he can help.”

I didn’t bother telling Richard that Weller had gone to work for Tyler’s dad over at the Hosser Ranch. It was yet another reason things were tense between Walt and me. I never in a million years would have poached one of his best men, but obviously, he didn’t have the same sense of honor.

We rode along in silence for a while longer until I saw the corner of the Mob Creek pasture fence up ahead. “Here we are.” I kicked Vic’s flank to speed him up before hopping down to open the gate. When Branson began to walk through it, Richard yanked back on the reins, startling the gelding.

“Woah,” I said, reaching out for the reins and patting Branson on the neck. I looked up at Richard. “What’s going on?”

His eyes were wide as they flicked between me and the pasture full of grazing stock. “I’m... um... you want me to just ride him in there? With all the cows? What if they...?”

“First of all, yes, you’re coming in here with all the cows. Second, Branson is very used to it. He’s a ranch horse. He’s been cutting cattle for years. Third, these animals are going to run as far away from you two as they can get. That’s what makes herding possible.”

After a moment of consideration, Richard nodded and let Branson move ahead. I heard muttering under Richard’s breath about stupid, rash decisions and stupid places you couldn’t get to without a decent truck. I bit back a laugh. Once the gate was secure behind us, I swung back into the saddle and moved ahead of him, glancing back over my shoulder.

“You *can* get here with a truck. But thanks to the Silver Fork River, the vehicle route here is eighty-five miles versus eight if you go over land on horseback.”

He seemed surprised, but he didn’t say anything.

“Stay over on the edge while Birdie and I look for the heifers, okay?” I gestured to an area off to the side where he

and Branson could simply stand and wait without running the risk of getting in the way.

Richard nodded and moved Branson where I'd indicated. I had to admit the man seemed to have picked up some horsemanship skills fairly quickly.

It didn't take long to find one of the missing heifers since she was standing there with a calf attached to her udder. "Fucking Christ."

The fact that the calf was nursing was encouraging. I pulled out a little notebook from my saddlebag and handed it over to Richard. "Take notes for me, will you?"

I dismounted and approached the calf as close as I could without pissing off its mother. "Bull calf," I called over my shoulder. I added an estimated time of birth and some general remarks about how he seemed to be doing.

When I glanced back toward Richard, I found that he'd discarded the notebook and instead was pointing his phone at the calf.

Irritation tightened the muscles along my shoulder. Could this guy even focus on the job for five minutes? "Now's not the time for social media, McQueen."

Richard rolled his eyes. "I'm not. I'm making the notes like you asked." He turned his phone and flashed the screen toward me. I squinted, taking a closer look. "It's an app," he continued. "Kind of like a dating app, though technically more of a hookup app. A friend of a friend created it after double-dipping the same dude one too many times."

I blinked, having no idea what he'd just said. "Huh?"

"Look, no offense or anything, but those spreadsheets you're using to track your herd are pretty crap. I mean, sure, the information is there, but it's not super useable. I figured there had to be a better way to go about tracking everything. And then I remembered my friend Sacha's friend Georgio, who could never keep all the men he slept with straight, so he created this app to track vital information. You know, pictures, name, age, kink preferences, etc. Then he shared it with a few

friends, and together, we all created this database of hot dudes. After working on the spreadsheets for a couple of days, I realized it might be useful in other ways, so I emailed him and asked if he could make some tweaks. He sent it to me late last night.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

Richard grinned. “It’s called Meat. Except instead of tracking man meat, it tracks cow meat.” He touched a few buttons on the screen. “You see, you can put in pictures, ear tag numbers, other vitals. There’s a map function that will track what pasture they’re in. Anyone with the app can update the information in real time. I’ve been putting in info on nearby cattle while you’ve been searching for the heifers.” He clicked to another screen, and a map appeared with little red dots scattered around us.

With another button press, one of those lights turned a light blue. “See, that’s your new bull calf.” He handed the phone to me. “Check it out.”

I took the offered phone and clicked on the bull calf’s dot. A screen popped up with a photo and all the vitals I’d called out listed underneath.

My mind swam. I thought of how much I hated the paperwork aspect of being a rancher—the spreadsheets and ledgers that had to constantly be updated by hand and that inevitably contained errors—such as the one that led to three heifers going missing.

“This is... incredible,” I told him.

Richard shrugged. “It’s more that after several afternoons in Jed’s cramped office doing data entry, I figured there had to be a better way.” He flashed a self-deprecating grin. “As my father likes to point out, I’m lazy. If there’s a shortcut, trust me to find it.” He tried to keep his voice light, but I could hear an edge to it. The corners of his lips tightened, the smile not quite reaching his eyes when he mentioned his father.

I looked at him then. *Really* looked at him. His clothing was as ridiculous as always—his jeans too tight and his shirt

adorned with crystals that winked in the sun. He'd tied a scarf around his sequined hat, the tails of which trailed down his back. It was all so completely out of place out here in the scrub, but it was also so undeniably Richard.

I placed my hand on his knee as I passed him back the phone. "Thank you," I said earnestly. "That's really helpful."

His grin faltered slightly, as if he suddenly didn't know how to respond to appreciation or a genuine compliment. He glanced down at where my hand rested. Suddenly, I became acutely aware of the heat of him burning through his jeans and warming my palm.

Without thinking, I curled my fingers slightly, pressing into his thigh. He tensed, his legs squeezing tighter around Branson, causing the horse to sidestep and pull him out of reach. My hand fell to my side.

In the absence of his touch, my head cleared enough to realize I'd wandered into dangerous territory. I coughed lightly and stepped back toward my own horse. "Anyway, did Jed send you with a radio?" When I saw him nod, I continued. "Tell him Number 9012 isn't close to delivering. He can pick her up tomorrow along with Number 9026 and her calf. Meanwhile, Number 9033 isn't here, which means we're going to have to keep looking."

I quickly mounted Victory and skirted toward the edge of the field toward the gate, needing a bit of distance. I heard Richard on the radio as he trailed after me. He was all business, asking questions that Jed put to him and doing his best to help us communicate while I continued cutting through the herd with Birdie's help.

After at least another hour of searching, I finally had to give up. "She's not fucking here," I muttered.

"I feel like you've already looked through this group three or four times," Richard called out. "No luck?"

I shook my head. "We're going to need to search some of the other pastures."

“Could she have gotten out? Even with all of this fencing?”

I shrugged as I led Victory back to where Richard and Branson waited. “Not really, but she’s not here, so she has to be somewhere.” I was sure my frustration was clear in my voice, but there was no hiding it. I was angry. “Let’s take a break before we move on to the next pasture.”

I led us out of the pasture and down to the creek itself so the horses could enjoy a little cool water. When we arrived, I helped Richard out of the saddle and held his arm in anticipation of wobbly and sore legs.

He winced and nearly stumbled. “Oh god, my thighs no longer work. I’m never going to be able to walk properly again. How do you guys do this?”

I laughed and helped him over to a nearby stretch of early grass. “Believe it or not, you get used to it.”

“Listen,” he said, easing himself down to the ground. “I know you desperately wanted to have sex with me later, but I’m not going to be able to perform. Possibly ever again.”

Even though I knew he was kidding, his words went straight to my dick. I made a sputtering, choking noise and grunted out some kind of response about that not being necessary. Then I quickly returned to the horses, trying desperately not to picture Richard naked in the soft grass, a breeze teasing across his skin and drawing goose bumps.

“I was joking,” Richard called, sounding apologetic. “Sorry. It was inappropriate. You’re my boss. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I waved my hand in the air dismissively. “Better than me saying it to you.”

I could have sworn he mumbled something under his breath that sounded like “I wish.” But I refused to believe he’d said it, much less actually meant it.

After helping the horses get a drink, I tied them to a nearby branch and pulled out a bag of sandwiches from the soft-sided

cooler in my saddlebag, along with my water bottle. I grabbed Richard's water bottle, too, and joined him on the ground.

"Stay hydrated. Your body probably isn't used to this dry air yet," I said, handing him his bottle and one of the sandwiches.

We ate and drank in an unexpectedly peaceful silence. Even after he was finished eating, Richard didn't speak for a long while. He simply leaned back on his elbows, staring at the water and the mountains unfurling in the distance. Above us, the sky was an unending blue, and the spring breeze brought with it the smell of fresh dirt and the soft sound of a cow snorting in the nearby herd.

"You know what this place reminds me of?" He rolled his head in my direction. "This time when I was twelve and my parents took me to Grindelwald in the Swiss Alps. You know, with the mountains and all the green and the cows everywhere."

I tried not to laugh. "So, you think the Silver Fork looks a lot like the Jungfrau herds? I'm flattered."

His face flushed, and he looked away. "Maybe you should invest in some traditional Swiss cowbells. Might spiff the place up a bit."

Now I truly did laugh, picturing my ear-tagged Brahmans and Herefords with giant bells under their chins. "You might be right. It would certainly help us find 9033. We could just listen for a little jingle."

Richard turned a sly grin back at me. "Birdie would find her right away. I was singing in the shower the other night, and Birdie started howling outside the door. I couldn't decide if it was flattery or an insult."

I glanced down at my spoiled dog. Her speckled chin was resting on Richard's thigh, and her eyes were closed in utter pleasure. His hand idly stroked her head and scratched gently behind her ears.

Seeing his long fingers moving over my dog made me feel some kind of way.

“She’s a good girl,” I murmured before looking away.

We finished our break, and I helped an incredibly sore Richard back into the saddle. I spent the better part of the next twenty minutes imagining giving his inner thighs a diligent massage. With my mouth. It made for an uncomfortable ride.

As the afternoon slipped away though, I began to worry more about the missing heifer. There was a lot of ground to cover, and Richard wasn’t exactly an expert rider.

I couldn’t regret Jed sending him, but at the same time, it meant less time spent searching, and time was critical in the case of supporting a heifer through her first delivery.

We entered several other pastures where yearlings and feeders grazed, but there was no sign of our missing heifer.

“Are we going back to the ranch?” Richard asked hopefully. “It’s going to be hard to ride in the dark.”

I shook my head. “No. We need to go back to the original pair and keep an eye on them overnight.” Not to mention, there was no way Richard would survive another four hours in the saddle.

When we finally got back to the Mob Creek pasture, I checked the pair and the first-calf heifer to make sure they were still well. We left the pasture and moved closer to the creek so the horses could drink again. There was a frequently used camping area there where we could bed down for the night.

I started to talk Richard through the process of removing Branson’s saddle, but he quickly rolled his eyes. “I know how to do a little bit more than shovel shit, you know. Who do you think untacked Victory for you the other day when you came back from that fence repair and went straight off to help with a calving?”

I winced at the reminder of what I’d said to him the day before. It had been uncalled for and rude. I pulled off my hat and ran a hand through my hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. You did good today. Real good.”

Richard froze, his back to me and his hands on his saddle. I wished I could see his face—try to read his expression. I waited for him to make some quip or joke, but after a moment's hesitation, he merely nodded and gave me a soft "Thank you."

I felt like there was something more I should say, a chasm between us that needed filling. But the moment passed when Richard clapped his hands and turned. "So," he said, his voice overly bright. "Do we need to gather wood or something? I've never camped before, but I've watched a few seasons of *Survivor*."

I studied him for a moment. He'd sounded a little forced, and I realized that he held his shoulders rigidly, almost as if he was guarding himself. Something about what I'd said had made him uncomfortable and desperate to change the subject. Was it my apology? Or my compliment? I wasn't sure, but I let it go.

"It's just like that," I said with a wink. "After dinner, you'll have to look for the hidden immunity idol unless you want me to vote you off the ranch."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized it may seem like I was saying I wanted Richard gone. When nothing could be further from the truth. I opened my mouth to explain, but he just cocked a hip to the side and raised an eyebrow.

"Honey, you would be terrible at *Survivor*. Don't you know you always keep the inept but dangerously good-looking comic relief? He's easily expendable at the end." He turned and untacked Branson before unpacking his saddlebags.

He'd said it as a joke, but a part of me wondered if that was how he actually saw himself. Which wasn't fair, especially given all that he'd accomplished today. I opened my mouth to tell him that when I noticed the growing pile of stuff accumulating at his feet as he unpacked his saddlebags.

"What the hell is all of that?"

He crouched and pulled open a silver-and-purple sequined pouch. "The secret to anti-aging, sweetheart," he said before

pulling out a series of ornate bottles. “Cleanser—both oil- and water-based, of course, exfoliant, essence, toner, moisturizer, eye cream, and miracle serum. Which I have to ration since I can’t afford it anymore.”

“You brought your entire skin care regime out camping with you?” I asked, incredulous.

He laughed. “Oh honey, no. This is just my AM products. This,” he said, holding up another equally sequined bag, “is for my PM products. I didn’t bother with my noon spritzer or biweekly hair masque.”

I shook my head disbelievingly. “Did you bring anything that would be actually useful for camping?”

“Of course,” he said, indignant. “I’ve roughed it before, if you know what I mean,” he added with an eyebrow wiggle.

He unzipped another saddlebag and began to pull out several stuff sacks. “Tent, sleeping pad, sleeping bag, pillow, ground cover, insect netting. Norma hooked me up.”

“We’re only out here for one night. Maybe two.”

“That’s why I pared everything down!” he protested.

I gave him a dubious look, not bothering to point out my small bedroll that had everything I needed tucked inside.

“Are you telling me you don’t want to share whatever meat-based deliciousness Norma packed for us?” he asked, brandishing another soft-sided cooler.

I thought of the perfectly adequate bag of sandwiches and the carrot sticks I had tucked in my saddlebag. Then I watched as Richard began to unpack two tinfoil-wrapped steaks, a couple of potatoes, and two ears of corn. I broke when he then pulled out a bottle of wine. “Norma sent wine?” I choked out.

“Of course she did. It’s not a picnic without wine,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

Not once had Norma packed any kind of spread like that for me. It was impractical, cumbersome, and unnecessary. A part of me wondered if I should be suspicious about her motives, but then I watched Richard pull out a Tupperware

container of banana pudding, I decided I didn't care. My mouth watered.

"Let's get the horses taken care of and camp set up. Then we can focus on dinner." We set about work in silence—or at least, *I* was silent. Richard was back to talking nonstop. First, he chatted with his horse, then gave a surprisingly creative litany of insults to the tent as he attempted to wrestle it into shape, and finally dove into a long and hilarious story about learning how to build and light a fire from his friend's dad's groundskeeper's nephew, who was apparently from Norway and quite good in bed.

To my shock, I didn't mind it as much as I would have expected to. In fact, I didn't mind it at all. The man was entertaining as fuck.

Finally, with the fire going and the food cooked and eaten and the last of the wine in our cups, he settled down, and we sat watching the sunset streak the sky into a million shades of reds and oranges.

"It's gorgeous," Richard said. I could hear the awe in his voice. I felt a surge of pride. "I can see why you like it out here," he added.

"There's no place else in the world I'd rather be," I told him.

"Have you ever been to the Maldives? They're pretty impressive, just sayin'. Especially if you get a bungalow over the water with a full staff included."

I chuckled. Not for the first time, I thought Richard was more like Oscar than he'd ever admit, especially since Oscar was probably enjoying the second week of his Maldives vacation right about then, and it was yet another reminder of how different his life was from mine. But with the light dying and the night settling around us like a blanket, I couldn't help but focus on the things Richard and I had in common. One in particular I'd been turning over in my mind since our conversation the day before.

“You were wrong,” I finally said, “about me not knowing what it’s like to have a difficult father.”

I kept my gaze on the fire, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see his head snap up as he looked my way. As a rule, I generally didn’t like to talk too much about myself, but I felt like I owed it to Richard. He’d done good today—real good. I’d underestimated him. Again.

I grabbed a twig and started to break it into smaller and smaller pieces, throwing each into the flames as I talked. “I grew up down in Texas. My dad was a rancher, just like his dad before him. Never occurred to me that I’d grow up to be anything but. Except my dad had a certain way he saw my life going, and it wasn’t one I was particularly interested in.”

“How so?” Richard asked.

I shrugged. “He had designs on my marrying the only daughter of the rancher who lived next to us. That way, when her daddy died, our land holdings would practically double overnight.” I cut my eyes to him. “To say I wasn’t interested is an understatement.”

“Oh? *Ohhh*,” he said as understanding dawned. “Were you out? Did your dad know?”

I chuckled. “My dad was real good at believing what he wanted to. Even though Oscar and I had dated through most of high school and weren’t shy about showing affection, my dad always referred to him as my friend. He thought I was just going through ‘a phase.’” I put air quotes around the last bit.

“And you know, it’s Texas,” I continued. “That part of things didn’t surprise me. Especially not a couple of decades ago. But that wasn’t all of it. He... he was into diversifying, which is always a good thing for ranchers—I’m not saying it isn’t. But he ended up spending more time on leasing out hunting rights, oil rights, water rights, and you name it than tending to his stock and his employees.”

Richard hummed thoughtfully, and I could feel the weight of his attention on me. It was strangely comfortable, which

might have explained why I kept going when I ordinarily might have stopped.

“Then my dad got into politics, and suddenly, optics were everything. He didn’t like the idea of standing onstage during his swearing in with his son and his son’s boyfriend in attendance. He started getting stricter about what was acceptable behavior, threatening to cut me off if I didn’t do as he asked.” I took in a deep breath. I’d let my resentment go, for the most part, but the memory still made me feel hollow. “Eventually, it became too much. I realized I was living his life, not mine. So I took off the moment I graduated high school.”

“Wow. Where did you go? What did you do?”

I stared into the fire, remembering how Oscar and I had left town together and the many months that followed as we’d tried and failed to make it work between us. It had taken us longer than it should have for us to realize we were two different people who had two different visions of the ideal life.

Leaving my father had been easy—he’d lost all interest in me once he realized I wouldn’t be the son he wanted. Leaving Oscar though... that had been much, much harder. He hadn’t simply been my boyfriend; he’d been my *best* friend—encouraging and comforting and endlessly loyal. I hadn’t known how to give that up.

In the end, of course, I hadn’t had to. Unlike my dad, Oscar hadn’t cut me off when our goals diverged. He’d never made me feel guilty for wanting what I wanted. His friendship hadn’t wavered for a second. Any attraction between us might have died out long ago, but I’d never questioned for a moment whether he’d be there for me if I needed him. He was one of the best people I knew.

Given that Richard had only ever seen a different side of Oscar though, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to make him understand, so I skipped over that part of my life.

“Ranching was who I was,” I said instead. “It was in my blood. I knew that eventually I wanted to buy my own land, run my own operation the way I saw fit. But when I left, my

dad cut me off financially. The only money I had was a few thousand from odd jobs I'd taken on during high school. So... I took everything I had and invested it."

"Holy shit." Richard laughed appreciatively. "What the hell did you invest the money in? This place is in the boonies, but it's still an enormous piece of gorgeous land."

My chest warmed at his praise, and my cheeks warmed at the answer. "Spunk."

I enjoyed seeing the whites of his eyes in the dimming light. "Come again, pun intended?"

I chuckled. "When I left my dad's place, I took my prized bull with me. He was from excellent stock—a calf off my dad's best cow and bull—and I'd raised him from a calf. I'd entered him in 4-H competitions until he had a heap-load of commendations, even winning Grand at Denver. So I contacted someone I'd gone to ag school with and got his help signing up for the AI program north of Houston."

Richard didn't seem to follow what I was saying, so I explained the process of bovine artificial insemination, controlling genetics, and breeding for stronger calves.

"Money started coming in pretty quickly. I could make twenty-five grand from one collection session. That adds up over time, obviously."

Richard started giggling. "Sorry. Sorry, keep going."

"I became a semen magnate," I said with a straight face. "Everyone wanted my seed."

He lost his composure and roared with laughter, enough to displace Birdie's dozing head from his lap and cause the horses to turn and glare at us. The sound was glorious and infectious, and I couldn't help laughing as well.

When he finally calmed down, he glanced over at me. "My father made his fortune in commercial real estate, so I know you have at least thirty thousand acres, which can't have cost you less than ten million dollars. Even if you leveraged the shit out of your resources, that's not the kind of money you make from bull jizz."

That he'd put that together so quickly was a reminder of how smart Richard was and how easy it was to forget that in the face of his ridiculous fashion sense and over-the-top personality.

"You're right. It's not." I squirmed a little before admitting the next part. "I... er... also invested in Oscar's company early on." I felt my cheeks begin to heat even more. "I'm actually a part owner of Overton Investments."

Richard blinked at me, his eyes widening. "Seriously? But Overton Investments is worth... like... I mean, there's rich, and then there's really rich, and then there's stupid rich, and then *insane* rich, and Oscar's so far beyond that I don't even know how you'd describe it."

Usually, this was a piece of information I kept to myself. Not that many people in my neck of the woods knew who Oscar was or had any idea how much his company was worth. But I'd had my fair share of gold diggers in my past, so mentioning my net worth was something I tended to avoid.

I shifted to tend to the fire and studied Richard out of the corner of my eye, waiting to see if learning about my wealth would change anything. After a moment, he shook his head as if clearing it.

"Well done, you," he said. "Okay, so you had enough to get this place, and then you had to build up your stock?"

"Not quite. I still had to wait for the right piece of land to become available, and I had a lot to learn about ranching in this kind of climate. It's different than Texas. I hired on as a hand down near Laramie. Asked a shit-ton of questions and learned a lot. By the time I was ready to go out on my own, I had more information specific to Wyoming ranching, as well as a foreman willing to jump ship with me."

"Jed's been with you the whole time?"

I nodded. "We've taught each other a lot over the years. Not sure I could have done it without him."

Richard smiled. "And now here you are, living your dream."

It should have been easy to answer yes, but something made me hesitate. I was living exactly the life I'd always wanted: I owned my own land, my own cattle, I had good help and good company. Until a week ago, I hadn't had much to complain about other than Walt Hosser causing trouble and leaving me shorthanded.

The only thing that had changed between then and now was Richard.

"I'm very lucky," I demurred.

He laughed. "It's not luck. You're good at what you do," he pointed out. "So what does your dad say about your success? I'm sure it feels good to prove him wrong. Do you still talk to him?"

"Every now and again. After a while, my sisters started getting married, and I realized it wasn't fair to them to miss their weddings because I wanted to make some sort of point to my father. I've also run into him at a few industry events. We keep it cordial. We definitely don't discuss my love life... not that there'd be much to discuss on that topic anyway."

"Are you not interested in dating?" He attempted to sound casual, but I could hear the interest in his question.

I tried to think of the best way to respond. I thought about Oscar's warnings earlier—that Richard wouldn't be sticking around, and he certainly wouldn't be interested in settling down with anyone.

"Nah. Not a lot of options around here, and I'm not really dating material anyway. Don't have the time or the inclination." It was the truth, but it wasn't the whole truth. I didn't want to date, but I *did* want to settle down with someone. I wanted a husband to come home to after a long day out on the ranch. I wanted a man cuddled up warm in my bed. I wanted kids I could teach to ride and love the outdoors.

But I was also a realist. I was pushing middle age, and available men with similar goals were thin on the ground in rural Wyoming.

"What about you?"

Richard flashed me a cheeky grin and ran a hand over his hip. “Oh honey, you can’t tame a wild horse.”

“Actually,” I pointed out, “you can.”

I hadn’t thought through my answer before speaking, and the minute the words left my mouth, I realized the proposition inherent in them. Richard noticed it as well because his eyes snapped to meet mine. It was as though I’d dropped a bomb of electric current between us.

All at once, I had a vivid image in my mind of what it might look like trying to tame Richard. Him on his hands and knees, his ass bare before me, one of my hands holding his hip while the other guided my cock toward his hole.

Listening to him beg me for it before I eased myself inside him.

I shuddered, the fantasy so real that I could practically smell the precum that would be leaking from his cock.

In the light of the fire, his eyes burned into mine, flames flickering in wide pupils. I knew then that if I leaned forward, if I let out a sound or gave any indication whatsoever of my interest, he would be bare before me in seconds.

His eyes dropped to the unmistakable bulge in my pants, and his lips parted on a breath. “Do you want to...”

RICHARD

I hadn't been sure how I was going to finish that question, but I never got a chance.

The second I started speaking, Boone was on his feet, scrambling away from me until the light from the fire barely reached him. I couldn't read his expression in the shadows, but it was clear from the distance he'd put between us that he'd felt the same surge of sexual attraction as I had. He was simply reacting to it completely differently than I was.

"We should go to bed." He snapped up his bedroll, which looked like little more than a couple of thin blankets. He held it against his chest, almost like a shield.

I glanced toward the tent, which was clearly large enough for two.

"You want to..." I repeated, gesturing to the tent and knowing how suggestive the question must sound. I swallowed thickly, forcing myself to finish. "Join me?"

Light from the fire flickered across his face, casting half in shadows. I couldn't tell if it was the flames making his eyes appear full of heat or if it was something else. I knew I shouldn't probe that question too deeply though.

"I shouldn't," he said.

Shouldn't, I noted. Not that he didn't want to.

I wanted to give him a sassy reply, to put a fist on my hip and give him my best playboy impression, but the tension between us was too heavy.

“Good night, Richard.” There was something final in the way he said my name instead of calling me McQueen like he usually did. He strode around to the other side of the fire and began to spread out his bedroll.

Birdie, on the other hand, wasn't so stubborn. The minute I unzipped the tent, she barreled her way inside and took up residence at the foot of my sleeping bag.

“Seriously, dog?” Boone asked, watching her disappear. I swore I heard him grumble the word *traitor* under his breath.

“Looks like she's got the good sense to take shelter in case of rain.” I gestured toward the distant horizon, where clouds had begun to gather just after sunset.

“It's not going to rain,” Boone said.

“That's not what the sky says.” As if to prove my point, a streak of lightning lit the clouds.

“Heat lightning, nothing more.”

I didn't point out that it was practically freezing now that the sun had set. If he wanted to be stubborn, so be it. “Well, if it does start raining and you come knocking at my door, I'm not letting you in unless you tell me I was right,” I teased.

“It's not going to rain,” he insisted yet again.

“Okay, then. Good night!” I said in my cheeriest voice.

He grunted in return.

Once in the tent, I stripped down to my briefs and the long-sleeve wool undershirt Harrison had loaned me specifically for the chilly nights. The sleeping bag was cold as fuck and a little too roomy, and I was glad for the warm spot Birdie created at my feet. As I settled into it, my ears picked up the sound of Boone's movements as he tended the fire and set up his bedroll.

I strained to listen as he pulled off his clothes. I imagined the soft light of the fire playing off his muscles, throwing shadows from the ridges of his abdomen. Following that train of thought did nothing to lessen my hard-on. If anything, it made it worse.

I slipped a hand under the elastic of my briefs and ran my hand down the length of my shaft. I wondered what it would feel like to have Boone's strong, callused fingers circling me, cupping me, pumping me.

I bit my lip against a groan. My hand made a distinct *whooshing* sound against the nylon of the sleeping bag. There was no mistaking what I was doing or that Boone could likely hear it. I hesitated, trying to decide which was worse: letting him hear me jack off or going to bed with all of this pent-up need filling my balls.

Before the decision came to a head, I heard a light splattering of what sounded like water droplets striking the side of the tent. "Is that... *rain*?" I called out.

"Nope," came Boone's shouted reply.

The sound grew stronger. "It sure sounds like rain."

"It's not."

Rain was coming down pretty steadily now. I shook my head at Boone's stubbornness. "Are you sure?"

"Just a sprinkle."

I rolled my eyes. Lord protect me from intransigent cowboys. I flicked on the headlamp I'd hung from the ceiling and unzipped the tent flap to stick my head out. It was very much raining—pouring, in fact. I withdrew into the shelter of the tent but kept the flap open.

"Just a sprinkle, huh?" I had to shout to be heard over the deluge. "You sure you don't want to join me? It's nice and dry in here."

A sodden shadow appeared in front of me. From the glow of the headlamp, I could see that it was Boone, water falling from the rim of his hat like it was a gutter. "Fine, I'll come in."

He started to push his way inside. I held up a hand, stopping him. He shot me a questioning look.

"Isn't there something you want to say first?"

"Thank you?"

“In addition to that.”

“Weren’t you the one who just ten seconds ago was demanding I get out of the rain?”

“And you can,” I pointed out. “As soon as you tell me what I want to hear.”

He closed his eyes and blew out a breath. A muscle twitched along his jaw. “Fine. It’s raining. You were right. Can I come in now?”

I gave him my brightest smile. “Of course you can,” I said, shifting back to give him room. “Thank you for asking.”

He scowled at me as he slid inside. He was soaked, dripping water from his hat, his chin, his elbows. Within seconds, a shallow puddle had formed around him. Birdie scooted out of the way, tucking her paws under her to keep from getting wet.

A tremor ran through his body. He was freezing. “You stupid asshole,” I muttered under my breath. “If you catch your death from this, there will be no one to show me the way home, and I’ll be stuck out here, wandering the plains, haunting all who cross my path.”

He chucked his hat to the side and ran a hand through his hair. “That’s a little dramatic, isn’t it?”

I didn’t answer. I was too busy watching a rivulet of water trace its way down the side of his cheek, sliding along his jaw before trailing down his neck to the seam of his soaked wool shirt. I turned to grab the bath sheet and matching hand towel from my bag. Even as I held them out to him, he’d grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. It hit the floor of the tent with a wet slap. He reached for his pants next.

“Whoa there, cowboy,” I said, my cheeks heating. “Moving a little fast, aren’t we?”

“I’m going to share your sleeping bag.”

“Oh?” It came out as a squeak.

“It’s a two-person bag,” he said. “Lord knows why Norma gave you that one, but it’s turned out to be handy because it’s

the only way I'm getting warmed up."

He was right—it was cold. His teeth had already begun to chatter, and goose bumps covered his flesh, turning his nipples into two rigid points. Not that I was staring. Because I totally was.

"Right," I said, clearing my throat. "Of course."

I slid to the side and opened the bag, gesturing for him to get in. His skin was like ice, and I sucked in a breath at the feel of it. "You're frozen," I murmured. I ran a hand up and down his arm rapidly to get some friction going.

"I should have come in here sooner so you didn't have to share your bag. Sorry."

His reluctant admission surprised me. "Stubborn cowboys are stubborn," I teased.

"Maybe," he said with a soft chuckle. "I would have had a miserable night if you hadn't come with all this extra gear."

"See how handy I can be?"

He rolled to face me. My fingers slid from his arm and trailed across his back before landing on his side. We were inches apart, barely even that. I could feel the cold radiating from his body, the slight tremors coursing through him as he warmed.

Our eyes met in the strange, shadowed light from my hanging headlamp, and time seemed to slow down. The masculine scent of him surrounded me—dried sweat and fresh rain. I wanted to lean forward and inhale him, to rest my cheek against his muscular chest and feel the strong bands of his arms pull tight around me.

A strangled noise of need escaped the back of my throat, and heat flared in his eyes.

"You're... you're still cold," I pointed out.

"I am," he agreed.

I bit my bottom lip. "Maybe you should come closer so we can share body heat. Let me warm you."

I'd intended to keep my hands to myself, but now he was here, and he was so close that the slightest inhale of breath caused the hair on his chest to scratch against my skin. This was beyond temptation. This was inevitability.

"On second thought, I don't think I can do this," I breathed. "I want to put my hands all over you."

Boone was big and solid, with powerful, iron-hard muscles under smooth skin. The lamplight gilded the day's growth of scruff on his jaw and gave a silvery glow to the single raindrop caught on the edge of his eyelashes. Every part of his body begged to be touched. How anyone could expect me to share this sleeping bag without copping lots and lots of feels was beyond me. But the look on his face, the stillness and almost vulnerability there, held me still.

Then his hand came up slowly to brush across the top of my hair and around to cup the back of my head. Our eyes stayed locked together as he pulled me closer. "C'mere," he murmured just before his lips touched mine.

It was sweet and light, teasing and tentative, for about three seconds. And then suddenly, the gloves were off. I lurched at him to deepen the kiss as the grip of his hand in my hair tightened almost to the point of pain. In that moment, I didn't give a fuck that he was my boss. That he was Oscar's friend. That he was surly and gruff. All I cared about was getting more of him. I figured we could excuse the breach of conduct as long as we were the only people out here under the stormy night sky. No one would ever have to know, and we could slake our thirst with each other in this frozen moment before returning to the real world in the morning.

"Want you," I gasped between hungry kisses. Boone's deep groan echoed my desperation, and his knee slid aggressively between my legs until he could wrap one leg around mine and tug me closer. His hand moved down to grab my ass and squeeze, pulling my throbbing cock against his hip.

I rutted against him as we kissed, making pathetic whimpering noises because I wanted it all at the same time.

Kissing, humping, grabbing. The rain came down even louder on the roof of the tent, nearly drowning out the sounds of our heavy breathing and the swishing of the nylon sleeping bag as we shoved it off of our now-heated bodies.

Boone's large, callused fingers shoved underneath my shirt until the whole thing bunched under my armpits, and his hand spanned my back to hold me closer to his chest. I thought I heard him grumble the words *more* and *fuck* several times, but that might have been my own thoughts echoing inside my head.

My hands were greedy bastards, trying to reach every inch of his bare skin possible, if only so I could inventory it quickly and come back later for a more detailed audit.

Within moments, my shirt had come off, and Boone had moved on top of me to thrust his hard dick against mine as he gripped my hair to hold my head still. His mouth invaded mine as if the man had been holding back for days and was finally, finally, allowed to taste me.

I arched up into him and moved my head away to suck in a much-needed breath. "Make me come," I gasped before kissing him again. He pulled back just enough to pin me with that dominant, combustible gaze.

"You need to be sure of things," he said in a rough voice. "Be sure, McQueen."

His use of my nickname washed over me with surprising affection.

I'd never been more unsure about anything in my life, but I was a damned good liar.

"I'm sure."

The fire in his eyes blazed bright and hot, and I let myself be consumed by it.

BOONE

Touching Richard was terrifying, both because I knew I shouldn't have been doing it and because I feared I'd never be able to stop. It had been that fear that had kept me outside, shivering in the rain, for as long as I had.

I'd known I wouldn't be able to share his tent, let alone his sleeping bag, without reaching for him. Even if I'd somehow managed to control myself while I was awake—not at all a guarantee, given how tempted I'd been all night—it would have happened later, when my dreams got the better of me.

Sure enough, now here we were, with his skin warm and inviting under my hands and his breathless, wanting noises in my ear driving me crazy. And all I could think was that I was going to take as much of him as he was willing to give.

I yanked his briefs down, even though I would have loved to spend time looking at his body in them. The light from his hanging headlamp created moving shadows across his skin, and the cool air made it pebble. I leaned over and dropped open-mouthed kisses across his chest to his nipples and then pulled the brown buds into my mouth to tease with my teeth and tongue.

When I reached for his dick, he arched into my grip and gasped. I wanted to do so many things to him—see, taste, and hear how he responded to various touches—but right now, I was laser focused on fulfilling his first wish.

I wanted to make him come.

After unzipping the bag enough to move, I spun around to pull his briefs off his legs completely and toss them aside. Then, while he watched with laser-hot intensity, I got to my knees and shifted so my lips were poised over his ruddy cock. It was gorgeous, just like the rest of him, decorated with a glossy smear of precum that made my mouth water. I licked a stripe over the tip, tasting the warm salt of it, before greedily sucking his full length down.

Richard arched again, his fingernails grazing my back as he begged for more. I grabbed a globe of his ass and squeezed, bringing my mouth farther down his shaft until it was covered in saliva.

He was hot and responsive, open and vulnerable, panting my name under his breath. His hands moved across my flank and into the back of my underwear, sliding curious fingers down the cleft of my ass.

I wanted all of him, and I was willing to take what I wanted as long as we were here in this temporary time outside of time.

I sucked his dick like I was starving for it, because I was. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd given anyone head. Usually, I was the one being serviced in the backroom of a bar or in a cheap motel room. I'd never had any trouble finding men who wanted to blow me or even provide their ass for the night, but it had never been like this before.

Full of more than desire. Straight-up, chest-burning *need*.

I wanted to hear him shout. I wanted to hear his grunts and groans shake the raindrops from the trees and echo across my ranch. And I wanted the taste of his release branded on my tongue so I could hold the memory of this stormy encounter for a time long after he was gone.

“Boone, fuck! Please, oh god, that feels... Turn around so I can... Fuck, I'm going to... *oh!*”

His cum filled my mouth and throat as his fingernails bit into my skin. He grunted and shuddered and gasped through a long release. When he was finally done, I moved with

lightning speed, reaching into my shorts and jacking myself off to the sight of him. His skin was flushed pink and damp with sweat. His hair was a messy nest, and his eyes were half-lidded and dazed.

Just seeing him like that, cum-drunk and half-unconscious, made my balls draw up. I knelt, straddling him, and came in spurts all over his belly and chest. The orgasm that hit me was like a bull blasting out of the gate right into my gut. I was breathless and shocked by it, stunned and frozen for a moment until the rest of the world came rushing back in.

We stared at each other, both of us panting.

My cum glistened on his skin, and a part of me wanted to smear it into him so that he would smell like me. Smell like this. A constant reminder of what we'd done. A reminder of *us*.

It was that last thought that caused me to pull away slightly. There was no *us* and never would be.

“Don't get weird.” He tried to sound cheeky, but he couldn't quite hide the vulnerability in his voice.

Too late, I thought. Except he wasn't the one making this weird; *I* was, with my desire to thread my fingers through his hair, tilt his head back, and hold him there until he begged to be mine.

I'd never felt such an intense desire to possess someone.

It spooked me enough that I leaned away, putting distance between us. I tried to give him every apology I could fit into one glance. “I can't promise you that. And I really shouldn't have—”

He reached up and slapped a hand over my mouth to stop my words. His eyes went from cum-drunk to fierce in an instant. “No. No regrets. I won't allow it.”

He was right. It wasn't fair of me to accept his body, his consent, and then toss it back as if I'd somehow regretted it.

Especially since I *didn't*. Not even close.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled against his hand. “Just so we’re clear, I don’t regret anything.”

He nodded before removing his hand from my mouth. “Good. Me neither. Now, hand me that towel, and let’s get some sleep. If there’s one thing I’ve learned since coming to Wyoming, it’s that ranch work starts disgustingly early. And the key element to any anti-aging regimen is a full night’s sleep.”

It was obvious he felt the tension that had crept in between us—an awkwardness that had no place in this tent. We were two grown adults—one of us more grown than the other, perhaps—and we’d had a consensual sexual encounter. Neither of us were prudes or virgins. Neither of us were strangers to casual sex.

So why did something feel so off?

Maybe because something about the sex itself had felt so indescribably perfect. And not at all casual.

After reaching behind me to find the discarded towel, I did my best to clean him off and help him back into his briefs. We turned out the headlamp, pulled the sleeping bag back in place over both of us, and lay awkwardly close without actually touching.

“Fuck this,” Richard finally said before moving closer and snuggling me. “Suck it up. This is happening.”

I made a sound of acknowledgment in my throat and held him in my arms. Something about having him there made my racing thoughts settle, and I fell quickly into a deep sleep.

Several hours later, Birdie’s cold nose nudged my head to wake me up, dragging me from my dreams. The barest hint of sunrise glowed against the skin of the tent. I reached out to scratch her head and murmured for her to give me a minute. Richard’s messy hair tickled my chin, and I realized his head was on my chest and an arm was thrown across my ribs. I leaned down to kiss his temple without thinking. He murmured something incoherent, and I told him to stay asleep.

After slipping out of the bag and stomping into my damp boots, I unzipped the tent and followed Birdie into the frigid morning. Because of poor planning, my spare clothes were still in my saddlebag, but at least they were dry inside a waterproof liner. I dressed as quickly as I could and stomped back into my boots, this time wearing a nice, thick pair of dry socks.

The fire ring was a puddle of soot, but I'd at least been smart enough to cover our makeshift wood pile with a small tarp to protect it from morning dew.

The tack and feed were still protected under another tarp, and I quickly set both tarps out on a stretch of grass in hopes they'd dry off a little before I had to pack them up. Then I made the fire and tended to the horses.

By the time I put water on for coffee, Richard was moving inside the tent.

"The fire's nice and hot if you want to bring the sleeping bag and come sit out here," I called. But a few moments later, he emerged fully dressed with his sleeping bag already crammed into its compression sack and his personal items packed.

"Morning," I said, forcing myself not to be awkward or silent. His plea the night before not to make things weird echoed in my memory, and I wanted to make sure he didn't feel used. "You've already packed, huh?"

Smooth, Boone.

He glanced up at me in surprise. "Were you expecting me to sleep in? We still haven't found that heifer, and she could be in trouble somewhere."

My heart warmed with his concern. I couldn't help but let out a laugh, wondering what his friends and family back home would think if they could hear him now.

Or what *Oscar* would think.

My gut tightened at the thought of Oscar and his warnings about Richard. But he could hardly blame me for falling into bed with the man. Oscar was open-minded and sex-positive. I

couldn't imagine he'd send me a beautiful man like Richard without the thought crossing his mind that I might want to take him to bed. Plus, his warnings had been about falling for the man, not fucking him.

And I was certainly not going to fall for Richard.

Or so I tried telling myself.

“Why are you laughing? Is it that unbelievable I'd be ready to go so early?” Richard sounded defensive, his arms crossed tight against his chest. “I'll have you know I haven't overslept since that first morning—”

“No,” I said, smiling at him to reassure him. “I was just wondering what your New York friends would say if they could hear you now, lamenting a missing heifer and deeming her worth waking up for before the sun.”

“Oh.” His sudden laughter filled the campsite, and I wondered if maybe I would be happy to wake up to that sound every day. The thought startled me. I quickly busied myself with the coffee before pulling out the instant oatmeal packets and paper bowls Norma had packed.

He poked at the fire. “If I was still back in New York, I probably wouldn't have even gone to bed yet. Right before I came here, I was staying with a friend who was known for his all-night parties. Not particularly conducive to turning in early.”

“Somehow, you strike me as a guy who doesn't mind an all-night rager or two.” I said it in a teasing voice, but I was also trying to remind myself of the stark differences between us and our lifestyles. I needed to remember all the reasons we would never fit together as a couple.

He lifted a shoulder. “Couldn't afford anywhere else.”

It was hard to imagine someone as polished and poised as Richard Dunning being broke, especially given the expansiveness of his wardrobe and skin care regime. Then I remembered the look on his face in the tack store when he had to admit to me he couldn't afford the boots because his father

had cut him off. It made me realize just how little I knew about his family situation.

I thought about asking more, but it was clear from Richard's expression that his financial insolvency was a bruise he didn't want poked, so I let it go. We ate and drank quickly before packing up the tent and tacking the horses. Once we were in the saddle again, I radioed Jed to ask for an update on the trailer pickup. He said Harrison was already on his way but would probably need our help rounding up the stock and getting them loaded.

Since Harrison's arrival was still at least an hour away, we rode another search grid and finally found the missing heifer fat and happy, gorging herself on new grass just outside a pasture we'd searched the day before.

"Christ almighty," I muttered before directing Richard on how to help me herd her back toward the pasture where Harrison would meet us with the trailer.

We worked together for a few minutes while Richard got the hang of it. He was still nervous in the saddle, but he'd picked up more information than I'd given him credit for, and I was surprised to see just how much he seemed to enjoy it.

"Just stay abreast of her like that and let Birdie worry about bringing up the rear," I told him. "The heifer will stay between us until we can get her into the pasture with the others."

It was obvious he was focused on the task at hand, not allowing himself to get distracted or sidetracked. He was patient and calm, treating the entire process with respect.

If anything, I was the one getting distracted. I couldn't stop my eyes from straying to him, mesmerized as I watched him work. He still wore that ridiculous sequined hat that glinted something awful in the sun, but somehow, all that sparkle suited him. It couldn't compete with his smile, however. His skin had tanned a little more, and despite his array of expensive specialty creams, his face had taken on a slightly weathered patina, making his eyes and teeth shine that much brighter.

He noticed me staring, and his smile faltered. “What am I doing wrong?”

The question bothered me, and it took me a moment to understand why: it was the assumption that he’d screwed up. As if he simply expected to fail and figured everyone else in his life expected that as well.

Hadn’t that been exactly why Oscar had sent him to the Silver Fork in the first place? Oscar hadn’t believed Richard would last one week, much less an entire month.

He’d set him up to fail. To teach him a lesson.

And I’d been complicit. I’d taken one look at Richard with his overpriced clothes and ridiculous luggage, and I’d written him off.

“You can tell me,” Richard pressed when I didn’t immediately answer him. “I’m used to screwing up. Trust me. But I can do better.”

My mind replayed the scene of Richard’s second night on the ranch, when I’d helped him to bed and he’d promised me in his sleepy voice that he would try harder. It made my chest ache.

I wondered if anyone had ever truly believed in Richard. If anyone had really given him a chance.

“No,” I told him sincerely. “You’re doing everything just right.”

Twin spots of color lit his cheeks, and his mouth broke into a wide grin. He beamed the entire rest of the way as we herded the heifer safely into the pasture and closed the gate.

“That was kind of exhilarating,” he said, eyes shining and cheeks flushed.

“You’re a bona fide cowboy now, McQueen,” I said, shooting him a wink.

He puffed his chest out. “I herded cattle out on the range. You can’t argue with that.” He then broke into a rendition of “Home on the Range,” belting the song out like he was a star on Broadway.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, cowboy, that's enough. How about we take a breather until Harrison gets here? Shouldn't be too long now." I dismounted, and he followed suit, stumbling slightly when he reached the ground.

I peered at him. "How are your legs holding up?"

He leaned over and massaged his thigh with one hand. My eyes went straight to the bulge in his jeans before sliding down the rest of his muscled legs.

He clearly noticed. "See anything you like?"

I blinked up at him. "Huh?"

His grin was as wide as the sun. "A man looks at my fly like that and I'm going to jump to some conclusions, cowboy."

He was too tempting. And technically, maybe, this was still considered a time out of time.

When we returned home, I could go back to being a proper boss. In the meantime, I needed to touch him, to taste him, one more time.

In two steps, I was in front of him. I reached for the front of his shirt and fisted it before using it to haul him close and crush my mouth to his.

RICHARD

I'd been wrong about Boone. Given his weirdness the night before, I'd assumed he'd do his best to pretend nothing physical had happened between us. But that was not at all what happened.

As he kissed the fuck out of me, I thought back to the easy grins and open conversation he'd shared with me so far this morning. He hadn't been his usual gruff self at all.

I wrapped my arms around his broad back and pulled him in close, trapping his fist between us. His other hand came up to cup the back of my head as if he worried I'd stop kissing him too soon.

News flash: I would *never* stop kissing him too soon.

We kissed for a long time, tasting and exploring each other's mouths and running hungry hands all over each other. When Boone finally got a hand between us to rub my dick through the denim of my jeans, I realized I wasn't going to be content until we saw this whole thing through.

I dropped to my knees and fumbled for his belt, yanking desperately until I got the leather strap free and yanked open his pants.

His fingers brushed through my hair, and I looked up to meet his eyes. He looked at me with a tender kind of affection, something James had done all the time when we were together. But when James had done it, I'd wanted to look away. I'd never felt worthy of his affection for some reason.

When Boone did it... it ignited something long hidden inside of me. That look on his face made me *want* to be worthy, but at the same time, it made me feel like I already was.

I kept my eyes locked on his as I began to lick and suck him. The heat in his gaze darkened and sparked, making my stomach tumble with excitement.

“You’re the sexiest man I’ve ever seen,” he said roughly. His hands came around to the sides of my face, and he caressed my cheeks with his thumbs. “Just like that. *Christ.*”

He groaned and threw his head back as I swallowed him down. I cupped his sac with one hand and reached back to press behind it with another. The sounds he made only spurred me on until saliva dripped from his balls and my chin. Boone’s jaw tightened as he met my eyes again.

He was holding back, trying to prolong the blowjob, but I wanted him to lose control. I wanted to *make* him lose control.

I reached around and grabbed his ass, squeezing hard before sneaking my index finger between his cheeks and grazing his hole as I sucked him faster and fucked my throat with his cock.

He shouted and tightened his hand in my hair, holding me deep on his cock for a split second before releasing me and fisting his hands by his sides as he continued to come down my throat. I sputtered and gagged before licking and sucking him through the rest of his orgasm.

When he was done, he pulled back, and I raised a hand to wipe my mouth. He stopped me. “I like you looking like this,” he said. He ran his thumb along my lips, smearing saliva and cum in the wake of his touch.

I wanted to hear more, find out what else he liked and how I could please him, but the moment was broken by the sound of an engine revving in the distance beyond the tree break. Harrison arriving with the truck. Boone’s eyes cleared, and he took a step back, pulling me to my feet. He reached into his

pocket and pulled out a dark blue bandana, which he used to carefully clean my face.

This kind of tenderness I could hardly bear. It was a promise I wasn't sure he realized he was making. I tried to grab the cloth from him to do it myself, but he batted my hand away and took hold of my jaw with one hand to hold me still.

"Let me care for you, dammit," he said under his breath.

I was so fucking gone for him. That one muttered command might as well have been an expression of love as far as my stupid heart was concerned. I closed my eyes and lectured myself.

You do not belong in this world. This rancher doesn't need a spoiled rich kid in his life. This is temporary. This is nothing more than a hookup. Don't be an idiot and expect anything more.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes again before plastering a smile on my face. He must have been able to tell it was forced.

"Where'd you go?" he asked, pinching his forehead together. He reached out to trace his thumb along my cheek.

"Nowhere. I'm fine," I said, flashing him a flirty wink as I stepped out of reach. His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to say something. The honk of a horn broke through the trees before he could.

Boone quickly dressed himself and reached for his water bottle before handing it to me. Instead of turning away and immediately seeking out the truck, he stayed in front of me and ran fingers through my hair as if brushing it back in place. The look he gave me held the same kind of tenderness he'd shown while I was on my knees, and I didn't know what to make of it.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

I nodded. He pulled me in for a searing kiss that lingered for a moment before his lips caressed the edge of my jaw. He pressed his forehead against mine, his fingers tight around my neck. "If I get my way, I aim to make you better than okay."

My heart leaped out of my chest and got lodged somewhere in my throat. I could only nod and stumble after him when he turned and made his way through the trees to the dirt access road, where the pickup truck and a long trailer were in the process of making a tight turnaround.

When Harrison finally got it in place, he hopped out of the truck and stretched, giving us his trademark grin and tipping his hat in greeting. “That drive fucking sucks,” he said with a laugh. “There’s absolutely nothing between here and home, I’ll tell you that. McQueen—you interested in keeping me company on the way back?”

The suggestion startled me. I couldn’t help but feel flattered that he would voluntarily want to spend eight hours in a truck with me.

I glanced at Boone, who looked just as calm, cool, and collected as always. “Nah,” Boone said nonchalantly. “We have some unfinished business to take care of.”

His eyes were full of heat and promise as they flashed to meet mine. I practically choked at the baldness of his innuendo. His words from earlier about wanting to make me feel better than okay echoed through my head and made me blush.

He grinned a little at my startled expression before turning back to Harrison and adding, “We found one of the missing heifers roaming free. Thankfully, she was close to a pasture, but if she’d wandered any farther, we probably would have lost her. Made me realize I need to check the northern edge of the ranch for any other strays, and McQueen can help if we come across any fence breaks. After calving’s done, we’ll need to audit the stock.”

Harrison nodded. “Makes sense. We could be missing some backgrounders and not know it yet.”

“Norma loaded us both up before we left, so we’ve got plenty of supplies,” I began, but Harrison cut me off with a grin.

“You know better than to think Norma’d let you make do with yesterday’s sandwiches, Boone,” he chided. “She sent along a fresh cooler just in case.”

Boone laughed, and the two of them kept talking, but all I could think about was another night spent alone in the shared sleeping bag with Boone. Another night naked against his muscular body. Another night of his kisses and questing hands.

Fuck. I needed to steer clear of these thoughts before I embarrassed myself.

Finally, Harrison moved off toward the trailer.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked Boone.

The answer was to man the gate. Watching the two of them manipulating the stock, Boone on Victory and Harrison riding Branson, was a sight to behold. Harrison’s playful attitude dropped away, and he became all business, calling out commands to Birdie and moving Branson with only slight squeezes of his thighs and shifts of his weight.

Boone’s intense scowl was startling, mostly because I finally realized it was a sign of focus, not anger. He was concentrating on moving his animals as safely as possible to protect everyone involved.

Separating the new cow-calf pair was the trickiest part of the whole endeavor since the cow was protective and the calf was terrified of the horses and the trailer ramp. I could hear the strain in Boone’s voice as he calmly directed me to move over beside the ramp to try and keep the calf from bolting in that direction. When we finally got all three adults and one baby in the trailer, Harrison let out a whoop of celebration.

“Now, that’s how you do it!”

It wasn’t until then that Boone cracked a smile.

And I fell just a little bit harder.

BOONE

After Harrison handed over the food Norma had sent—another elaborate spread from the looks of it—he left for the long drive back, and not a moment too soon. Finally, Richard and I were alone again.

Richard shuffled his feet, looking almost nervous. He kept scoring his teeth across his bottom lip, and if he didn't stop soon, I wouldn't be able to resist running my tongue against that plump flesh.

As if he sensed the direction of my thoughts, he cleared his throat. "So..."

I grinned. I liked him like this—full of anticipation and a little bit of nerves. Waiting for me to make good on my promise from earlier.

I slowly stepped toward him and watched as his pupils dilated with desire. I pressed my palm against his chest and slowly slid it down his front until I cupped the bulge in his jeans. "Please tell me you have lube and a condom in one of those fancy kits of yours."

He groaned, his eyelashes fluttering. "Yes. Of course." He began to pull away to go get it, but I kept my grip on his cock.

"Not yet," I told him. He let out a squeak of needy protest.

I began to stroke him and leaned into him so that my lips brushed the shell of his ear as I spoke. "Tonight."

"Oh god," he moaned. His head dropped to my shoulder. His teeth nipped at my neck. "Need you now."

I dropped my hand and let out a low chuckle. “Work first, play later.” I wasn’t sure who I was damning the most with my words, him or me. It would be a long day in the saddle at this rate, but I also knew if I allowed myself to indulge in him right now, we’d never leave this spot.

Richard let his head fall back as he blew out a long breath. “Fine.”

I smiled. “Now, saddle up. We have a lot of ground to cover.”

A string of muttered curses followed me as I settled myself on Victory’s back. My own cock was just as hard as Richard’s had been, and I wanted nothing more than to throw him down then and there and get us both off. But I liked the idea of his anticipation even more. And I liked the trust he was putting in me to take care of him.

Once Richard had mounted Branson, we moved off toward the northern boundary of the ranch. As we traveled, I pointed out plants, trees, rock formations, the remains of an old hunting cabin, and even an eagle.

He absorbed all the information I threw at him and even asked for more—wanting to know what I’d studied in school, how I’d grown the size of the herd, and what my longer-term plans were for the ranch.

I’d turned the tables on him and learned he’d studied business in college, but only at his dad’s insistence. He’d dutifully taken statistics and economics and everything else his father had deemed important, but then he’d audited several art and fashion classes as well. “Because I audited them, they never showed up on my transcript, so dear old Dad never learned that his hard-earned tuition money was spent educating me on the evolution of the silhouette and textiles through the ages.”

“You rebel, you,” I’d gasped.

He’d preened. Then he’d gone on to tell me more about his classes and about how he’d put them to use designing costumes for his friends. I’d never thought about fashion much

before and knew next to nothing on the subject, but Richard explained things with so much enthusiasm that it was hard not to understand his interest in it.

It wasn't until we'd been talking about it for a while that I realized the implications of what he'd said about auditing all those classes. "But wait, if you were taking all those other classes, that was like a double course load," I'd pointed out.

He'd shrugged. "The assignments never felt like work. It was just fun."

I'd made a mental note that it was just more evidence that Richard wasn't the man he sometimes seemed at first glance.

We'd continued talking, swapping stories as we rode north. The landscape was different in the northeast corner of the ranch. There weren't any grazing lands on a large swath of it due to the craggy, rocky ridge that ran across the corner. I led him up part of the ridge to show him one of my favorite views.

"This is incredible," he breathed, looking out at miles and miles of fertile Wyoming forage area.

I pointed out the distant mountain ranges and told him a little history about the area, and he asked more questions, proving he was curious and eager to learn.

Again and again, I noticed how different Richard was from the lazy, entitled, spoiled rich kid Oscar had warned me about. Was that simply because Oscar was too loyal to James to try to look below the surface? Or was Richard somehow different out here than he was back home?

When I called his attention to a bull moose in a distant stand of trees, Richard's face lit up in wonder. But instead of grabbing his phone to take a picture, his expression turned thoughtful, and he peppered me with intelligent questions about the threat of native wildlife on the herd. I explained how we managed the various threats—the importance of quality fencing, keeping eyes and ears out for signs of various predators, and communicating swiftly with our neighbors when those predators were spotted—then I answered his questions about other threats like disease and weather.

Somehow, as we rode along, the topic turned to sire selection and heifer replacement—one of my favorite subjects—and I went off on the kind of long tangent that would have had Oscar fake-snoring within seconds.

“Sorry,” I said when I caught myself. “I’m boring you—”

Richard snorted and glanced at me from the shade of his ridiculous hat. “You couldn’t bore me if you tried, Boone Hammond,” he said matter-of-factly.

I might have taken this for polite fiction, but to my shock, he drew me right back into the conversation, sharing some observations he’d made as he’d gone about his workday with various ranch hands that showed he’d paid far more attention to our operation than I’d given him credit for.

I found myself staring at him with the same fascination he’d shown the damn bull moose, like he was some species of wildlife I’d never seen before. I felt... *proud* of him—though it wasn’t at all my place to say so. And I couldn’t help admiring him too. The reality shift of moving from New York to Wyoming must’ve been difficult, but he’d dealt with it far better than I could have handled a shift in the opposite direction.

Richard was tougher and more engaged than people gave him credit for.

Oscar was wrong about Richard being lazy and spoiled, and I couldn’t help hoping that Oscar had been wrong about other things regarding Richard too. Like, that ranch life wasn’t simply Richard’s latest shiny obsession but something he genuinely enjoyed. That his interest in the Silver Fork—in me—wasn’t quickly approaching its expiration date. That maybe Richard would stay here and—

I stopped my foolish thoughts right in their tracks. Stay here and *what?*

I wasn’t looking for long term. And even if Richard wasn’t as flighty as Oscar believed, that didn’t mean he was likely to fall in love with an old rancher and build a life in the middle of Wyoming.

The reality was Richard would be taking off in a few weeks. That was a given. So there was no reason to spoil our time together by wishing it was anything more. Wasn't it enough that Richard showed genuine interest in the ranch right now and that I was able to share it with him? I decided that it was. That it *had* to be.

When we finally came to the campsite at Justice Ridge, the sun was sliding down behind the distant Wind River Mountains, leaving the air to rapidly cool in its wake.

"Legs okay?" I asked, standing in the stirrup and pulling my knee over the saddle to hop down so I could help him.

"Not at all. They are very much not okay," he admitted with a laugh. Sure enough, as soon as he was on the ground, his legs wobbled like jelly, and his hand tightened around mine. "Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. You're not used to spending so much time in the saddle. Go sit on that log, and let me handle the tack."

"No, no, I can do it," he protested.

I cupped a hand around his cheek, trying to think of a way he could sit and rest without feeling like he was letting me down. "You're going to need some strength in those legs for later."

He swallowed thickly at the reminder of what I'd promised him earlier in the day. "Then yes, by all means, you are permitted to wait on me hand and foot before taking full advantage of me after dinner."

I laughed as I quickly untacked the horses and gathered some wood before making a fire. The light was fading fast, but the golden glow from the flames warmed Richard's skin to a deep honey color.

As we ate, we talked easily and companionably, just like we had all day out on the ranch. Anyone might have mistaken us for a pair of lifelong friends... if the air between us hadn't been so thick with promise. Every so often, I caught his eye, and we exchanged a heated glance that went far beyond

friendly. And each time he blushed and turned away, the coil of anticipation in my gut twisted just a little tighter.

Once the horses were tended to, camp was set up, and dinner was over, we sat on a fallen log by the dwindling fire, staring at each other, the glow of the flames dull compared to the furnace of our gazes. Richard was uncharacteristically quiet though, and I realized he might actually be nervous.

“You okay with this?” I asked, wanting to make sure he hadn’t changed his mind.

His eyes went wide. “Why? Did you change your mind? Because if you did, I understand. I mean...”

I was on my knees in front of him before he could say another word. I threaded my hands into his hair, holding tight as I tilted his head back so that he met my eyes and couldn’t look away. “I’ve been fantasizing about this moment all day.”

I touched my lips to his before he could respond. I’d meant to start slow, to worship his mouth with my own before moving to his body. But the groan that sounded low in his throat and the needy way he pushed against me threw my efforts to go slowly out the window.

I wanted him. More than I’d wanted anyone in my life.

My mouth fell on his like a starving man. Despite our earlier kisses, despite spending all afternoon in his company, I felt like I’d been hungering for him all day. Watching his ass in the saddle in those tight jeans, following the curves of his thigh muscles as he’d manipulated Branson during the herding, and imagining what I would do the next time I got him naked had taken up more time in my brain today than any thoughts of work or the hundreds of tasks I always flipped through in my head while in the saddle.

His hands came around to clutch at the back of my shirt, and his legs curved around mine until we were a human pretzel falling back into the cool grass behind the fallen log. I never wanted to unwind from his sexy body, but there came a point where I needed to get our clothes off so I could feel the solid warmth of his skin against mine.

I growled and pulled away before dragging the tail of his shirt out of his jeans. Thank fuck there were snaps instead of buttons because I would have ripped his shirt off just as quickly either way, so frantic was my need to touch him with no barriers between us.

When I exposed his chest, I paused a moment, taking in the smooth expanse of skin laid bare before me. I ran a hand over his heated flesh that was as soft as a newborn calf's. I pressed kisses down his sternum, across his belly button, and along where his happy trail would be if he hadn't waxed.

He arched under me, and his fingers dug into my hair. "Please," he groaned.

It was hearing the desperate need in his voice that forced me to slow down. I wanted to tease him. To drive him mad with desire the way he'd driven me mad the entire day. I undid his belt unusually slowly, taking my time sliding the supple leather through the loops of his jeans.

His hands reached to undo the button, trying to speed things along, but I batted them away. I pulled his zipper down myself, tooth by tooth, so that he was squirming by the time I peeled the fabric away, revealing ridiculously tight briefs already damp with precum.

I pressed kisses to the ridge of his cock through the fabric before pushing myself back so that I knelt over him. His hooded eyes looked up at me, and I saw a moment of doubt cross his expression.

"Take the rest of your clothes off," I demanded before he could voice it.

The doubt melted away as he quickly followed my instruction, and within seconds, he was naked.

He reached for me, but I clucked my tongue. "Lie back and let me savor you for a minute."

He groaned, falling back on his elbows. "How do you have so much self-control?"

I grinned, enjoying the sound of need in his voice. "Age has its benefits. I've been imagining this all day. You naked by

the fire, the flickering light dancing on your skin. Watching your cock leak with need.”

I let my eyes hungrily devour him for a moment, committing every part of the sight to memory, before saying, “Touch yourself.”

His hand went straight to his dick, wrapping around it and pumping rhythmically.

“Slower,” I told him. And then again, more forcefully, “*Slower.*”

Richard gave a strangled sound in his throat. The muscles in his legs twitched, his breath coming in pants as he dragged his hand up and down his cock.

“Where’s the lube?” I asked him. I wondered if he could hear the strain in my voice. If he could imagine just how much willpower it was taking not to throw myself on top of him and rut against him like a teenager.

But I wanted this to last. We had all night together out here under the stars. Richard would be leaving soon, and I wanted as much time with him as I could get. I knew that once we returned to the ranch tomorrow, the real world would begin to creep back in, making finding this kind of languid time together difficult, if not impossible.

Richard scrambled for a gold quilted bag dotted with red crystal hearts. He tossed it to me, and I unzipped it to find several travel-sized bottles of lube and a handful of condoms. I grinned, selecting one of the bottles of lube at random and passing it to him.

“Exactly who were you planning on fucking out here?” I asked with a raised brow, peering from the bag to his face. “This stash is more than an emergency condom in a wallet.”

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. “I... I wanted to have something with me just in case, so I grabbed the whole thing without overthinking it.” He peered at me between his fingers. “I knew I’d be out here alone. With you. A-and I didn’t think anything would actually happen. I didn’t think you wanted me the way I wanted you. But I... I *hoped.*”

His words punched me in the chest. I didn't want to think of this as more than sex, but the damned man kept grabbing my heart and squeezing the fuck out of it.

“Play with yourself,” I instructed him in a rough voice. “Make your ass ready for me.”

His lips parted as he let out a shuddering breath. “How long are you going to tease me?”

I studied him. “Until you can't take it anymore.”

“I already can't take it anymore.”

I leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss to his lips, lingering longer than I intended until our tongues were tangling and we were both out of breath. I pulled back, putting distance between us again. “Oh, I think you can take more,” I told him. “I have faith in you, McQueen. You're stronger than you think.”

Though I hadn't thought it possible, his eyes flared even wider. For just a moment, I could see past all the bravado and cheekiness and sass that he usually cloaked himself with to the core of who Richard really was. I saw neediness—not for sex, but for approval.

I saw his desire to be seen and loved.

I knew instinctively that this was a part of him he kept closely guarded and that even allowing me a glimpse of it was a gift.

It was also an invitation. To *be* that person who saw and potentially loved him.

And god, I wanted to be.

So badly, that for this one night, I allowed myself to believe I could be.

He lubed his fingers, moving them to his hole and playing with himself. He slipped a finger inside, followed by another. As I watched, riveted by the view, I groaned, knowing that my cock would soon replace those questing fingers.

He smiled, a glint of mischief entering his eyes that said he'd realized just how much power he had over me. That I might be the one telling him what to do, but holding myself back was its own kind of torture.

"I'm so tight and ready for you," he said hoarsely. "Think about how good it's going to feel to squeeze your way inside me. How much my ass is going to wrap around you."

I shuddered, my cock throbbing.

"Fuck me, Boone. Please."

My control snapped. In seconds, I was naked, ignoring the sound of seams ripping as I yanked my clothes off. I fumbled for a condom from his tiny bag, feeling like a teenager as my hands shook, trying to rip it open. I'd barely rolled it on before Richard was reaching for me, his lubed hand sliding down my dick, his thumb running over the tip.

I growled, low in my throat. I'd wanted to take my time, to make him beg. But if I waited any longer, I would be the one begging.

I positioned myself against him. He whispered *yes* as my cock brushed against his hole. I had just enough willpower left to tease him, sliding in slowly, waiting, letting his body adjust.

"More," he groaned. "Oh god yes!" Tired of my teasing, he arched his hips up to take me inside.

I nearly choked at the tight grip of his body. "Oh fuck, fuck. Fuck, McQueen. Shit. Fuck." His channel was a furnace sucking me in, and all I wanted to do was shove myself as deep as possible and bury my face in his neck just to feel him.

"Thank god," he murmured, grinding his teeth against the initial discomfort. "Want you so fucking much."

My heart was tripping over itself, trying so hard not to follow my dick into heaven. Richard was hot as fuck, but his need was ten times hotter. I started with slow, steady pulses to make sure he was ready for me. When his fingernails dug into the skin of my hips, pulling me closer, I finally sped up.

I couldn't remember ever being this brainless with need. It was primal to the point of scaring me. Maybe it was being outside under the stars, maybe it was the crackle and hiss of the fire burning nearby or the sounds of the Wyoming wild all around us, the feel of the cool grass and uneven ground under my knees. My hands shook as I leaned in and held his face, locking eyes with the man beneath me before thrusting myself inside him harder and faster.

Richard sucked in a breath and let out a keening sound, which only made me sling my body into him with more fervor.

Take it, I thought. Take all of me.

I felt the hard press of his dick against my lower belly. Instead of reaching down to stroke it, I let my body tease him as I shifted my hips in and out.

He began to murmur my name under his breath with more pleading. The sound of his broken voice mixed with our ragged breathing and the slap of my hips against his ass made me even harder.

I felt his cock jerk between us. He reached his hand down, but I brushed it away. His orgasm was mine, and I intended to take it when I was ready.

He squeezed his eyes closed. "Boone," he panted. "I can't... I need... please let me come."

I paused, the tip of my dick poised at his entrance as I pulled back, ready to thrust into him again. He shuddered and trembled, his entire body wound tight and ready to explode.

"Look at me," I told him.

His eyes flew open. He was so gorgeous like this, laid bare beneath me. So full of need that it tore down his defenses.

I smiled. "You're perfect," I whispered. I hadn't meant to say it out loud. I covered the admission by squeezing my hand around his cock at the same time as I drove into him.

"Fuck!" he cried out. His eyes stayed on me as he came, pupils blown, lost to the waves of pleasure tearing through him.

Hot spunk hit my skin just as the squeeze of his tight ass shuttered my mind and exploded my body in release. I thrust into him one last time, as deep as his body would allow. I filled him before letting go completely.

As our orgasms subsided, I hovered over him, kneeling with my hands braced against the ground on either side of his head. His legs wrapped around me, his fingers digging into my shoulders.

Still we stared at each other, both panting, our chests brushing against each other as we sucked in air. It was by far the hottest sex I'd ever had, and judging from the dazed expression on Richard's face, the same applied to him as well.

As our breathing slowed, I could see reality start to enter his consciousness. His eyes became guarded again. I lifted my hand and traced my thumb along his cheek. Then I leaned forward, letting my mouth brush against his. Once, twice. I lingered there, tasting him.

I wanted him to feel treasured and important. I wanted him to know this wasn't just a fuck. This had been something more. A connection, even if it might be a connection between two very different people who lived in different worlds and had different lives.

I stopped myself from following that train of thought to its inevitable conclusion. Now wasn't the time to worry about the future. It was enough that the connection between us existed right now. Tonight, out under the stars, anything was possible. I'd let the future sort itself out tomorrow when we returned to the real world.

I eased out of him carefully, quickly disposing of the condom and grabbing his towel and my canteen. I cleaned us both up the best I could. But even so, I could still smell the scent of sex on him. The scent of *me* on him. It called to the primal part of me that Richard had awakened, which preened at the knowledge that I'd marked him as mine.

I shifted us both into the double sleeping bag without worrying about the tent, and our bodies instinctively wrapped

around each other, slotting together as if we were made for this.

As one, we stared up at the endless sky. It was a clear night, a chill in the air making everything crisper and sharper, including the riot of stars above us. Satellites scuttled amongst them, tiny pinpricks arcing across the dark expanse.

As we watched, a single star shot across the horizon, trailing a tail of light in its wake, and Richard sucked in a breath.

“Make a wish,” he murmured against my chest.

I pressed a kiss to his head as I wished that this moment would last forever.

RICHARD

There was something about being out under the stars with the night sky so big and wild above us that made me feel anything was possible. And there was something about being wrapped in Boone's arms that made me feel safe enough to ask the question I'd been thinking about all day.

"How'd you do it?" I asked.

"Hmmm?" Boone's voice had that post-sex lazy drawl to it.

"Leaving your family. Walking away from your inheritance. Striking out on your own with nothing."

Boone was quiet for a moment. "Well, I didn't have nothing," he said as he traced circles lightly along my arm. "I had my prized bull."

"And his spunk," I pointed out.

He laughed, nodding. "And his spunk."

I let a beat of silence pass between us, letting the levity of the moment fall away. "But you weren't scared of failing?"

He thought about this for a long while. "I guess I was more scared of not trying."

"And what if you had failed?"

"Then I would have tried again."

I huffed in frustration. He made it sound so easy. It was like every inspiration poster out there: *if at first you don't*

succeed... Except there had to be a point where you gave up, didn't there?

Boone rolled to his side and propped himself on his elbow so that he could look down at me. "Do these questions have anything to do with your dad?"

I was impressed at how easily he could read me. "Maybe," I muttered.

"You want to tell me about it?"

I lifted my shoulder. "It's not that different from what you went through. My dad cut me off for not conforming to the plan he had for me. He raised me to be the big man on campus, the most popular kid in class, the one who hosts all the parties and schmoozes all the wealthiest players. But being a socialite doesn't actually leave much time for studying and getting good grades in those business classes he insisted I take... so I didn't. I was the most popular kid in every group I joined, just like he wanted. I was the center of every circle, picked first for golf foursomes at my dad's country club, and recruited to the best fraternity. I got internships with high-profile companies in the city despite my lackluster grades because I was Dick Dunning's son, presumptive heir to the family business and the young man they'd all heard about."

I hesitated, knowing how spoiled and whiney I sounded and hating it. These were such first-world problems, and I was embarrassed to be sharing them out loud. I was about to tell him *never mind* when he said, "Go on."

I glanced at him. There was nothing judgmental in his expression or tone of voice. He looked genuinely interested in what I'd been saying. I blew out a breath and continued.

"So... now I know how to waltz, sink a putt, sail a catamaran, tie a bow tie. I know how to mix the perfect martini and convince almost anyone to listen to my father talk about the latest development project he needs investors for. I even know the difference between accounts receivable and payable, what a property-level financial model is, and how triple net leases work. And honestly, I don't care about any of it. Every day I spent in that office, I felt like I was dying

inside.” I clamped my lips shut against the sting of tears burning the back of my throat.

“So you left?” Boone asked gently.

I nodded. I didn’t admit that just the morning before, I’d planned on returning home and begging my father to take me back.

Lying on my back under Boone’s gaze made me feel too vulnerable. I pushed myself up until I was sitting. The sleeping bag fell around my waist, and the cold night air struck my skin. It was bracing and invigorating.

“I wanted to prove to my father that I could be my own man,” I told him. “That I didn’t need him or his money. That he could still be proud of me, even if I wasn’t joining the family business.”

He sat up next to me. He didn’t touch me, but he was close enough that I felt the heat radiating off his skin.

“I’m sure he’s proud of you.” He said it so sincerely that I almost loved him in that moment.

I shook my head. He didn’t know my father.

He reached out a hand, tentatively cupping my cheek and turning me to face him. “Well, I’m proud of you, for what it’s worth.”

And just like that, I did fall a little bit in love with him. Which fucking terrified me.

“What do you want?” Boone’s voice was soft as a whisper.

His question could have referred to anything: what I wanted in life, what I wanted from him, what I wanted between us, what I wanted the future to look like.

You, I thought. I want you.

But it was too much. Too fast. Boone didn’t even know me—not the real me. I wasn’t even sure I knew the real me.

So instead, I said, “I want a big sexy cowboy to fuck me again under the stars.”

And he did.



THE NEXT MORNING, I might as well have been riding a My Little Pony for as many hearts and sparkles as there were floating in my aura on the ride back to the ranch house. The seed of a crush on my boss had taken a jacked-up hit of growth hormones and was now an aggressive, suffocating vine with a stranglehold around my heart.

I kept expecting Boone to put his walls back up, act like the stoic rancher who didn't crack a smile for anyone, but he didn't. He cheerfully chatted with me all the way back and continued to point out places and items of interest along the way.

It was a gorgeous spring day, and I couldn't imagine the ranch looking any more beautiful. The sun was warm on our backs, and the sky was the same deep azure blue as the Aegean Sea in Santorini.

Unfortunately, the hearts and sparkles riding in a rainbow bubble over my head came crashing to the ground as soon as we broke through the final stand of trees between the main calving pasture and Norma's chicken coop. A cluster of men crowded the gravel parking area in front of the bunkhouse, shouting and shoving each other.

Boone bit out a curse and leaned forward in the saddle, nudging Victory's side with his heels until the horse picked up the pace and brought Boone right to the center of the action. He swung down and tossed his reins to PeeWee before wading into the mix, causing several of the men to scatter. All except for one.

The remaining man was large and square, the buttons on his checkered shirt straining against the bulge of a middle-aged paunch. He looked like he might have been fit once and intimidating. Now, he looked soft. His expression, however, was anything but. His cheeks flared an angry red, his eyes flashing and spittle at the corner of his fleshy lips.

He launched himself at Boone. “You motherfucker! You killed my cows! I know it was you!”

Boone clearly hadn’t expected the man to come at him, but he reacted quick enough to raise his hands and sidestep the man’s swing. When he spoke, he sounded calm and even-keeled, but there was still a sharp edge to his voice that laced his words with a threat. “Now, Walt, what’s got you in a lather?”

My eyes widened in recognition of the name as I drew alongside PeeWee. “Wait, is that Walt Hosser? Tyler’s dad?” I asked in a low voice.

PeeWee nodded. “Showed up about ten minutes ago, demanding to see his son and talk to Boone.”

I glanced to where Tyler stood off to the side. He looked small, surrounded by so many larger cowboys, and while he tried to keep his shoulders stiff and his chin raised, I could see a slight tremble to his hands fisted by his side.

I slid out of the saddle and handed the reins to PeeWee. “Can you take Branson?”

PeeWee nodded, immediately understanding my intention. “The boy could use someone on his side.”

The quiet statement was a rare look into the mechanic’s heart and mind. I thanked him and quickly skirted the group toward Tyler. As I got closer, I could see tears spiking his lashes and pink flags of anger on his cheeks. I moved to stand behind him, clasping his shoulder with one hand and giving him a reassuring squeeze.

“You okay?”

He nodded, but I could feel the tension radiating from him.

“What’s going on?”

He shook his head. “Seems like some of Dad’s stock died. Apparently, the vet told him it was poison, and they traced it back to one of the ponds. Dad’s saying it was Boone that did it —says he’s got a witness to Boone coming onto his land sometime last week.”

I frowned. There was absolutely no way I could imagine Boone ever doing something like that. He had too much respect for the animals and too much respect for the land. Plus, he just wasn't that cruel.

"Why in the world does he think Boone would do that?" I asked.

Tyler lifted a shoulder. "Boone bought some of Dad's land back in the day, and I guess Dad wasn't happy about the deal after the fact. He's always thought Boone stole his land from our family and has been saying for years that it was only a matter of time before he tried stealing the rest."

I snorted. The whole idea was absurd. Especially now that I knew how wealthy Boone was. If he'd wanted the rest of the Hosser land, he'd have just made them an offer they couldn't refuse.

I looked to where Boone and Tyler's dad were in a heated argument. They were far enough away that it was difficult to hear what they were saying, though every now and again, Walt's voice would rise in a series of threats and cursing.

Tyler ran a hand down his face. "This never would have happened if I hadn't come to work here."

I turned and took him by the shoulders. "This is not your fault, Tyler."

He tried to look away, and I squeezed his shoulders lightly until he met my eyes again. "I'm serious. You are not your daddy—you're your own man. You don't own his choices or his mistakes."

I perhaps said it a bit more forcefully than I intended because his eyes widened slightly. He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good," I said, giving him one last squeeze before dropping my hands.

"McQueen's right," Harrison said as he and several of the other hands came over to join us. "This ain't got nothin' to do with you."

Tyler shuffled his feet. “Even so, maybe it would be best if I go back with him—”

“Fuck *best*,” Harrison grumbled, kicking at a pebble with the toe of his boot. “Maybe it would be best if you stuck around and saved another calf’s life like you did last night. Ever think of that?”

The pink flags deepened on Tyler’s cheeks as he looked at the ground. “No, sir.”

Harrison reached over and ruffled Ty’s hair for a split second before cuffing him on the shoulder. “Don’t sir me, man. Jeez. Make me feel old like Mercy, here.”

Mercy barely took his eyes off Boone, Jed, and Walt Hosser long enough to roll them in Harrison’s direction. “At least McQueen isn’t the baby around here anymore.”

I looked around for Hiram. He was the only one I thought might be younger than I was. “Where’s Hiram?”

Mercy met my eyes and gave the slightest chin lift toward the direction of the Hosser Ranch truck parked farther down the drive. Several more men I didn’t recognize leaned against the truck, watching everything. I assumed they were some of Walt’s hands.

Hiram stood nearby, faking work on a perfectly good utility vehicle that happened to be pulled up at the entrance to the calving barn. He was most likely pulling double duty protecting the most vulnerable of the stock as well as eavesdropping on anything Walt’s hands might say.

Just then, Boone’s calm, deep voice—which part of me had always been following—was cut off by a louder, angrier one.

“Then you will fire his ass!” Walt shouted.

Boone’s eerie calm made the hairs prickle on my arms. “You do not run this ranch. I do. And I have no reason to fire a perfectly good ranch hand when I have need of him.”

Walt Hosser looked like he wanted to throw a punch at Boone. I moved a little closer without thinking too much about

it.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if you need him or not,” Walt snapped. “He’s my son, and he’s coming home with me. Anyone can find a ranch hand. Just go into town and put the word out you’re hiring.”

The only sign of Boone’s anger was his flared nostrils. His voice stayed steady and calm. “While that may work for you, there are no hands left in town at present. It seems a certain ranch around here has hired them all up. Which would mean that same ranch has no use for Tyler at this time.”

Walt waved his hand in Boone’s face and turned to face Tyler. “Ty, get in the truck. I’m not gonna tell you again.”

Tension radiated from the kid’s body as his eyes flicked nervously from Boone to his dad and back again. Boone walked over and put a hand on Tyler’s shoulder. “You’re welcome here. Jed tells me you’re a hard worker, and I’d already seen enough before that to notice myself. You have a place at the Silver Fork as long as you need it.”

My heart clenched with a combination of pride and something else I couldn’t identify as I watched Boone handle the situation with such easy control. Authority radiated from him, and it was clear without needing to be said aloud that Boone would defend Tyler’s right to stay if need be.

Tyler swallowed thickly and glanced at his dad again. He looked back at Boone and nodded while murmuring a “Thank you, sir.” Then he walked over to his father.

“I think it would be best for everyone involved if I stayed here for now,” he said, trying his hardest to mimic Boone’s professionalism. “I can learn a lot from these men. I already have.”

Walt snorted. “You mean like how to poison a man’s herd? Because that’s what he did.”

Tyler shook his head. “I just don’t believe Mr. Hammond would do such a thing.”

Walt’s voice lowered and turned menacing. “You callin’ your daddy a liar?”

The blood drained from Tyler's face, the only color left the twin splotches of red in his cheeks. "No, sir. I just think there has to be a mistake or a misunderstanding or something."

"There's no mistaking it." Walt pointed a finger at Boone. "That man wants my land, and he'll stop at nothing to get it. I don't know what his game is by takin' you on, but I'm sure as shit there's an ulterior motive. No one hires on a kid like you otherwise."

Tyler winced as though the words were a physical blow. I tensed, ready to step forward and defend him, but something made me hesitate. After a second, Tyler squared his shoulders and sucked in a breath. "Mr. Hammond hired me on because I'm an experienced hand and a hard worker, and whatever I don't know, I pick up fast."

Walt apparently wasn't expecting his son to challenge him because he was silent for a moment. Finally, he spat on the ground. "You want to work here, fine. But if you stay here, that's it. We're done."

Beside me, I heard a grunt of disapproval from Harrison, while Mercy muttered a few choice curses under his breath. Tyler glanced toward Boone. It was easy to read his expression—he was worried that Boone might have changed his mind about keeping him on in the face of Walt's rage.

Boone nodded at him once, making it clear he would support any decision Tyler made.

Tyler's chin wobbled, and his hands shook, but he stood tall and faced his father like the adult he was. "Then I guess we're done. Thank you for everything you've done for me, sir. I'm grateful." He held out his hand for a shake.

Walt looked down at it and scoffed, rejecting his son's offer of a somewhat peaceable ending. "This is exactly why you were never going to be the right man to take over the ranch. You have no loyalty whatsoever, no respect for your family name and everything that comes with it. For you to throw away your legacy by throwing in your lot with these... *men*... these... *murderers*... shows just what a coward you are. Thank you for making this decision even easier."

He looked past his son's shoulder to lock eyes with Boone. "You'll regret this, Hammond. Don't think for one minute you can murder my best breeding stock and get away with it. I'm coming for you, just you wait."

Boone stood with his feet spread and his arms crossed. Anyone who didn't know Boone would think he appeared impassive, even bored. But I'd been around him enough to recognize the tells that gave away his anger. A muscle ticked in his jaw, the skin around his eyes was tense, and his lips were thin. His entire body was coiled, ready to leap into action if need be.

Walt clearly expected a fight. It seemed to me he wanted one, but Boone refused to sink to his level. Instead, he said, "Well, it was nice seeing you as always, Walt. I wish you and yours my best. But if you'll excuse us, we'd best get back to work. As you know, if it's daylight, that means there's work that needs doing on a ranch." He gave a curt nod. "Good day."

With that, he spun on his heel and started for the ranch house. His eyes cut to the group of us standing around Tyler. His expression made clear that the show was over and he expected us to get to work.

I glanced toward Walt, wondering if it was smart to walk away from him and his hands like that. But given the shade of red the other rancher's cheeks had taken on, it was obvious that dismissing him so unceremoniously was the worst kind of insult Boone could give him. There was nothing Walt could do but signal to his men it was time to go.

Harrison clapped a hand on Tyler's shoulder and steered him toward the calving barn. Mercy followed behind.

I wanted to go after Boone—to make sure he was okay, and ask him what the hell that had all been about, and tell him what a badass he'd been. But somehow, the closeness I'd felt with him out in the field these past couple of days seemed to be slipping away.

It was exactly as I'd feared: now we were back in the real world, where he was the boss and I was his employee. And as

an employee, I had work to do, same as all the other ranch hands.

I cast one last look toward the ranch house, hoping to catch sight of Boone, but he was nowhere to be found. With a sigh, I made my way to the barn to untack and rub down the horses. Boone knew where to find me if he wanted me.

Meanwhile, like Boone said, I had work to do.



THE DAY MOVED QUICKLY, as most days did on the ranch. There was a shit ton of work to do, and I was surprised to have been upgraded from stall mucker to lawn mower. Supposedly, Tyler had taken over the mucking as the youngest and newest hand. Thankfully, the ranch owned a high-end riding mower. It took a little while to get the hang of it—a learning curve that included PeeWee’s repeated insistence that “city boys don’t know shit”—but once I did, it was pure heaven. I put in my earbuds, cranked up my latest music playlist, and mowed every blade of grass I could find that wasn’t fenced into a grazing pasture.

Being out of the saddle was a huge relief. Yes, I was getting more used to spending time on a horse, but that didn’t mean my inner thighs weren’t screaming in agony after several long days spent riding.

Of course, the soreness could also have been from the vigorous fucking Boone and I had engaged in that morning. I spent quite a bit of time after that replaying that morning and the night before and every other second we’d spent together. I knew I was sporting a dopey grin on my face like a schoolboy with his first crush, but I couldn’t help it.

The downside to a crush, however, was the overwhelming uncertainty that came with it. I spent the rest of the day as visible as possible to anyone inside the ranch house, hoping Boone might catch sight of me and call me into his office to talk or fuck or at least say hello. But he didn’t.

I finished my chores in the opposite mood than I'd started them in. Gone was the peppy music in my ears, and now my head was filled with second thoughts and confusion.

After returning the mower to the machine shed, I made my way to the bunkhouse for a quick shower before dinner. I could hear the other hands in nearby shower stalls in the large bathroom, and Harrison's voice called out good-natured teasing to Tyler that was almost enough to make me laugh.

"He's one of us now, folks," Harrison boomed. "For better or for worse, for poorer and more poorer, in sickness and in don't-ask-me-to-nurse-your-sorry-ass..."

I let the words fade into the background as I thought about how kind and welcoming this group of people was. For some reason, I'd never spent much time anticipating what kind of welcome a gay man like me from a prep-school background in New York City would get among ranch hands in Wyoming. But there'd never been a single moment when these guys had made me feel ostracized. They'd given me hell just as much as they gave each other on a regular day, and there'd even been moments where they'd gone out on a limb to trust me.

These were good people. And I was glad they'd accepted Tyler as readily as they'd accepted me.

Tyler's voice startled me out of my thoughts. "For fuck's sake, I don't need you to pledge your love to me, Harrison!"

Harrison's deep chuckle made me grin as I finished rinsing the soap off my body. "To thee, I pledge my troth. Or is it trowth? Troth like water trough? Or troth like roast? Oh shit, you think Norma might be making roast tonight? I could go for some thick beef."

Hiram's voice cut through the noise. "You hear that, Hossler? Harrison wants your thick beef."

PeeWee's quiet laughter came from the stall on my other side.

"Norma's tender beef, asshole," Harrison said. "I'm only interested in heifers. No steers for me."

"Bull," Tyler shot back. "I ain't no steer, jackass."

I couldn't hold back a snort. Tyler was going to fit in just fine.

After returning to my room, I nearly tripped over the luggage that was still packed and waiting by the door from when I'd planned to leave two days ago. I sat on the bed, staring at it and wondering if I should unpack.

Then I thought of Boone—how I hadn't seen him all day, and I had no idea what kind of reception I was going to get from him at dinner. If he even made an appearance.

Maybe I should leave them packed, I thought to myself. Just in case I needed to make a quick getaway. Because if things were going to revert to how they were before—if Boone was going to be distant and untouchable—then I wasn't sure I wanted to stay. Mucking stalls would be easy compared to pretending not to care about Boone rejecting me.

Finally, my growling stomach got the best of me. I decided to leave my bags to deal with later and pulled out a pair of clean jeans, a fresh T-shirt, and flip-flops to wear to dinner.

I entered the kitchen and joined the rowdy group already taking seats around the large kitchen table. Everyone was still giving Tyler affectionate hell, and Jed was throwing puppy eyes at Norma while she hustled to put the food on the table. I tried to join in the fun, but I felt anxious and jittery. My every nerve was trained on the door, waiting for Boone to make his appearance. I was half-afraid he wouldn't show and half-afraid that he would but he'd treat me in the same reserved fashion as before.

And then, he was there. I felt his presence before I even laid eyes on him. I could feel him in the way the air in the room shifted. I could smell him as he neared—sweat and horse and hay and sunshine. I tried to be subtle in the way I turned to take him in. His jaw still sported the grizzled whiskers from our camping trip, and his fingers forked into his hair to displace his ever-present hat head.

My own fingers twitched, wanting to reach out and tame a wayward strand that fell across his forehead. My heart ticked up at the sight of him, the pressure in my chest only growing

as he took in the room, nodding at Jed and then at Tyler. I held my breath, waiting for him to notice me, and tried not to stare at him as I drank in his sexy presence. The man radiated masculine authority in a way that made me hard as nails beneath the kitchen table. My cheeks heated, and I felt the burn down the back of my neck.

He still hadn't given any indication he'd seen me as he crossed behind me on his way to his seat at the head of the table. Already, I could feel the threat of tears deep in my throat. If he ignored me completely, I didn't know how I was going to be able to stay there. I thought I might sprint all the way back to my room, grab my suitcases, and run for the hills.

But then he paused behind me. I felt his hand land on my shoulder. The heat of his touch seared through me, jump-starting my heart and causing my pulse to skitter. He bent toward me.

"Hey," he murmured in my ear.

I wanted to say hey back, but my throat was squeezed too tight to let any air pass.

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. "Missed you today."

Then he dropped a kiss on my head as casual as could be and continued on to the head of the table to take his seat.

The room was silent. Curious eyes began ping-ponging between the two of us. My cheeks were blazing hot, and I couldn't suppress my dopey grin no matter how hard I tried.

Boone, for his part, looked utterly at ease. He shot me a wolfish smile and winked. Everyone noticed. I wanted to melt into a puddle of hot lava and slide under the table to the floor.

Norma was the one to put everything to rights. "As long as your mouths are hanging open, might as well start putting food in there."

I ducked my face down to stare at my plate when what I really wanted to do was leap onto the table and break into song. My brain whirred like the industrial fan mounted over Daffodil's stall, but it just kept pushing the same thought around in circles.

He kissed me in front of the hands. He kissed me in front of the hands. He kissed me...

“Dude, take it. I know you want it.”

My head shot up, and I saw Harrison trying to hand me the bowl of mashed potatoes. I took it without thinking and plunked a helping onto my plate before passing it along. Norma had graciously added some roast chicken to the beef she was serving, and I took a big helping of it when it came my way too. Thankfully, the din had picked back up, and people seemed to be talking about an upcoming rodeo next weekend in Casper.

“We’ll have to take McQueen,” Mercy said. “Pop his rodeo cherry.”

Beside me, Harrison opened his mouth to make his usual kind of teasing quip, but he glanced at Boone before changing his mind and nodding instead.

Suddenly, my unadulterated joy waned a bit. Was this going to be a problem? Would the hands treat me differently or respect me less if they knew I’d slept with the boss? Would they be less likely to speak freely in front of me?

I cleared my throat and decided to take the bull by the horns. I’d never been considered a shy man. “I’d like that. I’ve always daydreamed about having my cherry popped by a gang of muscular cowboys.”

Jed almost choked on his dinner while Hiram hooted with laughter, and even PeeWee snickered to himself. I watched to see how Boone would react, but the only thing I noticed was the slightest tightening of his jaw.

Shit, had I completely misjudged the situation? I fell silent, self-doubts starting to crowd in again.

Everyone laughed and joked around, making plans for the rodeo and making sure to include Tyler too. I felt the itch of Boone’s eyes on me, but I couldn’t bring myself to meet his glare.

Harrison leaned over and spoke low enough so only I could hear him. “You’re reading him wrong. He’s jealous.”

I blinked up at him. His face was full of sincere understanding, so much that I wanted to cry. “You think?”

He nodded and murmured, “Watch this.”

I opened my mouth to stop him from doing something stupid, but it was too late.

“What do y’all think about me setting McQueen here up with Tommy Prescott? Maybe that’ll finally get ole Tommy off Boone’s back, and McQueen here can live out his cowboy fantasies.”

Mercy knew exactly what Harrison was doing. “Good idea. The man’s not bad-looking, and he makes a fine living with his dairy farm. Just think, if things worked out, we could keep McQueen here in Wyoming forever. He could be a milkmaid.”

There was a chorus of “awws,” and someone reached over to ruffle my hair. “Not sure he’d know what to do with all them teats,” Jed joked.

Boone’s jaw tightened even more. “He’s not going out with Tommy Prescott,” he said in a low voice. “And that’s final.”

Harrison’s face was pure innocent confusion. “But, boss ___”

Boone held up a hand. “Try me, Malone. See how that works out for you. If I’m not mistaken, Norma’s chicken house needs cleaning out in the morning. Do we have a volunteer?”

Even I knew that cleaning the chicken house was one of the worst jobs on the ranch. But I was curious to test Harrison’s theory even more, so I opened my idiot mouth. “I’ll do it.”

Boone’s entire face softened as he met my eyes, and my heart squeezed tight enough to steal my breath. “No. You’re going to learn how to collect colostrum and help with the bottle-feeding. If we can collect our own, we can stop sourcing it from Tommy, and I want you to get the refractometer data

put into some kind of spreadsheet or software system like you did with the calves.”

Jed’s eyes widened in surprise. “I’ve been trying to get you to do this for months.”

“Yeah, well, now I’m listening.” He turned to Tyler. “And I want you to stick with the calving. Jed said you volunteered to sleep out there tonight. You sure about that?”

Ty sat up straighter. “Yes, sir. Definitely. I think 9067 is getting close. She might need help overnight.”

Boone nodded. “Good. Ask Norma to hook you up with a cooler full of food to take out there with you. There’s already coffee stuff in the barn. You know how to text me if you run into trouble. Don’t hesitate or think you’re bothering me. You understand?”

“Of course, sir. I promise.”

Norma walked past Tyler and patted his shoulder. “I already have the food packed and ready. The cooler bag’s in the mudroom fridge. Grab it on your way out.”

Tyler blushed at her attention as he thanked her.

I glanced at Boone from under my lashes. He was such a good guy. My heart skittered in my chest like an overexcited puppy.

I pushed back my chair as soon as the hands began to get up from the table and clear their dishes to the sink. After scraping my plate and stacking it with the others, I hesitated, wondering if I should return to the bunkhouse or wait. Thankfully, Boone solved the problem for me.

“McQueen,” Boone’s calm voice said above the commotion of the table clearing. “You mind waiting for me in my bedroom? I need to talk to Jed about something.”

Once again, all the noise stopped, and my face ignited. But this time, I didn’t care a single bit.

Boone Hammond wanted me in his bedroom.

And he wasn’t afraid of letting everyone know it.

I bolted out of the kitchen and down the hallway to his room like the hounds of hell were after me.

BOONE

I stood outside my bedroom door, running my hand through my hair, feeling more unsettled than I ever did. I was a person who generally knew the right thing to do and did it, even if it was unpleasant. With Richard though, things weren't that simple. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't reconcile facts and feelings.

I knew I was asking for trouble with him, and I didn't care. It didn't matter that I'd been here before, trying to make things work with a man who was meant for a far different life from mine. I'd have thought I would have learned my lesson the first time, with Oscar, but apparently, I hadn't.

I wasn't in love with Richard, not yet, but I could feel the possibility of it stirring inside me. I knew the more time I spent with him, the harder I'd fall, and the more impossible it would be when he left. Because he *would* leave, in just a few short weeks.

Oh, I could ask him to stay, of course, and there was a pretty good chance he'd give it a try. Then I'd spend the next months or years slowly watching him dull and lose his vibrancy, just as I had with Oscar decades before. And, just like with Oscar, there'd come a point where keeping hold of him would be more painful than letting him go.

I *knew* this.

I also knew it would be easier to part ways when the time came if we kept our distance until then, but I couldn't seem to make myself stay away. I'd spent all afternoon holed up in my

office, pointedly *not* thinking about Richard, but found my eyes straying again and again toward the window to watch him mow the grass and my mouth pulling into a grin whenever his spirit fingers flew through the air.

I'd told myself I'd treat him just like any other hand at dinner, but *that* resolve had lasted all of ten seconds. Even the idea of keeping distance had made me desperate to draw him closer, so the moment I'd seen him sitting at the table, his hair damp and his pristine white shirt clinging to all those slender muscles, my resolve had broken. My feet had carried me toward him like I was on autopilot, and I'd bent to kiss his head.

It wasn't until the entire table had fallen silent that I'd realized I'd screwed up. I wasn't the only person whose feelings needed to be considered in this. Given how red Richard's face had gotten after that and how he'd kept his eyes doggedly fixed on his plate, it had been a mistake to make our relationship public without discussing it with Richard first.

Then Richard had made that joke—at least, I was almost sure it was a joke—about popping his cowboy cherry, and I'd had to wonder whether he considered us to be in any kind of relationship at *all*.

I'd spent dinner cool and collected on the outside and a roiling mess on the inside. When I'd seen him start to leave after clearing the table, I'd panicked. I'd blurted out for him to wait for me in my room before I'd thought better of it, and when he'd taken off running, I'd known I'd fucked up yet again.

And now there I was, pacing the hallway outside my door, trying to figure out the best way to apologize for the way I'd behaved. Trying to come up with some magic words that would keep him with me, at least for the short term.

Because for once, I didn't care what the *right* thing to do was. Not when saying goodbye to Richard a minute sooner than necessary felt so damn *wrong*.

I gave up, took a deep breath, and pushed open the door. "I'm sor—"

I didn't even get the word out before a wall of man knocked into me, sending me off-balance. Fuck, Richard was even more pissed off than I realized. I raised my arms instinctually, grabbing hold of him to steady him.

Before I could resume my apology, however, he covered my mouth with his own. His lips devoured mine, his tongue exploring me hungrily. Momentum sent me staggering until my back was against the wall with Richard's legs wrapped around my waist.

My surprise quickly gave way to desire. I tangled my fingers into his hair, clamping my other hand on his ass to keep him pressed against me.

"Want you," he said, fingers already fumbling with my shirt.

I had a brief moment of thinking that maybe we should talk—make sure we were on the same page—but then his hands were on my bare chest and sliding down my abdomen, and I decided that talking could wait.

I had an eager, sexy-as-fuck man in my arms, determined to fuck me, and I aimed to take advantage of it.

"Is this how you want it?" I spun, pressing his back against the wall and crowding close. I nipped at his throat and bit his ear lightly until he sucked in a sharp breath.

I felt him nod against me.

"I want to hear you say it."

"Yes," he gasped.

"Be more specific." I ground my cock against the bulge in his pants.

He groaned low in his throat. "I want you in my mouth. I want to taste you."

I grinned and stepped back. "On your knees, then," I told him.

He promptly dropped to his knees in front of me. He reached for my pants, fingers fumbling to pull them open and

free my cock. Once he did, his eyes gleamed. He looked up at me, his eyelids hooded with desire, and he slowly flicked his tongue across the tip of my dick.

“Tease,” I growled.

He grinned and batted his eyelashes innocently.

“There’s a word for you, you know.”

“Amazing? Scintillating? Brilliant? Dazzl—”

I cut him off by pushing my cock into his mouth. His lips closed around me in an appreciative hum, his eyes still sparkling with mischief.

“Brat,” I told him, unable to keep from smiling.

He pulled back and batted his lashes. “Who, me?”

I growled, tightening my grip in his hair and holding his head in place. “You’re driving me crazy. Can’t stop thinking about you, wanting you.”

“Same.” He played his fingers up and down my cock lightly.

“Can’t hold back.” I pushed into his mouth again, holding his head steady as I drove myself deeper, *deeper*, until I felt the back of his throat, and still I pushed. His eyes widened, but he took me without complaint.

I stayed there for a second or two before pulling back. “Okay?” I asked him. I was still feeling my way with Richard. I didn’t want to overwhelm him or do anything that would make him uncomfortable.

“More.” His lips glistened with saliva and my precum.

God, this man was decadent and gorgeous and sexy as fuck. I’d wanted to tease him the way he teased me, but I couldn’t. I wanted him too badly. But there was one thing that needed clearing up first.

I pressed the tip of my cock against his lips. “If I recall at dinner, there was some mention of you having your cherry popped by a bunch of muscular cowboys.”

“Was there?” He teased his tongue around the rim of my head, eyes dancing. He was enjoying this.

So was I. I pushed into his mouth. “Did you forget, McQueen, that you’ve already had your cherry popped by a cowboy? Do I need to remind you?”

I thrust until I felt the back of his throat again and held a second before withdrawing. He sucked in a breath, then grinned cheekily. “My memory seems a bit hazy...”

“Oh?” I pushed myself back inside his mouth. He swallowed, his throat closing around my cock. “Let me remind you, then.” I tightened my hands on either side of his head and throat fucked him until his cheeks and chin dripped with saliva. I gave him little chance to recover between thrusts—just enough to draw a breath before I filled him up again.

He took it all, groaning and humming and straining. His hands clung to my ass cheeks, fingers digging into muscle as he held himself steady. I’d wanted to take my time—to indulge in him—but he was too perfect. Too willing and needy.

Normally, I had better self-control—I could tease and taunt for hours before coming. But Richard was too much. I felt my control shattering, my orgasm unstoppable as my balls tightened.

“Fuck!” I roared as I drove so deep in his throat that his lips pressed against the base of my cock. I pumped into him, filling him, feeling him gag around me.

Once I released him, I tilted his head back and looked down at him. He was thoroughly debauched, his lips plump and chin slick. Twin tracks of tears trailed down his cheeks from the strain of being gagged. I had a moment of hesitation, worried that perhaps I’d pushed too far.

Then he grinned. “That was hot as shit. God, I almost came just from the taste of you.”

I noticed then that at some point, he’d unbuttoned his pants, and his cock strained, tip dripping with precum.

I trailed a thumb through it. “Should I let you come?”

His expression turned to one of horror. “Wait, you mean that’s an option? Me not coming? I just assumed...” He trailed off, suddenly nervous.

“I guess that depends on how well you follow the rules,” I teased.

“Rules? Fuck! You know how I am with rules. I’m doomed.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can find ways to help you remember,” I said, my fingers dancing lightly along his cock. “Give you motivation to succeed.”

I let go of him, and he groaned. Richard feigned innocence with those blue eyes. “Please can we start following rules tomorrow? I don’t think I’ll make it through the night if I can’t come.”

It amused me that he didn’t realize it would be a punishment for *me* to deny his pleasure. I loved to watch him come, and I loved even more being the one who made it happen. I wiped my hand across his face and, using his own saliva as lube, grabbed his cock.

It wasn’t a soft hand job; it wasn’t gentle. I was demanding and rough, tugging and pulling, then easing off when he was about to come. His hips bucked against the ground, his back arching. By the end, he was begging, promising me anything in the world if I would just please please *please* let him come.

Eventually, I did, and he came with such force that I was pretty sure the cowhands all the way out in the bunkhouse heard his cry of pleasure. Afterward, he lay boneless on my bedroom floor, chest heaving as he sucked in oxygen.

“Fuck,” he finally breathed.

I lay on my side next to him, trailing my fingers across his naked skin. “Agreed.”

After a moment, his head lolled to the side so he could meet my eyes. “You know I’ll never stop pushing your buttons, right? Not if that’s how you’re going to respond.”

I laughed, grinning wide. “Please. You couldn’t stop even if you wanted to. And I...” I hesitated, dragging my thumb up his jaw to trace his puffy and well-used lower lip. All the things I wanted to say—the things I might have said if circumstances were different—felt like choking vines clogging my throat. My voice came out rougher than usual as I concluded softly, “Well. I wouldn’t want you to change on my account.”

Richard watched me for a long moment, his eyes soft like sunset, then leaned up and pressed his lips to mine.

Good enough, I told myself. This is good enough.

But I didn’t quite believe it.

RICHARD

I woke up the next morning to the heat of Boone against my back. His nose nuzzled my neck, and his warm lips pressed kisses down my spine. I cracked an eye. It was still dark out. “Too early,” I mumbled.

I felt his hand close around my dick. “You sure about that?”

I tried to make some sort of joke about cocks crowing at sunrise, but then his mouth was on mine, and I lost myself to the feel of him. He rolled on top of me, rutting against me. He didn’t bother with lube; instead, he spat on his hand and took us both in his grip.

“Oh god, just like that,” I groaned, reveling in the roughness of his hand and the tight clasp of his big fingers.

He nipped at my neck, my collarbone, my shoulder. “Fuck, I can’t get enough of you,” he growled against my shoulder. “I want to be inside you.”

I nodded. “Yes, oh yes, please.”

He pushed up on an arm, the delicious weight of him lifting from my chest for a moment. He gazed down at me, his eyes hot and hungry. “But if I was going to do that, I’d want to take my time. And you have chores to do, McQueen.”

“You’re the worst.” I sucked in a breath when he tightened his fist around the two of us.

He swiped a thumb across the head of my cock. I shuddered, making a sound low in my throat.

He chuckled, the sound deep and gravelly. “You sure I’m not the best?”

My muscles twitched, my balls drawn tight with the need to come. I was so close, so close. “You are absolutely the best,” I gasped. “Hands down,” I added. “And up and down and up and—”

Then my words turned into burbles as he reached around to my ass, stroking a finger against my hole. “Jesus fuck!” I cried, arching off the bed with the force of my orgasm.

In two strokes, he followed, his cum warm and sticky as it mixed with mine. We lay together, panting. “You’re so fucking beautiful when you come, you know that?”

I pushed myself up and stretched before shooting him a wink. “I happen to think I’m beautiful all the time.”

The sound of his laughter followed me into the bathroom. We showered quickly before making our way to breakfast. Everyone else was already there and tucked into plates filled with food.

If it hadn’t been clear before that we were sleeping together, it was pretty damn obvious now that we were both arriving at the table at the same time, from the same direction, both with wet hair.

The goofy grin on my face probably gave it away as well.

I sat, somewhat worried that it might be awkward now that it was so obvious what was going on between Boone and me. But if I’d been expecting judgment or censure, that’s not what I found.

Mercy gave Boone one look and said, “You look chipper this morning, boss.”

He gave them a large grin. “Sure am,” he said, sending a wink my way.

And that was pretty much that. Breakfast continued as usual, with talk of the day and what tasks were on the agenda. I spent most of the morning with Mercy again, working on fence repairs. In the afternoon, I worked on data entry,

transferring data from the old spreadsheet into the app with Boone's approval.

Dinner was beef, as usual, and after dinner, I enjoyed a very different type of meat.

In the week that followed, it was easy for our days to fall into a kind of rhythm like this. Because it was calving season and because Boone was short-staffed, it was all hands on deck, which meant no days off and no leisurely mornings in bed.

It was tough work, with long hours, and I fell into bed at night exhausted... but not too tired to enjoy time with Boone. Some nights, if we hadn't seen each other all day, we fucked fast and desperate, needing the feel of each other. Some nights, we were more deliberate, discovering what made the other gasp and moan. But every single night ended with us curled around each other, our heads side by side on Boone's pillows.

Before Boone, I'd never really been much of a fan of snuggling. I liked my space, and I liked being able to spread my legs out at night without worrying about kicking anyone else. But Boone and I fit in a way I'd never experienced before. When I kicked my leg out at night, he shifted to accommodate me, allowing my foot to slide under his knee.

Waking up to his mouth around my cock wasn't too bad either.

What surprised me was just how natural it felt, being with him, whether we were in bed or not. Obviously I looked forward to the moments Boone would pull me into an empty stall to suck me off, but it was a shock to realize that I liked it just as much when he'd steal me away for an afternoon to show me how to pull a calf or bottle-feed a newborn.

We never talked about our relationship status or what our time together meant. We certainly never talked about the future. It was as if we both realized there would be no answers to the kinds of questions those discussions would raise, and talking about it would only serve to complicate matters.

It was enough that we were both here, enjoying each other for now. There was no need to go borrowing trouble by

fretting about what all of this meant or where it was going.

The week went by more quickly than I ever could have imagined, and the only reason I realized how much time had passed was because of the envelope Jed slipped to me after breakfast.

When I looked at him quizzically, he laughed. “You didn’t think you were working for free, did you?”

I opened the envelope to find my first paycheck as a cowhand on the Silver Fork Ranch. It was probably the least amount of money I’d ever made in my entire life, but I was still proud as shit. I’d worked my ass off for every cent. I figured I deserved to buy myself a treat to celebrate, and I tore through my to-do list as fast as possible so that I had a bit of free time before dinner.

I checked with the other hands to see if anyone needed me to pick anything up for them, and then I grabbed the keys to one of the trucks and headed for town. It was late afternoon, the sun sliding toward the Wind River Mountains in the west. The past several days had been warm, but the wind through the truck’s window was cool and refreshing.

The radio station was automatically tuned to some country music station, and I found myself singing along, recognizing the song as one of Hiram’s favorites.

Of course, Silverhollow wasn’t really known as a shopping destination. The closest I could get to any kind of store that might have something I might be interested in was the tack store, where Boone had bought my boots when I’d first arrived in town.

A bell rang over the door when I stepped inside, and the woman behind the checkout counter glanced up and smiled. “Can I help you with anything, hon?”

I waved a hand. “Oh, I’m just browsing, thanks.”

She gave me a curious look. I doubted they had a lot of window shoppers. This really was one of those “get in, get what you need, and get out” kind of stores.

My first stop was the corner with several racks of men's clothes. As it turned out, designer clothes might feel and look good, but they weren't necessarily designed for long hours of physical labor. Several of my best shirts had stains I'd rather not think about the origins of, and my best pair of jeans had a rip in the knee.

I fingered one of the snap-front shirts on the sale rack. They weren't the worst-looking things in the world, and with a few alterations, I could probably make them work. I grabbed a couple, along with a sturdy pair of jeans, and then went hunting for a sewing kit, which I found tucked along a shelf of toiletries.

On my way back up to the front, I passed a nook with kids' cowboy dress-up clothes. Thinking they could make great embellishments to jazz up the shirts I'd picked out, I grabbed a pair of tiny little tasseled chaps, a small leather vest, and a handful of star-shaped sheriff's pins.

I was just about to check out when I noticed the rack of fly masks—the things I'd originally thought were puppy-play masks. I snorted to myself at the memory of Boone's expression when I'd asked about them. I grabbed a few, partly to amuse myself with the thought of giving it to Boone and seeing what he said, but mostly because I'd noticed that Duck hadn't been her usual self recently. I figured if changing up my wardrobe brightened my mood, maybe new horse accessories would perk her up too.

The woman at the checkout counter rang everything up and gave me my total. I felt a deep blush warming my cheeks. I was so fucking dense. I had money to pay for everything, just not in my checking account. And my credit cards were maxed out.

"Um... any chance you can hold this stuff while I find a bank to cash my paycheck?" I asked tentatively.

She narrowed her eyes, and I was pretty sure she was going to say no, which meant I was going to have to go slinking back to the ranch empty-handed. There was no way I

was going to admit to the others that I had no idea what to do with an actual, physical paycheck.

I tried to lay on the charm, hoping to change her mind. “You see, I’m new in town and just started working and got my first paycheck today. I got so excited to shop, I forgot I needed actual money to do it with.” I set the check down on the counter and gave her my best sheepish puppy-dog grin.

She glanced at it, and her expression softened when she noticed who the check was from. “That’s right, you’re one of Boone’s hands. Of course. Though you know he has a tab for his hands to use if they’re buying ranch equipment or necessities. Most of what you’re buying would qualify if you want to put everything on that.”

I thought about it for maybe half a second. It wasn’t like I was rolling in cash these days. But I actually wanted to buy this stuff with money I’d earned. That was the point.

“No, thanks,” I told her. “But... er... Boone loaned me money to buy a pair of boots a couple of weeks back. I don’t know if he put it on his tab or not, but do you think I could pay off the cost of those as well?”

“You sure, hon?”

I knew Boone hadn’t given buying those boots a second thought, especially now that I knew how wealthy he was. But it was important to me to pay that debt back. I nodded, and she pulled out a cash box from under the counter.

“If that’s a Silver Fork Ranch check, I’m happy to cash it for you. Save you a trip down the street. That sound good?” she asked.

“That sounds perfect. I feel so silly,” I said with a little laugh. “It’s been a while since I got paid with a paper check. I’m used to it going right in my bank account.” I didn’t know why I was babbling, but I felt a kind of excitement bubbling in my gut.

At the thought of fixing up my new clothes, I remembered how much I’d enjoyed helping James with his cosplay costumes and helping my friends trick out their outfits for

Pride. Hell, I'd even had a reputation for a while for jazzing up my club clothes after an unfortunate experience at Vive when Dom Sanchez and I had shown up with the exact same outfit. Ever since then, I'd vowed only to club in a Richard Dunning original.

Maybe it was time to show the Silver Fork Ranch a little Richard Dunning style too.

I walked out of the tack shop a few minutes later with a bag of cheap clothes in one hand and a wad of cash in my pocket.

I'd never felt more content.

I whistled as I walked to the diner to grab a cherry pie as a surprise for Boone. And I grinned as I let my imagination run wild with the possibilities of trailing the cherry goodness across his abs and licking it off. I lost myself in the fantasy for most of the drive back to the ranch in the gathering dusk and was just pulling down the driveway, wondering if I could convince Boone to indulge in a little dessert before dinner, when my phone rang.

I glanced at the screen and frowned when I saw my father's name. The muscles along my shoulders instantly tightened, and my heart rate picked up. I answered it immediately, the possibility of declining it not even entering my mind. "Hey, Dad, is everything okay?" I hadn't talked to him in months and couldn't think of a reason for him to call unless something had happened.

"Your mother tells me you're in Wyoming," he said in response. I guessed that was his way of saying things were fine.

"Yes, sir. Been out here a couple of weeks."

"Good. I got a bead on a land deal over in Jackson Hole. Old man is selling a large swath of acreage that's been in his family for generations. It's a hell of a steal, and he knows it. He's playing hardball, so this one's going to take more of a personal touch. He needs to know how serious I am about

buying, but there's no way I can get away right now, and he'd see it as an insult if I sent an underling."

I had no idea why he was telling me all of this. And to be honest, I'd only been half listening as I parked the truck and gathered my packages. "Okay?"

"So here's what I need you to do," he continued. "I've set up a meeting with him first thing in the morning out at his property, which means you'll need to get up there tonight. My assistant has already booked you a room in town. She's pulling together all the information you'll need and will be emailing it shortly."

I blinked, convinced I hadn't heard him correctly. I sat back in the truck. "Wait, you want me to go to Jackson Hole? Tonight?"

"I want you to do what comes naturally: charm the pants off the guy and close the deal. It might take a couple of days, especially if he tries to turn it into a bidding war. If that happens, you'll have to—"

"Dad," I said, cutting him off. "I can't."

There was a long pause.

"What do you mean *you can't*?"

"I can't go to Jackson Hole right now."

"You said you were already in Wyoming," he said, as if my location was the issue.

"I am," I told him. "But I've got work tomorrow."

"Yes. In Jackson. Like I said."

"No. Dad... I don't work for you anymore. Remember? I work for someone else now."

"I'm sure they'll be happy to give you time off."

I shook my head, even though he couldn't see me. "It's not that kind of job."

I could hear his frown through the phone. "What kind of job is it?"

“I’m a cowhand,” I said proudly. “On a ranch.”

There was another long pause. Then a snort. “A *cowhand*? This another of your larks?”

His tone of voice caused me to deflate a little. I didn’t know what I’d been expecting from him. Perhaps respect. Interest. Support. Or, at the very least, acknowledgment that I had a job and wasn’t a lazy layabout like he thought.

“You’re the one who said I needed to get a job and that you wouldn’t help,” I pointed out a little too defensively. “So I did.”

“Jesus, Richard. As a cowboy? Leave it to you to make a point in the extreme.” He let out a sigh. “If it’s money you want, fine. You’ll be back on the payroll at the VP level—same as before.”

“I’m not coming back to work for you.” I hoped I sounded more sure than I felt.

He took a breath and let it out. “Fine. I can see we’re in the punishment phase of negotiations. I’ll cut you in on this deal if you pull it off. Two percent. That should net you at least a million.”

I lost my breath at how casually he said it: a million. Dollars. And sure, perhaps I’d been casual about that kind of money once too. But after being broke for several months and then working my ass off for two weeks shoveling shit, I had a much better appreciation for money.

And what my father was offering was a shit ton of money for very little work. In fact, I’d probably make more money going up to Jackson Hole for this one deal than I’d make in a hundred years working at the Silver Fork.

All I had to do was turn the truck around and set my navigation app for Jackson Hole.

All I had to do was walk away from Boone and the ranch. Let down the one man I couldn’t imagine ever letting down.

The answer was easy. “I’m sorry, Dad. I can’t.”

“Fine,” he huffed. “Five percent.”

I ran a hand down my face. It wasn't like I was integral to the day-to-day workings of the ranch. I was sure if I asked Boone for a few days off, he'd let me go. Probably without even asking why.

But I also knew it wouldn't just be this one deal. It wouldn't stop. My father would expect me to keep working for him. He would snap his fingers and expect that I would drop everything to do his bidding. I'd cease to be my own person again, and I'd find myself slipping back into that old world, living a life I hated.

That was the entire reason I'd quit working for him in the first place.

"It's not about the money, Dad. I have a job. I made a commitment. I would think that you of all people would recognize how important that is."

He snorted. "I would think you would understand how important *family* is." His voice was ice. He wasn't used to not getting what he wanted, especially from me. "But I guess you just don't give a shit, do you?"

"Dad," I protested. His words were cruel and unfair. "I do give a shit. I'm respecting my commitments. Something you've been trying to teach me my whole life."

"What about your commitment to this family?"

"Closing a business deal isn't the same thing as respecting our family." I expected us to talk about it, for him to come around and see things my way, maybe even recognize that I was finally following through on something without following the next shiny thing on the horizon.

But he didn't.

"Goodbye, Richard." He ended the call without waiting for a response.

I sat in the truck, staring at the blank screen of my phone. Tears burned the back of my throat. All the joy I'd felt earlier in the day, all the pride at my first paycheck, was gone. I felt like a kid again. One who could do nothing right.

It wasn't fair. I was doing everything right—everything my father had wanted. I had a job, I was working hard, I was making it on my own.

And it still wasn't enough.

I was never going to be enough for my father.

Suddenly, my earlier plans of trying to convince Boone to do unspeakable things with the cherry pie I'd picked up seemed childish and unappetizing. I wasn't in the mood to be around people right now, so I took my packages and retreated to my old room in the bunkhouse.

Alone, I found myself resorting to old habits. Growing up, whenever I'd been upset, I'd retreated into fashion. I'd lost myself in designing or creating a new outfit, channeling my feelings into something I could put on to make myself feel beautiful and accomplished.

I might have felt like shit on the inside, but at least no one would be able to tell by looking at me.

I spent the next two hours happily ripping apart seams of old clothes, cutting them into patterns, and rearranging them on my bed. I was so lost in the process that I didn't even hear the knock at my door or realize anyone was there until Boone stood in front of me.

“What's wrong?” he asked without preamble.

I knelt on the floor, cutting fringe into the leather vest I'd picked up. I sat back on my heels and looked up at him. I plastered on my best smile. “Why do you think something's wrong? Everything's fine.”

He crossed his arms, not buying it. “You missed dinner.”

I glanced at the window, belatedly realizing it was dark out. “I lost track of time.”

He shook his head. “It's meatloaf night. And as much as you like to bitch about all the meat Norma serves, you've been looking forward to her meatloaf for days. Also, you're here instead of up at the house.”

“I had a project I wanted to work on,” I said dismissively.

He crouched until he was at eye level. He reached out a hand and cupped my cheek, tilting my face toward him. “Did you know that when you’re nervous, you do this thing where you throw your shoulders back and lift your chin?”

“A proper lady never shirks on excellent posture,” I noted with a wink.

He nodded. “Uh-huh. And when you’re upset, you deflect everything with a joke.”

Touché.

His thumb drew across the skin under my eye. “And given your elaborate skin care regimen, the only way the skin around your eyes would be red and puffy is if you’d been crying.”

I glanced down at my hands.

“Talk to me,” he said gently.

I still felt raw after speaking with my father. My inclination was to keep it all to myself, not burden him with my emotional turmoil. Everyone liked the life of the party; no one liked the maudlin emo guy.

“Please.” Boone was so earnest, his expression open and caring.

I let out a breath. “My dad called.”

A shadow crossed his face. “And?”

“He had a job for me.” I explained what my father wanted.

His jaw muscle flexed. “Do you want to go? Do you need time off?”

Of course his first thought would be to try to find a way to accommodate me. But I didn’t want special treatment just because we were together.

“I told him I couldn’t do it. I have a job. I have obligations here. To the ranch. To you and the others. If I left, who’d help Mercy tomorrow? Who’d finish getting the app set up? That wouldn’t be fair.”

“We’d miss you, but we could make it work.”

I shook my head. “Thank you, but it’s not that I want to go. It’s just... I thought he would be proud of me. I’m doing everything he wants—being responsible, holding down a job, proving myself—and it’s still not enough. I thought he would respect my commitment to my obligations...” My voice caught.

“Oh, baby.” Boone pulled me against him, wrapping his arms so tight around me that I couldn’t tell where I ended and he began. He kissed the top of my head. “You’re enough. You’re so much more than enough. If your father can’t see what a wonderful son and human being you are, then fuck him. He doesn’t deserve you.”

I let out a watery chuckle. “You have to say that. You’re my—” I swallowed the word, realizing too late what I was about to say.

Boone tensed underneath me. “I’m your what?”

I held my breath, waiting for Richard to respond. My mind spun with possible ways to end that statement:

You're my boss.

You're my boyfriend.

You're my lover.

You're mine.

I wasn't even sure what I was hoping for.

Richard's expression shifted. Whereas moments before, he'd been open and vulnerable, something closed off, and a part of him retreated. He batted his eyelashes exaggeratedly and said in his breathiest voice, "You're my hero."

Then he broke into a truly awful rendition of Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings."

I couldn't help but laugh. It was exactly the response one would expect from Richard—over-the-top, dramatic, and full of flair.

I knew he was deflecting, just like I'd known he was upset, but this time, I didn't call him out on it. Any other answer he'd given would have turned into a discussion, and I wasn't sure I'd like the direction that discussion took. The logical conclusion was that what we were doing wasn't smart and would only end in pain for the both of us. Logical or not though, I wasn't ready for this to end yet.

It seemed like perhaps Richard had realized all this, too, and had drawn the same conclusion.

He continued with the song, flinging his arms around like wings as he stood and spun around the room. The intimate moment between us was over. At least the emotionally intimate moment.

Another night of physical intimacy was just beginning as I stood and hoisted him over my shoulder, carting him back to the house while he let out a whoop and continued singing, finally bringing the song to a close when I set him down in my bedroom and sealed my mouth over his.



NEARLY A WEEK LATER, I'd just woken up to Richard's mouth around my cock when a knock sounded at the front door. Birdie, guard dog extraordinaire, barely lifted her head from her dog bed in the corner to give a half-hearted bark. She was still sulking over being kicked off our bed for the early morning fornications. Richard had somehow gotten me to agree to allowing her to sleep with us at night, but I drew the line at her being on the bed during sexy times.

When the knock sounded again, I met Richard's eyes and cursed under my breath. If I wasn't mistaken, this was one of the days Norma took off early to hit the vegetable market a few towns over, which meant there was no one else to answer the door.

"We'll continue this later," I promised, pressing a kiss to Richard's glistening lips before slipping out of bed. I tugged on jeans and swiped a hand through my hair as I grabbed a white T-shirt. I was just pulling it over my head when I opened the door to find Sheriff Chisolm waiting on my front porch.

He was a few years older than me, but spending time behind a desk instead of running cattle had turned him a little soft. Despite the slight belly he now carried, the man retained an aura of authority exacerbated by the scowl of concern clear on his face this morning.

“Mornin’, Boone.” He touched his fingers to his hat in greeting. “Hope it’s not too early. I figured you’d be up, given that it’s calving season and everything. I didn’t catch you at a bad time, did I?”

His eyes flicked curiously over my shoulder and widened slightly. I had a pretty good idea of what he was looking at. As if to confirm my suspicions, Richard appeared, wearing the ridiculous bright red floral robe he swore was his “final remaining connection with Tom Ford.” Whatever that meant.

The sheriff looked at him. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

I stepped aside, pulling Richard next to me. “Richard, this is Sheriff Chisolm. Sheriff, this is Richard. He’s one of my new hands this season and an all-around good man.”

Chisolm took him in with a twitch of his mustache. “Interesting.”

Richard laughed, baring his long, smooth throat. “Oh honey, you don’t know the half of it.” He placed a hand on my arm. “I’ll go make coffee for the two of you. Sheriff—how do you take yours?”

“Milk and sugar, thanks.”

Richard grinned, giving the sheriff a wink as he ran a hand down his side. “I should have known you’d be a fan of sweet and tan.” He turned and sashayed to the kitchen.

I tried to cover my laughter with a cough, figuring Chisolm might not appreciate it too much. I gestured to the rocking chairs on the porch. “To what do I owe the visit, Sheriff?”

Chisolm sat, pulling a large envelope out of his back pocket and holding it out to me. “I’m awfully sorry about this, Boone, but I have to serve you these papers.”

He sat back while I opened the envelope and pulled out a thick sheaf of documents. I cursed under my breath when I realized what it was: a legal complaint filed by Walt Hosser. He was claiming all sorts of damages for the poisoning of one of his ponds, leading to the death of some of his best breeding stock.

My eyes bulged when I saw the amount he was asking for was well into the seven figures. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” I shook my head, already feeling the muscles along my shoulders knotting with tension. “You know this is bullshit, right?”

The sheriff spread his hands wide. “He claims he has evidence.”

“He’s got crap,” I spat. “We both know he’s been after me since the day I bought this land. This is just another way to get back at me.”

Chisolm shrugged. “He’s got a bunch of dead cattle. I’ve seen them with my own eyes.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’d just assumed Walt had been making it all up. “And they were poisoned?”

The sheriff nodded. “That’s what the vet says.”

I cursed under my breath, running a hand through my hair. “Jesus fucking Christ. Is that man crazy enough to poison his own damn cattle just to make a point?”

He shrugged again. “I guess that’s for the court to figure out.” It was obvious the sheriff didn’t want to pick a side in this one, and I understood why. His family went back generations in this area, as did Walt’s. I was the interloper, and while I had a reputation for being fair and honest, I was still the new kid on the block—if you could call seventeen years “new”—which made me an outsider.

I let out a sigh. “I appreciate you have a job to do, and I’ll take care of this. Meanwhile, I’ve been meaning to ask you how Brittany is getting on with that nice pig of hers.”

Chisolm’s face brightened, and he settled back to tell me about his daughter and the pig she’d raised, who’d been on a winning streak at local livestock shows. Richard brought out coffee and served a cup to the sheriff before taking a seat next to me. I absently dropped my hand on his knee, and he smiled at me before turning his attention to the sheriff and his musings on animal husbandry.

Given the news of the lawsuit, I should have been anxious and itching for Chisolm to leave so I could get to work straightening everything out. Except I wasn't. I was too busy enjoying the moment: sitting on the porch with Richard as the sheriff waxed on about town gossip and the ranch came awake around us.

I realized in that moment that this was what I wanted: for every morning to be like this. To reach out, knowing that my hand would always find Richard's and we could enjoy the beauty and bounty of this land together.

Now that I knew what I wanted, maybe I needed to go about finding a way to actually make it happen.

RICHARD

Sheriff Chisolm may as well have been speaking Klingon for all I understood what he was talking about—something about a 4-H civic engagement program in town?—but it didn't matter when Boone's hand was on my knee, making me feel like I belonged there.

I'd spent over three weeks working my ass off at the Silver Fork and more than half those nights sharing Boone's bed. In another week, give or take—these days, I refused to look at the calendar too closely—my month as a cowhand would be up. I'd have won my bet with Oscar, and it would be time to figure out what came next.

The trouble was... I didn't want to.

Sitting at Boone's side, looking out over the ranch, I felt almost as if I'd landed in some kind of dreamscape—mind you, a dreamscape involving *significantly* more cow manure than any actual dream I'd ever had—and the strangest part was that no part of me wanted to be anywhere else. No corner of my heart wondered what exciting things were happening on far-flung islands; no part of my brain was itching to figure out my next big, manure-free opportunity in New York.

For the first time ever, I felt like I was exactly where I wanted to be, with the person I liked best.

For the first time, I understood what it meant to be *content*.

And if keeping this feeling alive meant ignoring the fact that I would be leaving soon, I was going to ignore it like a

fucking champion. After all, there'd be plenty of time to worry about it later.

I shifted slightly, pushing myself farther into Boone's space, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, without even pausing his conversation, he pressed his thigh more firmly against mine and squeezed my knee gently, telling me he approved of this new position. It was all I could do not to kiss him a little desperately right then and there, Sheriff Chisolm be damned.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sheriff standing and stretching. "Well, I guess I'd better get going." He paused at the top of the steps, taking in his surroundings. "Looks like things are going well for you, Boone."

Boone nodded. "We've had a good season so far."

Chisolm nodded to the papers Boone still clutched in his hand. "Hopefully, this mess will get straightened out and—" He cut himself off as his eyes fell on the small pasture nearby where Hiram had just turned out a few of the horses. He squinted. "Is that a..." He tilted his head to the side. "Unicorn?"

Boone glanced up, confusion marring his brow. He noticed what had caught Chisolm's attention. Duck was wearing the new fly mask I'd designed for her.

One night, maybe a week ago, Boone had been working late in the calving barn. While I'd waited up for him, I'd spent several hours embellishing the masks I'd bought at the store with embroidery, and since then, I'd worked on the project a bit each evening. Two nights ago, after a particularly brilliant idea, I'd used the fabric and stuffing from an old pillow to create a horn that I'd then sewn onto the mask so it would sit over Duck's forehead. Yesterday, after I'd presented all of the horses with their new headwear, I'd braided ribbons into Duck's forelock for an extra touch.

I thought she looked rather beautiful, and clearly, she was feeling it too. She'd had a new pep to her step the rest of the day.

Chisolm let out a deep belly laugh. “Well, I’ll be. Ain’t that clever.” He started down the steps and ambled to the pasture. “Brittany and her friends sure would get a kick out of that. And look there.”

He gestured toward Daffodil. I’d embroidered her mask with an intricate pattern of vines and leaves dotted with tiny flowers I’d created out of a brightly colored silk shirt I’d accidentally ruined when I’d been called in last minute to help pull a calf. I felt like the motif suited her.

I held my breath when Boone’s eyes fell on his own horse. I’d gone all out for Victory, using my Prada ruffled panel shirt to fashion wings for his ear covers. The goal was to make him look like the statue of Winged Victory, and I thought I’d done a pretty good job.

It was obvious who’d been behind the fly mask embellishments, and when Boone turned to me, an eyebrow raised, I lifted my chin a little in challenge.

It was true that I hadn’t exactly asked permission to bedazzle his horses, but I felt like this was a situation where it was more appropriate to ask forgiveness than permission.

“The horses were feeling left out,” I explained. “With all the attention on the calves, there hasn’t been much time for them. I figured they could use a pick-me-up.”

Boone’s expression softened. “You,” he said, moving toward me. He pulled me against him, placing a kiss against my forehead. “You are the absolute most adorable, big-hearted, wonderful human being on the planet. You amaze me.” The pride in his voice was unmistakable.

I blushed to the roots of my hair, fully aware that the sheriff and the other hands were watching this very public display of attention. I didn’t know why it still surprised me how easily and unapologetically Boone showed me affection.

“You like them?” I asked, the challenge melting out of my posture instantly. I’d actually been a bit nervous about what Boone would think when he saw what I’d been working on.

I'd worried that he would think it was frivolous and a waste of time.

"I love them."

"Good," I said with a grin. "Because I have like half a dozen sheriff stars for Moonbeam's—she's gonna blaze like the midday sun."

"Of course she is," Boone said with another kiss to my temple.

Chisolm ambled over. "I took a picture for Brittany. She's going to flip when she sees it."

"Tell her if she ever needs something to spruce up her pig, I've got ideas." I said it as a joke, but the sheriff nodded as if actually considering it.

"Anyway, I gotta head out." He held a hand to Boone. "Good seeing you, though I'm sorry about the unfortunate circumstances. Nice to meet you, Richard." He nodded a goodbye to us and lumbered toward his truck.

I was able to hold out just long enough for the sheriff to start up the drive before turning to Boone. "Unfortunate circumstances? What was that all about?"

Tension clouded his expression for a moment before he forced a smile. "Nothing you need to worry about." He held up the papers he'd been holding. "Just Walt Hosser causing trouble again."

James was a lawyer and had been a workaholic when we were together, always bringing files home. Because of that, I'd seen enough legal complaints to recognize one when I saw it. "What the hell? He's suing you?"

"It's bullshit," Boone said, trying to sound bored and dismissive. But I could tell by the tightness of his shoulders that he was bothered.

I snatched the papers from him and skimmed them. The more I saw, the more my anger boiled. "Are you fucking kidding me? He's accusing you of poisoning his pond and intentionally killing his cows! That's ridiculous! Is he allowed

to do that? Make shit up like that? It's one thing to throw those words around in the heat of the moment, but does he actually think he has evidence to pin this on you?"

I seriously thought about hopping in one of the ranch trucks, hightailing it over to the Hosser Ranch, and kicking Walt Hosser's ass. I wasn't the biggest guy or the most skilled at fighting, but what I lacked in experience, I more than made up for with righteous anger on Boone's behalf.

Boone noticed how upset I was getting because he reached out a hand and cupped my cheek. His thumb trailed along my jaw, easing the muscle I'd been clenching. "It's going to be okay. Walt's all hat, no cattle, as they used to say back in Texas. He likes to hear himself talk, but it'll all blow over soon enough. Until it does, though, maybe don't mention anything about it to the others? I don't want Tyler finding out. It would only upset him."

I blew out a breath and nodded. "Yeah, okay. What are you going to do?"

The corner of his mouth twitched up. "Well, first, I'm going to kiss you. Then I'm maybe gonna grope you a little. Then I'm going to head over to the calving barn to check on how things went overnight and see if we have any new additions to the herd. Then, at some point later on, I'm gonna find you and make you finish what you started before we were so rudely interrupted by Chisolm. Good plan?"

I rolled my eyes. "I meant about the lawsuit."

"Oh, that." He waved a hand in the air. "Next time I'm in town, I'll ask around about lawyers. Until then, I'm not going to give it a second thought. It's just Walt being Walt. No one's going to take this very seriously."

I couldn't tell whether he actually believed that or if he was just saying it so I wouldn't worry. It didn't matter though. I was going to worry anyway. And I couldn't help but wonder if I'd been the one to set all of this in motion by making Boone hire Tyler in the first place.

He stepped closer and used the side of his finger to lift my chin. “Stop whatever you’re thinking right now.” He leaned in and gave me a soft kiss. “There’s history between me and Walt —”

“I know. Tyler said his dad was cranky about selling you off some land. But—”

“But nothing. This fight has been a long time coming. You did not cause this. Tyler did not cause this. Do you understand?”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t sure I agreed.

He pulled me against him. “Now, come here. If I recall, the first item on my to-do list involved some groping.”

“Kissing first,” I reminded him, and then I tilted my mouth up to his.



AS MUCH AS Boone didn’t want me worrying about the lawsuit, I couldn’t help myself. It was time for me to mow the grass again, and since riding the mower didn’t take a ton of brainpower, I had plenty of time to think.

I worried Boone wasn’t taking this seriously enough. I knew Walt’s claims were bullshit, but I also knew lawsuits could cause problems, even if they were based on false accusations. Remembering how enraged Walt had been a couple of weeks ago, I wouldn’t put it past him to concoct some evidence to prove his claim. And while that evidence might not be enough to convince a judge, it might be enough to start rumors in Silverhollow.

I’d paid enough attention working for my father to know that reputations mattered. Walt was basically accusing Boone of being an unscrupulous and malicious cheat. No one wanted to do business with a person like that. At least no honest person would.

I couldn’t bear the idea of anyone ever thinking poorly of Boone, especially when he was one of the most genuine,

hardworking, and caring men I knew. I knew Walt's goal was to push Boone off his land and it would devastate Boone if something happened to cause him to lose the ranch.

I vowed I wouldn't let that happen.

Which was how I found myself on a bench by a small creek just past the calving pasture, calling my ex-boyfriend.

James answered immediately, his voice warm. "Hey, stranger, are you tired of playing cowboy? Sawyer suggested I offer you a job here. Summer season is coming, and we could probably find some work for you next month. Surely being on the Cape this close to P-town would be ten times better than having to deal with stinky old cows."

A couple of weeks ago, I'd have probably jumped at the offer. Now, I didn't even find it tempting. "And sit around watching you two suck face all day? No, thank you."

James laughed. "So if you're not looking for an escape, to what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

I pressed the toe of my boot against the soft soil along the bank of the stream. "I need a lawyer."

"Oh lord." James sobered instantly. "What kind of trouble have you found yourself in this time?"

I rolled my eyes. Of course he would jump to the conclusion that I was the one in need of help. Not that he would be entirely wrong, given past circumstances. There had been a few times when I'd woken James up in the middle of the night needing legal help to get out of a scrape or two.

"Not me. It's for a friend. My boss—you remember Boone, the rancher who knows Oscar?—well, he was served with a lawsuit today. He has some kind of long-standing feud with a neighboring rancher who's a total fucking asshole. The guy made up this story about Boone intentionally trying to poison his cattle. It's ridiculous." I could feel my blood starting to boil just from talking about it.

James paused for a moment. "You know I have to ask... is there any chance your boss did what this guy is accusing him of?"

My jaw dropped. “Hell no! Boone’s a good guy. One of the best I know. He *cares* about animals. You should see the setup he has in the calving barn. Mercy told me most operations would just have bare bones, but Boone installed heaters and fans, and he changes the straw out daily to make the cows more comfortable. And Harrison says this is the best operation he’s ever worked for. That’s the kind of guy Boone is, James. He’d never intentionally harm another creature. *Ever.*”

I realized that perhaps I’d gone a little over the top defending him when my rant was met with several beats of silence. Eventually, James cleared his throat. “Okay. You, ah... you know this isn’t really my area of expertise, right? Unless the cows in question are perhaps looking to acquire land for a high-end resort, of course.”

I knew he was trying to make me laugh, but the more I’d talked, the more upset I’d gotten, and at the moment, I was too worried about Boone to even crack a smile. “You have to help him, James.”

His voice softened. “Is there something I should know about? Something going on between you and this cowboy?”

“No,” I said quickly. Possibly *too* quickly. Even through the phone, I could tell James didn’t believe me.

I sighed. “It’s just...” I tried to find the right words and couldn’t. I looked back over my shoulder at the calving pasture and the collection of buildings that lay at the heart of Silver Fork. Beyond that, waves of ranch land stretched toward the horizon. It was beautiful in a rugged and wild way. So incredibly foreign from the tamed city skyscraper vistas I was used to.

“What would you say if I told you I was thinking of staying out here?” I asked softly. I’d had the thought in the back of my mind for several days, but saying it out loud made it somehow feel more real.

My heart fluttered with a heady sort of anticipation. *Am I actually considering this?*

“Staying... in *Wyoming*? On the ranch?” James’s voice was incredulous. It made me automatically defensive.

“Yeah. With Boone.”

“Boone the cowboy,” James clarified.

“I think...” I hesitated. It was one thing to think these things. It was another thing to act on them. But it was time to put on my big-boy pants and admit the truth. No more putting it off or ignoring how I felt. “I might be falling for him.” I held my breath, waiting for his response.

I admit, I wasn’t expecting laughter. “Oh, Richard,” James said when he could finally breathe again.

I felt like I’d been doused with a giant bucket of frigid water. “I’m serious.”

His voice immediately softened, but there was still an undercurrent of sympathy to his words. “I know you are, sweetheart.”

“Then why are you laughing?” I demanded.

James must have realized he’d hurt my feelings. He sighed. “Do you want the truth?”

No. I closed my eyes. Wasn’t this why I’d called him? “Yes.”

He took his time, choosing his words carefully. “Richard, you have a big heart—it’s one of the things I love about you. You don’t approach life in half measures—it’s all or nothing with you. And you don’t settle.”

“You make all of that sound like a bad thing,” I protested.

“It’s not a bad thing. It’s wonderful!” James hesitated, and I braced myself for the *but*. “Except it also means sometimes you don’t see things for what they are.”

“I don’t understand.” I sounded petulant to my own ears, and I hated it.

“Most people, when they start something new—a job, or a relationship, or a new venture—go into it with eyes open, thinking optimistically, but also figuring they’ll give it a

chance and see if it works out. You, on the other hand, go in whole hog. You convince yourself that this is it, this is the missing piece that will make your life complete. If it's a new job, you approach it like it's your destiny. And if it's a new person, you tell yourself they're your soul mate."

I didn't think James was being very fair. "But what if they *are* your soul mate? What if Boone *is* who I'm supposed to be with?"

"How many times have you met your soul mate, Richard?" The affection in his tone didn't take the sting from his words. "And how many times did you hang on to a relationship rather than let it go because you were afraid to be wrong?"

I winced. Even if I didn't want to admit it, there was truth to what he was saying. I'd dated James far longer than I should have because I wanted him to be the right person for me. It also hadn't hurt that my father loved James, and I was always trying to please the old man. By the end, I'd felt like I'd tied myself in knots trying new things—trying to be a new person—so that James and I could stay together, and it still hadn't worked.

But this time, with Boone, it felt different. Very different.

"You're suggesting I can't let things go, which is highly ironic since Oscar thinks I've never stuck to anything in my life," I retorted.

"You stick to the idea of things," James said with so much sympathy my eyes stung. "Or maybe to the *ideal* of them. To the dream you've dreamed up, even when it doesn't match with reality. Even when it's not a good fit."

I let out a shaky breath, remembering sitting with Boone on the porch just that morning. Had I been doing the very thing James was suggesting? It *had* felt dreamlike, but still... "That's not what this is."

"No? What are you going to do if you stay out there, Richard?" James continued. "You going to keep working as a ranch hand? Shovel shit all day, every day? Wear Levi's and

flannel shirts? That's a great life for someone, but that's not who you are, and you know it."

I wanted to defend myself, but I wasn't sure how. Because some part of me knew he was right, even if I didn't want to admit it to myself.

When I didn't respond, he must have assumed I still needed convincing because he pressed the point. "Remember when you started your own interior design business? You loved it—you thought it was the perfect job. In less than a year, you were already bored, and that's when you started looking into exotic pet photography. After that, you wanted to invest in all-inclusive, high-end gay resorts."

"I still think that resort in Hawaii was a good idea," I grumbled.

James chuckled. "I'm sure it was. The thing is, you were never wrong about the jobs you pursued. They all suited you, and you were good at them. And if all you were looking for was a job, then you'd have been fine."

"Then what do you think I'm looking for?"

He blew out a breath. "I don't know. I tried to figure that out when we were still together because I wanted to be able to give it to you. But I couldn't." There was real pain and regret in his words, and that, more than anything, gave me pause. I knew James would never be cruel and that everything he was saying came from his heart.

"Look, Richard, I know how easy it is to love you."

"You should tell that to my father," I joked.

He didn't rise to the bait. "I'm serious. I saw a future with you: marriage, kids, white picket fences—"

My stomach twisted with guilt and shame. "I wasn't trying to lead you on—"

"I know you weren't. That's my point. You'd convinced yourself you wanted that future too. That you *should* want it. But deep down, you didn't."

"I'm sorry," I told him.

He let out a soft laugh. “I’m not. It took us breaking up for me to realize we were never going to be good together. We needed that distance to see the truth of things. Besides, if it hadn’t been for you and your father’s business, I wouldn’t have met Sawyer. I’m living the life I’ve always wanted now.”

“Glad the implosion of our relationship could lead you to such joy,” I said sardonically.

He ignored my tone. “Look, I know you don’t want to hear this. I just don’t want you to get hurt again. You say you’re falling for Boone? That you’ll be happy living in the middle of nowhere shoveling shit for the rest of your life? Then I want you to at least consider this might be just another one of your daydreams. One that the *real* Richard is going to wake up from way too soon.”

I blinked and realized that my eyes had grown cloudy with tears. “Anyone tell you what a total buzzkill you are?”

He laughed. “All the time. I’m a lawyer, remember?”

“I know, that’s why I called in the first place,” I grumbled. “If I’d wanted to be told how much I suck, I’d have called dear old dad.”

“You don’t suck, Richard—” James began, but I didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

“That’s not what the boys at the club say,” I teased in my cheekiest voice.

Even I could hear how hollow and half-hearted the joke sounded. If I’d been talking to Boone, he would have seen right through me.

James, on the other hand, just laughed. “Anyway, about that lawsuit,” James continued, bringing us back on point. “It’s definitely not my area of expertise, but I can reach out to my contacts and find a good lawyer in the area who can take it on. And I’ll stay in touch on it, just in case I can do anything more to help. That sound good?”

“Thank you, James.” I squirmed a bit before adding, “For everything.”

“You deserve to be happy, Richard. Speaking of, I’m having drinks tonight with Oscar. I’ll give him your best. I’m sure he’ll love hearing how well you’ve settled in there. You’re proving him wrong by staying and following this through. I’m proud of you.”

My eyes smarted, and the emotions needed to get the hell out. “Tell him his friend has a great cock!” I blurted, trying hard to change the subject.

“I absolutely will not,” he said, laughing before saying goodbye and hanging up.

Once the call was over, I sat staring at the creek for a while longer, not quite ready to return to the ranch.

I understood what James had been saying. I knew he meant well. And I knew he absolutely believed everything he’d told me.

But I also thought that in this instance, he might be wrong.

With Boone, I felt more wanted and appreciated and *seen* than I’d ever felt with anyone else. He listened when I spoke and understood even the things I couldn’t bring myself to say out loud. He never hesitated to show he cared about me, whether it was in front of the other hands or even the sheriff. And I never felt as though I needed to act a certain way around him or pretend to know things I didn’t because there were no conditions on his affection.

He liked me just as I was, sparkly cowboy hat and all.

And the fact that I *was* considering giving up my life in New York to live on a ranch “in the middle of nowhere” should have been proof enough of how much I cared for Boone.

So, sure, I’d rushed into things in the past. James was right that I’d thought I’d been born to be an interior designer, and then a house flipper, and then a travel influencer. But that had been an entirely different situation because back then, I’d been a different person.

I chewed my lip. *But what if James is right?*

It wasn't just my heart on the line; it was also Boone's. Because what James had been too kind to dwell on in our conversation was that when I'd convinced *myself* I wanted a future with James, I'd convinced *him* as well. He'd wasted years waiting for me to be ready, and in the end, I'd only caused him pain. The fact that he was happy with Sawyer now didn't negate that.

What if the same thing happened with Boone? What if I gave up my life in NYC and moved out here to be a full-time cowboy? What if we fell in love and Boone imagined a future for us that I couldn't give him? What if I broke Boone's heart?

I couldn't do that to Boone. I couldn't promise him anything I didn't know for certain I could give him...

But how was I supposed to know if falling for Boone was for real or just another daydream?

How was I supposed to know if I could trust my own heart?

I buried my head in my hands. Just this morning, everything had seemed so clear. I'd been content, knowing exactly where I wanted to be and the person I wanted to be with. Now, everything was so muddled. How the hell was I supposed to figure this out?

Just then, my phone rang with another call. If it was James with more "helpful" advice, I wasn't interested. But when I looked at the screen, I saw that it was my mother.

I blinked. I couldn't remember the last time she'd called me. Certainly never this early. As far as I was aware, she didn't understand that the world existed before noon.

A note of alarm sounded in the back of my head. I answered the phone with a cautious hello.

"Richard." Her voice caught on my name. It was probably the most emotion I'd heard from her in years.

My heart rate shot through the roof. I gripped the phone tighter. "Everything okay?"

She took a breath, pulling herself back together. “Your father passed away last night.”

I blinked at a tiny pile of rocks near the toe of my boot while my brain tried to make sense of her words, but it couldn’t. “What?” I demanded.

“Your father is gone. He died, Richard.”

Sound roared in my ears, and my vision went splotchy. “What?” I gasped, repeating myself because surely I’d misheard her. “I don’t—I—I don’t understand. What happened?”

“A stroke in his sleep, apparently,” she said, no-nonsense once again. “He didn’t suffer.”

I pressed my fingers against my eyes, trying to take in this new information. “But—but that can’t be. I mean, he’s Dad. I thought he was in good health? He’s not that old. I just—”

“You’re needed at home, Richard,” she said, cutting me off before I could wrap my head around what she was telling me. “Where are you?”

It took a minute for my brain to process her question and come up with an answer. “Um, Wyoming?”

“Where in Wyoming?” she pressed.

“Silver Fork Ranch,” I told her, my mind still trying to catch up. “Outside of Silverhollow. Why?”

There was a beat of silence. “What’s the closest airport?”

I rattled off the name of the private airstrip Oscar had used when he’d flown me out here.

I heard her murmur to someone in the background. “We’ll send a plane from Jackson. It should be there within the hour. A car is on the way to pick you up.”

This was all happening so fast. “I—okay. But Mom—”

“There will be a car waiting at Teterboro to bring you to the town house. Guests have already begun to arrive, and the lawyers should be here by noon, so for my sake, please wear

something respectable.” She didn’t even give me a chance to respond before saying goodbye and hanging up.

I struggled to take a deep breath, but my lungs refused to cooperate. Everything was spinning—the world, my thoughts, my stomach. I thought I might be sick, and I leaned forward, shoving my head between my knees.

Boone.

I needed Boone. More than water or air or anything else in this world. I jumped to my feet and stalked across the pasture toward the barns, nearly running. My eyes blurred with tears, my throat tight as I struggled to get my breathing under control. All I could think about was falling into Boone’s arms. I needed him to hold me tight. I needed him to tell me everything was going to be okay, even if it wasn’t—

Isn’t this exactly what James warned you about? The thought came to me in an exasperated, disapproving voice that sounded exactly like my father’s, and it caught me so off guard I nearly stumbled. When will you ever face reality, Richard? When will you ever stand on your own two feet?

I stopped running and pushed a hand to my stomach, my chest burning.

I’d never been enough for my father. I’d been a constant disappointment. I’d never measured up, and now that he’d died, I never would.

The thought hollowed me out, causing me to nearly double over with grief.

After a few stunned moments, I finally straightened up and numbly made my way back toward the bunkhouse. I couldn’t go to Boone. Not right then. How selfish would it be to throw the hot, conflicted mess of my emotions at his feet and take shelter in his arms when there was a chance I might eventually break his heart? Boone deserved better than that.

And, *fuck*, if figuring out the truth of my feelings for Boone had seemed impossible ten minutes ago, it felt twice as impossible now. My phone was already pinging with a dozen texts confirming my flight, letting me know about upcoming

meetings with lawyers, and informing me of decisions that needed to be made regarding my father's final arrangements. I could feel my brain shutting down and compartmentalizing.

I skirted the edge of the barns, hoping to stay out of sight. I couldn't face anyone. Couldn't handle their shock and sympathy. If I tried, I'd shatter into a million jagged pieces that would never go back together again.

I slipped through the back door to the bunkhouse, grabbed a suitcase, and threw things inside without thought. When I was done packing, I hesitated. I couldn't just leave the ranch without telling someone. I didn't want anyone to worry.

I grabbed a pad of paper, scrawled a note, and folded it in half, writing Boone's name on the front.

Then I left the Silver Fork just as abruptly as I'd arrived, without saying goodbye.

BOONE

Nothing could wipe the smile from my face as I went about my morning chores, not even Walt's bogus lawsuit. Sure, it was going to be a pain in the ass to deal with, and an expensive pain at that, but that's what lawyers were for. Instead, I let my thoughts drift to Richard and the plans we'd made to sneak away for some alone time after lunch.

When Jed approached me half an hour later with a grim set to his lips, I knew it was going to be bad news. I held up a hand. "I don't want to hear it. I'm in a good mood and don't need any more bad news today."

Of course, that didn't stop him. "Just got a call from Hunter over at the Worthy ranch. He came across a cow with a Silver Fork ear tag just standing in the middle of the road."

The good mood I'd been riding all morning instantly soured.

"Also said he thought he saw a couple more cows in the distance but couldn't read their tags. He figures they're probably Silver Fork too."

I ran a hand down my face. "Fuck."

Jed nodded. "That about sums it up."

I shook my head. "It's gotta be a fence break out near Mob Creek, but Richard and I checked that area just a couple weeks ago." This was the last fucking thing I needed. We were already stretched thin without having to go riding fences.

I let out a frustrated growl. “You and Hiram take the trailer and go round up our girl from the road. See if you can also round up the ones Hunter caught sight of nearby. I’ll take Tyler to see if we can figure out how they got out and how many we’re missing. Mercy and PeeWee can hold down things here.”

“What about Richard?”

I thought of our last trip to Mob Creek and how much I’d enjoy a repeat performance. There was a good chance I could be gone overnight, and I hated the thought of missing even a single night with Richard. But at the same time, that last trip had pushed the limits of Richard’s endurance in the saddle, and I knew this trip would be even harder. There wouldn’t be time for long breaks in the shade or picnic lunches along the creek.

“He’ll stay here and help Mercy and PeeWee,” I said, knowing I was right, even though I hated it. “I’ll let him know.”

Jed started for the barns to fill the others in while I went looking for Richard. I knew he’d planned on mowing when he’d finished mucking the stalls, but the mower was still parked in its usual spot.

I popped my head into the kitchen, where Norma was already packing up a couple of coolers for us to take with us. “You seen Richard?”

She shook her head. “Not for a while. I saw him on the path down to the pasture creek earlier. Looked like he was on the phone.”

I knew the spot she was talking about. It was the same general direction as Mob Creek, which meant I could find him on our way out.

“Thanks,” I told her, grabbing one of the coolers and heading over to where Tyler waited by Victory and Branson, who were already saddled.

Except when we reached the bench by the pasture creek, Richard wasn’t there. I bit back a curse and turned in my

saddle to look back toward the ranch buildings. I tented a hand over my eyes, trying to catch sight of Richard mowing the lawn or turning the compost pile, but I was too far away, and I knew it was more likely that PeeWee or Mercy had pulled him off his regular duties to help them out.

For a moment, I considered leaving Tyler and riding back just to find Richard and say goodbye. I had to remind myself I was only going to be gone a day, hopefully overnight at the longest. I could handle being away from Richard that long.

Besides, being gone would just make coming home to him all that much sweeter.



UNFORTUNATELY, once we finally found the fence break, we discovered it was worse than expected. A huge swath of wire lay cut and mangled on the ground, leaving a gap about ten feet across. The ground around it was churned from all the cattle that had made their way free.

Tyler stared at the mess with wide eyes. “I’ve never seen a break that bad.”

I dismounted, taking a closer look at where the wire had been split. It was obvious from the crimping at the ends that it had been cut. “No shit. That’s because it was intentional.”

His jaw dropped. “Someone did this on purpose?”

I nodded.

“But who would...” His voice trailed off when he caught sight of the expression on my face. I only knew of one man who hated me enough to do something like this. Walt Hosser.

“You think it was my dad,” he said simply.

I didn’t answer him. Walt Hosser was an asshole and a bully, but he was still the boy’s father. My silence, however, was answer enough. Tyler frowned as he dismounted to help me work on the fence.

“You think it has anything to do with me coming to work for you?” It was obvious by the set of his shoulders how terrible he felt about what his father might have done.

“Even if it was your father, you’re not responsible for his actions,” I told him.

“But if this is because of me—”

I cut him off. “This has nothing to do with you. Walt took issue with me long before I hired you on. He can hire all the hands he wants, and cut my fence to ribbons, and throw a lawsuit at me for poisoning his herd, but if he thinks that’s somehow going to intimidate me or run me off, he’s more wrongheaded than I thought.”

Tyler’s lips twitched into a smile. “He can be pretty wrongheaded sometimes.”

“Had to be to run you off.”

Tyler frowned. “Wait, did you say something about a lawsuit?”

I shrugged. “It’s all the same bullshit as before when he came out here claiming I poisoned one of his ponds and killed his best breeding stock.”

His jaw dropped. “He’s actually suing you? Why? There’s no way he can win. You’d never do anything like that and everyone knows it.”

“I appreciate you saying that, and it’s true. But it’s nothing you need to worry about. The lawyers will sort it all out.”

Tyler still looked concerned. “Did his lawsuit mention the name of the pond he’s claiming you poisoned?”

I waved a hand. “Somewhere nearby,” I told him. “I was out this way a couple weeks back with Richard, looking for a few heifers. He’s claiming I did it then.” I swung myself back up onto Victory’s back. “Now, let’s get a count on what’s left of the herd so we know how many head we’re looking for.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about my dad,” Tyler said as we started toward a group of cows grazing in the distance.

“Don’t let him take up too much real estate in your head,” I told him. “He doesn’t deserve it.”

Between getting an accurate count on the remaining herd and tracking down strays, the two of us worked hard until dark, when we were forced to stop and set up a hasty camp. I was exhausted and sore and mad as hell when I radioed in to fill Jed in on where things stood and asked him and Hiram to ride out in the morning to bring more supplies and help us get things fixed. Once we were done making plans, I asked to speak to Richard.

“I think he turned in early,” Jed said. “We didn’t get back until about half an hour ago, and the lights were already out in the bunkhouse. Want me to wake him up?”

My chest ached with the need to hear Richard’s voice. I just wanted to close my eyes and listen to him tell me about his day and let his voice carry me to sleep. Instead, I sighed and told Jed no. “I’ll catch up with him tomorrow.”

Except I didn’t hear from Richard the next day either. Apparently, Jed and Hiram left before he was awake. Then it started raining midmorning, the storm growing worse through the day, making every single task take that much longer. We’d gotten the strays back in the pasture and worked by the light of portable lamps Jed had brought with him to get the last of the fence repaired. It was past midnight before we finished and collapsed into the tent.

Despite the late night, I was up at first light. “Let’s go,” I called out to the others. “We ride for home in thirty minutes.”

It was in that moment that I realized just how hard I’d fallen for Richard. Because when I thought about home, it wasn’t the ranch or the main house I pictured; it was him. It was his ridiculously sequined cowboy hat and him singing to the horses when he mucked their stalls. It was his spirit fingers on the riding mower and the way he crafted costumes for the animals just to make them happy.

It was the way my chest filled with desire when I saw his smile and the way his hand fit perfectly into mine. It was the

way he tasted and how he looked when he was naked and needy under the stars.

It was waking up next to him every morning and wanting that every day for the rest of my life.

I'd been lying to myself when I thought I could sleep with him and not want more. I wanted more. I wanted everything.

Richard still had half a week left to win his bet with Oscar. Which meant I had that long to figure out how to make it work between us. To convince him to build a future with me.

The entire ride back to the ranch, my chest fluttered with the anticipation of seeing Richard again. I felt like a teenager with a crush, unable to stop the grin from spreading across my face at the mere thought of him. As we came over the final ridge and the barns were finally in sight, I gave Victory free rein and let him take off.

We flew across the final pasture, the wind blowing through my hair as I let out a joyous whoop that I was only moments away from seeing Richard again.

But it wasn't Richard who greeted me in the main yard; it was Sheriff Chisolm and two of his deputies. Beside them stood Walt Hosser, who had a look on his face like the cat who ate the canary.

A sour taste flooded my mouth, and I forced a smile as I dismounted. "Sheriff," I said with a nod. "Nice to see you again. Everything okay?"

Walt's shit-eating grin grew larger. "Not for you, asshole."

Sheriff Chisolm cut him a warning look. "No starting any trouble, Walt. You gave your word. Or else we're going to have to send you back home."

Walt pressed his lips shut but didn't bother hiding the gleam in his eyes. Behind me, I heard the rest of my men trotting into the yard and dismounting. Hiram came forward, taking Victory's reins. "You okay, boss?" he asked under his breath.

“I’m fine. Why don’t you have Tyler handle the horses?” I wasn’t sure what Walt was doing here, but whatever it was, I figured Tyler didn’t need to see any of it, and it would probably be easier if he was out of sight.

I turned back to the sheriff and crossed my arms. “What can I do for you, Sheriff?”

The sheriff blew out a breath. “Walt’s pressing criminal charges for what happened to his cows.”

“Jesus Christ,” I spat under my breath. “You know I had nothing to do with that.”

“Unfortunately, given the nature of the accusations, we’re going to need you to come down to the station to answer a few questions.”

I shoved a hand through my hair. I didn’t need to be dealing with this shit right now. I was dirty, exhausted, and I still hadn’t seen Richard.

“Why don’t you ask my *dad* about the fence break on Mr. Hammond’s pasture out by Mob Creek?”

I glanced behind me to see Tyler striding forward. His cheeks blazed with color, and his hands clenched in fists by his side.

Walt pointed a finger at Tyler. “You stay out of this, boy.”

Tyler kept going. “You think I haven’t run enough fence with you in my life to recognize your handiwork?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Walt’s tone was menacing, his eyes narrowed.

“You twist the wire back when you cut. Same way your dad taught you, same way you taught me. It’s such a habit you probably don’t even realize you’re doing it.”

Walt frowned.

Tyler pulled his phone from his pocket. “I took pictures. I have evidence.”

“You don’t have shit,” Walt spat. His face was red with fury.

“Or why don’t you tell them that you don’t keep breeding stock out by Corrigan’s Pond? That’s where you’re saying your breeders were poisoned, right? I can attest to the fact that you’ve only ever grazed cull cows out that far. And I would know since I was the last to ride out there.” He held his phone higher. “Oh, and I have pictures of that too. I took them three weeks ago.” He looked to the sheriff. “Would you like to see them?”

“You motherfu—” Walt launched himself at Tyler, but one of Chisolm’s deputies was quick enough to get an arm around him and hold him back. That didn’t stop Walt from shouting, “Fuck you, you ungrateful shit! After everything I’ve done for your sorry ass!”

Tyler walked right up to his father until only inches separated them. “No, Dad. Fuck you,” he said evenly. Then he turned and walked away, head held high.

I glanced at Chisolm. “We good here?”

He let out a weary sigh. “Seems we are. Sorry about all this.” He held out a hand, and I shook it. Then I turned and started for the bunkhouse, my mind on only one thing: Richard.

I was practically running by the time I hit the porch, and I raced down the main hall, not even bothering to knock before bursting inside his bedroom. I pulled up short. The room was empty, the bed made and the area around the sink emptied of his usual collection of skin care products.

My heart began to hammer, an uneasy feeling taking root in my gut. There was a piece of paper folded on the bedside table, and I approached it warily. It had my name written in bold on the outside. I flipped it over.

I’m leaving—I’m sorry. Tell Oscar he won the bet.

RICHARD

I stared at my phone, willing it to ring. Instead, it stayed stubbornly silent. I sighed and let my head fall against the window of the town car my mother had sent to pick me up at the airport. I tried to catch a glimpse of the sky to gauge what time it was, but my view was blocked by towering glass skyscrapers.

I looked again at my phone. I'd left the ranch nearly six hours ago, and I still hadn't heard from Boone. Not that I knew what I'd say when he did call. I couldn't explain why I'd left without saying goodbye because I didn't even understand it myself. And what if he asked me how I felt about him? What if he wanted to talk about our future?

The thought caused my skin to prickle and my heart to race with panic. As much as I wanted to hear Boone's voice, I realized there was absolutely no way I could talk to him right then. Not with everything else going on. With fumbling fingers, I quickly powered down my phone. The moment the screen went blank, I felt peace wash over me. No more texts from my mother or my father's assistant, no more emails about my father's estate, no more worrying about what to tell Boone.

With a sigh, I went back to staring out the window. The city noise outside was muffled as we glided up Broadway toward my parents' brownstone. Spring was turning to summer, and the sun wasn't close to setting yet. Freshly planted flowers filled a few window boxes here and there, and men and women paraded up and down the street in fewer layers than they'd worn when I'd left.

This time of night on the ranch would have still required at least long sleeves, but in the city, it was already warmer. I spotted a gorgeous Dolce & Gabbana cherry-print halter dress I'd noticed in a recent fashion magazine, and I smiled as I watched the woman wearing it do the damned thing justice with every step she took. This city was amazing. Everything I'd ever wanted was here, and there was inspiration everywhere I looked.

But for the first time ever, it no longer felt like home.

"Sir?" The driver's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "If you'll wait here, I'll come around."

Come around for what? I reached for the door handle to let myself out just as he rounded the back of the car and tried to open the door for me. *Oh. Come around for that.*

I bit back a smirk. There'd been a time in the not-too-distant past when I would have automatically waited for the driver to open my door and help me with my luggage. My mother had taught me the finer points of interacting with drivers, doormen, and help staff of all kinds, and I'd been brought up to know my place at the top of the food chain. Only now the idea I couldn't do that stuff for myself was laughable.

I thanked the driver and grabbed my own bag, carrying it up the stairs and pressing the doorbell. My mother's housekeeper let me in and led me to the formal living room, where my mother waited. She stood at my arrival and held out her hands toward me. The moment I drew near, however, her nose wrinkled, and she took a step back.

"My god, Richard, what is that awful stench?" She covered her mouth with her hand. "And what are you wearing?"

I looked down at myself. I'd showered that morning and put on my usual work clothes: jeans, a snap-button shirt that I'd adorned with tassels, and my Justins, which I'd made sure to brush off before boarding the plane.

"For the love of—" She shook her head, cutting herself off. "The estate lawyers will be here any minute, and you

smell like a barn. Go get yourself cleaned up and put on something appropriate.”

Hello to you too, Mom, I thought to myself. *Sorry about your loss*. Instead of saying anything, I turned and started up the stairs toward my room. Or rather, the room formerly known as mine. My mother had wasted little time before redecorating once I'd left for college. It had been through several iterations since: study, office, exercise studio, meditation retreat. Now, thankfully, it served as another guest room. I set my bag on the bed before stripping my clothes off and stepping into the shower.

I took my time getting ready. After the reception I'd gotten from my mother, I figured she could wait. Thankfully, after James and I had broken up, I'd moved some of my clothes here until I could find a new place, which meant I still had a couple of old suits in the closet. They were a few seasons out of date, but I made it work.

Once I was dressed, I stood for a moment in front of the mirror, taking myself in. My hair was a little longer than I usually wore it, but I'd styled it in a way to make it look rakishly intentional. My skin was tanner, but a little bit of highlight powder made my cheekbones pop more than usual.

Something still wasn't right though. I might look like my old self, but I didn't feel like it. I forced a smile. It looked fake. I tried again, but it wasn't much better. I was losing my edge. I was the good-time guy. The guy who made things fun, who lifted moods with a perfectly timed quip or a bawdy joke.

But *fuck*, I didn't feel like being that guy just then.

I shrugged on my jacket and wandered downstairs to face my mother and the hoard of estate attorneys. Before I even entered the formal parlor where they were gathering, I heard the annoying voice of my uncle Winthrop. It shouldn't have surprised me that he was here. He'd worked for my father for the past decade and was probably hoping for some sort of payout from his will.

I took a breath and braced myself before entering the room. “There he is,” my mother said upon my arrival, giving

me a once-over. She didn't wrinkle her nose or outright retch at my appearance, so I must have been successful in washing the smell of the ranch off.

I bent to give my mother a kiss on the cheek. "How are you?"

She sighed. "Put out. I'd warned the man to take better care of himself, and he simply never listened. Now, here we are."

Coming from a woman who considered a balanced meal to be a protein smoothie in the morning and several gin and tonics in the evening, this was rich. But I knew my mother would rather die than show something as low-brow as human emotion to strangers.

I glanced toward my uncle Winthrop, who didn't even bother heaving himself up from his leather chair to say hello. Instead, he acknowledged my existence with a nod. "Nice of you to finally make it, Richard."

My mother ignored him and gestured at two men in business suits who'd stood upon my arrival. "These are your father's estate attorneys. They're here to go over some of his final wishes."

They introduced themselves and offered their condolences. I couldn't help but notice that they'd been the only ones so far to even acknowledge I'd lost my father. In fact, since the moment my mom had called, they were the first ones to even mention he was dead.

That reality struck me harder than I expected. It had never occurred to me one of my parents would pass away this soon, and the experience was disorienting. I felt like I was a yacht that had not only come untethered from its mooring but had also been whisked out to sea in a storm.

There were so many words left unspoken between my father and me, words I'd never get to say now. I'd spent my entire life trying to convince him I was worthy of his love and attention, and he'd still died disappointed in me. There was nothing I could do to change that.

I drew a shuddering breath and tried to focus on the attorneys as they read the trust provisions that disposed of my father's estate. But the words were meaningless.

A flood of memories assaulted me without warning. Mercy's eyes meeting mine before he softly praised me for the way I handled Branson during a river crossing. Norma's warm smile as she thanked me for doing the dishes long after the other hands had escaped for the bunkhouse. Tyler's enthusiastic gratitude as he told me how much happier he was at Silver Fork than he'd been at his family's own ranch. Boone's comment about being proud of me as we lay in our postcoital haze under the clear Wyoming sky.

Just thinking about Boone made me ache for him in a way that didn't seem possible. Despite having so much unsettled between us, I wished he were here by my side. I wished I could feel his hand slip into mine, his fingers squeezing me as he murmured in my ear that I would be okay—I would make it through this.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" My thoughts were interrupted by Winthrop's outburst.

My mother cleared her throat sharply, dragging me back to the present. Everyone in the room was looking at me expectantly, and I realized there was something I'd missed. I blinked, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. "I'm sorry, can you repeat that?"

Winthrop threw up his hands. "See what I mean? There's a reason his father fired him. He's incompetent at best. In no world would Dick Sr. leave *Richard* in charge of Dunning Capital." He practically spat my name.

I blinked. "Excuse me?" I hated to agree with Uncle Winthrop, but he was right—there was no way my father would have left me anything related to his company.

"Your father was quite clear," the older of the two lawyers explained. "After his death, he intended for you to inherit and run Dunning Capital. With some conditions, of course." He began to tick off the requirements on his fingers as he explained. "You'd be a full-time employee with the same

requirements as other senior management in terms of necessary hours in the office, time off, holidays, etc. Current C-level management would stay in place to assist you. You'd be allowed to hire as necessary, but your father was quite clear that his one requisite was that you would be required to work."

"I would have to be the CEO of Dunning Capital," I said, just to hear it out loud. "Actively."

"Yes, sir," the attorney said with a nod. "For a period of five years. After that point, assuming all conditions have been met, then the business becomes yours with no further conditions or requirements."

Uncle Winthrop laughed. "Since when has Richard held down a job for five weeks, much less five years?"

For a moment, I considered accepting the job just so I could turn around and immediately fire my uncle.

"And if he fails to meet the conditions?" my mother asked.

I glanced her way, stung by her lack of faith in me.

"Come now, Richard," she said, her expression exasperated. "We both know you're hardly qualified to run a billion-dollar business."

Winthrop snorted. "He'll fucking bankrupt the company by year's end."

I stared at them both, appalled. "I have a business degree, you know. I also worked for Dunning Capital for quite some time, if you recall. I can do it."

And suddenly, I knew I was speaking the truth. I *could* do it. I'd been raised to run this company, and I'd spent years listening to my father in addition to educating myself in business. I could take over my father's legacy.

More than that, I could have my old life back. A luxury penthouse in the city. A personal shopper at Neiman's. Nights out with my friends at the clubs on the weekends. Summer vacations to Fire Island and the family house in the Hamptons. The dream I'd dreamed for the longest time.

My heart began to thump unevenly in my chest. My father had left the company to me for a reason. There was so much that would forever go unspoken between us, but in the end, he hadn't written me off entirely. He'd given me one last chance to prove to him and to myself who I was. What I was capable of. What I really wanted.

And I would... just as soon as I was absolutely sure what it was.

BOONE

I read the words Richard had written again, but they didn't make any sense. He had *left*? Why? When? I grabbed for my phone and tried calling him. Straight to voicemail. I hung up and tried again. Same thing.

I stared at my phone, not knowing what to do. *Oscar*, I thought. I immediately called him. He answered and said without preamble, "Who in their right mind dates a divorce attorney and expects it to work out?"

I didn't have time to hear about Oscar's latest dating exploits. "He's gone," I interrupted, cutting him off.

"Who's gone?"

"Richard." I started to pace Richard's small room. "I don't know what happened. I thought there was something between us. I thought he really cared about me. That maybe we could make this thing work. But the day before yesterday, there was a fence break, and I had to go deal with it, and while I was away... he left."

"Of course he left," Oscar said, his voice matter-of-fact.

I paused in my pacing, my eyes going wide. "Really? You're going to choose *now* to say I told you so? I mean, you did tell me so. Fine. Okay. You were right. You warned me all about him. You said he was a flake and a tease and a lazy layabout who flitted from lark to lark. But that's not who Richard was when he was here. He was a damn hard worker. And a fast learner. I had to take him out to search for some missing heifers, and you should have seen him cutting the herd

with me. I only had to show him once, and he got it. And he embroidered fly masks for the horses. And I..." My voice cracked just slightly before I steadied it. "I thought he was happy here, Oscar. I thought he was happy with me. But I guess he wasn't because now he's gone."

"Orrrrr..." Oscar said, drawing out the word. "He could be gone because his dad died."

I froze. "What?" I breathed.

"Richard's dad passed away two nights ago. The memorial is later today. I assumed you knew."

My legs felt weak. I stumbled to Richard's bed and sat. His familiar scent wafted up around me, a combination of high-end skin care products, fancy soap, and styling gel. It made my stomach twist with longing.

Richard's *dad* had died? Why hadn't he told me?

Sure, Richard's relationship with his father had been tumultuous, but that didn't mean there wasn't love there. That was the whole problem: because Richard still loved his father, he couldn't just walk away. I thought about the pain in his voice whenever he'd talked about his father and their relationship. I remembered how raw his need was for his father's approval. Now, his father was dead. I couldn't imagine what Richard had to be going through.

Fuck. I wanted to be with him. The desire to hold him and comfort him was physically painful.

"Why didn't he tell me?"

Oscar was silent a moment. "You have it bad for him, don't you?"

I let my head fall into my hand, using my fingers to massage my temples. "Yeah. I really do. I thought..." My throat ached, and I had to swallow several times before I could finish. "I thought he was the one."

"I'm sorry, Boone."

I let out a huff of laughter. "I think what you meant to say was, 'I told you so.'"

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Oscar protested.

“But it’s true,” I said. “You warned me, and I didn’t listen. I should have known the minute he got out of Hank Picoe’s truck that he wasn’t meant for a place like this and a man like me.” I noticed that Richard still had clothes hanging in the closet, and I stood and walked toward them. I reached for one of the hangers, laughing when I realized it was covered in velvet. The man had brought his own fancy-ass hangers!

I pulled the shirt free, letting the silky material slide across my fingers. The feel of it reminded me of Richard, all smooth perfection.

“I mean, you should see the clothes he left behind. All of it inappropriate for life on a ranch. My life is Levi’s and Wranglers while his is…” I glanced at the tag on a pair of jeans on the next hanger. “Dussault.”

“It’s pronounced do-SO, not DU-salt,” Oscar said, immediately correcting my bungled pronunciation.

“Regardless, they’re hideous.”

“And also worth about a quarter of a million dollars.”

I nearly choked. “Are you fucking kidding me? For these things?”

“They’re also nearly impossible to get these days,” Oscar continued. “Which means he would have never left them behind if he didn’t plan to come back.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the brand shut down over a decade ago, which makes those jeans vintage and super rare—”

I rolled my eyes. “Not about the pants. What do you mean about Richard?”

Oscar sighed. “No one with any taste or love of fashion would abandon an original pair of Dussaults. He’s planning to come back. Trust me. It may pain me to do so, but if there’s anything I have to give Richard credit for, it’s his fashion sense.”

My heart beat as wildly as hummingbird wings. I'd assumed Richard had left without a word because he was done with me—done with this place. Now Oscar was giving me hope. "You think he's coming back?"

I could practically hear him shrug. "The question you need to be asking is, 'Are you going to let him get away?'"

The answer was immediate and obvious. *Of course I'm not.*

I realized, though, that was my heart talking. My head wasn't so sure. I fell back onto the bed, still staring at his clothes in the closet. The ridiculously expensive jeans, the garishly colorful shirts, the wholly inappropriate shoes. "Maybe I should. Maybe he'd be happier."

"I thought you said he was happy *there*. With you." There was no judgment in Oscar's voice.

I snorted. "I thought you and I would be happy together once too, and look how that worked out."

Oscar let out a long breath. "First, because of your delicate emotional state, I'm going to ignore any insinuation in your previous statement that Richard and I are alike in any way. Second, you know damn well why you and I didn't work out. Lord knows you remind me often enough when I have what you so unflatteringly refer to as my *maudlin moments*." He sniffed delicately.

"Yeah, because I'd never have been happy living in the city, and you shine too bright to ever be happy living on a ranch. You always did."

Oscar sighed like I was being obtuse. "No, Boone. It was because we wanted different things in life."

I didn't see any distinction between our answers. "That's what I said."

He laughed, but there was a wistful edge to it. "We never would have worked together because you wanted the ranch more than you wanted me. And I wanted to make a life in the city more than I wanted you."

I winced. “Way to be brutally honest.”

I could practically hear Oscar roll his eyes through the phone. “Way to miss the point of what I’m trying to tell you. It wasn’t geography that made us break up, Boone. I *shine bright* in the city because I’m doing what matters most to me. If being together had mattered most to both of us, we would’ve found a way to make it work.”

“Oh.” I frowned.

“We didn’t want it enough. But if you want it with Richard, and he wants it too... you’ll find a way to make it happen.”

He made it sound so easy when it wasn’t. “So what happens if I convince Richard to give us a shot and he ends up changing his mind? You’re the one who said he could never commit to anything.”

“Well, true. But I’m also the one who said he was lazy and entitled and would be packing his bags after two days of shoveling shit. Turns out, according to you, I was wrong. So maybe I don’t actually know Richard all that well after all, and you shouldn’t be listening to me when it comes to what Richard will or won’t do.”

He had a point. The Richard I’d gotten to know over the past few weeks wasn’t anything like the man Oscar had initially described.

“Trust me, I, more than anyone, am surprised to find myself in the position of asking you this question, but I feel that I must. Are you in love with Richard?”

It was a question I’d been avoiding. It seemed impossible to be in love with someone after knowing them for such a short time. There was so much about Richard that I didn’t know. But I *wanted* to know it. I wanted to know all of him. Richard was color and life and joy. When I pictured a future without him, everything seemed gray and meaningless.

“I think I might be,” I admitted.

“Then why aren’t you packing?” Oscar asked gently.

My throat tightened. “Because I’m busy panicking. What if he doesn’t love *me*?”

“But what if he *does*? Someone once told me, ‘Keep putting your heart out there, and eventually, the right person will grab it and keep it safe for you.’ So put your heart out there, Boone.”

I remembered saying those words to him a few weeks back, but hearing it now, I rolled my eyes. “You shouldn’t take life advice from someone who didn’t understand how fucking terrifying love is,” I grumbled.

Oscar’s laugh rang down the line. “Not so easy when the shoe is on the other foot, huh?”

It really wasn’t. “I still don’t get why you’re encouraging me to do this when you hate Richard.”

“Because I love *you*, and I’m a sucker for happy endings,” Oscar said simply. Then he added, “Besides, I told you I don’t hate him. I didn’t like who he was with James. I may have harbored some, ahem, *resentments* about that. But if Richard loves you and makes you happy, I might possibly, at some distant and undetermined point in the future, attempt to... like him.” He paused. “Tolerate him, at least.”

As scared and frantic as I felt, I couldn’t help chuckling. “And if he doesn’t love me back?”

“Then the man’s dead to me, and I won’t rest until he’s banned from every fashion house in the city,” Oscar vowed promptly, and I laughed. “It won’t come to that though. I trust your judgment, Boone. And this time, I’m betting on Richard sticking it out with you.”

Oscar’s confidence quieted my nerves, at least enough to let me think. I needed to talk to Richard, to get to him, as soon as possible.

“Thank you, Oscar,” I said sincerely. “You’re a great friend, and I hope that someday you find someone who—”

“Oh, please. Now who’s being maudlin?” Oscar interrupted. “I told you, I’m over the whole dating thing, Boone. I’ve moved on. I have fulfilling work, a *very* full social

calendar, and plenty of friends I can hang out with and call and... and text.”

Text?

Before I could question him, Oscar went on. “Not to mention, I’m very busy managing the love lives of my ex-boyfriends. On which note... I’m arranging for a plane to come in from Jackson immediately. If the weather cooperates, you should arrive in the city in time for the service. I’ll have a car waiting for you.”

I blinked. “You... you...”

“Don’t argue. Oh, and Boone?” he continued before I figured out how to end my sentence. “Don’t fuck this up. I have an unbroken track record of helping my exes find their soul mates. I won’t have you messing up my stats.”

RICHARD

The church was packed for Dad's funeral, though I doubted anyone crammed into the pews actually ever gave a shit about my father. They weren't here to pay their respects. They were here because Richard Dunning had been rich and powerful.

My mother, ever one to stand on ceremony, had insisted that the family station ourselves in the vestibule to greet and thank the mourners as they arrived. I'd been able to stomach it for only twenty minutes before I'd needed a break. I'd escaped to a dark corner in the back of the church, wishing I were a thousand miles away.

From where I stood hidden, I could hear the guests whispering. Word had gotten out that my father's will had named me heir to Dunning Capital. I could practically feel their glee at the prospect of Dick Sr.'s incompetent son taking the helm of the family business. Already, they were placing bets on how long it would be before I ran things into the ground.

They were like jackals, their eyes shining and jaws slavering. My failure would lead to their gain as they swept in, buying up my father's hard-earned assets at bargain-basement prices.

It was stunning how open and naked their greed was. How easily they'd worn the mask of concerned colleagues and business partners when they'd greeted me at the entrance to

the church and how quickly they'd let the facade drop when they thought I wasn't looking.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and my heart seized. *Boone*. It was my first thought, and the name sent my pulse skittering and my thoughts whirling. I'd spent hours the night before with my finger hovering over the call button, wanting desperately to reach out but having no idea what to say.

When I finally yanked my phone free, however, it wasn't Boone who'd texted; it was my friend Sacha. Despite my disappointment, I still felt a little burst of warmth to finally be hearing from a friend. He was the first one to reach out since my father passed away, and it wasn't until that moment that I realized how lonely I felt and how badly I wanted the support of my friends.

Sacha: *Hey, boo! I heard you were back in town!*

Richard: *I am. I guess you heard the news about my father passing away?*

Sacha: *Super bummer for sure. But hey, at least you're not cut off anymore, right? Does that mean you inherited his plane by any chance? Cause we were thinking of taking off for Cabo this afternoon and Speya overpacked as usual so if you came along, we could use your plane for luggage. You in??*

I stared at the message in shock. How had this ever been my life? It felt as unfamiliar to me as the inside of this random church.

Richard: *Well, my dad's memorial is this afternoon.*

Sacha: *But like, you don't have to go do you? I mean, he'd be cool if you skipped it, right? Otherwise I'm gonna have to make Pascal leave his mastiff at home and you know how broody that makes him.*

Richard: *I can't skip my dad's memorial, Sacha.*

Sacha: *Ugh. Okay. Anyway, have fun at your thing today. Bye!!!*

I stared at my phone. Sacha had been one of my closest friends, and the most he had to say about my dad's death was

“Bummer.” There’d been no condolences, no offer of sympathy, not even a thought of actually coming to the memorial to support me. I hadn’t even heard from him after I’d left his spare room for Wyoming. He’d only called now because he wanted something from me.

How had I not seen how empty my life had been before? I closed my eyes, the loneliness crashing over me. I wanted Boone. I *needed* him. Fuck not knowing what to say to him—I just needed to hear his voice.

I started to dial his number when I heard an insistent snapping. I looked up to find my mother scowling as she gestured angrily for me to join her. “It’s time,” she hissed. I glanced past her to see the guests all standing, staring at me, waiting. So many familiar faces and yet none of them friendly.

With a sigh, I slipped my phone back into my pocket and took my mother’s arm. A harpist at the front of the church plucked out “Amazing Grace” as I escorted my mother to our reserved pew in the front row.

As the harpist continued playing, I tried not to look at the urn resting on a dais in front of the altar, but I couldn’t help it. That was all that was left of my father. An entire life, a family, a billion-dollar business, and all of it had led to this: ashes. A church full of acquaintances, with none of them actual friends. A wife who had yet to shed a tear and a son who’d yearned for a relationship he could never have.

What was the fucking point of it all? Every single person in this church would wake up in the morning and go about their lives as though nothing had changed. Dick Dunning’s death was an inconvenience, little more.

Except for me. Dick Dunning had been my dad. I loved him. Despite all the arguments and expectations and fights, I’d always assumed that one day, we’d figure it all out and come to some sort of truce. When I’d thought of my future, he’d always been there: at my wedding, at my kids’ birthdays.

Now, he was gone. And that hurt like hell.

My throat burned, and the pressure of tears became too much. I let out a gasp, choking on a sob. My mother inhaled sharply, likely appalled at my public display of emotion. She shifted slightly away from me, making it clear I wasn't to lean on her for support. The harpist fell silent, and the priest stood, gesturing for us all to sit. I collapsed onto the pew, dropping my head into my hands as grief overwhelmed me.

There was a moment of quiet shuffling as the guests in the church settled into their seats. It was interrupted by the sound of footsteps. They started in the back of the church and grew louder, the strike of solid shoes against the stone church floor. They were unhurried but purposeful as they strode closer, and I raised my head as the person neared.

I let out a soft gasp. I knew that stride.

Boone.

I could recognize him even through the blur of tears. He came toward me, hat held in one hand and eyes on me as though no one and nothing else in the world existed. Behind me, the guests murmured in shocked whispers.

Boone knelt in front of me. His eyes swept across my face, taking in my tears and pain. He reached out a hand, cupping it gently behind my neck. His thumb brushed a tear from my cheek. "Come here, baby."

He stood as he pulled me against him, and I gasped as his arms came around my back, holding me tight as though I was his whole world. I collapsed into his strength.

"I've got you," he said, his hand gripping the back of my head. "I'm here. And I'm never letting go again."

My mother cleared her throat sharply, and the guests' whispers rose to murmurings. We were causing a spectacle, but I didn't care. I needed this. I needed Boone.

Eventually, when I thought I might be able to stand on my own again, I pulled back. Boone held my gaze, making sure I was okay. I nodded, and together, we sat. Boone kept my hand gripped tightly in his throughout the ceremony.

After the final prayer and after the guests had left for the reception hall, I stood with Boone out on the front steps of the church. It had rained during the service, but now, the sky was clear, and the air smelled fresh and clean. It wouldn't last long though. Soon enough, the smells of the city would reestablish their dominance.

I closed my eyes and turned my face toward the sinking sun, letting the warmth and light wash over me. If I ignored the sound of traffic and shoes clicking hurriedly past on the sidewalk and just focused on the sound of Boone breathing beside me, I could almost imagine I was back in Wyoming. Almost.

I turned to face him and found him leaning against the railing, watching me. He'd returned his hat to his head, casting his face in shadow.

"Nice hat," I said.

The corner of his lips twitched into a smile. "Nice boots." He nodded at my feet.

I looked down. At the last minute, I'd chosen to wear my Justins. They made me feel grounded and strong, and I'd needed that today. "I hope you didn't come all the way out here hoping to take them back. I paid for them fair and square."

His eyes burned as they held mine. "I didn't come for the boots, Richard."

My mouth went dry. "No? What did you come for?"

"You."

My heart skittered wildly in my chest. I wanted to squeal with happiness and joy, but there was something Boone needed to know first. "My father's net worth when he died was 1.75 billion dollars. He left it all to me."

Boone whistled. "No more couch surfing or shit slinging for you, then."

I reached for the stair railing behind me, gripping it tightly. "But he left it to me on one condition: I work for the family

business for five years.”

He thought about that for a moment, then nodded slowly. “All right. Five years isn’t so long. We can make it work. Jed can run things well enough without me most of the time. I’ll have to go back to the ranch during the busy seasons, but—”

I frowned, not understanding. “What do you mean?”

He pushed off his railing, drawing closer to me. “I mean I want to be with you, Richard. Wherever you are. Whatever it takes. Even if that means moving to the city.” He pulled his hat from his head, making sure I could see the truth of his words in his eyes. “If you’ll have me.”

I blinked, sure I hadn’t heard him correctly. The ranch was everything to Boone. I couldn’t imagine ever asking him to give that up. “No. No way,” I told him, shaking my head.

He pulled up short, his head jerking back as though I’d slapped him. “You won’t have me?”

“No!” I said, reaching for him. “I mean *yes*.” I grabbed his hand in mine. “I mean... I turned it down. I said no. I don’t want it. It was my father’s dream for me to run the family business, not mine, and I’m done letting him or anyone else dictate my life. I know what I want.”

In the end, it had been embarrassingly easy to figure that out.

Last night, I’d lain awake for a long while in the perfect, artificial stillness of the brownstone. The weight of grief and of my new inheritance had sat on my chest like twin anvils, and despite my fatigue and the luxurious mattress beneath me, I couldn’t sleep. Outside, mere steps away, a dozen potential distractions waited for me—parties and clubs, handsome men just waiting for me to buy them a drink—but none of my usual escapes had held any appeal at all.

Instead, I’d stared at the shadows on the ceiling, and for the first time in a long time, I’d let myself remember all the things I usually tried to forget.

The mistakes I’d made.

The new careers and life schemes I'd tried and abandoned—both the ones James had brought up on our call and the others, like my frantic, desperate attempts to resuscitate our flagging relationship that he'd been too kind to mention.

All the boxes I'd tried to shove myself into, hoping to earn my father's approval.

All the times I'd heard—and repeated, because I'd started to believe it too—that I was spoiled and easily bored. A magpie flying toward the next shiny thing.

But in a single day, I'd been handed a fortune—over a *billion* shiny things, a magpie hoard—and also lost any chance of reconciling with my dad. And it was only then that I realized that excitement had never been what I was looking for.

I'd been searching for a *purpose*. For something real. For a life where I, with all my faults and imperfections, mattered more than the boxes I'd never fit in. And somehow, accidentally, I'd found it.

As the grandfather clock in the sitting room had chimed two low gongs, I'd rolled over in the darkness, wanting Boone with a deeper craving than I'd ever felt for anything or anyone. I'd literally ached to be back in his bed at the Silver Fork, not because I'd thought I'd find some idealized version of cowboy life there—I knew better—and not because I'd thought it would magically transform me into the kind of person my father would be proud of, because I knew that wouldn't happen either.

What I missed was the sweet, simple joy of being with Boone. Of breathing in his calming leather-and-sweat scent. Of feeling the warmth of his arm over my shoulder in the rare moments when he was tired enough to let me carry some of his weight. Of facing down whatever problems came our way—angry ranchers, or adorable newborn calves, or literal mountains of manure—together.

Then I'd grinned dopily to myself because there was nothing on Earth that could make a man like me think fondly of cow shit...

Except true love.

And now that I recognized it, now that I *believed* in it, I'd promised myself as I drifted off to sleep that once my father's memorial was done, I'd head back to Wyoming. I'd find the words to convince Boone to give us a chance.

Figured that my handsome, steadfast cowboy had figured it out already. That he was the first and only person in my life who'd ever come looking for me and that he was offering to build us a life outside of any boxes at all.

A wave of affection for the man swamped me, and I lifted our joined hands to my mouth to kiss his work-rough knuckles. "I'm not staying in New York," I whispered.

Boone stared at me, eyes wide. "You're turning down 1.75 billion dollars?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Actually, I'm only turning down 1.47 billion. I'm still inheriting the house in the Hamptons, some land up in Maine, a beach house down in the Keys, and..." I frowned. "I think there might be a yacht as well."

He smiled. "Enough that you don't have to worry about money."

I nodded. "Enough for me to do anything I want."

Boone drew closer. His mouth hovered near mine, so that I could feel his breath on my lips when he asked, "And what's that, baby? What is it you want?"

The answer was easy. "I want to be with you. I want to go back to Wyoming and the ranch." I drew my mouth against his softly, letting my tongue flick against his. "I want to go home."

EPILOGUE

BOONE

I stood with Jed and Norma on the porch of the main house, surveying the Silver Fork Ranch.

“He’s got an eye for detail, doesn’t he?” Jed murmured as he took it all in.

The “he” in question was Richard. And the detail he was referring to were the decorations for the first-ever Silver Fork Fair, which had begun that morning.

It looked like a traveling carnival had exploded in the main yard. Brightly colored triangle streamers were strung between roofs, and balloons dotted every fence post. In the far corner of the yard, the grass had been freshly mowed, and stalls had been set up with various kids games: ring toss, can knockdown, putt-putt, Skee-Ball, face painting.

Beside that were several tables set up for local artisans to sell their wares, and beyond that, even more tables stuffed with food. On the other side of the yard, a show ring complete with benches for spectators had been set up, and kids and teens would show off their livestock there later in the day.

In and among it all were tons of people, most from nearby Silverhollow but some from farther afield. Kids ran around in green 4-H T-shirts and white shirts with blue Future Farmers of America scarves. Younger children toddled about with popcorn and cotton candy and almost any food imaginable on a stick. The air was filled with laughter and chatter and the screech of kids having fun.

The backdrop to it all was the new barn Richard had had built a few months back. And it was quintessentially Richard. Unlike the utilitarian structures on the rest of the ranch, Richard's barn had what he liked to call "flair" and what most people would call crenelations. It was designed like a castle, complete with a tower. Three sides of it had been painted with elaborate, brightly colored murals he'd commissioned from local student artists, and the fourth wall was a series of massive doors that accorded open, turning it into a quasi open-air pavilion.

Inside were dozens of stalls of various sizes, several with their own doors leading to private runs. This was where Richard housed his menagerie. It had started at his first livestock auction, where a young boy had been showing his fourth-place market lamb but wasn't getting any bidders. Richard had been unable to bear the kid's disappointed expression and had leaped in with a ridiculously high offer.

Richard was now the proud owner of twelve lambs, eight pigs, seventeen rabbits, two goats, three miniature horses, and one very, *very* ornery llama... so far. I was pretty sure we'd be ending today with several new additions to the family.

Seeing the smile on Richard's face as he stood amongst the crowd of people milling around the ranch made it all worth it. I had to admit that I'd been a little worried when he'd given up his inheritance to move out to Wyoming with me. I was afraid that he would tire of country life and wish he were back in the city where he could sparkle and dazzle.

I should have realized that Richard sparkled wherever he was. It wasn't the location that made him shine; it was the man himself. It was being where he wanted to be, doing what he loved to do.

Today's fair was the perfect example. It had been Richard's idea from start to finish. Shortly after moving to the ranch, Sheriff Chisolm had stopped by to let me know that all charges had been formally dropped, and Walt Hosser had withdrawn his claims. He'd brought along his daughter to see Duck in her unicorn fly mask, and she'd been enthralled, asking Richard a ton of questions about how he'd made it.

She'd explained that she was working on a project for her 4-H club and asked if he'd help her design and sew her own fly mask. One thing led to another, and Richard now sponsored a group of Cloverleaf members and taught monthly sewing and design classes.

From them, he'd learned about show animals and started attending shows and auctions to support his students. That led to even more sponsorships and the purchase of his first animal. One thing had led to another, and Richard had volunteered to host a 4-H/FFA ag-fair/festival at the ranch. He'd spent the last month in a whirlwind of party planning and had loved every minute of it.

That was in addition to the design work he'd been doing for Jame's next IceCon costume and his burgeoning online business selling custom couture fly masks. As it turned out, there were a lot of wealthy people out there who liked the idea of dressing their horses in designer-inspired accessories. Fashionable and functional, as Richard liked to point out.

Richard noticed me looking his way and raised a hand to wave. But before he could start making his way toward the house, he was stopped by an elderly couple and then again by a mother of twin girls. It seemed like every other person in the crowd stopped him to say hello and make some comment or another. Already, folks here had begun to treat him like a local—an integral part of the community.

I loved seeing him so settled and happy.

Jed must have noticed my puppy-dog expression as I watched Richard. "So, when are you going to make an honest man out of him?" he asked, sending his elbow into my ribs playfully.

I turned on him, noting how close he stood to Norma, and crooked an eyebrow. "I might ask the same about you two."

Twin spots of color rose on his cheeks. He glanced at Norma and then back to me. "We're not... I mean... it's not like you think..."

Norma apparently took offense at his protests. She fisted her hands on her hips. “Oh, it isn’t, is it?”

Jed immediately realized he’d stepped into a whole lotta trouble. “Well, that is to say... I mean... “

Even in the best of times, Norma wasn’t good at bluffing, and her stern expression quickly gave way to laughter. She slapped her knee. “You should see your face, Jedidiah Thompson. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so tongue-tied.”

His eyes turned mischievous. “I’ll show you tongue-tied.” He reached for her, and she squealed, sounding decades younger than she was. He got his arms around her, and she melted into him as their lips met for a kiss.

Thankfully, my phone buzzed in my pocket, giving me the perfect opportunity to excuse myself. I stepped farther down the porch and glanced at the screen. *Oscar calling.*

“Hey!” I said after swiping quickly. “This is a treat. You finally back on this side of the globe?”

“I think so? Probably?” His laughter sounded a bit frayed and tired. “I was just in Macao. Before that was Nairobi and Detroit. Tomorrow, I leave for Dubai.”

I frowned. Oscar had always loved traveling, and long after Overton Investments had gotten big enough for him to let other people take meetings for him, he’d insisted on being involved in every aspect of his business. But something had changed in him this summer, and I couldn’t quite put my finger on what... or why.

He now traveled *constantly*, often for weeks at a time, and when he wasn’t ping-ponging around the world like a criminal on the lam, he was holed up in his office drafting business proposals and working deals with the kind of frantic energy I hadn’t seen in him since we were just starting out... back when he’d tried to bury all his fear and sadness under piles of paperwork.

We still chatted occasionally, but whenever I asked him about anything beyond work, he deflected with his trademark

humor and insisted things were fine. Better than fine. *Wonderful.*

For a minute, I'd wondered if Oscar's behavior had been somehow related to me and Richard—fear of losing me from his life causing another one of those wistful, nostalgic moods or something—but I'd quickly dismissed the idea. Oscar had been nothing but supportive about my relationship now that he knew Richard loved and appreciated me. He'd even sent Lorna, a rescued llama, for Richard's menagerie as a kind of peace offering, which Richard had accepted happily.

Of course, Oscar still teased Richard at every opportunity, and Richard retorted with cutting barbs of his own, but I'd swear the two of them almost enjoyed their verbal sparring now... though I was smart enough not to point this out to either of them.

"Sounds tiring," I said carefully. "Not knowing what time zone you're in."

He gave another of those little laughs. "True story."

"Must make it hard for you to keep up with that guy from the wedding." I attempted to sound casual but was pretty sure I failed.

"Which guy?" Oscar's impression of *casual* was even worse than mine. "For that matter, which wedding? I've married off no less than *five* exes this year." He sighed like a proud papa. "I'm a professional best man now."

"You know exactly who I mean," I insisted. "The way you talked about him... he was special."

"Every man I've been with was special to me, at least for a little while." Oscar's voice hardened a fraction. "The difference is I'm done trying to be *their* someone special. It's much simpler this way."

I hesitated. "I know it's hard to lose someone, Oscar. You know that better than anyone. But—"

"*Bup bup bup.* I did not call to talk to you about my tragic losses, Boone Hammond. Jesus, you're a buzzkill. Tell me

about *you*. Any... news to share? How's that appallingly ill-tempered beast of yours enjoying ranch life?"

I rolled my eyes. "His name is Richard, as you know, and he's the kindest, most loving person I've ever met. Besides, I thought you two were getting along—"

Oscar burst into raucous laughter. "Boone, Boone," he choked out. "I meant Lorna. The skittish rescue llama I sent your way?"

"Oh." I scowled. "You're an asshole."

Oscar only laughed harder. "Moi? *I* am not the one who just equated my boyfriend to a beast. You did jump to defend his honor, of course, but I still think you owe him an apology. Maybe a good excuse to get on your knees, hmm?"

I glanced over at Richard, who looked flushed with excitement and totally in his element, surrounded by several Cloverbuds who'd had four-leaf clovers painted on their cheeks. The kids were fawning over Birdie, who hadn't left Richard's side since the fair had begun. He looked up at me and winked, and my chest squeezed.

"I don't need an excuse to get on my knees for Richard," I told Oscar. My voice came out rougher than expected.

Oscar paused for a moment. "Still disgustingly happy?" he asked gently.

"Every single day," I agreed.

"Good," he said sincerely. "I'm glad you have that, Boone. You deserve it."

I sighed. I wished there was something I could say that would magically make Oscar feel better but knew there wasn't. I thought about how big his life looked from the outside—how perfect. He had reams of friends, he threw lavish parties, he was the talk of the town and the belle of the ball. He was outrageously wealthy.

And on the inside, he was lonely as shit.

I wanted to tell him not to let his past losses make him too afraid to try to love someone again. To remind him that he

deserved to be truly happy too. But I knew this wasn't the time to push. When Oscar was ready, I'd be there for him, just as he'd always been there for me.

“Silver Fork Fair is today,” I offered.

Oscar seized upon the subject change gladly. “Yes, I know. Your lover boy sent me a text about it earlier. Frank and I expect a full recap, Boone. A *full* recap.”

“Yeah?” I raised an eyebrow, though he couldn't see me. “Hedgehogs are interested in livestock competitions these days, are they?”

“Something like that,” he agreed.

As we said goodbye, there was a clatter of boots on the stairs, and I looked up to see Richard strolling toward me. I slipped the phone back into my pocket.

As Richard approached, he swiped off his signature sequined cowboy hat and ran his fingers through his slightly damp hair. “Oh mylanta,” he said. “This heat!” He pulled a small spray bottle from his pocket and spritzed his face. The air filled with a familiar scent, one that always made me think of running my tongue along the tendons in his neck.

He knew this, too, because he shot me a look full of promise under heavy-lidded eyes as he pushed the vial back into his pocket.

I caught him around the middle, pulling him toward me. “Playing with fire, whipping out the skin mist stuff in public. You know what your high-end skin care products do to me,” I murmured in his ear.

He nipped at my shoulder playfully, and I could feel his smile as he pressed it against me. “Do I?”

“If it weren't for the several hundred people crowding this ranch, I'd take you into our bedroom right now and remind you,” I growled.

He leaned back, flashing me a brilliant grin. “Just giving you something to look forward to later on.”

Fuck later on, I thought to myself before I captured his mouth in mine. I didn't care that well more than half the town was there and we were on full display. I was damn proud of Richard and what he'd accomplished since moving to Wyoming, and I liked making it clear he was mine.

Once I was getting close to the point where I really was thinking about dragging Richard inside, he squirmed away and slid under my arm so he was standing next to me, his hand resting on my chest. He let out a happy sigh that made my heart smile.

"You think it's going okay?" he asked.

I snorted. "I don't think it could go any better."

Richard twisted in my arms and looked up at me. "I can think of a way." Something mischievous sparkled in his eye. It made me wary.

"Do I want to know?"

He nodded very seriously. "You do. You very much do." Then he turned, threw up his arm, and shouted, "Hit it!"

I swear to god, an entire marching band came streaming out of the horse barn, drums beating in time to their steps. Two dozen middle-school-aged boys and girls came running forward in the crowd, which parted to give them room. When they reached the clearing at the base of the porch stairs, they arranged themselves in a semicircle.

"What in the—"

Before I could finish the statement, Richard vaulted down the steps. The drums paused. An older teen held a baton in the air, counted off the beat, and then lowered it. At his signal, the band burst into music, horn blaring and drums thumping. The semicircle of kids began to dance in unison. The crowd had thronged around them and started to clap along.

It was like a damned flash mob on my own ranch.

And in the center of it all was the man I loved—the man who'd taken my practical, ordered life and made it *shine* with

color and whimsy and fun—watching me with so much heat and affection on his face I could barely breathe.

Jed elbowed me toward the stairs, and I descended, never taking my eyes off Richard. And when I finally stood in front of him, he dropped to one knee at my feet.

I'd imagined this moment many, many times in the months since Richard had moved to the ranch, but in every iteration, I'd been the one doing the knee-bending, and there hadn't been a tuba in sight. This seemed really silly of me in retrospect.

“Boone Hammond,” Richard began, tilting his head back to look up at me. His chin wobbled a little, and his eyes went shiny. “Do you know how I knew you were the one for me? Because you never asked me to give up my sparkles in order to fit in around here. Even when you doubted me, you gave me a chance to prove myself. And now I know...” He made a noise like his throat had gone tight. “Now I know I'm a hard worker. Because it turns out, I wasn't proving myself to you or anyone else.”

The adoration in his gaze made my knees weak. I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life being his home and his safe place. The audience for his zany ideas, his co-conspirator, and his comfort when some of them didn't go the way he hoped.

“You believe in me,” Richard said softly.

“I *love* you,” I corrected just as softly, and Richard's eyes lit up with the kind of joy he brought me every damn day.

“And I love you, Boone Hammond. So much. Marry me?”

I felt my face crack into a wide grin as I pulled Richard to his feet and gave his sparkly hat a little tweak. “Name the day and time, cowboy.”



UP NEXT: Oscar finally finds his very own true love in HEA: Happily Ever After. Follow us on Amazon or subscribe to our

*author newsletters to be the first to know when HEA: Happily
Ever After is available!*

LETTER FROM LUCY & MOLLY

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *ISO: In Search Of*, book four in the “After Oscar” series! If you haven’t read the others yet, start with *IRL: In Real Life*. It’s a steamy enemies-to-lovers story that begins with a text to the exact wrong person.

We would love it if you would take a few minutes to review this book on Amazon. Reader reviews really do make a difference and we appreciate every single one of them.

Lucy and Molly are pen names of a real pair of sisters who are excited to collaborate on our first ever joint project.

There are five stories planned in the After Oscar series, so the next book will conclude the series. In *HEA: Happily Ever After*, we finally learn more about Oscar and the messy path he takes toward love. Be sure to follow us on Amazon or subscribe to our newsletters at www.LucyLennox.com and www.MollyMaddox.com to be notified when it becomes available.

To see fun inspiration photos for this book, check out the [Pinterest page for ISO](#).

Happy reading!

Lucy & Molly

PS: A Special Note From Molly:

I had so much fun researching and writing Richard and Boone's book that I didn't want to leave this world! If you enjoyed *ISO: In Search Of*, and are interesting in reading about more hot cowboys and the men they fall in love with, sign up for my newsletter to be the first to find out about the release of the first book in my Seven Sons Ranch series.

You can sign up for my newsletter [here](#), or on my website: www.MollyMaddox.com. Hope to see y'all soon!

ABOUT MOLLY MADDOX

Molly Maddox is the romance pen name for a New York Times bestselling author who started writing at an early age because her older sister, Lucy Lennox, was a writer and Molly wanted to be like Lucy in all ways (she still does).

When she's not writing, Molly likes to cook, read, take pictures of her dog and cat cuddling, and finds an odd satisfaction in folding sheets so that the top sheet is indistinguishable from the bottom sheet.

She loves all things romance and is grateful every day she gets to write for a living.



Connect with Molly on social media:

www.MollyMaddox.com

AuthorMollyMaddox@gmail.com



ALSO BY MOLLY MADDOX

After Oscar Series (with Lucy Lennox):

[IRL: In Real Life](#)

[LOL: Laugh Out Loud](#)

[BTW: By The Way](#)

Also be sure to check out audio versions [here](#).

ABOUT LUCY LENNOX

Lucy Lennox is the USA Today bestselling author of over fifty romance novels. Her debut novel, *Borrowing Blue*, was the winner of the A.C. Katt award for Best Gay Debut, and her novel *Wilde Love* is a GoodReads Hall of Fame, All-Time Favorite M/M Romance winner. Her stories feature plenty of humor, heart, and heat.

When not busy writing about falling in love, Lucy stays up way too late at night reading gay romance because it's simply the best thing ever.

For more information and to stay updated about future releases, please sign up for Lucy's author newsletter [here](#).

Connect with Lucy on social media:

www.LucyLennox.com

Lucy@LucyLennox.com



ALSO BY LUCY LENNOX

Join [Lucy's Lair](#)

Get Lucy's [New Release Alerts](#)

Like Lucy on [Facebook](#)

Follow Lucy on [BookBub](#)

Follow Lucy on [Amazon](#)

Follow Lucy on [Instagram](#)

Follow Lucy on [Pinterest](#)

Other books by Lucy:

[Made Marian Series](#)

[Forever Wilde Series](#)

[Aster Valley Series](#)

[Virgin Flyer](#)

[Say You'll Be Nine](#)

[Hostile Takeover](#)

[Prince of Lies](#)

[Twist of Fate Series](#) with Sloane Kennedy

[After Oscar Series](#) with Molly Maddox

[Licking Thicket Series](#) with May Archer

[Licking Thicket: Horn of Glory](#) series with May Archer

[Honeybridge](#) series with May Archer

Visit Lucy's website at www.LucyLennox.com for a comprehensive list of titles, audio samples, freebies, suggested reading order, and more!