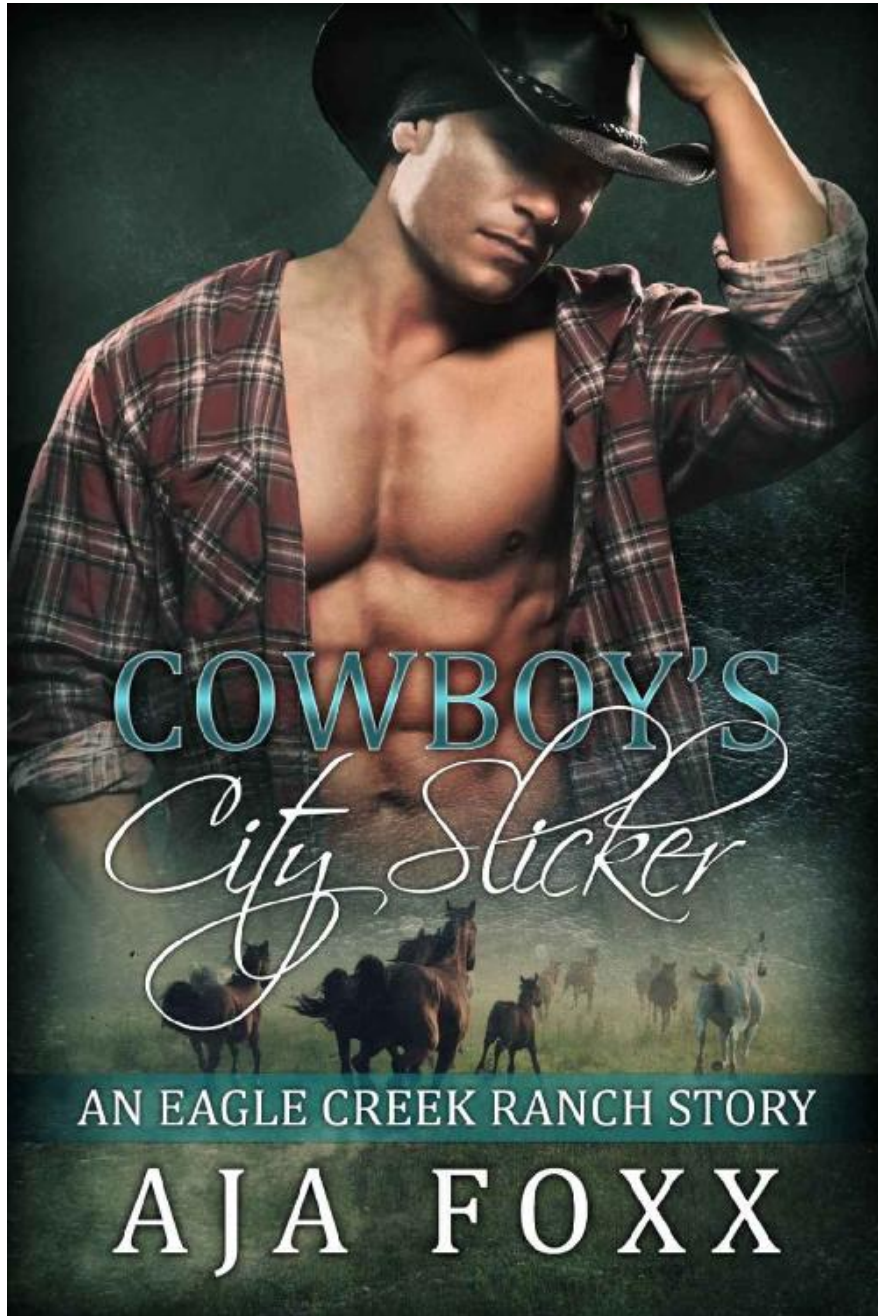


COWBOY'S

City Slicker

AN EAGLE CREEK RANCH STORY

AJA FOXX



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Cowboy's City Slicker

An Eagle Creek Ranch Story

~Cooper~

I thought I had everything I could ever need right here on the Eagle Creek Ranch until Ethan Walker walked into my life. He was a city slicker right down to his polished dress shoes. He had no business being here, but I didn't want him to leave, especially since I can't seem to keep my hands off of him. Too bad he doesn't plan to stick around.

~Ethan~

Forced to come to Montana from New York City for the reading of my estranged father's will, I knew I wouldn't be staying. I didn't even pack an overnight bag. I didn't plan on being here that long. Little did I know that my dead father had other ideas.

In order to inherit my father's ranch and save the men who worked there, I had to accept the conditions of the will. A year in hell was a small price to pay when I learned someone was stealing from the ranch, but it just might kill me. Literally. Someone is out to take the ranch and they need me out of the way to make that happen. My only chance is to put my trust in the one man I can't have.

~~~

***Warning:*** *Gay erotic romance. The material in this book contains explicit sexual content that is intended for mature audiences only. All characters involved are adults capable of consent, are over the age of eighteen, and are willing participants.*

## **Cowboy's City Slicker**

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# Cowboy's City Slicker

## *An Eagle Creek Ranch Story*

**Aja Foxx**  
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### Chapter One

~ Ethan ~

"I'm in hell."

There was no other way to describe the small, backwoods, Podunk town I was driving through. If this was where my father had lived, no wonder he'd been such an asshole. There wasn't a single building taller than three stories, and I was pretty sure they rolled up the sidewalks when the sun went down. I hadn't seen a Starbucks since the airport, which was over a hundred miles behind me.

If this wasn't hell, then I was on an alien planet.

I followed the GPS through town, which took about five minutes, and then another twenty miles west of town before it said I had reached my destination. I slowed the car to a crawl and looked up at the big sign hanging over the driveway to my right.

Eagle Creek Ranch.

Apparently, I'd arrived.

I drew in a fortifying breath and then turned the car onto the dirt—I shuddered—driveway. Faded wooden fence lined both sides of the drive. Horses were in the field to my right, cows on my left. A

mountain range was beyond the horses, but there were wide-open fields as far as the eye could see beyond the cows.

It was a long driveway. I drove it slowly because I didn't know what I might run into. It still took about ten minutes before a house came into view. When it did, I almost backed back down the driveway and raced for the airport as fast as my luxury rental car would take me.

This was what my father had left me and my mother for?

I had a three-bedroom penthouse on Park Avenue. It was a showcase property, complete with a rooftop patio, Jacuzzi, and built-in bar. I could fit over a hundred people in the entire place and had on numerous occasions.

This was not that place.

I wasn't even sure what this place was. The lawyer I'd spoken to had told me my father—who I hadn't seen since just a few months after I was born—had made it a condition of his will that I be in attendance for the reading of the will. If I wasn't there it wouldn't be read. The lawyer only told me that because I hadn't wanted to come.

I prayed I had put the address into the GPS wrong.

I grabbed my leather briefcase and pulled out the address that had always been on my birthday cards and then double-checked it against the address I'd put into the GPS.

Damn.

I hadn't gotten it wrong. This was my father's ranch. The ranch that he'd given me and my mother up for. The ranch that was more important than his marriage or his infant son. The ranch he'd lived on until the day he died.

I truly was in hell.



The ranch house was probably bigger than my entire penthouse apartment. I could see a first and second floor, but I wasn't sure if the windows at the top led to a third floor or an attic. For all I knew, they could have been there for decoration.

It looked sturdy enough, but the white paint on the outside was fading from years of Montana weather and what I could only assume was lack of upkeep. Strangely enough, the barn seemed to be in great condition, even if it was unpainted.

There was another weathered building between the house and the barn, but I had no idea what it was. It could have been a luxury outhouse for all I knew. My knowledge of life on a ranch was limited to what I'd seen on TV and in the movies.

I could ride a horse, but only because I'd had a client who'd had horses and he'd taught me. I wouldn't know the first thing about cows or steers or bulls or anything that mooed.

I parked my car in front of the house and climbed out. I stiffened when a large black and white dog came barreling around the side of the house, barking for all he was worth. I wasn't aware that dogs were allowed on ranches, but it made sense. They probably kept the critters away.

I stood my ground as the snarling beast stormed up to me. I knew better than to run or show fear. He was no different than some hoodlum protecting his territory in the inner city.

"Hello, boy," I said in a calm voice. "I'm not going to hurt you."

When the dog stopped barking and started sniffing the air close to me, I slowly held out my hand. He didn't bite it off, so that was something. I moved my hand back to stroke the fur behind his ear and then down his neck.

I squatted down and then quickly dodged the tongue aimed at my face as the dog went from ferocious to friendly. "Oh, you're a good boy, aren't you?"

I continued to pet the dog for several moments until I heard someone's loud shout coming from the same direction the dog had come from.

"Sampson!"

The dog stilled.

"Is that your name?" I asked. "Are you Sampson?"

He could be a Sampson. He was some sort of sheepdog, but he was huge. When I stood, his back came up nearly to my waist.

"Sampson!"

I glanced up just as a man came storming around the side of the house. He was dressed as I imagined a cowboy would be dressed—jeans, heavy-duty button-down shirt, cowboy boots, and hat—although, he was a little cleaner than I thought cowboys were.

That was a plus.

"He didn't hurt ya, did he?" the guy asked.

"No," I replied as I continued to pet the dog. "He was just greeting me."

The man stopped a few feet away from me and tipped his hat back. "Well, that's the darndest damn thing I've ever seen. Sampson don't like no one."

"Really?" I glanced down at the dog, who had sat down at my feet and leaned against my thigh, and he wasn't light. "He seems friendly enough to me."

"Last man that done drove up to the main house unannounced walked away with teeth marks in his hand."

"Huh." There was a lawsuit waiting to happen. "Well, he's been nothing but friendly to me."

There was the whole licking thing, but I could let that pass.

"You here to see Mr. Maddox?"

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Asa Maddox, the ranch foreman. He's in charge now that Mr. Walker done passed away."

I smiled. It was the same smile I gave a judge when I couldn't tell him to go fuck off. "I can assure you, Mr. Maddox is not in charge." Especially since I'd never heard of the man. "Would you happen to know where I can find this man?"

"This time of day, he should be in the office."

Fantastic.

"And where is the office?"

It was like pulling teeth.

The guy smiled as he pointed to the house. "Mr. Maddox moved into the main house when Mr. Walker died. He took over Mr. Walker's office."

"He moved into the main house?"

The cowboy shrugged. "Mr. Walker don't need it no more."

I reached down and patted Sampson's head. "You go chase rabbits or herd sheep or whatever it is you do. I need to go meet Mr. Maddox." And toss him out of my house. I smiled at the cowboy.

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr..."

"Colby, sir."

Well, at least manners were not lost on him.

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Colby." I held out my hand.

"Oh, it's just Colby." Colby wiped his hand on his jeans then shook my hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Colby. I'm Ethan Walker."

Colby's jaw dropped. "You're...you're..."

"I am."

Colby's eyebrows drew together in the cutest little frown. "But, Mr. Maddox said you was some city slicker who'd never set foot on a ranch."

Good god, the man's grasp of the English language was atrocious.

"Considering I've never met Mr. Maddox or even knew who he was before you mentioned him, I find it highly unlikely that he knows anything about what I would or would not do."

"But, your pa said—"

"My pa"—not a word I'd give to the man who had contributed to my birth—"knew me about as well as your ranch foreman thinks he does."

Which was not at all.

"I'm real sorry your pa died, Mr. Walker."

"Thank you." I didn't have much more of a response than that. I hadn't known my father and he hadn't known me. Other than a quarterly support check he sent to my mother—which stopped when I turned twenty-one—I hadn't heard from my father since the day my mother left home with me when I'd been just a few months old.

Well, there was the birthday card with a hundred dollar bill in it that came once a year on my birthday. That had been cool when I was a kid, but it quickly lost its luster when that was all I got from my father. If we'd ever spoken, I had been just months old.

I hope I drooled on him.

"I'm supposed to be meeting my father's lawyer here. Do you know if he's arrived?"

"I ain't seen hide nor hair of anyone but you, Mr. Walker."

Wow.

The education system in this backwater town needed a serious update.

I sent Colby a polite smile then gestured toward the house. "It was nice talking to you, Colby, but I'm going to head inside now." I would have preferred climbing back in my car and driving back to the airport, but I didn't see that happening.

Once the will was read, I'd be free.

"Oh, I can let you in." Colby raced up the steps before I could stop him and opened the front door. Sighing because I knew I had no other choice at this point, I followed.

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting when I stepped inside, but it wasn't what I found. The open floor concept was nice, but the furniture was so outdated, it might actually be back in style. Very nineteen-seventies. If it wasn't so worn out, it could have been chic. It was also very rustic, with lots of wood.

A. Lot. Of. Wood.

It was surprisingly clean.

Colby walked over to a door on the far side of the room and knocked. "Mr. Maddox, sir?"

I heard a muffled reply, but couldn't quite make out what was said.

"Mr. Walker's son is here, sir," Colby said.

He jumped back a moment later when the door was wrenched open. A tall clean-shaven older man stood there. Considering we were on a ranch, I was a bit surprised he was dressed in slacks, a dress shirt, and a tie.

Seemed kind of out of place.

The hair was jet black without a gray strand in sight, making me wonder if he dyed his hair or had touch-up work done. It was clear from the wrinkles on his pudgy face that he was an older man.

The mustache was just as bad as the dye job. Maybe worse. It curled into one of those handlebar mustaches. It even had a curl at the tips.

All that black made his skin look pasty.

"Who is here?" the man barked out.

Colby pointed to me. "Mr. Walker."

I arched an eyebrow when the man glanced at me. "Mr. Mattox, I presume?"

I wasn't sure what to think of the man at first, but I knew I didn't like him when he flashed me a huge smile with lots of sparkly white teeth. I shivered at the slimy feeling it gave me. It was the same one I got when some stupid, slicked back, ambulance-chasing lawyer tried to get one over on me.

"Ethan," the man said as he walked toward me, his hand outstretched, "I wasn't aware you'd be coming. I had the impression that you didn't leave the city."

"Believe me, I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here, but—"

"Now, that isn't true."

Oh, yes it was.

I wasn't too thrilled with the guy calling me Ethan either. I didn't know him, had never met him, and I certainly had not given him permission to use my first name.

It just wasn't worth fighting at the moment.

"Mr. Maddox—"

"Just call me Maddox. We're all friends here."

The hell we were.

"My father's lawyer called me and informed me I needed to be here for the reading of my father's will." I glanced at my gold Rolex watch. It was eleven forty-five. "He asked me to meet him here at noon, so I assume he's on his way."

"I see." For a moment, the man's mask slipped and I saw the rage steaming inside of him, but then the smile was back as if it had never been gone. "Well, that makes sense, of course, what with you being Mr. Walker's son and all."

"Can I get anyone coffee?" Colby asked.

"We're talking here, Colby!" Maddox snapped, and just that quickly, he went from charming to asshole.

"Sorry, sir," Colby whispered before darting away.

I arched an eyebrow at Maddox. The man might have a couple of inches on me and more than fifty pounds, but I'd been eating assholes like him for breakfast for years. I wasn't intimidated in the least.

"My apologies," Maddox said before sending me another one of his slimy white toothed smiles. "Colby can be a bit of a chatterbox at times, always walking around with his head in the clouds. He'll talk your ear off if you let him."

Funny, that hadn't been my impression of Colby. He seemed kind of quiet and timid. I had no idea how he had survived on a ranch.

Maddox waved a hand back toward the room he'd walked out of. "Why don't we go wait in my office? Mr. Anderson should be here soon."

I didn't bring up the fact that we were walking into my father's office. For all I knew, it could be Maddox's office now. I didn't care either way. I was just here for the reading of the will. I had a return flight ticket for this evening in my pocket. Maddox could do what he wanted with the office, the house, and the whole fucking ranch.

I didn't want it.

I hadn't been planning to come at all until my mother learned my father had put me in the will. She's the one who insisted I go. I could have cared less. The man had done nothing for me when he was alive. I had no reason to think that might have changed now that he was dead.

I had no idea why he thought leaving me anything was a good idea.

It wasn't.

I hoped this didn't take long. Staying this far away from civilization could quite possibly make me break out in hives.

"Please, have a seat." Maddox waved his hand toward one of two chairs sitting in front of a massive wooden desk. He walked around it and sat down in a chair equally as large.

I had to wonder if the size of the furniture was meant to intimidate me. I'd seen people do try something like this before. I even remember one guy having his desk up on a platform so he was above anyone he was speaking to.



Some people could be really stupid.

I was a man who was comfortable in my own skin. I had been for a very long time. My mother had instilled a strong sense of self-worth while she was raising me. I hadn't even been worried about people's reactions when I came out as gay.

Technically, I hadn't "come out". I'd simply brought my first boyfriend home to meet my mother, and that was that. She knew I was gay. I knew I was gay. Beyond caring about who I was dating, I didn't care what others thought.

Some considered it a flaw. I considered it the building blocks to a life where I had no problem telling someone to go fuck themselves.

"Can I offer you some coffee?"

I gave Maddox the same smile I'd used before. Colby had offered the same thing and he'd jumped down his throat. "No, thank you. I don't intend to be here that long."

That statement seemed to make Maddox happy. His smarmy smile brightened. "That's too bad. I'd love to show you the ranch. We've been able to build it up over the last few years."

"I have no interest in my father's ranch, Mr. Maddox."

The man frowned. "Then why are you here?"

"My mother insisted."

## Chapter Two

~ Cooper ~

I frowned as I stared at the fancy car parked in front of the main house and knocked the dirt off my boots then raked them over the doormat. I was confused as to why such a fancy car was here.

We didn't get a lot of vehicles on the ranch that looked that clean, not out here. Living on a cattle ranch, dirt, mud, and more dirt was all a serious problem and something we dealt with daily. If that car was here for any significant amount of time, it wouldn't continue to look that shiny and clean.

Maybe one of Maddox's friends was visiting. There seemed to be a lot of them ever since Mr. Walker had passed away a month ago. All sorts of people were coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Considering we got up before it was light and went to bed just as the sun was setting, it made living on the ranch a real pain in the ass.

Before I could walk up the steps, the sound of another car coming up the driveway caught my attention. It wasn't unusual for people to come and go on a ranch, but I could tell from the sound of the engine that it wasn't a ranch vehicle.

I waited until it came into view then walked over to stand next to the luxury vehicle and waited. When Mr. Walker's lawyer climbed out of the silver four-door sedan I walked around the front of the vehicle and held out my hand.

"Cooper, how are you?" the older man asked as he shook my hand.

"I'm good, Mr. Anderson, thank you for asking." I shot a quick look toward the house before glancing at the fancy car and then back to the lawyer. "Something going on, sir?"

I'd always respected Mark Anderson. Unlike a lot of people in town, he never put on any airs. He was a small-town lawyer and he was proud of that fact. He didn't try to be someone he wasn't or look down on others just because he had a college education.

"It's time for the reading of Mr. Walker's will."

I tilted my cowboy hat back as I glanced back at the house again. "Guess that's why I was called up to the main house." It had been a real pain to come in all the way from the west pasture, but I'd learned to do what Maddox said, even when it didn't make sense.

The worst day of my life was the day Garrett Walker died and Asa Maddox, the ranch foreman, decided the ranch belonged to him. I was one argument from walking away from a job I'd held for the last ten years.

The man was an ass, but he was also the man in charge.

"I'm afraid I requested your presence, Cooper. I know that it interferes with your workday, and I apologize for that, but Mr. Walker was very specific about who he wanted here for the reading of the will." Mr. Anderson glanced at the car beside his. "I suspect that that car belongs to his son."

My eyebrows rose before I could stop them. "Mr. Walker's son is here?"

I'd heard of the man, of course, and seen some pictures, but I'd never met him or even heard of him coming to the ranch to visit. As far as I knew, he lived in some big city back east.

Mr. Anderson nodded. "His father requested it."

Huh.

"Well, I guess you'd better come in then." I started for the house, stopping at the bottom of the steps to brush the dirt off my boots again. The fall rains would be coming soon and that meant mud instead of dried dirt. That was going to make things interesting.

I knew better than to just walk in when I reached the front door, so I knocked first and then push it open. Maddox got pissed about people just walking in. It was one of the things that had changed when he took over. Mr. Walker had welcomed everyone who worked for him. Maddox did not.

I held the door open for the lawyer and then stepped in behind him and shut the door. I could hear Colby banging dishes around in the kitchen so I knew he was cooking. Since no one was in the living room, I headed for the office, figuring that's where Maddox and Mr. Walker's son would be.

I knocked on the office door when I reached it, and then opened it and stepped inside when I heard a reply. I started to nod to Maddox when I spotted the brown-haired man sitting in a chair in front of the desk.

It was the deep emerald green eyes staring back at me that caught my attention. I don't think I'd ever seen eyes so green. He certainly hadn't gotten them from his father. Garret Walker had brown eyes.

I could drown in those eyes.

The rest of him wasn't bad looking either. He wasn't as muscular as I was, but from what I understood from the things Mr. Walker had told me, his son worked in an office in the city. I worked a ranch. My

work was a lot more physical than his. Still, he did have nice muscle definition. It blended very nicely with his sun-kissed skin.

I wondered if he had tan lines.

"Cooper."

I tore my gaze away from the beautiful man and turned to look at Maddox. "Mr. Maddox."

The man never allowed the familiarity of any of the ranch hands being able to call him by his first name. Mr. Walker would have if everyone hadn't already called him Buck.

"Sit," Maddox directed me before turning his attention to the lawyer.

Feeling as if I'd been dismissed like a dog, I walked over and sat down on the small loveseat next to the window. I crossed one leg over the other, resting my ankle on my knee, and then I pulled my hat off and rested it on my lap.

"Did you work for my father?"

I swallowed tightly as I glanced at the man with the emerald green eyes. "I did, yes."

"What exactly do you do on the ranch?"

I snickered because that question was amusing as hell. "Pretty much everything."

During my younger years, I'd done every damn job on the place except paying the bills. I'd even mucked stalls, and still did on occasion even though I spent the majority of my time out in the pasture with the livestock.

"Do you ride a horse?"

I cocked an eyebrow as I tried to figure out if the guy was serious. I didn't know a ranch hand who didn't ride a horse.

Well, maybe Colby. He could ride. He just wasn't real good at it. On the other hand, he was a whizz in the kitchen, and for a hungry cowboy, coming back to the ranch after a long day and having a hot home-cooked meal waiting was better than gold.

"Mr. Anderson, thank you so much for calling Ethan," Maddox said. "I'm afraid, with everything going on, it slipped past me."

I didn't believe a word of it.

From the deep frown, Ethan Walker shot Maddox, he didn't believe it either.

"If we may precede, Mr. Anderson," the man in question said. "My flight leaves in a couple of hours. I'd kind of like to be on it."

"Yes, of course." Mr. Anderson grimaced as he glanced around, his gaze finally landing on Maddox. "Do you have a VCR I may use?"

"A VCR?"

"Yes, Mr. Walker recorded his will."

Maddox frowned before getting up and walking to the cabinet on the wall. He opened the doors, pushing them back all the way to reveal a large television and a VCR sitting inside. He grabbed the remote and held it out. "Will this do?"

"Yes, thank you." Mr. Anderson got up and walked over, putting the tape into the VCR. He took the remote from Maddox and made his way back to his seat. "I have Mr. Walker's official will, which he had me file with the courts three months ago. He—"

"Three months ago!" Maddox shouted. "He filed a new will three months ago?"

"Yes, sir," the lawyer replied evenly as if he was unaware of the rage simmering inside of Maddox. "He had me draw up a new will

three months ago. That was about the same time he made this recording."

Oh boy.

This was not going to end well. The vein on Maddox's forehead was pulsing. I was kind of hoping his head would explode. The man did not make a good foreman. I always wondered how he'd ended up in the position, but I'd never asked. Maybe I should have.

I turned my attention to the television when it flickered to life and then drew in a deep breath when I saw Buck's wrinkled face. I missed the old man. He'd been a tough boss, but he'd been a good man.

Buck didn't smile. He simply leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands together over his stomach. Even at fifty-two, the man had been in good shape. The heart attack that had taken his life had come out of nowhere. No one had been expecting it, least of all Buck.

"If you're listening to this, then I can only assume I've kicked the bucket," Buck started. "If the gods were kind to me, I died on the back of my horse. If I didn't, I'm going to come back and haunt you all."

I glanced at Ethan to see his reaction to his father's words. The man was staring intently at the screen, not a sign of emotion on his face. It was almost as if he'd never seen his father's face before.

I turned back to the screen when Buck continued talking.

"If Mr. Anderson followed my orders, then the only ones in the room should be him, my son Ethan Walker, my foreman Asa Maddox, and one of my ranch hands, Jake Cooper. If those three men are not in attendance, my attorney has been directed to wait

until they are here before the will is read. If anyone else is in the room, then they need to leave. I'll wait." Buck chuckled. "Seems like I got lots of time on my hands."

Several tense moments went by.

"Okay, so you were all asked to be here for the reading of my will. This is going to be short and sweet. I, Garret Ethan Walker, being of sound mind and body, do hereby declare that this is my last will and testament. I leave the sum of five thousand dollars to each of my ranch hands, except for Jake Cooper. To him, I leave twenty-five thousand dollars and my three quarter horses King, Prince, and Mimi."

I smiled at Buck's generosity. Buck and I had often spent the evening discussing our mutual love of horses and my dream to create a horse breeding farm.

Those three purebred horses would be a good start, as would the money. I knew the boys could use the extra cash as well. Granted, room and board and a wage were all part of living on the ranch, but a little extra couldn't hurt.

"To my son, Ethan Walker, I leave the Eagle Creek Ranch and the bulk of my estate with the condition that he lives on the ranch for one year."

Ethan gasped. "Can he do that?"

Mr. Anderson paused the video. "He can, sir."

"I don't want to live on the ranch," Ethan insisted. "I don't even want to spend the night here."

"If you'll please listen, sir." Mr. Anderson started the video again.

"Now, son," Buck said as if he knew Ethan would have a problem with what he'd done, "I know you've got no reason to trust me, but I



truly believe you'll come to love the ranch as much as I do if you just give it a chance."

Ethan snorted and crossed his arms.

"However," Buck continued, "if you truly cannot give this a chance and choose not to live on the ranch for one year, then I leave you the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars and your grandmother's jewelry. The bulk of my estate will be liquidated and donated to charity."

"To Asa Maddox." Buck picked up a file and set it down in front of him. "As you have already embezzled several hundred thousand dollars from my ranch, I feel you've already received anything you may think you have coming from me. But in deference of your time at the Eagle Creek Ranch, I leave you the sum of five dollars, which is just enough for gas to get you into town. You're fired."

"What!" Maddox jumped to his feet. "He can't do that!"

"You embezzled from Buck?" I asked. I knew Maddox was a snake, but I never dreamed he'd bite that hand that fed him.

"I didn't embezzle anything. Buck's mind was starting to go when he died. That's probably why he changed his will." Maddox waved his hand toward the TV screen. "I'd bet that won't even stand up in court."

Mr. Anderson cleared his throat. "Mr. Walker was afraid you would contest the will so he had himself evaluated by two separate psychiatrists and was found to have all of his faculties. I would be happy to supply the doctors' reports to any court you deem appropriate."

"I earned every cent of that money." Maddox's hands clenched into fists. "I'm not leaving here until I get what's coming to me."

"You mean a view from behind bars?" Ethan asked. "That's usually what someone gets when they embezzle."

I jumped to my feet when Maddox took a threatening step toward Ethan. "Don't."

Maddox sneered as he looked me up and down. We both knew who would win if we got into a fight. I had fifty pounds of muscle on the man. I also had a physically hard job that I worked every day. Maddox hadn't been out on the ranch in ages. He tended to spend all of his time in his office.

"You should be pissed, too. He only left you twenty-five thousand dollars and some horses for all the years you've been here. You'll waste that in one weekend of hookers and beer."

"Mr. Walker paid me an honest wage for an honest day's pay," I replied. "I don't need any more than that."

The twenty-five thousand dollars and three horses were just a bonus. I was going to put the money away as a rainy day fund anyway. I wasn't about to spend it on hookers and beer, not that I ever did. I didn't do hookers and only occasionally drank. I didn't need either.

I had everything I could ever need right here on the ranch.

## Chapter Three

~ Ethan ~

I couldn't believe this was happening to me. I never even wanted to come to this godforsaken place and now my father was making me stay?

No money was worth this.

I stood up and started toward the door.

"Mr. Walker?" the lawyer asked. "Are you leaving?"

"Oh, yes." I laughed at the absurdity that I'd actually stay. "He may be dead, but my father can go fuck himself."

"Sir—"

I turned to glare at the man with narrowed eyes. "There is no way in hell that I am staying here."

Dead silence filled the room.

"I see," Mr. Anderson finally said. "Well, that is your right, of course, but if you choose to not fulfill the requirements of your father's will, then I need you to sign some papers relinquishing it so I can liquidate Mr. Walker's assets and give the money to the charities he listed for me."

"I'll sign whatever I need to sign." Luckily, I knew what papers he was talking about. I didn't deal in estate law, but I'd studied it in law school.

"The papers are in my car. I'll just go get them."

"Fine, whatever."

Mr. Anderson walked out of the room, leaving the door open. I didn't know whether to follow after him or stay where I was. When I turned to look at Maddox and Cooper, following after the lawyer

seemed like a better choice. The two men were staring at each other with such intense hatred, I could feel it saturating the air.

"You heard Buck, Maddox," Cooper said. "You need to leave."

"This is my fucking ranch!" Maddox shouted. "I'm not leaving."

"Buck fired you. You don't have a choice."

"The hell I don't!" Maddox waved his hand toward me. "He's not fucking staying. That means no one is in charge except me. Now get the hell out of my office."

"I'm going to call the sheriff if you don't leave, Maddox."

"Call the sheriff." Maddox laughed. It was a loud and obnoxious sound. "He can't make me leave either." Maddox glanced at me, his eyes narrowing. "And you, get the hell off my ranch. You don't belong here."

I couldn't agree more, but I wouldn't just because the guy was a dick.

I flipped him off instead and walked out of the room.

Mr. Anderson wasn't back with the papers I needed to sign so I walked around, checking the place out. The rest of the first floor seemed to look just like the living room. The whole place seriously needed to be brought into the current century.

I heard pans clanking together and headed for them. I smiled when I walked into a kitchen and saw Colby at the sink. "Can I take you up on that cup of coffee now?"

Colby's face was pale when he jumped and spun around. A small smile slid over his face when he saw me, replacing the fear that I had spotted for just a moment. It kind of made me wonder who he was afraid of.

"Of course," Colby replied. "It will take just a moment. Do you take cream or sugar?"

"Black is fine." I was on the go a lot. It wasn't always possible to get cream or sugar so I'd grown used to drinking it black. I slid my hands into the pockets of my slacks and leaned back against the counter. "So, what do you do on the ranch?"

"Oh, Mr. Walker made me the cook. I was supposed to be a ranch hand, but, well, I kind of kept falling off my horse." Colby let out a small laugh as he poured me a cup of coffee. "I like cooking better anyhow. The guys are real appreciative of a hot home cooked meal when the day is done."

"Did you make whatever I smell?" I asked as I took the coffee Colby held out to me. "It smells delicious."

"Oh, I'm making lasagna and salad for dinner. I wanted some good garlic bread to go with it."

I glanced at the double ovens built into the wall over by the stove. "You're making homemade garlic bread?"

Colby nodded. "The guys love homemade bread. I can barely keep it in the house."

I almost whimpered. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had homemade bread.

I hoped I wasn't drooling.

Colby smiled as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. "Dinner is at seven."

"Oh, I doubt I'll be here that long. Mr. Anderson is getting some papers for me to sign and then I'm headed back to the airport."

"Oh." There was a slight slump to Colby's shoulders when he glanced away. "Well, it was nice meeting you."

I smiled. "It was nice meeting you, too, Colby."

"If you can wait just a little longer, I can send some garlic bread home with you. It only has about another ten minutes to go."

Oh god, yes.

"I'd appreciate that, Colby."

I could do ten minutes.

"Colby!"

Colby jumped and stared at the doorway.

"Was that Maddox?" I asked. I didn't like the fear that slid back across Colby's face as he nodded. "Does he shout at you a lot?"

"He, um, it's a big house." Colby quickly dried his hands and then turned toward the kitchen doorway. "I'd better go see what he wants."

I was not thrilled with the way Colby hurried out the door or the fact that he was so jumpy. I'd seen this kind of fear before and it made my stomach clench. I set my coffee down on the countertop and then walked over to the doorway to watch Colby hurry into the office.

"Mr. Walker? I have those papers for you to sign."

I glanced toward the front door. Mr. Anderson was walking in, a file in his hand. I walked over to join him in the living room. Mr. Anderson sat down on the couch and set the folder on the coffee table, flipping it open.

"Are you sure this is the road you want to take, Mr. Walker? Once you sign these papers, there's no going back. Everything your father ever worked for will be gone." Mr. Anderson held up a small stack of papers. "I have the papers here in case you've changed your mind and want to keep the ranch."

He sounded almost hopeful.

I shook my head. "I haven't and I won't." What did I want with a ranch that had been more important to my father than me? "I don't care about the money. You can keep that as part of your fee or donate it to charity, but I would like my grandmother's jewelry."

Maybe I'd have a daughter one day that I could give them to.

"Alright." Mr. Anderson held out a different stack of papers. "This is—"

"I'm a lawyer, Mr. Anderson. I know what it is." That didn't mean I wasn't going to read it before signing. No one should ever sign anything without reading it first.

"Really?" Mild surprise laced the man's voice. "Your father never told me."

"I doubt he knew." I'd certainly never told him.

I took the papers Mr. Anderson held out to me and started reading them over. It was pretty much what I expected. If I signed on the dotted line, I gave up all rights to the ranch and the inheritance my father had left me with the exception of twenty-five thousand dollars and my grandmother's jewelry.

I set the papers down on the coffee table and held my hand out for a pen, but before Mr. Anderson could hand it to me, I heard shouting coming from my father's office. The door slammed open.

Colby was visibly shaking as he followed after Maddox as the man stormed out of the office and there was a distinctive red mark on his cheek.

I stood.

"Do it now!" Maddox shouted.

"Sir, I can't," Colby started. "Mr. Anderson said—"

"I don't care what he fucking said. Anderson is not in charge here. I am."

The man obviously hadn't seen us.

"Sir—"

Maddox grabbed Colby by his throat and yanked him closer. "You will find those jewels and—"

"Let him go this instant!" I strode across the room as calmly as I could considering I was filled to the brim with rage. I grabbed Colby and pushed him behind me. "How dare you put your hands on Colby."

I couldn't believe the balls on this man.

"Colby belongs to me," Maddox snarled. "I can do anything I damn well please with him."

My eyes narrowed. "Slavery was outlawed in eighteen-sixty-five, Mr. Maddox."

I didn't turn to look when the front door opened behind me. I wasn't about to take my eyes off of Maddox, not when he had deadly outrage in his eyes.

"What's going on here?" Cooper asked.

"Mr. Maddox seems to think Colby belongs to him and that that gives him the right to smack Colby around."

"Is that true, Colby?" Cooper asked.

"Um, well, he...um..."

"Colby has a red mark on his face. Maddox also had his hand wrapped around Colby's throat," I pointed out. "What exactly were you trying to get Colby to do, Maddox? You weren't referring to my grandmother's jewelry, were you?"

How low could this man actually sink?



"None of your fucking business!" the man snapped. "You need to leave. All of you need to leave."

Colby whimpered.

I crossed my arms. "You were fired, Maddox. You're the one who is leaving."

"You're giving up the ranch. Why do you care what happens to it?"

"I don't," I replied honestly because I really didn't. The whole place could burn to the ground for all I cared, but Colby was another story. I was pretty sure he had no one to stand up for him. "I care about what happens to Colby."

"Fine, then take the little cock sucker with you, but get the hell off my ranch."

I raised an eyebrow. "Cock sucker?"

"Oh, you didn't know about the boy you're trying to defend." Maddox grinned maliciously. "Colby is a cock sucking bastard who likes to take it up the ass."

A frightened whimper came from behind me.

I was pretty sure my grin was just as spiteful as Maddox's when the man took a step back from me. "Funny, so do I." Colby's soft gasp was amusing, but not as much as the shock that dropped Maddox's jaw. "Guess my father didn't tell you that part, did he?"

"You're—"

"Gay?" My grin grew. "Why, yes, I am." I could barely keep from curling my lip back in disgust as I looked him up and down. I'd learned a lot over my years and one of them was that the easiest way to piss off a guy was to question his sexuality.

I had a long standing belief that most heterosexual men were merely men who had yet to accept that they were homosexual at heart. Sure, there were those who truly were heterosexual, but most men, specifically those who protested too much, were gay right down to their toes. They were just afraid to admit it.

"Why?" I asked. "Interested?"

I wasn't fast enough to stop the fist Maddox aimed at my face, but someone else was. I slowly panned to Cooper, amazed that he'd caught Maddox's fist in his hand. The muscles on the man's arm bulged and flexed.

"You were fired, Mr. Maddox," I stated firmly, leaving no doubt that I was serious. It was the same voice I used when dealing with assholes who thought they could intimidate one of my clients. "You need to leave, and if you resist, I'm sure Mr. Cooper would be more than willing to help you out the door."

"Oh, I would," Cooper said.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Maddox snickered. "You've been after my job since day one. Well, I have news for you, Cooper. I'm the boss here." Maddox tapped his chest. "Me. I say who comes and who goes, and I say you go. Now, get the fuck off my ranch."

"Your ranch?" I snapped. "I don't remember my father leaving it to you."

"You're not in charge here, boy. I am, and if I say this is my ranch, there ain't shit you can do about it."

Boy?

I didn't fucking think so.

I held out my hand without looking away from Maddox. "Mr. Anderson, the papers, please."

After the lawyer handed me the papers, I glanced at them quickly to make sure they were the right ones, and they were, and then I signed on the dotted line before handing them back.

"Mr. Cooper, I would like to offer you the position of ranch foreman."

Cooper blinked at me with wide eyes. "I accept."

"Then your first order is to get this piece of trash off my ranch and then post lookouts to make sure he doesn't come back. I'll have his stuff packed and shipped to him, but Asa Maddox is not allowed to step one foot back on this ranch for as long as I own it."

Cooper grinned. "Yes, sir."

I stood back and watched as Cooper took the fist he was still holding and twisted it around until he had Maddox's arm bent behind him and then he simply frog-marched the man right out the front door.

"I'll get these papers filed with the courts right away, sir."

Huh?

I glanced at Mr. Anderson. My stomach started to clench at the wide grin on his face.

Oh god, what had I done?

## Chapter Four

~ Cooper ~

I took great delight in escorting Maddox to his car. The man had been a thorn in my side for years and I would be glad to see the last of him. I was pretty sure the rest of the ranch would as well.

Especially Colby.

I knew things were tense between them, and Colby always seemed to be anxious around the former foreman, but I'd always assumed it was because Colby was shy. I never dreamed Maddox might be knocking Colby around, or doing worse.

I wondered if Buck had known.

I couldn't help but wonder if that was why Buck didn't leave the ranch to Maddox. For years, everyone had assumed that was what was going to happen when Buck eventually died. Maddox had seemed to make a point of letting people know he was going to own the ranch one day.

Guess his plans just went to hell.

I opened the car door when we reached the vehicle and pushed Maddox toward the driver's seat. "Have a nice life, Maddox." As long as it wasn't on the Eagle Creek Ranch. "I'll have the boys pack up your stuff and drop it off at the hotel in town."

Maddox gripped the doorframe. "Don't touch a single thing. I'll be back, and then we'll see who gets kicked off this ranch."

I jumped back when Maddox climbed into his car and slammed the door shut. His tires spun as he peeled out and raced down the driveway in a cloud of dust. I stood there and watched until the dust settled.

"Was the Maddox?" Chester Macon asked as he walked up to stand beside me.

"Yep."

"Where's he headed in such an all-fired hurry?"

"He got fired." God, I loved saying that. "We got us a new boss."

"Who?"

"Ethan Walker inherited the ranch."

Macon rubbed his hand over his beard as he stared down the empty driveway. "Ain't that Buck's kid?"

"Sure is."

"I thought he hadn't been here since he was a baby."

"He was required to be here for the reading of the will. Buck recorded his will and none of us could see it unless we were all here."

Macon snorted. "That sounds like Buck."

"Mr. Walker wasn't going to accept the ranch until Maddox pissed him off." I turned to look Macon fully in the face. "Did you know Maddox has been knocking Colby around?"

"What?" Macon's eyes narrowed with rage. "How long has this been going on?"

"I don't know, but I suspect that is why Buck changed his will and decided to give it to his son. He fired Maddox on the tape."

"Why didn't Colby say anything?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "But I'm going to find out."

"Let me know, will you? I don't like the idea that this was going on and no one knew anything."

"I'm more concerned with why Colby didn't come to one of us and say something. He might not work out in the fields with the rest of us,

but he's still a member of this ranch. He should have come to one of us."

"Don't go too hard on him, Cooper. He may have been too scared to come to one of us."

I nodded because I knew that. People who were being abused often didn't know who they could turn to. "Hey, I need you to get a couple of the guys to go down and watch the road. Mr. Walker doesn't want Maddox back on the ranch."

"I'll send Levi and Nate down there."

"Tell them the new ranch foreman ordered it if they give you any grief."

Macon frowned. "Who's the new ranch foreman?"

I grinned. "Me."

Macon grunted and walked away. I knew the man wasn't upset with me being the new ranch foreman. He pretty much thought I already had the job without the fancy name or pay raise. The men tended to come to me before going to Maddox.

Maddox was not well liked by most of the ranch employees. There were a couple, however, who would need to go. I needed to talk to Mr. Walker about that before I fired them, but I would fire them. They looked to Maddox as if he was the answer to all their prayers and they barely did a lick of work around the ranch. It was a constant battle with them.

I waited until I saw Levi and Nate leaving the bunkhouse before making my way back to the main house. I didn't know how Mr. Walker would feel about things, especially after how much the man had fought staying here, so I knocked on the door when I reached it.

I was surprised when Colby answered the door. "Hey, how are you?"

His eyes looked a little too wide.

"I'm okay," Colby murmured.

He wasn't okay. There was a nasty red mark on his cheek and fingerprint bruises starting to come to life on his throat.

"I wish I'd known Maddox was hurting you." My guilt that I hadn't even noticed anything was wrong weighed heavily on me. "I'd have stopped it. I hope you know that."

"I know," Colby replied before shuddering and wrapping his arms around his waist. "He...he said he'd punish me if I said anything to anyone."

Fucking bastard!

"He can't hurt you anymore, Colby. He's gone, remember? I escorted him to his car myself and Levi and Nate are down guarding the gate so he doesn't come back."

"He'll be back," Colby said. "He wants the ranch too much to let someone else have it."

"Did he say why he wanted the ranch so bad?"

Colby shook his head. "No, but I've heard things here and there. He's got some business dealings with some guys down in Nevada. He always shut the door when they called, but I listened in a few times. They talked a lot about shipping stuff, but I don't think they were talking about cattle."

My eyebrows lifted. "Drugs?"

"I'm not sure. They always called it cattle, but it just felt like they were talking about something else." Colby shrugged. "I could be wrong."

I doubted it.

I gave Colby what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "Why don't you go finish working on dinner? I'm going to go talk to Mr. Walker."

Colby nodded before walking off.

I met up with Mr. Anderson as he was coming down the hallway from the office. "Heading off?"

Mr. Anderson held up his briefcase. "I have all the papers signed. Now, I just have to get them down to the courthouse and filed."

"Are you sure there's no way that Maddox can contest the will?"

"I'm sure. Not only do I have the two doctor's reports, but Buck had a forensic accountant go over the books for everything since Maddox was hired on. I've been instructed to take it to the police if Maddox raises a stink."

"Why wouldn't you do that anyway? The man stole from Buck. He deserves to go to prison."

"I agree, but Buck didn't want to make a fuss."

"Maybe if he had, Colby wouldn't have gotten smacked around so much."

"Maybe."

We both knew I was right.

"Well, I need to get these back to town and get them filed. If you or any of the guys have any questions, give me a call. Mr. Walker has my number."

"Thank you for all your help, Mr. Anderson."

The man waved before heading on down the hallway. I watched him for a moment before turning and walking toward the office. The door must not have been closed all the way because it swung open when I knocked.



"Mr. Walker?"

"Ethan. Call me Ethan. Mr. Walker was my father."

I glanced over to see Ethan standing in front of the window. He seemed to be watching something outside with a great deal of intensity.

"What is that building over there?"

I walked over to the window and looked at the building Ethan was looking at. "Oh, that's the bunkhouse."

"Bunkhouse?"

"That's where all the ranch hands live."

Ethan glanced at me. "They don't have homes of their own?"

"This ranch is their home. Some of them, like Cookie, have been here for decades. Hell, I'm pretty sure they built the ranch up around Cookie."

"What's Cookie do around here?"

"What doesn't he do might be the better question. Cookie has done and seen it all. He's a cranky old bastard, but if you have a question about ranching, he's the one to talk to."

"What about my father?" Ethan asked. "Did he know a lot about ranching?"

"He did, but then he was born on this ranch."

"I vaguely remember my mother telling me something about that, but I guess I tend to tune out things about the great Garret Walker."

I clenched my jaw to keep from arguing about the tone of disrespect in Ethan's voice. From what I knew, he hadn't gotten along well with his father. I didn't know what had happened between the two men except that Ethan had never visited the ranch in the entire time I'd been here.

It wasn't something Buck really talked about.

"The Eagle Creek ranch was established in eighteen-thirty-six when a man named Ephraim Walker staked a gold mine on the left fork of Eagle Creek. He struck it rich and then started buying up all the land around the mine, eventually getting into cattle. He got a mail order bride from back east and began building his legacy. I believe you are his great-great-great-grandson."

"Is the mine still here?"

"Yeah, it's up in the hills behind the house, but all the gold inside was mined out decades ago. The real prize now is the land and the cattle. You know own over three hundred thousand acres of prime pasture, mountains, and forest land."

"I'd give it all up for my penthouse in New York." Ethan groaned as he rubbed his hand over his face. "I have no idea what I'm doing. I can't run a ranch. I'm a lawyer. I know how to run a defamation case or fight for my clients rights. I don't know how to cull cattle."

I squinted at Ethan. "Defamation case?"

"I'm a civil rights attorney specializing in LGBTQ cases."

"You're really gay?" I know he'd said something about it to Maddox, but I'd really thought he said it to piss the man off, which it had done. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen Maddox's face turn so red.

"Yes, I am." Ethan's eyes narrowed. "Is that going to be a problem?"

I snorted. "No, I'm pretty sure half the men on the ranch are gay."

As quickly as Ethan's eyes had narrowed, they widened. "Did my father know that?"

"It never really came up in conversation, but I'm sure he did. Buck didn't care much what you did once you were off the ranch as long

as you did your job while you were on it."

"Huh."

"Did your father know you were gay?" I asked.

"My father and I have never spoken."

My jaw dropped. "Never?"

"Well, my mother and I left when I was just a few months old. I never saw him again and the only contact I had with him was the child support payments he sent once a quarter and a birthday card that came once a year."

"That's it?"

"That's it." Ethan clasped his hands together and let them dangle as he leaned back against his desk. "You probably know him better than I do."

"I'm sorry?"

Ethan shook his head. "Nothing to be sorry for. It is what it is."

"Yeah, but—"

"There was a time when I was desperate for my father's attention, but all of my letters went unanswered and none of my phone calls were ever returned. I don't know why my father cut me out of his life, and now that he is gone, I doubt I will ever know. There's nothing I can do to change that except move on."

"I suppose." I wasn't sure I agreed, but I couldn't think of anything else to say to that. "Has your mother ever given you any indication of what happened to make her leave?"

Ethan shook his head. "She refused to talk about it, but I think it weighs heavy on her."

"How so?"

A small smile appeared on Ethan's face. "For as long as I can remember, she'd go away one weekend every month. When I was a kid, I was positive she was seeing someone, and I was so angry at her. She used to come home with a smile on her face every time. As I got older, I realized she really just needed some time for herself. Being a single mother couldn't be easy on anyone."

This was a little too personal for someone I had just met so I changed the subject quickly. "Were you serious about me being the new foreman?"

Ethan cocked one very fine brown eyebrow. "Can you do that job?"

I snorted. "Probably not."

Ethan grinned. "Then you're perfect for the position."

I wasn't so sure about that either.

## Chapter Five

~ Ethan ~

I woke in a bed that was not my own, but at least there wasn't someone curled up next to me that I didn't know. I was all alone in the big wide bed. I didn't know whether to be thankful for that or sad.

I flipped back the covers and then scooted to the edge of the bed. A quick glance at my watch made me groan. It was barely eight o'clock in the morning. Granted, I was usually up and moving by now, but I'd done my very best to polish off a bottle of my father's whiskey last night. I was surprised I was moving at all.

I needed coffee.

I stood and then stumbled toward the bathroom. A shower wouldn't be out of place either. I probably stank of whiskey and sweat. I shuddered thinking about putting on yesterday's suit. That would just be disgusting.

I needed to make some phone calls and have some of my stuff shipped here. Despite the requirements of my father's will, I wasn't sure exactly how long I was going to stay. A ranch in the wilds of the west was no place for a city boy.

Even I knew that.

I took care of my morning business and then hopped into the shower. I felt halfway human by the time I stepped out and dried off. But only halfway. I was going to need a really strong cup of coffee to be fully human.

"Mr. Walker?"

I stilled for a moment before walking over to the bathroom door. I wrapped the towel around my waist and pulled the door open a

crack. "Colby?"

"Yes, sir. I waited until you woke up."

"What do you need, Colby?"

"Oh." The man's face brightened as he flushed and glanced away. "I brought you some clothes to change into. I know you were supposed to catch a plane back home yesterday so I figured you might not have brought anything with you and it just ain't right to wear a suit on a ranch."

I chuckled at his exuberance. "Thank you, Colby. It's much appreciated."

"I'll just leave these right here," Colby said as he set a stack of clothes on the edge of the bed. He hightailed it out of the room as if the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

I waited until the door closed behind him before walking out of the bathroom. I grabbed the first item in the stack. It was a simple black short sleeved cotton shirt. It looked as if it would easily fit. The jeans would be a little looser than I normally would have worn, but I could work with them. I had a belt that would help.

I was surprised at the boots. Not only did they fit, but they were damn comfortable. The calf high socks were so white I wondered if they had ever been used before.

I wished I had clean underwear also, but I wasn't about to use someone else's. That was just gross. I went without instead. It wouldn't be the first time I hadn't worn underwear and I doubt it would be the last. At least the jeans were button-fly so I didn't have to worry about zipping up anything important.

I ran my fingers through my hair since I didn't have a brush and then walked out of the bedroom and headed downstairs to the

kitchen.

Colby shot me a quick smile when I walked in. "Coffee, sir?"

"Yes, please, and stop calling me sir, Colby. My name is Ethan."

"Yes, sir, I mean, Ethan."

I smiled. "Better."

"Are you ready for breakfast?" Colby asked as he set a cup of coffee down in front of me.

"I'll wait until the others get here." Colby's laughter drew me away from the smell of my morning coffee. "What's so funny?"

"Everyone has already eaten and gone out to the cattle range."

I glanced at my watch again. "It's barely eight o'clock in the morning."

"Breakfast is at six."

My eyebrows lifted. "That early?"

"Yes, sir." Colby's grin was infectious and I found myself smiling again. "The day starts early on a ranch."

Yeah, but there was early and then there was "oh my god" early. Breakfast at six meant getting up at five, and that was "oh my god" early.

I knew there was a reason I didn't like life on a ranch.

"I'll have breakfast now, Colby. Thank you."

The plate Colby set down in front of me was piled high enough to feed an entire bus full of people back in New York. I stared down at it with wide eyes. "Colby, I can't eat all of this."

I was kind of a muffin and coffee for breakfast kind of guy.

"Breakfast is usually a pretty big meal on the ranch. It's a good way for the guys to start their day. Lunch is usually pretty light

because I make sack lunches they can all eat on horseback out in the fields."

"And dinner?" I asked.

"Oh, dinner is a big meal because the guys are all tired and want to go to bed with full tummies."

I chuckled as I grabbed my fork and dug in for my first bite.

"Whatever you're feeding them, I eat about half of that."

"Noted."

"Has Cooper already headed out?"

"Oh yeah, but he told me to let him know when you started moving. I called him when I heard your shower go on. He should be here soon."

"Thank you." I groaned when I took my first bite. The food was simple—eggs, hash browns, and sausage—but it tasted fantastic.

"Just a note, I don't eat asparagus or brussel sprouts."

"Neither do I, and I don't cook anything I don't eat."

Perfect.

"Is there anything you do like?" Colby asked.

"Fish, or more specifically, salmon. I tend to eat fish a lot. It's supposed to be good for your heart."

"The natural omegas threes."

I blinked at Colby in surprise. "Yes."

Colby grinned. "I do a lot of research on recipes and try and use as many natural ingredients as possible. I hate processed foods. Everyone on the ranch works real hard and they like to eat hard. I want to make sure whatever they are eating is good for them."

"Apparently my father knew what he was doing when he made you the cook."



Colby snorted. "I think it was less him making me a cook and more him trying to keep me from killing myself on the back of a horse."

"Yeah, I don't get that. How can you be a ranch hand and not know how to ride a horse?"

"Oh, I know how to ride a horse. I just don't seem to know how to stay on one." Colby laughed so I knew he was okay with what we were talking about. "Do you know how to ride a horse?"

"I do, but I'm not sure if it's the same as riding a horse on a ranch."

"A horse is a horse."

"Of course, of course." I chuckled when Colby squinted at me. "The man who taught me to ride was a polo player. He was not a rancher. He chased a ball around the ground with a stick. He did not herd cattle."

"I still think riding the horse is the same."

I certainly hoped he was right.

I had gotten through about half of what was on my plate by the time Cooper walked into the kitchen. I set my fork down and pushed my plate away before reaching for a napkin to wipe my mouth.

"Morning, Cooper."

Good god, Cooper's jaw was firm, but then so was the rest of him. I doubted there was an ounce of fat on the man's tall, firm form. He was really nice to look at.

Cooper nodded at me. "Mr. Walker."

"Ethan," I corrected. "Please call me Ethan."

Cooper poured himself a cup of coffee and then slid into the seat next to me. "I thought I'd give you a tour of the ranch if you're

interested."

"I suppose I need to be, huh?"

I still had a lot of planning to do and a few phone calls to make, starting with my mother. I doubt she intended for me to stay on the ranch for a year when she insisted I come out to listen to the reading of my father's will.

Wasn't she going to be surprised?

I also needed to call my assistant and arrange to take a hiatus from work as well as turn my current cases over to other lawyers. I didn't think I would be able to take a lot of court cases via teleconference. Judges tended to frown on lawyers not appearing in court in person to defend their cases.

"You know how to ride?" Cooper asked.

He glanced between me and Colby when we both laughed.

"Yes, I know how to ride."

"Do you have a lot of experience or just a little? The reason I am asking is because I need to know which horse to saddle for you."

"I'm comfortable on the back of a horse, but I don't have that much experience."

Cooper nodded. "Okay, then I know which horse to put you on. Once you get some more experience, we can move you up to a different horse."

That sounded reasonable.

"Thank you for breakfast, Colby. It was very good."

"You're welcome, Ethan."

I was glad the man had used my first name. I just hoped he grew more confident using it as time went by. I understood that I was his

boss and he was my employee, but that didn't mean we couldn't be friendly with each other. We did live in the same house after all.

I stood and then grabbed my plate, ready to take it to the trash can to scrape the leftovers off. Colby held out his hand before I could even take a step.

"I can take that."

"I can scrape off my own plate, Colby."

Colby tucked his lips in and glanced down.

I felt like a heel.

"I'm not upset with you, Colby, but you just cooked me and everyone else a really great breakfast. You shouldn't have to clean up after me as well."

"No, I know. I just...Cooper is waiting to take you out to show you the ranch so I thought I'd help out so you could go."

I smiled so the man would know I meant my words. It was obvious I'd have to be careful around Colby until he learned to trust I wouldn't hurt him. "How about I scrape it and then put it in the sink. You can take it from there."

Colby had a grin on his face when he lifted his head. "That works."

I walked over to the trashcan and scraped the remaining food off and then carried my plate to the sink and set it inside. "All yours."

"Have fun on your ride," Colby said as he headed right for the sink.

I watched him for a minute before gesturing to Cooper to follow me out of the kitchen. I kept walking until I stood outside on the front porch. When Cooper closed the door behind him, I nodded my head toward the house.

"Has he always been like that?"

"You mean scared?"

"Yes."

Cooper shook his head even as his lips turned down at the corners. "No. I knew he was shy and anxious around other people, but always just kind of thought that was it. I didn't realize until yesterday that there might be something else going on." Cooper's hands clenched. "If I ever get my hands on Maddox..."

He really didn't need to expand on that thought. I knew exactly what he wanted to do to Maddox. I wanted to do the same damn thing. Colby was a shy, sweet, and unassuming man who had been abused.

I was terrified to find out just how badly he'd been abused, but I knew I'd have to ask at some point. Maddox had seemed pretty homophobic, but a lot of abusers acted that way and still sexually assaulted people like Colby. For some reason I couldn't understand, they didn't see that as gay sex.

Idiots, every damn one of them.

"Come on," Cooper said as he started down the steps, "let me show you the property and then I can introduce you to Mimi."

"Isn't that one of the horses my father gave you in his will?"

"Yep. King, Prince, and Mimi. They are all purebred quarter horses. Your father and I spent many a night talking about raising purebred quarter horses. Prince is the offspring of a mating between King and Mimi. He'll be the center of my breeding program."

"I know nothing about breeding horses."

Cooper chuckled. "That's my dream. It doesn't have much to do with the ranch."

"Well, the ranch isn't my dream, so..."

Cooper glanced at me. "What is your dream?"

Huh.

"I don't know if I have one at the moment. When I was younger, all I dreamed about was getting into Harvard Law School and then making it through until graduation. And then it was finding a good job with a prestigious law firm. That one didn't work out exactly like I thought it would, but I can't say I'm unhappy with the outcome."

"What happened?"

"Oh, I was hired at a prestigious law firm. That part happened. I just didn't stay there. I'd been there for about three years when I began to notice that all the other young lawyers were getting promoted except me, even the ones that had been hired after me."

"Why weren't you promoted? Did you fuck up a case or something?"

"When I questioned my superior, he said my work wasn't up to par, except I knew it was. I graduated top of my class from Harvard. My work was stellar. So, I started doing a little investigating and learned that no one that was gay was ever promoted in his department. He had to hire us due to federal law, but that didn't mean he had to promote us."

"He didn't promote you because you were gay?"

"No." I still seethed when I thought about it. I was a very good lawyer. I had deserved to be promoted. Who I slept with never should have come into it. One had nothing to do with the other.

"What did you do?"

"I took him to court for discrimination and I won. That was the beginning of my career as a lawyer for LGBTQ rights. I ended up

starting up my own law firm with a couple of friends I went to law school with and now Harvard graduates come looking to get hired with us when they are looking to work at a prestigious law firm."

"Sounds like that worked out for you then."

"Yes, it did."

"So, no dreams after that?"

I pushed my hands into the pocket of my jeans and looked off toward the pasture where the cows were. "I haven't really thought about it. I've been pretty busy just living my life."

I was going to miss that life.

## Chapter Six

~ Cooper ~

"This is King." I pointed the stall with the black quarter horse and then bay colored horse in the next stall. "This is Prince." I walked toward the chestnut colored horse in the last stall. "And this pretty lady is Mimi."

I grabbed a small baggy of sliced apple out of my pocket and fed them to her. I didn't indulge her often, but every now and then was okay. "She's a five year old bay quarter horse. Prince is her only offspring at this point, but I plan on breeding her to King again in the spring."

"Are you planning showing horses?"

"Oh, no." I shook my head. "The quarter horse is the ultimate cattle horse. They are quick, stocky animal with a superb cow sense. And, while they are really good at barrel racing, reining, cutting, and show jumping, I'm not breeding them for show. I'll leave that up to other people. I'm breeding them to sell to the people who want to show them or have quality cattle horses."

"Ah, now I see. You want to be the breeder behind the shows."

I grinned. "Pretty much."

"And you think this pretty lady will do it?"

"Well, her and King. While colors can be important, it's the stock that people are looking for, and these two make beautiful babies."

"I can tell. Prince is a very handsome horse."

"Buck brought in a bunch of brood mares and King wanted nothing to do with them, but he kept trying to break into Mimi's pen."

Finally, I convinced Buck to just let the old man have his way. Prince was the product of that."

"That's probably why my father gave them to you. You seem to know your horses."

"That's the hope." This could all blow up in my face, but I'd never know if I didn't try. "That's something we need to discuss. Can I continued to board them here or do you want me to move them to another stable?"

"You might as well leave them here," Ethan replied. "I'm going to need you to show me the ropes of running a ranch and you can't do that if you're driving between two different places every day."

"I can pay you for boarding them." It would dip into my savings, but I'd do it. I'd have to pay someplace else if I had to move them. Might as well pay to have them close to me.

Ethan waved a hand at me. "Don't worry about it."

"Cooper!"

I spun around at the sound of Colby's shout just as the man ran into the barn. "Levi just called. He said the sheriff is coming up the drive. Mr. Maddox's car is behind him."

Fuck sticks.

"Colby, call the others in from the field. Tell them to double time it, then get to the house and make a fresh pot of coffee. I think we're all going to need it. Under no circumstances are you to come out of the house. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go!"

Colby turned and ran out of the barn.

"This might get messy," I warned Ethan.



"Why would the sheriff be coming here?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know, but I'm sure it has to do with Maddox. I knew he'd left a little too easily." And I was kicking myself for not expecting him to be back quite so soon. "Come on. We'd better go stop Maddox from trying to get inside the house."

"Over my dead body," Ethan snapped. "This is my ranch."

We walked out of the barn and headed for the front of the main house. We reached the front steps just as the sheriff's vehicle pulled to a stop in front of it. Maddox's car pulled up right beside him. Maddox stayed in his car. The sheriff did not.

"Morning, Sheriff." I greeted the man with a nod of respect. "Sheriff Madras, this is Ethan Walker, Buck's son. Ethan, this is Sheriff Ken Madras. He's been sheriff around here for the last ten years or so."

"Give or take a year," the sheriff said as he held his hand out. I shook it first and then Ethan did.

"Buck's kid, huh?"

I stiffened when the Sheriff looked Ethan up and down.

"You here for the reading of the will?" the sheriff asked.

"I was, but it looks like I'm going to be here for a bit longer."

Sheriff Madras frowned. "Why's that?"

"It was a requirement set down by my father in his will. In order to inherit the ranch, I have to live here for a year."

I grew uneasy when the Sheriff's eyes narrowed.

"Now, how'd you know what was in your father's will? The reading isn't until tomorrow."

My eyes rounded. "Sheriff, the will reading was yesterday."

"According to Maddox, the reading isn't until tomorrow."

I crossed my arms and glared at the man still sitting in his car.  
"What exactly did Maddox tell you?"

"Well—"

"I had him escorted off the ranch yesterday after he assaulted one of my ranch hands, Sheriff," Ethan said.

"Assaulted? Who? Why?"

"He was pissed because my father only left him five dollars in the will and then fired him for embezzling funds from the ranch to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars."

I noticed that Ethan didn't mention who Maddox had assaulted and wished I could take the time to thank him for keeping Colby out of this mess. I didn't think that would last, but for now it would.

"Maddox swears up and down that the reading is tomorrow and that you're squatting on his ranch." The Sheriff nodded toward me. "He said you and your...uh...boyfriend here, hatched up some plan to keep him from inheriting what Buck promised him."

Ethan's eyes rolled. "Talk to Mr. Anderson. I'm sure he can straighten this all out for you. He was the one who called me and said I had to be here for the reading of the will, and now we know why."

"Mark Anderson died in a car accident yesterday."

Ethan gasped.

I glanced toward Maddox again. I knew the man had something to do with it. I didn't know how I knew. Just that I did. "On the road between here and town?"

"Yes," the Sheriff replied. "How did you know?"

"Did he have his briefcase on him?"

"His..." Ken's head snapped back as he frowned. "How the hell would I know? I wasn't looking for his briefcase. I was looking to see how he could have crashed his car when no other cars were involved."

I turned to look at the Sheriff. "If you search his car, I'd bet you any amount of money, his briefcase is missing."

"And why would it be missing?"

"Because all the papers Ethan signed accepting his inheritance, plus the videotape will Buck made was in that briefcase."

"Oh, no," Ethan said. "Mr. Anderson said that the tape was a copy and I was welcome to keep it. It's in the office. I also have copies of all the papers I signed for Mr. Anderson. I never sign anything without getting a copy of it. Too many chances of someone changing it."

"I need to see that videotape and those papers," the Sheriff said.

"I'd be more than happy to show you, Sheriff. Colby is making a fresh pot of coffee. Can I get you a cup?"

Apparently, Ethan knew how to play nice with law enforcement. Probably came from being a lawyer.

"Maddox is not to step foot inside the house." I wanted that made perfectly clear. "He can sit in his car or he can leave, but he is not getting out or coming inside."

"Cooper—"

"I promised Colby that he'd be safe from that man," I snapped. "I will not go back on my word or let him be afraid in his own home one second longer."

The sheriff's shoulders went rigid. "Colby was the man he assaulted?"

Oops.

"Yes," Ethan said, "and he still has the bruises to prove it."

"I'll need to speak to Colby."

"Only if he agrees to it." Ethan's voice was surprisingly firm when he spoke. "And if he does agree, you will not upset him."

The sheriff's chest puffed out. "I know you're from back east from one of those big cities, but out in these parts, I am the law. I get to speak to whoever I choose to."

Ethan grinned.

I rolled my eyes. This was going to be fun.

"You may be a sheriff, sir, but I am a lawyer, a damn good one. And the one law that is universal in every state is that a witness cannot be compelled to speak with the authorities if he or she does not want to."

I wasn't sure if that was true or not, but it certainly seemed to take the steam out of the Sheriff's sails.

"I promise not to upset Colby," the Sheriff said through gritted teeth. "I still need to see him."

"I'll ask him if he wants to speak to you." Ethan turned and walked into the house.

"You got yourself a live one there, Cooper."

I noticed the Sheriff only said that after the door had closed behind Ethan. "Oh, don't I know it."

"You think he's legit?"

"I saw the tape myself, Ken." I nodded my head toward Maddox. "And I'd bet anything that Maddox had something to do with Anderson's death."

"Fuck." The Sheriff's shoulders slumped. "We haven't had a murder here since old man Murphy got knocked off by his wife for sleeping with his secretary."

"It could have been a simple car accident, but I doubt it, especially if Anderson's briefcase is missing."

"I'll have one of my deputies check the car and surrounding area."

"How'd he convince you to come out here?"

"Like I said, he told me some story about you and Mr. Walker kicking him out and trying to take the ranch away from him. He insisted on coming out here with me when I left the station to come question you."

I glanced at Maddox again. I couldn't figure out what his game was. I knew he wanted Ethan off the ranch, but why? Could it have anything to do with those business dealings Colby told me about or did he have another reason I didn't know about?

"Sheriff, when you get back to the office, you might want to look into Maddox's business dealings. I've heard some rumors that they are not all above board." I wasn't about to out Colby as the man who had given me that information. The shy little man already had enough to deal with.

I turned when I heard horse hooves hitting the raw ground. Several men on horseback were riding hard toward the main house. They slowed when they neared the front of the house and then finally came to a stop.

"Problems, Cooper?" Macon asked.

"Maybe." I nodded my head toward Maddox's car. "I need you boys to stay out here and keep an eye on things. Maddox is not to

get out of his car. If he tries to, I want one of you to come get me. The Sheriff and I have to go inside and talk with Mr. Walker."

"You got it, Boss."

"Boss?" the Sheriff asked as we walked toward the front door.

"Ethan made me foreman after Maddox was fired."

The Sheriff snorted. "About damn time. I've been telling Buck for ages to make you foreman. The men respect you a whole lot more than they respect Maddox. They'll listen to you."

"I certainly hope so." Or this was going to be the shortest job in history.

"So, that thing Maddox told me about you and Mr. Walker being involved..."

"I met Ethan Walker yesterday right before the reading of the will."

"So, why would he tell me that then?"

"We're both gay." It wasn't something I hid away, but it wasn't something I advertised either. Ken knew I was gay because he was, too. There had never been anything between Ken and me, but we sometimes hung out together. "Maddox is a homophobic prick."

I almost plowed into the Sheriff when he stopped and turned to look at me. "What?"

"Maddox is as gay as you and me."

I frowned. "No, he isn't."

"Yes, he is."

"Then why say all that shit about gays?"

"Because he's an asshole."

I knew that. Everyone knew that. Maddox had the tendency to rub people wrong within moments of meeting him.

I'd often wondered why Buck had left him in charge for so long. I had wavered between lack of caring what people thought and sheer ignorance, but now I wondered if it was something else. Could Maddox have had something on Buck, something he didn't want the world to know?

Ethan was walking toward the door when we got inside. "I talked to Colby and he said he'd speak with you, but I warn you now, upset him, and I will become your worst nightmare. That man has already been through hell. He doesn't need to visit it again."

"I know," the sheriff replied. "I just need to talk to him and get his side of the story."

"Fine." Ethan's eyes blazed as he crossed his arms. "He's in the kitchen waiting for you. He asked to speak to you alone. Cooper and I will be waiting out here for you."

Ethan was so angered, he was practically vibrating.

I waited until Ken left the room before walking over to stand in front of my new boss. "Ken's a good guy, Ethan. He won't hurt Colby. He just needs to hear from Colby what happened."

"I know," Ethan replied. "I just hate to see Colby go through anymore than he already has."

"This has to happen. You know that. Think like a lawyer. Ken needs evidence and eyewitness testimony to be able to build a case against Maddox."

Ethan pushed his hand through his hair. "Yes, I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"None of us like it, Ethan, but Maddox isn't going away until we make him go away. Hell, he's sitting out there in his car right now

thinking he's thrown one over on us and gotten the law on his side. I doubt he has any idea that Ken thinks he's an idiot."

Ethan stared at me for a moment before snickering. "He is an idiot."

"I was kind of thinking about that out on the porch. No one here likes him and the men certainly don't respect him. I can't understand how he remained foreman for so long."

"You think he had something on my father?"

"I'm starting to wonder."

"My father could have been involved in whatever business deals Colby was telling us about."

I shook my head. "No, Buck was all about the ranch. He wouldn't have done anything to jeopardize it."

"Oh, I am aware. The Eagle Creek Ranch was more important to him than anything in the world, even his wife and infant son."

Yeah, there was a lot of bitterness there.



## Chapter Seven

~ Ethan ~

"I'm sorry that happened to you, Ethan," Cooper said. "I don't know why it did. Buck was so proud of you, he practically busted something puffing out his chest every time he talked about you."

Some of the anger left me, replaced by curiosity. "He talked about me?"

"Oh yeah. He never gave out too many specifics, but he talked about how proud he was of what you were doing with your life. I was a little shocked to learn you were a lawyer. I kind of got the impression you'd cured cancer or something."

"Nothing that prestigious, I assure you."

Most of what I did was actually kind of depressing if I really thought about it. Sure, I got a thrill out of winning a case for a client, but it sucked that the client was being discriminated against simply because of who they slept with. Whose business was it who they had in their beds?

I glanced toward the kitchen. "Do you think they will be done soon?"

"It shouldn't take too much longer."

I hoped Cooper was right. If it took too long, that would just mean Colby had a lot to tell the sheriff, and I was really hoping that wasn't the case. The more he had to say, the more had happened to him.

I jumped and turned when the front door slammed open. I didn't recognize the tall dark haired man who came rushing in, but Cooper did. He didn't even seem miffed that the door had been flung open.

"Coop, Maddox just took off down the driveway. He was going to so fast, he almost took out some fencing."

"Who's down at the gate?" Cooper asked.

"Levi and Nate."

Cooper pulled his phone out and dialed. I thought it was rude that he didn't even announce himself. Just asked, "Which way did Maddox go?" Cooper nodded a couple of times. "Okay, stay down there and make sure he doesn't come back. If you see his car, call me immediately."

When Cooper hung up, there was a grim look on his face.

"Well?" the cowboy standing with us asked.

"He went toward town," Cooper said before glancing toward the kitchen. "I'd better go tell the sheriff."

I watched him walk away then turned to smile at the cowboy, holding out my hand. "Hi, I'm Ethan Walker. The new owner of Eagle Creek Ranch."

The man's eyes widened slightly as he shook my hand. "Chester Macon, but everyone just calls me Macon."

"It's nice to meet you, Macon. I take it you're one of the ranch hands?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Ethan."

The man gave a curt nod.

"Have you been a ranch hand long?" I inwardly rolled my eyes at myself. I was usually better at making small talk. I certainly had lots of practice seeing how many fundraisers I'd attended back in the city. I just didn't seem to be doing a good job of it right now.

"Most of my life," Macon replied. "I grew up on a ranch down in Utah and then moved around a bit until I came here. I've been on the ranch for about five years now."

"Do you like it?"

"I do."

He didn't sound so sure.

"Is there anything that could make it easier being on a ranch? I mean, this ranch? I know you guys must work awfully hard. What would make it easier for you?"

Macon's lips thinned as he shot a quick look toward the kitchen. I didn't know if he was hoping Cooper would come back or praying he wouldn't.

"Macon?"

"The bunkhouse," he said as he glanced back at me. "It leaks."

My eyebrows lifted. "It leaks?"

"It's drafty because the walls are paper thin and there's no insulation. In the summertime, it's not so bad, but the winters are brutal. Every damn one of us comes down with the flu at least once every year. Makes it hard to get up and do our jobs."

"I'd like to see this bunkhouse. Is that allowed?"

"It's your bunkhouse, man. Hell, it's your ranch. You can see whatever you want."

"Can you show it to me?"

"Yeah, sure." Macon's dark eyebrows scrunched together. "You really want to see the bunkhouse?"

"I really do." I glanced toward the kitchen again. "I just need to wait until the sheriff is done here." I smiled when I looked back at Macon. "Maybe later today?"

"Sure."

I glanced at the kitchen doorway again. Where was Cooper? Colby? The sheriff? One of them should have been back by now.

Just when I was about at the end of my patience, the sheriff walked out of the kitchen with Cooper. Sheriff Madras was talking on his cell phone as he headed for the front door. Cooper stopped next to me.

"What's going on?"

"The sheriff is having one of his deputies watch the road into town. He wants to know where Maddox is headed."

"Why?" I was just kind of glad the guy was gone.

"Between Maddox's story about us taking over the ranch and what Colby told us, there are enough questions that the sheriff is going to start an investigation into Maddox. We both think something hinky is going on."

My eyebrows lifted. "Hinky?"

I don't think I'd ever heard that particular word.

"Colby overheard Maddox on the phone with some of his associates in Nevada. He said they were talking a lot about shipping stuff and he didn't think they were referring to cattle even if that was the word they were using."

"Drugs?"

Cooper chuckled. "I asked the same thing, but Colby didn't know. Maddox would always shut the door before he learned any more, but it was enough to get the sheriff nosing around."

"I don't get it," I said. "We're not exactly in the middle of a bustling city here. If you were shipping drugs, I wouldn't think this would be a hot spot."

"We're not that far from the Canadian border," Cooper pointed out. "Maddox could have been setting the ranch up as a halfway point. I'm also concerned he planned to use shipments of cattle to hide drug activity."

"A drug mule heifer?" Macon asked skeptically.

Yeah, it sounded weird to me, but people in the drug business did stupid stuff all the time. Like being in the drug business in the first place.

"How's Colby?" I asked.

"Better, I think. Being able to finally tell someone in a position of authority what Maddox was doing seemed to go a long ways toward lifting his spirit. I don't know exactly what he told the sheriff, and I won't unless he wants to tell me, but he seems...lighter."

"If he needs anything, someone to talk to, a lock on his door, a gun, whatever, let me know." I hated what was done to Colby, and I suspected a lot more had happened than I'd been told. "We also need to talk to him about getting a physical just to make sure there are no lasting effects from his abuse."

"Sheriff Madras already talked to Colby about that," Cooper said. "He wants one of us to drive him into the clinic tomorrow for a check-up."

"I'll do it," Macon said. "I'll take one of the guys with me. We'll keep him safe."

I was glad that Macon seemed to understand the gravity of the situation Colby was in. If Maddox got a hold of him again, he might not survive it, either physically or emotionally.

"Whatever you do, don't coddle him," I warned. "Treat him like you always do."

Cooper frowned at me. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"If you coddle him, he's going to think you pity him." I'd seen it before. "People who have been abused and finally get free do not want to be treated like victims. It took a lot of strength for Colby to talk about what happened. He needs to know we support him and will keep him safe, but we still see him as a man and not a victim."

"I get what you're saying, Ethan," Cooper said, "but it's going to be hard. Most of the guys see Colby as a younger brother. We're all kind of protective of him. It's going to gut them when they learn he was being abused right under our noses."

"And if you usually treat him as a younger brother, then it's fine to continue treating him that way. Just don't start treating him like he's made of spun glass. If you used to joke around him, then joke around him. If you used to slap him on the back, then slap him on the back. Don't be afraid he'll break or he will."

I'd seen it time and time again. Clients of mine said it was like being abused twice. They knew the people supporting them meant well, but being treated as if everyone had to walk around them on egg shells hurt more than it helped.

"Just treat him like you usually do, and he should be fine."

"If you think that's best," Macon said, "that's what we'll do."

"In my work, I come across a lot of men and women who have been abused in one form or another. They've already been victimized once by their abuser, and as much as they need the comfort and support of those around them, they need to feel strong. They need to learn that they are stronger than what was done to them. Treating them like a victim won't do that."

"It makes sense," Cooper said. "We also might want to see about teaching Colby a few defensive moves so he can protect himself."

I smiled at Cooper's thoughtfulness. "That would make him feel stronger, if he's in control of some part of his life."

Cooper glanced at Macon. "Why don't you and a couple of the boys start teaching him some moves tomorrow? Nothing too intense, but enough that he can protect himself."

"Levi and I can show him a few moves, but Sawyer would be the best one to teach him. He has a military background."

Cooper winced. "If he'll do it."

"For Colby, he'll do it."

I glanced between the two men before settling my gaze on Cooper. "Is Sawyer another one of the ranch hands?"

"Dylan Sawyer," Cooper said. "He's only been here a couple of years, real quiet guy, doesn't say much, but he works hard and follows the ranch rules so..."

I was interested in meeting this man.

I think.

"After the sheriff leaves, Macon is going to show me the bunkhouse."

"Oh?" Cooper's stiffened posture was slight and I would have missed it if I hadn't been watching the man so intently. I couldn't help but wonder what that was about, but now didn't seem like the time to discuss it. Being my foreman allowed the man some privacy when I wanted to know something personal.

"He mentioned to me that the place was drafty."

"Oh, yeah." The tension in Cooper's shoulders lessened. "It can be hell in the wintertime."

"I want to see it. If these guys work as hard as you say they do, they deserve to sleep without worrying they will get pneumonia."

"Buck was working on it," Cooper explained, "but it takes a lot of money to keep a cattle ranch going and he put every penny back into keeping it running smoothly. He was going to try and do something this summer."

"Can you make a list of things like that that need to be fixed on the ranch?" I asked. "I might not know squat about ranching, but I do know how to manage money. Maybe we can start getting some of those things knocked out."

Cooper's dark brow flickered. His eyes darted to Macon and then back to me. "Can we speak in your office?"

"My office?"

Cooper waved his hand toward the office where I'd sat and listened to my father screw up my life. I almost snorted out a laugh. I had an office now.

"Fine."

I heard Cooper say something to Macon as I walked away.

I wasn't exactly comfortable in that office or any other part of the house. There were a few good pieces of furniture here and there, but the rest of the house needed a serious overhaul. If I was sentenced to hell in this place for the next year, I was going to fix it up. Ranch or not, there had to be standards.

When I reached the office, I walked across the room to sit behind the desk. I wasn't trying to set myself apart from Cooper, but I needed a pen and a piece of paper so I could make a list of what needed to be repaired or upgraded or whatever. I'd start with the main house and the bunkhouse and go from there.



Cooper shut the door after walking into the room and headed over to sit in the chair in front of the desk. He breathed deep for a moment before leaning forward, his forearms resting on the edge of the desk.

"Are you a pull Band-Aid off quickly kind of guy or do you prefer a little information at a time?"

"I prefer honesty any way it comes."

"Eagle Creek Ranch is a big ranch. We run thousands of heads of cattle through here. That takes money. We earn that money by selling the cattle to other people, whether they are locals who just want one cow or a meat processing plant that wants a thousand cows. We have good years and we have bad years. The last few years have been bad years."

"Why?"

"The economy, competition from other ranches, the list is endless. Raising cattle is kind of like gambling. Sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not."

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because I don't want you to think your father didn't care about this ranch and I want you to understand that we can't just fix things just because we want to. That takes money and right now, we don't have any and we won't until after the next batch of calves are born and we sell off our excess stock."

Ah, I finally understood.

## Chapter Eight

~ Cooper ~

Ethan cocked his head to one side as he regarded me across the desk. "Let me ask you a question. How much did Mr. Anderson charge an hour for his services as a lawyer?"

My eyebrows snapped together. "I don't know, fifty dollars an hour maybe?" Seemed kind of excessive to me, but what did I know? I wasn't a lawyer.

"I make two thousand dollars an hour minimum."

My jaw dropped.

"My usual work week is about eighty hours long, sometimes more, and I've been doing this for a very long time. I've made a lot of money. And as much as I don't want to be here, I will not let the men who live on this ranch live in shitty conditions. If investing some money into this place is what it takes to make sure they are well cared for, then I'm okay with that."

"Why do you care?" Ethan clearly didn't want to be here. He'd just stated that. Why would he care about how the ranch hands lived? He hadn't even met most of them.

"A majority of my clients are people who have been discriminated against in their workplace or where they live. They've been abused, bullied, or made to feel worthless, you name it. Some of them have even been assaulted. I've seen what being a bad employer does to people and I don't ever want to be that person."

"I don't see you bullying one of the ranch hands."

They'd eat this city slicker alive.

"It's not about that. Not in this instance. It's about respect, but how can I expect them to have respect for the ranch and the work they do if I don't have respect for them?"

"You do realize these guys are ranch hands, right?" A solid roof over their heads, food in their stomach, and a few dollars in their pockets, and they were pretty happy.

"I don't care if they are post hole diggers. They still deserve respect. This ranch is their home for as long as they are here. If they are sick, they can't do their job. If they are miserable, they won't do their job. If they are not taken care of, they will hate their job. I'd rather invest some money so these men know they are appreciated. It creates a better work environment for them and hard workers for me."

I narrowed my eyes. "You've done this before."

"Not this exact thing, no, but I take care of the people who work for me. In my experience, if they are happy where they work, receive an honest wage for an honest day's pay, and have all the benefits they should have in any work environment, then they work hard and stay loyal."

I couldn't argue with that because it was true. I just wasn't sure how much of what Ethan was saying I believed. The man was so adamant about not wanting to be on the ranch. Why improve the place if he was just going to bail in a year?

"Can you give me a list of what needs to be fixed?" Ethan asked. "We can break it down into what is most important and what can wait a little longer, but I'd really like to have a starting point."

I sat back in my chair and got comfortable. This was going to be a long list. "Our most pressing needs right now are new water

troughs for the fields, fencing, and a better vet. The one we have is okay, but he's not great. He's older, and I suspect that has something to do with it, but he's not real up on current veterinarian procedures. Unfortunately, Buck had used him for years and never thought about finding a new one."

"Okay, and what about what's not pressing?"

"Buck built a new barn last year so we're good there, but the bunkhouse could use some updating."

Ethan made notes as I talked. I wasn't sure what he was writing down, but there was a lot of it.

"It wouldn't hurt to look into getting another bull for breeding. We've got three, but one of them is getting up there in years. Some of the tack needs replacing and before winter hits we're going to need a few new covers for the horses."

Ethan squinted. "Covers?"

"It's like a horse jacket. It helps keep them warm in the wintertime."

"The barn's not heated?"

Was he serious?

"It's a barn."

Ethan wrote something else down and my curiosity got the better of me. I leaned over until I could read the paper. My eyebrows rose as I glanced at Ethan. "You want to put heating in the barn?"

Did he have any idea how much that would cost, and not just the installation? The monthly price tag alone would be through the roof. Literally.

Ethan smirked as he set his pen down and leaned back in his chair. "What do you know about solar power?"

I cocked my head. "Solar power?"

"Yes, solar panels, windmills, hydropower. Harnessing nature to power your world."

Where was he going with this?

"I can't say I know much."

"The initial cost of putting in solar power can be expensive, but it pays off quickly, especially if you lose power. Over time, it can cut the cost of heating the barn, the house, the bunkhouse, or whatever. But not just heating it. It can heat water, keep the lights on, there's a bunch of stuff. It just depends on what you want and are willing to install."

"How do you know so much about it?" I asked. "I thought you were a lawyer."

Ethan chuckled. "I had a client who was into solar power energy. We used to sit and talk about it for hours while we were waiting for his court case to go before the judge. I learned a lot. I think if we put in solar power, we could save a lot of money. It would also give us a way to heat the barn, bunk house, and main house."

I chuckled as I shook my head. "I can't believe you want to heat the barn."

Ethan shrugged. "Wouldn't it better in the wintertime for King, Prince, and Mimi?"

"It'll spoil the shit out of them."

Ethan grinned. "Nothing wrong with that."

This man was unreal.

Ethan picked up his pen again and pulled his list closer. "Can you get me an estimate on the most urgent things? We can tackle the rest after our most immediate needs are taken care of."

"I can do that, but it might take a couple of days."

"That's fine. I'd like to get started right away, but I have a few people I need to contact about staying here for the next year."

"You're really going to stay?"

Ethan sighed. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not going to let Maddox get his hands on this place."

"You heard Mr. Anderson. If you don't accept the ranch, he was instructed to liquidate everything and donate it to charity. You don't have to stay."

"Yes, I do. Don't get me wrong. I am not thrilled to be here. This is pretty much my idea of hell, but not only did I sign those papers accepting my father's stipulations, but I refuse to do anything that might give Maddox an opportunity to get his hands on this ranch or hurt anyone on it."

"You know, the ranch isn't such a bad place." I admit I was a little miffed that Ethan seemed to hate a place I loved so much. "It might grow on you."

"Let me ask you something. How would you feel if you flew to New York, had a meeting, and found out that you couldn't leave for twelve months? Your work, your friends, everything you knew was suddenly gone? How would you feel?"

Well, when you put it like that... "Yeah, okay, I get it, but I hope you give the ranch a chance. Like I said, this really isn't a bad place."

"I'm sure it's not."

I didn't believe a word of what he was saying, and from the look on his face, he didn't either.

I turned when someone knocked on the office door.

"Come," Ethan called out.

The door opened and the sheriff stepped into the room. "Maddox never made it to town."

Ethan raised one eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I had one of my deputies watching the road and his car never showed up. He had to have turned off somewhere between here and there. I'm going to head toward town while my deputy heads out this way. I want to know if he turned off somewhere or if he's trying to circle back around to here. I'll let you know what I find, but in the meantime, I suggest you up your security just a bit. If he is trying to circle around, I doubt he's coming here to give you his sympathies on your father's death."

"His personal belongings are still here," Ethan pointed out. "He might be trying to get them."

"Maybe you could pack them up and have one of the guys drive the stuff into the station."

"We can do that," I said. I was actually in favor of that. Considering we'd heard Maddox telling Colby to find Ethan's grandmother's jewels, I kind of wanted to go through his belongings and find out if he'd taken other stuff. "I'll get it packed up and have one of the boys bring it into town by the end of the day."

Sheriff Madras nodded. "Good. I don't want to give Maddox any reason to come back to the ranch. He's up to no good. I can feel it in my bones."

"What's between here and town?" Ethan asked. "I mean, if he never showed up in town, he had to have pulled off somewhere. What's between here and town? Where could he have stopped?"

"Just a few ranches and farms," I explained. "The closer to town you get, the more houses, but nothing of any importance."

"Could he have any connection to any of those other ranches?"

I shrugged. "Anything is possible, but I don't see why he'd do that. We're the biggest ranch out this way. I can't think of any reason why Maddox would have anything to do with them. He's kind of a snob."

The sheriff snorted and I knew why. Maddox distained anyone he considered beneath him, and that was about ninety-five percent of the local population. That might actually explain why he was so insistent that he get the ranch. He liked lording it over other people that he was in charge of such a large place. He wasn't going to want to give that position up for anyone.

"Did you get a chance to ask one of your deputies to look for Mr. Anderson's briefcase?" Ethan asked as he glanced at the sheriff.

"Not yet, but I'll pass by the accident scene on my way into town. I'll stop and take a look."

"Did you want to see that tape?" Ethan asked. He pointed to the television. "It's on VHS."

The sheriff chuckled. "I swear, Buck hated technology."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Yes," the sheriff replied. "I need to get a copy of it as well."

Ethan stood up and walked over to look at the backside of the television. "That shouldn't be too hard. There are plug-ins back here." He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and held them out. "Cooper, could you go get my bag from the backseat of the car? My laptop is in there. I should be able to hook it up and record it while the sheriff watches it and then I can just email it to him."



"Sure." I took the keys and walked out of the office. I noticed Macon leaning against the kitchen doorframe as I walked through the main room. Colby's soft voice filled the void. I couldn't tell exactly what the man was saying, but Macon was smiling so it couldn't be all bad.

Sawyer was sitting on the front steps when I stepped out onto the porch. He briefly glanced up at me and then went back to watching the driveway. "Everything okay out here?"

Sawyer nodded.

"I need you and the boys to be armed over the next few days. The sheriff seems to think Maddox will try and get back on the property. I don't want anyone causing trouble if they can help it, but I want him stopped."

Sawyer nodded again.

"Maddox has lost his mind."

Sawyer snorted.

Yeah, that was kind of the understatement of the year.

"I suspect he's going to try and come after Colby and Ethan. He seems to have some sort of fixation on Colby, thinks Colby belongs to him or some shit, and he just wants to kill Ethan." I sighed as I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I could feel a dull ache forming between my eyes. "Ethan's a city boy. I just don't think he understands the danger he's in."

"He might surprise you."

I dropped my hand and stared down at the big, usually silent, warrior. "He might at that."

He had so far.

I had a picture in my mind of what the city slicker was supposed to be like and Ethan was destroying each and every one of those preconceived ideas. I never knew what to expect each time the man opened his mouth.

It was very intriguing.

I walked down the steps and then over to the fancy car Ethan had arrived in. After unlocking the door, I reached in and grabbed the bag sitting in the passenger seat. I didn't bother locking it back up. We were on the ranch. Anyone stupid enough to touch a vehicle on the ranch took their lives into their hands.

"Keep an eye on things," I told Sawyer as I passed him and went back into the house. I wanted to get back to the office and make sure Ethan didn't piss off the sheriff. Having my new boss arrested was not going to be a good way to start this new working relationship.

Ethan and Ken were laughing like old friends when I walked into the office.

I didn't expect that.

## Chapter Nine

~ Ethan ~

I glanced up when Cooper walked in with my bag. I stood up and took it from him and then dug out my laptop. It was fairly easy to hook my laptop up to the television. I had a lot of practice. In my work, I often had to either play things from my laptop on the television or vice versa.

"Cooper?"

"Yeah?" The man stepped up close to me.

I handed him the remote and tried to ignore how warm he was and how cold I was. Or how much I wished he'd share that warmth.

I was clearly not going to survive Montana.

"Hit this button here once you start the video. It will record it." I pointed to my laptop. "When you're done, just hit the button again to stop recording."

Cooper frowned at me as he took the remote. "Where are you going?"

"I thought now would be a good time for Macon to show me the bunk house." I swallowed tightly as I glanced at the television screen. "I really don't want to see that again."

"Oh, right. Yeah." Cooper winced. "Why don't I show you the bunk house? I've got the guys out checking on things around the ranch. The sheriff can stay here and watch the video and then he can come find us if he has any questions. I'm sure he won't mind."

"I can stay here and watch the video by myself," the sheriff said. "It's not a problem."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"It's not a problem," the sheriff repeated. "Really."

"Okay, then I guess we go check out the bunkhouse." I tried to smile as I walked toward the door, but I wasn't feeling it. It wasn't that I didn't want Cooper to show me the building, but more that I wasn't comfortable leaving someone I didn't know in the office unattended. Cooper seemed to think the guy was trustworthy.

I just wasn't sure how much I trusted Cooper.

"How many men work the ranch?" I asked as we headed for the front door.

"Before Maddox left, there are eleven fulltime employees that lived on the ranch, including me. We do have a couple of part-time employees who come in and do odd jobs around the place on the weekends, but most of them are doing it to pay for horse boarding. They don't really work the ranch."

"This is a cow ranch, right?"

Cooper frowned at me. "Yes."

"Then how did we end up with so many horses?"

"Well, most of them are for the ranch hands to use, a couple of them are personal horses, and the rest are just boarding here. Buck started renting out space in the barn when he needed to raise a little money last year."

"Buck?"

Who the hell was Buck?

"Your father."

"My father's name was Garret Walker." I knew it was because it was on my birth certificate.

"Yes, but everyone called him Buck."

Huh.

Guess you learned something new every day.

"So, Colby cooks and—"

"Colby cooks and keeps the main house clean."

"By himself?" With eleven ranch hands and a house that big, that was a lot.

"He does a good job, and I actually think he'll start feeling a little more settled now that Maddox is gone. Hopefully, he'll stop jumping at shadows."

"It'll take awhile." It always did. "He needs to feel safe, and up until today, his home wasn't a safe place for him."

"Do you think it would help him if we put a lock on his bedroom door?"

That was insightful.

"Yes, it probably would," I replied. "Does Colby know how to use a gun?"

Cooper snorted. "He lives on a ranch. Of course he knows how to use a gun."

"Yes, but is he any good at it? From what I understand from Colby, just because he knows how to ride a horse doesn't mean he can."

A wide grin split Cooper's lips. "He told you about that, did he?"

"He did." I shook my head. "I don't get how a man can live on a ranch and not know how to ride a horse."

"Oh, he can ride a horse." Cooper's brow flickered. "Okay, he can sit on a horse. It's when the horse starts moving that he runs into issues."

"Thank god he can cook."

Cooper snickered. "Right?"

"How did he end up here?" This seemed like the last place for a man like Colby to live.

"Not real sure actually. Buck was on a trip out of town a couple of years back. When he came back, he had Colby with him. In the beginning, a few of the guys asked Colby where he'd come from, especially when he started falling off his horse, but Buck put a stop to that quick enough. No one ever really had the balls to delve into his story after that."

Maybe I needed to.

When we stepped out onto the porch, a large sandy haired man who had been sitting on the steps stood up. I froze in the doorway and took him in. He was tall. Not quite as tall as Cooper, but still pretty tall. He was also built, but again, not quite like Cooper.

Still, there was an air of danger about him that said he was the more lethal of the two men. As soon as his dark eyes settled on me, I felt like prey.

"Ethan, this is Dylan Sawyer, one of the ranch hands. Sawyer, this is Ethan Walker, Buck's kid."

I almost rolled my eyes.

Would I forever be introduced to people as "Buck's kid"? I was a whole lot more than that.

The man gave me a slow nod before speaking in a deep gravelly voice. "Mr. Walker."

"Ethan, please."

The man nodded again, but didn't say anything.

"I'm taking Ethan over to check out the bunkhouse, see what it needs to get it fixed up and ready for winter," Cooper said. "The

sheriff is in the office going over the video of Buck's will. If there are any problems, give a holler."

Sawyer nodded again.

I waited until we had walked several feet away before glancing at Cooper and asking, "What's his story?"

"Sawyer?"

I nodded.

"Not much to tell, really. He's ex-military. Showed up here a few years ago and applied for a job. He's been here ever since."

"He doesn't say much."

"No."

I waited for Cooper to say more, but he didn't.

I wanted to be introduced to all of the ranch hands and get to know them a little. I didn't need their life histories or anything, but I wanted to know who worked for me.

"Is there anyone on the ranch I need to be wary of?"

"Yeah, there is. Brick and Jones. I was actually going to talk to you about them. I'd like your permission to fire them and get them off the ranch."

I stopped walking and stared at Cooper. "Why?"

Cooper stopped as well. He drew in a heavy breath before looking at me. "Brick and Jones are lazy bastards that kiss Maddox's ass every fucking chance they get. If he said bend over, they'd be grabbing their ankles. They are good for nothing hooligans who give this ranch a bad name."

A spurt of laughter shot out of my mouth. "Well, tell me how you really feel why don't you?"

Cooper chuckled. "Yeah, well, I've had to work alongside them for the last few years, and I guess a little resentment has built up. I never could figure out why Buck hired them let alone let them stay. They barely did a lick of work, and almost every time they go into town, the sheriff is arresting them for disorderly conduct or being drunk in public, or some other shit. They are a nightmare and they need to go."

"So, what does it take to fire someone from the ranch?" I had no idea if there was a process or if I could just fire someone.

"Basically, permission."

"You have it."

Cooper's eyebrows lifted. "Just like that?"

I huffed as I formulated my answer. "Do you know how to file a defamation case with the courts?"

"No." Cooper squinted at me. "Honestly, I'm not even sure what that is."

"Well, I do, but I know shit about running a ranch. I asked you to be the ranch foreman because you seem to know what you are doing. If you tell me these two men need to go, then they go."

I prayed I wasn't shooting myself in the foot by admitting that. For all I knew, Cooper could be as bad as Maddox, although I didn't think so. I didn't get the same creepy vibe off of him that I did from Maddox.

"I just need to know how it's done so I can make sure all the legalities are covered. I don't want them to have any chance of coming back or dragging us into more drama. We have enough to deal with already."

And then some.



"If you really want to make things all legal like, then they need to be given two weeks wages and a formal letter of termination."

That sounded reasonable. It's what I would have done if I fired someone in my office. "And what reason do I give for termination?"

"Because they are assholes?"

I snickered. "Not sure that would hold up in a court of law."

Unfortunately.

"Well, you can start with not doing the work they were assigned to do. They could also be terminated for starting fights in the bunkhouse, causing property damage, cruelty to animals, and not holding up the standards of the ranch while in public."

My eyebrows rose with each example Cooper gave me. "My father didn't fire them even after all of that?"

"No, but he didn't fire Maddox either. Kind of makes you wonder if Maddox had something on Buck, doesn't it?"

I didn't like how that sounded.

"You think Maddox was blackmailing Buck?"

Cooper shrugged before looking off into the field to our right. "It's the only thing I can think of that would explain why he let Maddox stick around for so long." When he looked back, there was a hint of sadness darkening his eyes. "Despite what you may think, Buck was a good man and he loved this ranch more than anything."

"Oh, I am aware." Probably not the right thing to say, but I hated having the fact that my father loved the ranch more than he loved me thrown up in my face.

"I don't know what happened between you and your father, and frankly, it's none of my business, but what you need to understand is that this is a good place to live and to work, but it's a good place

because Buck made it that way. He took care of everyone here, the ranch hands, the animals, all of it. Maddox only tore it down and he should have been gone the day he arrived. Instead, he was here for years. There's something hinky about that."

Hinky.

There was that word again.

"Look." I brushed my hand through my hair. "My crap with my father is my crap, and I will do my level best to not let it interfere with the running of the ranch, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt to hear how much Buck loved this place when it was the reason he was never a father to me."

"And I just don't understand that. Buck talked about you all the time. He showed me pictures. None of us could ever understand why you didn't come to visit him, but it wasn't our place to ask."

"I was never invited."

It was as simple as that.

"And you let that stop you?" Cooper snorted. "Funny, I thought you had bigger balls than that."

My anger, while usually calm and controlled, roared to life. My first instinct was to rip into Cooper and tear holes in him the way he was tearing holes in me. It took me a moment to realize I was angry at myself and not him. Cooper was just voicing what I already knew.

Nothing had stopped me from flying out to see my father except my own stupid pride and now it was too late. My father was dead. I would never get a chance to see him, to ask questions, or to rage at him because he wasn't an active part of my life.

Yes, he could have called, but so could I.

"You're right," I finally said. "I should have come out to see him whether he invited me or not. I didn't, and now he's gone and I'll never get that chance, but that's a two way street. He never reached out to me either."

"You ever think that maybe he was afraid to?"

"According to you, there was nothing Garret Walker was afraid of." Cooper hadn't said it in so many words, but it was implied.

"No, he was afraid of a great many things. He just didn't let it stop him from living his life or running this ranch."

"Fair enough."

Cooper fell in beside me as I started walking again. Having seen it out the window of the office, I knew which building I was headed form.

"Snakes."

I glanced at Cooper in confusion. "Snakes?"

"Buck was afraid of snakes. Didn't matter if they were real ones or rubber ones or what. He was terrified of them. Squealed like a girl every damn time he saw one."

Huh.

"Water he couldn't see the bottom of."

"Like a lake?"

Cooper nodded. "If he couldn't see the bottom, he didn't go in. It made crossing rivers on cattle drives kind of interesting. He had to close his eyes while one of us led his horse across the river."

"You know that that's a phobia, right?" I asked. "It's called *thalassophobia*. It's an intense fear of deep bodies of water such as the sea, oceans, rivers, or lakes."

Cooper lifted an eyebrow. "You seem to know a lot about that."

"Yeah." I grimaced. "Apparently, it's genetic in the Walker family."

"You're afraid of water?"

"Only water I can't see the bottom of, which is why I tend to vacation in the Bahamas. The water is so crystal clear there, you can see all of it."

The hot cabana boys didn't hurt either.

Man, I really needed a vacation.

## Chapter Ten

~ Cooper ~

I didn't know what to think of Ethan Walker. He was a man that was surprisingly insightful about his own behavior and owned up to it. That was kind of rare, and certainly not something I'd experienced in most of the people I dealt with.

Ranch hands could be real idiots on occasions.

Ethan was so like Buck, that it was stunning, and yet that was one thing he seemed to not understand. I didn't know if it came from the distance in their relationship or if it was something else, but it was certainly worth considering.

"Where are Brick and Jones now?"

"They should be out in on the range with the cattle," I replied. "Why?"

"Can you get someone to pack up their stuff? I'd like to have everything ready when they get back. I don't want them on the ranch any longer than it takes to give them their severance pay and termination letter."

I stared at the man in shock. "You're not one to let grass grow under your feet, are you?"

Ethan squinted at me. "I'd answer that, but I have no idea what you just said."

I chuckled at his confusion. "It simply means once you decide something, you do it." It was a good trait, especially in a boss.

"Then yes, I don't like grass to grow under my feet. I never really saw the need for it. If you're going to do something, then do it."

Actions get results. Don't think something to death. It doesn't get you anything except a headache."

"I can have one of the hands pack up their stuff and bring it up to the big house by the end of the day."

"Good. If you'll tell me how much two-week severance pay is, I'll get it ready and type up the termination letter. I want to make sure I have a signed copy in my files."

"Signed copy?"

"They have to sign the termination letter stating they received it before I give them their severance pay. That way, they can't come back later and say they were fired without cause."

My jaw dropped. "You've done this before."

Ethan grimaced. "Unfortunately, I have. There are over a hundred employees at my law firm. Being one of three partners in the firm, I've had to fire my fair share of people. It's never pleasant, but I have learned a few things along the way. The first being never give them reason to scream discrimination. If you clearly state why they have been fired, they can't fight it in court."

A hundred employees? No wonder running a ranch with eight ranch hands seemed to come so easy for Ethan. A hundred employees was insane.

"Do you know how to use a gun?"

Ethan blinked at my sudden change in conversation.

"I'm asking because I can't guarantee that Brick or Jones won't try something when they get fired. They're pretty much idiots."

"Ah, well, yes," Ethan replied. "I do know how to use a gun."

"Former client?"

Ethan's face lit up when he laughed.

I was spellbound.

"No, actually, it was my mother. She insisted that I learn and made me take a course and then practice every weekend for an entire year."

My eyebrows inched up my forehead. "Your mother made you learn how to shoot a gun?"

"To give her some due, I had recently been attacked by someone who lost a case to me. She wanted me to learn how to protect myself so I took martial arts classes and learned how to shoot a gun."

Now for the big question.

"Are you any good?"

"I'm not an expert by any stretch of the imagination, but I can hold my own."

That was surprisingly sexy.

"Got a gun on you?"

"While I am licensed to carry in every state and have a gun back home, I don't usually take one with me when I fly somewhere unless I am going to be gone for longer than a week or if I am flying somewhere dangerous or meeting a client in a volatile situation."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, well." Ethan grimaced. "I wasn't expecting this."

"Buck has a collection of guns in the cabinet in his office. You can choose from one of those if you want."

"You think I'm going to need one?"

I shrugged. "This is a ranch."

Ethan huffed. "I'll take a look at them when we get back to the office."

"Might not be a bad idea, just until things even out around here."

"Do you actually think that will happen?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah, I do. Things are usually pretty monotonous on a ranch most of the time. We just need to deal with this Maddox mess before it goes back to boring."

Ethan smirked as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Guess I couldn't argue with that.

"So, tell me what I'm looking at here," Ethan said as we started walking again.

"Well, like I said, the barn is new, but the bunkhouse was built sometime back in the fifties or sixties I think. It has ten individual rooms, five bathrooms, and a small kitchen. There is also a main living space for everyone to share."

"Is that enough or should we build on?"

"Technically, it's enough, but a couple more bathrooms and bedrooms wouldn't hurt. Sharing five bathrooms between so many guys gets kind of dicey on occasion."

"What if we built a completely brand new bunk house with private bathrooms for all the bedrooms? Would that work better?"

I stared at Ethan for a moment, my mouth opening and closing several times as I fought to say what I needed to say and not what I wanted to say. I just didn't know how to find the words.

"Cooper?"

"Do you know how much money that would entail?"

"I don't know what the property values are around here, but probably in the range of five hundred thousand dollars."

"Yeah, just about."

"So, is it a good idea?"



"You seriously want to drop five hundred thousand dollars on a bunkhouse even with all the other money you're thinking of investing in the ranch?"

That was insane.

Ethan stopped and turned to stare at me with a tight lipped look.

I quickly backed up my string of thought. "It's your ranch and you can do what you think is best. I just—"

"How much money do you think I am worth?"

Was that a trick question?

"You said you made good money as a lawyer, so I'd guess a lot."

"I paid nine million dollars for my penthouse, in cash. It didn't even put a dent in my bank account. I've only been a practicing attorney for about seven years, but I've built a solid reputation in that time. The waiting list to get a simple consultation with me is six months long, longer if you want me personally on your case." Ethan raised one eyebrow. "See where I'm going with this?"

"So, you're saying money isn't an issue?"

"Yes and no. I'm not going to throw money after something frivolous like ribbons for horse hair or some such nonsense, but if the ranch hands need a new bunkhouse, then it makes no sense to not build them one. Hopefully, they will be here for a long time to come and they need a good space, a private space, to call their own. You get the best workers if you supply the best work environment."

I took my hat off and rubbed my hand over my head. "You know this is a little surreal, don't you?"

"Maybe." Ethan chuckled. "Just try to help me figure out what needs to be done and what is frivolous."

"Horse ribbons would be frivolous."

Ethan's face lightened up when he laughed. "Noted."

"So, um, yeah, a new bunkhouse would be great, but I'm not sure what to do with everyone while it's being built. We'd have to tear down the old one first. There's not a ton of room around here to build a second one in a different place."

"How long would it take to build one?"

"I'm not a construction guy, but maybe six months?"

"Do you think the guys would be willing to move into the main house while the new bunkhouse was being built?"

Ethan kept surprising me.

"We can certainly ask, but I think they'd be willing to do just about anything if they knew they were going to get a new bunkhouse."

"Good, then we'll do that. I'll do a bit of research later tonight and track down a good construction company. I'd like to get this started sooner rather than later."

"I would too, before you come to your senses."

Ethan threw his head back and laughed, and I was spellbound once again. The man was handsome, but not in a model way. More like, people were drawn to him because of his charisma. They wanted to bask in his glow.

I knew I did.

And that was so wrong.

So, so, wrong.

This man was my boss. I'd just met him for the very first time yesterday when his father's will was read. I had no business fantasizing about how soft and plush his lips looked and how much I wanted to lick them.

"We should..." My voice trailed off when I saw something glint off in the distance. I knew for a fact that there was nothing in that direction except trees and brush. There shouldn't be a glint.

"What?" Ethan asked.

"I thought I saw something, but—Fuck!" I shouted when a bullet slammed into the ground right by our feet. The echo of a gunshot sounded a moment later.

I grabbed Ethan's arm and took off running toward the bunkhouse, which was the closest building to us. I heard several more bullets hit the ground as we ran.

I pushed Ethan inside as soon as we reached the bunkhouse and came stumbling in after him. I slammed the door shut and then yanked my phone off my belt and dialed Macon as I scurried over to the window on the far wall.

"Where are you?" I asked the moment he answered.

"Out with the cattle."

"Fuck the cattle. Get the guys and search the woods on the right side of the main ranch. Someone is shooting at us."

"Maddox?"

"I don't care who it is. Find them." I hung up and then dialed Ken. "Hey, this is Cooper. Are you still in the office?"

"No, I'm headed back to the station. Why?"

"You need to get your ass back out to the ranch. Someone just took a shot at me and Ethan. They haven't been caught yet, so be careful. I have the guys out hunting for them now."

"Shit," Ken snapped. "Okay, I'm on my way back. Where are you?"

"Ethan and I are hunkered down in the bunkhouse."

"Stay there."

I wasn't really planning on going anywhere else.

"I need to call the big house and warn Colby to stay away from the windows."

"I'll be there soon," Ken assured me.

I hung up and dialed the main house.

"He-Hello?"

"Colby, its Cooper. I need you to stay away from the windows. Someone is taking shots at me and Ethan. I don't want them taking shots at you, too."

"I know. I heard the shots. Sawyer made me go hide in the pantry."

Oh, thank god for Sawyer.

"Is he there with you?"

"Yes," Colby replied.

"Okay, let him know that Ethan and I are in the bunkhouse, the sheriff is on his way out here, and I have the guys searching the woods for whoever was shooting at us. I don't want either of you leaving the house for any reason. You hear me?"

"Okay, I hear you."

I hung up and slid my cell phone back into the holder on my belt. I scooted up as close to the window as I could get and then carefully pulled the edge of the curtain back just far enough for me to look out.

"What are you doing?" Ethan asked. "Get away from that window."

"I'm trying to spot the shooter."

"Well, don't!"

I grinned at the vehemence in Ethan's voice.

Ethan just rolled his eyes and said, "Get down and stay away from the window, you idiot."

I chuckle and dropped the curtain.

Ethan rolled his eyes. "I swear, you're going to be chuckling with a bullet in your head if you don't get down."

Before I could scoot back down, the window shattered. Glass flew everywhere. I dove for Ethan, slamming him down onto the floor as I plastered my body over the top of his. I covered both of our heads with my arms, protecting us from the flying glass.

I heard two more shots hit the side of the bunkhouse before a third shot echoed through the air and then all went silent. I waited a moment before slowly lifting my head.

I found myself just a couple of inches from those vibrant green eyes that I found so intriguing. I suddenly felt every contour of Ethan's muscular body. Granted, he wasn't as built as I was, but that made sense. He worked in an office. I worked outside. Still, the man was no slouch in the looks department.

"Are you okay?" I asked without looking away from his eyes. "Hurt anywhere?"

I almost groaned when Ethan licked his lips.

"I'm okay."

"I should probably get off you."

"Yeah, I guess we need to get off the floor."

Neither one of us moved.

My cell phone rang. I reached down and grabbed it without breaking Ethan's gaze and held it to my ear. "Yes?"

"He got away, Cooper," Macon said. "He had a truck waiting for him down on the little dirt road that runs along the south side of the

west pasture."

Ethan's eyes flickered to my phone so I knew he could hear everything Macon said.

"Did you see who it was?"

"Brick was the shooter, but Jones was driving the truck."

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "Well, he's definitely fired now. Fuck the severance pay. He can sue me for it."

I grinned. "Okay, head back to the big house. I'm sure the sheriff is going to want to talk to you all."

I hung up and put my phone away. "I guess the shooting is over."

"Sounded like it."

"Sheriff will be here soon."

"He'll probably want to speak to us, too, considering we were the ones getting shot at. We should probably go out and meet him."

"Yeah." But I didn't want to move. I was really enjoying being pressed against Ethan. From the stirring I felt pressing against me below the belt, so was he.

Ethan arched an eyebrow.

I snorted before rolling off him and up onto my feet. I reached down and held out my hand. When Ethan grabbed it, I pulled him to his feet. I smiled as I brushed the glass off his shirt. I desperately wanted to brush the glass off his ass too, but that would probably get me fired.

I tried to avoid looking at his ass—it was a really nice ass—and headed for the door. I opened it and waited for Ethan to join me. If he walked a little too close and brushed against me as he walked past, I wasn't going to complain.

I followed him out of the bunkhouse with a smile on my face.

# Chapter Eleven

~ Ethan ~

If I was breathing just a little faster, and my heart pounding out of control in my chest, or if my cock was throbbing in my jeans, I wasn't going to acknowledge it.

At least not right now.

I'd found Cooper attractive from the first moment I'd seen him, but having the man's entire body pressed against me put a whole different spin on things.

See, the thing was, I dealt with intense situations on a daily basis, situations that were highly emotional, intense, and sometimes violent. I used all of my intelligence to fight for my clients' rights, and sometimes my body when things grew difficult.

When it came to my sex life, I preferred partners who could take me out of my head, men that made the decisions for me. I liked the feeling of being surrounded and protected that only a strong man could give me.

And Cooper was oh so strong.

There was no way I couldn't have become aroused with his body pressing me down into the floor like it had. I couldn't help the smirk that came to my lips when I recalled the flash of lust I'd seen in Cooper's dark brown eyes or the way the man had stared down at me as if he wanted to eat me.

I knew even thinking about this was putting both Cooper and myself in a bad situation. We were employer and employee. I had strict rules about not crossing that boundary, and yet, I couldn't keep myself from considering it.

It could be the one bright point in being stuck in this hell.

"Is that the sheriff?" I asked when I spotted a truck tearing up the driveway, a cloud of dust blowing up in its wake.

"Yeah, that's him."

"With the way he's driving, he might actually make it on the streets of New York City."

Cooper chuckled. "If he doesn't kill himself first."

"Yeah, he—" I glanced around as another thought hit me. "Where's Sampson?"

"Sampson?"

"The dog. With all the shooting and everything I totally forgot about him. Why isn't he out here barking his head off?"

"If he was smart, he ran and hid."

I glanced at Cooper. "Is he?"

Cooper shook his head sadly. "Not really."

Damn, I was afraid he was going to say that.

"We need to find him." I didn't know the dog well, but he seemed like a cute little—huge—pup. He didn't deserve to die because some asshole was taking pot shots at me.

"Let's talk to the sheriff and then I'll get the guys to search for him."

Fair enough.

We started walking toward the front of the house again. We reached it just as the sheriff pulled up and climbed out of his truck.

"Did you catch the shooter?"

"No, he had a truck waiting, but the guys were able to identify both the shooter and the driver of the truck." Cooper's upper lip curled back. "It was Brick and Jones."



The sheriff spit on the ground, which was kind of disgusting. It was clear that he was pissed and that he was familiar with these two men.

"Cooper and I had decided today to fire them," I interjected. "I don't think that had anything to do with this, though."

"Whys that?" the sheriff asked.

"We were discussing it when the shooting started. They hadn't been told yet."

"Ah."

Was that it?

"Sheriff—"

I snapped my lips closed when the sheriff held up his hand. I didn't know whether to be insulted or pissed until the sheriff started speaking into the mic on his shoulder, ordering an APB on Brick and Jones. They were to be considered armed and dangerous.

I was glad someone had figured that out.

"Alright," the sheriff said after he was done. "Take me through what happened from the beginning. Don't leave anything out."

It took just a few minutes because there wasn't that much to tell, not from our perspective anyway. I didn't mention the little interlude on the floor of the bunkhouse and neither did Cooper.

I wonder why?

By the time we were done explaining to the sheriff what we'd seen, the rest of the ranch hands were riding up. They tied their horses off to the fence and then walked over.

More than one of them gave me a wary look. I smiled, knowing that several of them had not been introduced to me yet. I imagine they were plenty curious, and not just because I was Buck's kid.

There had had been a shooting on the ranch, and I was the one being shot at. They had to wonder why.

I wondered why.

"Cooper seems to think this might be connected to Maddox," I tossed out there. "Has there been any sign of him?"

"No, but I'm looking for him," the sheriff admitted.

"So, you think this was Maddox then?" I asked. After what Cooper had told me, I certainly did.

"Of course it was fucking Maddox," Ken snapped. "The man's an idiot, but he's a smart idiot."

My eye twitched.

"Sheriff—"

"There's no evidence at this point that Maddox is involved in this. All I have is supposition and a strong dislike for the asshole. That's not enough to arrest him. Hell, it's not enough to even question him."

Anger curled up in my gut. "So, he gets away with trying to kill me?"

"No, I just have to find the evidence."

I crossed my arms, not knowing what else to do with them. I really wanted to smack this guy, but I knew he was only doing his job. He enforced the law and I was a very big support in the law. It kept me employed.

"How can we help?" I asked.

"I think we need to go through Maddox's things." Cooper shrugged. "While we're packing them up, of course."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Does that include the office?"

Cooper snorted.

Guess that was an answer.

"Where do you want to start?"

"Why don't you and I start in the office?"

My eyes rounded. "Did anyone call Colby and Sawyer and let them know the danger was over?"

"Fuck!" Cooper grabbed his cell phone and dialed before holding it to his ear. "It's safe for you guys to come out now. The danger is past."

I glanced at the other men standing around, zeroing in on the face I recognized. "Macon, right?"

The man nodded.

"I'm worried about Sampson. Can you get a couple of the guys to see if they can find him?"

Macon's eyes rounded for a brief moment before he nodded.

"Sure thing, Boss."

"I'd really prefer to be called Ethan."

Macon nodded, but I doubted he'd do it. He did, however, gesture to a couple of the guys and tell them to go find Sampson.

I turned when the front door opened. I was a little surprised by the relief I felt when Colby stepped out. I hadn't expected that. Granted, I didn't want anything to happen to the man, but my protective instincts were flaring to life big time.

This man needed a keeper.

"I need to get back to the office and file a report," the sheriff said. "Call me if you find anything."

I nodded.

Cooper waved a hand at me. "Come on, let's go check out the office."

I nodded as I started for the front door. I smiled at Colby as I climbed the steps and then stopped in front of him. "Since things have kind of gone to shit for the day, I don't suppose I can impose upon you to make us all some lunch?"

Colby beamed. "I can do that."

"Good." I gently patted Colby on the shoulder. "I'd really appreciate it. I'm getting kind of hungry and I imagine everyone else is, too."

Colby worried his bottom lip with his teeth for a moment. "Can you give me an hour?"

"Yes, I believe we can. We're going to be searching the office to see if we can find anything that would connect Maddox to the shit going on around here."

Colby's forehead furrowed. "Check his laptop. He did a lot of work on it and got pissed if I went anywhere near it."

"Laptop. Got it."

Hopefully, it was in the house somewhere.

I chuckled when Colby darted back into the house and Sawyer followed right after him. Looked like maybe he'd found that keeper.

When we got inside, Cooper and I walked toward the office. Once there, I stood right inside the doorway and planted my hands on my hips. "So, any suggestions where we should start?"

"Why don't you start going through the desk?" Cooper suggested. "I'll start on the bookshelves."

I nodded in agreement and walked around to sit in the chair behind the desk. It was a simple design, pretty much like any other desk out there. It had a middle drawer and two on either side.

I pulled the one in the middle out first. There wasn't much in there. A few pencils and pens, some paperclips, rubber bands, and a pad of paper.

Not exciting at all.

Going to the drawers on my left, I started at the top. I found a bunch of file folders. I tapped through them with my fingers, reading the clear plastic label on each one of them.

From what I could see, they were broken down into different files for the ranch. Wages, stock records, vet records, employees, and insurance. All pretty straight forward.

Still, I grabbed the one labeled wages and pulled it out. I set it on the desk in front of me and flipped it open. The first thing I saw was a payroll log with employee names.

"Who's Brady?"

"Who?" Cooper asked.

"Emmett Brady." I glanced toward Cooper when he walked over to the desk. "I don't remember meeting him."

"That's because there is no Emmett Brady, not on this ranch."

"Really?" I looked back down to the payroll log. "Jake Cooper."

"That's me."

I smiled as I looked up. "You're name is Jake?"

"Jacob, actually." Cooper shrugged. "I usually go by Coop or Cooper."

"Fair enough." I went back to the list. "Stop me when you hear a name of anyone who doesn't work on the ranch."

Cooper nodded so I started reading the names off the list. "Colby Walker, Silas West, Chester Macon, Levi Wagner, Nate Colton,

Owen Maverick, Dylan Sawyer, Thomas Jones, William Brick, Asa Maddox, Emmett Brady, and Dean Ross."

"Brady and Ross," Cooper said. "There's never been anyone here named Brady or Ross."

"Are you sure?"

"Technically, no, but there hasn't been anyone employed at this ranch named Brady or Ross in the last ten years, which is as long as I have worked here."

"Well, they're making quite a bit of money for not showing up for work." I moved my finger down the log, looking at how much each man made. "I'd say that combined, they make about five to seven thousand dollars a month more than the rest of you."

"Five thousand?"

"You're salary, right?"

Cooper nodded. "Everyone is. Ranchers don't have set hours."

"Well, according to this log, you make approximately three thousand dollars a month."

"No, I make twenty-five hundred a month, everyone here on the ranch does except Maddox, but he was the foreman."

"No, according to these records, you all make three thousand dollars a month or more, except Colby, and he makes minimum wage."

"Colby is a ranch hand like everyone else, even if he does work in the main house," Cooper said. "He should be making what we make."

"Well, he isn't."

"Well, the rest of us aren't making three thousand dollars either."

"How do you usually get paid?" I asked. "A bank transfer, check —"

"Cash," Cooper said in a tight voice. "We get paid in cash on the first of every month. We've always gotten paid in cash, even when your father was alive. It's easier for a lot of ranch hands."

The clues were coming together faster than I could go through them. "I think Maddox or someone has been padding the wages and then taking his cut before he paid you all."

"I would have noticed when I filed my taxes," Cooper insisted.

"Would you have?" I glanced up at Cooper. "He didn't take large amounts, and that's the beauty of this. He skimmed a little from the top from all of you, which gave him a pretty big payout, but it was small enough that you probably didn't even notice."

"That fucking bastard!"

"This might be what my father meant when he said Maddox had been embezzling." I went back to the log. "I just don't understand why he would leave this lying around like this."

"I do," Cooper said. "He wasn't expecting you to show up. He thought the ranch was his. He had no reason to hide it."

"Well, that was stupid."

I looked up when someone knocked on the doorframe of the open door. "Hey, Boss, just wanted to let you know we found Sampson. He was hiding out in the barn."

"Ethan, this is Levi Wagner. Levi, this is the new boss, Ethan Walker."

Levi tipped his cowboy hat. "Sir."

"Ethan, please."

The man gave me a tight lipped smile.

"Levi, can I asked you something?"

"Yeah, I guess," Levi said as he sauntered into the room to stand in front of the desk.

"Are you salary or do you get paid by the hour?"

"I'm salary."

"How much do you make a month here at the ranch?"

"Two thousand dollars." Levi squinted. "Why?"

I slid my finger down the page until I came to Levi's name and then tapped it. "See what I mean?"

Cooper stepped closer and then leaned over my shoulder to look at where I had pointed. "According to this ledger," I explained. "Levi is making three thousand dollars a month, just like everyone else on the ranch except for Colby."

"What?" Levi shouted before leaning over to look at the ledger. "I ain't never made that much money working on a ranch in my life."

I shook my head as I opened the middle drawer and pulled out the pad of paper I had found before and a pen. I carefully wrote every name down in the ledger. I crossed off the names Maddox, Brick, Jones, Brady, and Ross before holding both the pad of paper and the pen out to Levi.

"Cooper and I have reason to believe that Maddox has been padding your wages and then skimming the extra to give himself a bigger paycheck. I need you to go to every man on this list and find out if they get paid salary or by the hour and exactly how much they make per month. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah, sure, but why?"

"Because this isn't right. If the records state you are making a certain amount every month, then that is what you should be paid. If



Maddox is skimming your wages, I want to know."

Levi blinked at me. "Yes, sir."

"Not sir, Ethan," I corrected before pointing to the last two names on the list. "While you're getting that information, ask everyone if they've heard of these two guys here. Brady and Ross. Cooper doesn't remember them working on the ranch at all."

"I ain't never heard of them."

"Well, according to these records"—I waved my hand at the papers in front of me—"both Brady and Ross have worked at the Eagle Creek Ranch for about five years."

Levi shook his head. "Yeah, no."

"Cooper, could these men be doing something off the ranch?"

"How do you mean?" Cooper asked.

"I'm trying to see if there is some plausible explanation for them being on the payroll. Could they be on the payroll because they are out buying cattle or something?"

"No." Cooper sounded pretty damn sure.

Yeah, I didn't think so.

## Chapter Twelve

~ Cooper ~

Saying I was pissed was ridiculous. I was enraged. Not just for me, but for everyone who worked on the ranch. I'd worked here for more than ten years and thought I was getting paid what I was supposed to be paid. Finding out I wasn't was like a kick in the teeth.

How could Buck let it come to this?

It wasn't like we all didn't know Maddox was a lying piece of shit. Everyone knew. How could Buck continue to let Maddox not only work on the ranch, but be in charge?

"I'd really like to know what Maddox had on your father."

"I would as well," Ethan replied. "If this is the kind of shit Maddox has pulled with the ranch hand wages, it kind of makes me wonder what he's done for the rest of the ranch."

I shuddered to think.

"Levi, go do what Ethan asked and be quick. I want to check these numbers."

"You got it," Levi said.

"And don't go spreading this around," Ethan added. "We'll discuss it with everyone over lunch, which will be mandatory for anyone who wants to continue working on this ranch."

Levi's eyes rounded. "Yes, sir."

"Ethan, not sir."

"Yes, si—I mean Ethan."

"Better."

I waited until Levi left the office before saying, "We need to check everything else."

"Grab that chair." Ethan pointed to one of the chairs in front of the desk. He set the file he'd been going through down in front of me.

"Start going through that. Look for any names that are out of place."

"What are you going to do?"

Ethan reached into the drawer and pulled out another handful of files. "I'm going to go through these."

God, we were going to be here forever.

Everything was quiet for the next several minutes as we each went through the papers in front of us. When Ethan suddenly swore, my head snapped up. "What?"

"Give me a minute." Ethan reached for the phone on the desk and dialed a number I didn't recognize. "Hello, my name is Ethan Walker. I'd like to speak to someone concerning an insurance policy on a ranch I just inherited."

What in the hell was he talking about?

"What's going on?" I asked.

Ethan flipped the file around and pointed to date the insurance on the ranch expired...a month ago.

My jaw dropped.

"Yes, hello," Ethan said. "I'm calling about policy number 453287. I want to see if it is still in effect." Ethan's jaw clenched for a moment. "It's not? Okay, can you tell me how long ago the policy ran out? Uh uh, okay. I'd like to reinstate that policy."

I knew there was trouble when Ethan's eyebrows snapped together.

"What do you mean you can't issue me another policy? Why not?" Ethan didn't seem like it was specifically looking at anything, but his eyes narrowed anyway. "No, thank you. That will be all."

Ethan slammed the phone down.

"What?" I asked.

"When the policy expired, someone called them and told them that not only would they not be renewing it, but that the ownership of the ranch was in question. So, the insurance company refuses to issue a new policy until they get a copy of the deed stating who owns the ranch."

"Maddox."

"Oh, it was Maddox alright. He called them a couple of days ago and told them that he would be sending them a new deed by the end of the week as he had just inherited the ranch."

"Why are you so upset? You can just get a copy of the real deed and send it in."

"It takes weeks, sometimes months, for an inheritance to go through probate. During that time, the ranch is without insurance. If anything happens, not only am I financially responsible, but if something happens to the ranch itself, I lose everything."

And that would be why Ethan was pissed.

"We need to get insurance now," I said. "If Maddox knows there's no insurance on this place, there's no telling what he might try to do to it."

"Oh, I am aware." Ethan closed his eyes for a moment and then drew in a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. When he opened his eyes, he reached for the phone again, dialing. "Madge, this is Ethan Walker. I need your help."

I was kind of in awe as I watched Ethan do his thing. He might not be much of a rancher, but he was one hell of a businessman. It

took him less than ten minutes to get the ranch fully insured, right down to the last cow.

When he started talking about life insurance policies and health insurance, I kind of tuned him out. I'd never had either one of those so why did it matter now?

Besides, I still needed to go through the payroll.

I don't know how long I'd been going through the payroll, but I'd already found three names—besides the ones Ethan had found—listed over the last ten years that had never been on the ranch.

A soft knock had me looking toward the doorway. "What do you need, Colby?"

"Lunch is ready," Colby replied.

I sent him a smile. "Okay, we'll be there in a few minutes."

Colby nodded before turning and walking back down the hallway.

"Ethan? Did you hear Colby?"

Ethan's head came up. "Huh?"

Guess not.

"Colby says lunch is ready."

"Oh, okay, um..." He glanced at the stack of files in front of him. He stood up, gathered all the files in his arms and started walking toward the door.

"What are you doing?"

"I have questions about some of the stuff I found in here."

"Okay, so why don't you ask them after lunch?"

Ethan shook his head. "Its better I ask them now. The guys need to get back to work, don't they?"

"Yes, but..." I reached out and took some of the files from Ethan before they fell on the floor. "Let's just eat first and then we can go

from there. It's not going to matter one way or the other if they are a few minutes late getting back out in the field."

Ethan glanced at the files. "Yeah, okay."

"We can put these on the coffee table for now."

Ethan followed me into the living room. We deposited the files on the coffee table and then made our way into the dining room, which was full. There were two spots left at the table. One at the head of the table and one right next to the head of the table.

I was so used to seeing Buck sitting there that it was weird to see Ethan take that seat, and yet it wasn't. It felt as if he was meant to be there.

Not sure what to think about that.

"For those who haven't had a chance to meet him," I began once we were all seated, "this is Ethan Walker, the new owner of Eagle Creek Ranch. Ethan has appointed me as the new foreman. Maddox and his goons are no longer allowed on the ranch and if you see them on the property, you are to report it to me or Ethan immediately."

"He's really gone?" Nate asked.

I nodded. "He's really gone."

"Does this have anything to do with what Levi was asking us?"

"Yes and no," Ethan said. "Maddox is gone because I caught him trying to assault Colby. For future reference for all of you, I don't allow bullying of any kind. You bully someone on this ranch and your ass is out. No questions asked and there will be no two week notice. You are gone. Is that understood?"

Several heads nodded, but not all of them. I knew those who hadn't nodded were still trying to feel Ethan out. We'd had to deal

with Maddox for so long, none of us trusted very easily.

Besides, actions were stronger than words.

"The second reason that Maddox is gone, and will hopefully be behind bars pretty soon, is that he has been stealing from this ranch and from you all."

"That's why you sent Levi out to ask about our pay?" Nate asked.

"It is. We already know that he embezzled a lot of money from my father. Buck mentioned it in his will. After going through some of the records in the office, we've also learned that Maddox has been recording more pay for you guys, but paying you less."

"I get paid twenty-five hundred dollars a month salary," I said. "The payroll records state that I make three thousand dollars."

Ethan huffed a heavy sigh and rested his elbows on the table, clasping his hands together. "The amounts are so low that they probably wouldn't register when you filed your taxes, but what you were getting on paper and what you were actually being paid are two totally different things. We have reason to believe Maddox has been pocketing the difference."

"If you think about it," I added. "If he skimmed five hundred dollars off of each of you every month, he was taking home an extra five thousand dollars a month, give or take."

"Fucking bastard!" someone snapped. I wasn't sure who. It didn't really matter. That was what we were all thinking.

I folded my hands together and rested them against my chin. "We also think that Maddox had people on the payroll that didn't actually exist, which brings his monthly payroll up to around ten thousand dollars a month, not including what he made as ranch foreman."

"Damn," Levi said, "that's a lot of money."

"And that's where the problem is," I said. "Maddox isn't going to give up that money or this ranch without a fight. He's already had his goons take shots at me and Ethan. I would understand if any of you felt you couldn't stay."

"If anyone chooses to leave, I'll give them a month's severance pay and a letter of recommendation," Ethan said. "I know this is probably not anything any of you signed up for."

"Well, hell, boy," Cookie said. "This is just life on a ranch."

There were a few chuckles before Macon leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table like Ethan had. "I think I can speak for everyone here when I say we ain't going nowhere. We love this ranch, although we'll love it a whole lot more without Maddox around."

Ethan smiled. "I appreciate that."

"Someone down there want to get things started?" I reached for the platter of fried chicken and put a piece of chicken on my plate before handing the platter to the next person in line. The dishes of food Colby had cooked up for us slowly made their way around the table until everyone had food on their plates.

"Ethan, now might be a good time to tell the guys some of the things you are planning for the ranch." They needed to know that the new owner wasn't Maddox in disguise.

"Oh, well, the first thing is that I've decided the old bunkhouse won't do so I'm going to have a new one built. It'll take a few months, but I hope to have rooms with private baths for all of you."

Levi froze and stared at Ethan. "Each bedroom is going to have its own bathroom?"



"Yes, but I won't hire a maid service so you're responsible for cleaning it yourself."

"Can we have some input in what we want in our rooms?" Macon asked.

Ethan squinted. "Could you be more specific?"

"Well, like, helping pick out the hardware for the bathroom and the colors and such."

"Oh, yeah, that would be fine. If you each want to take some time and think about what you want and then get it to me, when I talk to the builder, I'll see if it's feasible."

"Even if we want a tub?"

Ethan frowned. "Why wouldn't you have a tub?"

"I mean a tub instead of a shower. After spending all day in the saddle, a long soak in a tub is my idea of heaven."

Ethan sighed before setting his fork down. "Each bathroom will come equipped with a sink, toilet, tub, and shower."

Macon paused with a biscuit half way to his mouth. "Really?"

I chuckled when Ethan slowly panned to look at me. "Do they not know how a bathroom looks?" he asked.

"They know how a bunkhouse looks. Private bathrooms are a different animal."

"Okay." Ethan blinked a few times before taking a deep breath. "I am building the new bunkhouse with ten bedrooms and eleven fully equipped bathrooms. There will also be a regular sized kitchen, a large common area, and a laundry room big enough for at least three sets of washer and dryers. If there is something I haven't thought of, let me know and I'll add it to the list."

"A mud room with a shower close to the laundry room," Nate said. "We tend to get dirty out in the field. If we can come in through a mud room, strip off our clothes, and toss them in the washer before taking a shower, we'd track a lot less dirt through the place."

Ethan nodded as he reached for his fork again. "That sounds reasonable. I could create a shower room off the mudroom with some storage shelves where you could all keep a change of clothes for when you get out of the shower."

"A big porch," Cookie said. "Some of my best days have been spent sitting on a porch in the evening after a long day's work, enjoying a tall cool glass of sweet tea."

Ethan smiled. "That sounds doable, too."

"Ethan also wants to look into getting some solar power panels installed to help offset the cost of heating the ranch and keeping the lights on." My lips twitched with amusement. "He wants to put heating in the barn."

Ethan rolled his eyes. "I do not see what is so weird about that. Those animals are living breathing creatures. They deserve to be warm in the winter."

"Did you win the lottery or something?" Colby asked. "That's a lot of money to be spending on a place where you don't even want to be."

Dead silence filled the dining room.

Ethan sighed before setting his fork down again. "You're right, Colby. I don't want to be here. I have a life back in New York along with a thriving law practice. I'd rather be there. I'm a lawyer, not a rancher, but for some reason known only to my father, he thinks I

should be here, and in order to inherit the ranch, I have to stay here for one year."

"You don't have to stay," Colby mumbled. "We would have been okay."

"I'm staying because I won't let my father's legacy go to someone like Maddox. Once that stupid stipulation in my father's will is met, I'll decide what I am going to do, but until then, I am here."

I knew Ethan's reasons had nothing to do with preserving his father's legacy and everything to do with keeping Colby safe from Maddox, but I wasn't going to say that. What Colby chose to share was up to him, just as it was up to Ethan what he wanted to share.

"As for your question about whether I won the lottery or something, I have not. I'm a lawyer, a very good lawyer. Me and two of my friends own our own law firm back in New York City, and we have learned that when we have happy employees, we have hard working, loyal employees. That was something Maddox forgot."

Macon snorted. "That was something Maddox never learned."

"Well, I'm hoping to change that. Besides building a new bunkhouse and taking care of some of the repairs around the place that Cooper mentioned to me, I've also arranged for each of you to receive full medical and a life insurance policy as part of your employment contract. It's something you already should have had along with accurate pay, which I will also be taking care of."

I frowned as I glanced at Ethan. "What does that mean?"

"You've been paying taxes on money you never received. I'm going to make sure you receive it. I just need to have a forensic accountant go over everything before I know how much that will be."

"Forensic accountant?"

"A forensic accountant is like a regular accountant except they specialize in looking for mistakes and discrepancies. I have one I use at my law firm. I just have to send him everything so he can go over it. It'll probably take a couple of weeks." Ethan winked at me. "He's very thorough."

I wanted to ask what that meant, but I didn't.

"You're like a fairy godfather," Colby said.

Ethan chuckled as he turned to look at Colby. "Not hardly."

I wasn't so sure.

## Chapter Thirteen

~ Ethan ~

Glass shattered from somewhere in the house. Sampson started barking and took off. I jumped out of my seat and ran out of the dining room after him. I could hear several people running behind me. Since Sampson had run toward the office, I went in that direction.

Sampson was still barking when I reached the office, I understood why. I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back. "We need a fire extinguisher!"

My father's office was on fire.

I dragged Sampson back toward the living room. "Colby, come hold on to Sampson."

When the man ran over, he dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around the dog.

"Keep him here. I don't want him hurt."

Colby nodded.

I hurried back to the office. Cooper and Macon were using fire extinguishers to put the fire out. Besides the shattered window and some scorch marks on the desk there didn't seem to be too much damage.

Once the fire was out, Cooper set the fire extinguisher down and walked over to the broken window. His jaw clenched when he looked out the window.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Footprints in the dirt under the window."

My gut clenched. "Someone did this on purpose?"

"Looks that way. Unfortunately, it looks like whoever did is long gone."

"Why would someone do this?" I asked.

"My guess, considering where the fire was located, is that Maddox is trying to get rid of evidence."

"So, he tried to burn down my house?"

"I think he was just trying to burn the desk and all the files in it."

I huffed. "You'd better call the sheriff."

Once Cooper grabbed his phone and started dialing, I walked around the desk and pulled out each of the drawers to assess the damage. Luckily, it looked as if we had stopped the fire before it could do more than burn the top of it. All of the files were fine.

"Can someone get me a box?" I asked of the crowd of men standing just inside the door.

If someone was going to be starting fires to burn the evidence, I was going to move the evidence. I didn't think for an instant that that would keep them from trying again. I just wanted to make sure all the files were somewhere safe.

"I'll get you one," Macon said before spinning and hurrying down the hallway.

As soon as he came back, I started emptying the drawers out into the box. After I was done with that, I carried the box into the living room and grabbed the files Cooper and I had put on the table and added them to the box.

I carried everything up to my room.

By the time I got back downstairs, everyone had gathered in the living room. I crossed my arms as I walked over to stand next to

Cooper. "For the foreseeable future, I'd like everyone to pair up. I don't want anyone going anywhere alone."

"You think Maddox is going to come after one of us?" Cooper asked.

"I think Maddox is crazy enough to try anything to get what he wants. He's already shown that. I'm putting a big wrench in his plans. He's not going to stop until he gets what he wants or he's behind bars, and he's just going to keep escalating the situation until that happens."

"We also need to arrange regular patrols," Cooper said. "If Maddox is crazy enough to throw something into the office to try and burn the desk up, there's nothing stopping him from trying to burn down the bunkhouse or the barn or do something else."

I glanced at the men surrounding us and then at Cooper. There was anger present on every face I looked at. "I know some people I can call, people who specialize in this type of thing. I can give them a call and see if they can come out for a few days and give us some extra eyes and ears."

"Clients?" Cooper asked.

I smiled. "No, we sometimes hire them to protect clients, though."

"We can handle it," Nate said vehemently. "This is a ranch thing. We don't need people from outside the ranch coming in and messing everything up."

"Uh..." Wasn't that kind of what I was doing?

I glanced at Cooper for more clarification, but he was staring at Nate with an intensity I couldn't decipher. I didn't know the man that well.

"Do you all prefer to keep this to ranch personnel?" Cooper asked. "It'll mean each of us will have to put in extra hours."

Most of the men nodded.

Colby did not.

I decided I would have a small talk with him later. If he felt uncomfortable with this plan, I could always send him back east where he'd be safe.

"I guess that's it then." I turned toward Cooper. "Can you make out a patrol schedule? I want to get upstairs and finish going through those files."

Cooper nodded. "I'll come and help once I get the office cleaned up."

"I can do that," Colby said. "I've got some good wood cleaner that might help minimize the damage."

I smiled. "That would be appreciated, Colby."

Colby beamed back before darting for the kitchen.

God, he reminded me of an over eager puppy. No wonder Maddox had been able to get his claws into Colby so easily.

I nodded to Cooper. "I'll see you upstairs."

Cooper nodded back and started talking to the men so I headed upstairs. I still hadn't located the laptop Colby had mentioned. That bothered me. Maddox had been tossed out on his ear not long after I arrived. He hadn't had time to take any of his belongings with him.

Maybe it was in his room?

Instead of going into my bedroom, I headed down the hallway to the master bedroom. I had no doubt whatsoever that the second my father died, Maddox had taken over my father's bedroom. He'd done it to the office after all.



I pushed open the door and stopped as soon as I got inside the room. I wasn't sure what I was expecting. I hadn't thought Maddox had enough time to make many changes to the room, but I was hoping I was wrong.

Considering how rustic the rest of the house looked, this modern decor seemed out of place. The colors were all grey scale and sleek lines. The room would be perfect in New York City, even if it wasn't my style. Here on a ranch in Montana, it looked totally out of place.

The bed had a black tucked fabric headboard and matching black comforter. The nightstands matched right down to the tucked black fabric covering the drawers. Hell, even the wardrobe was shiny black wood with silver handles.

Definitely not my style.

I pushed my disgust aside and started searching for the laptop. I found quite a few other things including an interesting array of sex toys, a box of files that I wanted to go through, and a burner phone.

What Maddox needed with a burner phone I would never know, but I could guess.

The handgun in the nightstand concerned me as well. I didn't want to touch it, but I didn't want to pack it up with Maddox's things either. He'd probably use it to try and shoot me. I'd turn it over to the sheriff and he could do what he wanted with it.

After searching everywhere I could think and coming up empty, I stood in the middle of the room with my hands on my hips and scanned the room. I had to have missed something.

My gaze landed on the bed. I stared for a moment before shaking my head. "That would be too easy."

I stood at the bottom of the bed and pulled the blankets off, dropping them on the floor before walking toward the head of the bed. I grabbed the pillows and tossed them on the floor. I had kind of been hoping that the laptop was hidden under the blankets, but it wasn't.

I was grasping at straws.

I lifted the mattress and looked under it, and there was the laptop. I pushed the mattress off to one side and grabbed the laptop...and the disc sitting under it.

I turned the disc one way and then the other, wondering what was on it. I took both the laptop and the disc back to my room. I didn't bother making the bed again. We were going to pack up all of Maddox's stuff anyway.

Cooper was just coming up the stairs when I reached my room. I paused at the door and waited for him to reach me. When he did, I held up the laptop. "I found it under the mattress along with this." I showed him the disc I had found.

"Do you know what's on it?"

I shook my head. "I haven't had the chance to look yet."

"Why don't you go ahead and do that. I'm going to get Colby to help me pack up Maddox's room."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I do, actually. I think it will be good for him to pack Maddox's stuff. Maybe it will give him some sort of closure."

Okay, I couldn't argue with that.

"Keep an eye on him then. There's a cabinet in there with some pretty interesting sex toys. Not sure how Colby is going to feel seeing them again."

Cooper's jaw clenched. "Tell me which cabinet. I'll pack them up before I bring Colby up."

"The black one by the bathroom door."

Cooper turned without saying anything more and walked down the hallway to the master bedroom. I watched for a moment until he came out with a pillowcase filled with items and then I turned to go into my room. I sighed as I set the laptop and disc down on the bed next to the box of files.

It was going to be a very long night.

It took me just a few minutes after turning on the laptop to figure out it was password protected and I had no hope of getting in on my own. Luckily, I knew someone who could. I'd just have to ship the laptop to him first.

I set the laptop and disc aside and tackled the box of files.

Cooper walked in awhile later with a small box. "I found these in Maddox's stuff." He glanced down into the box. "Most of this is your father's."

"Oh?"

"I know it's not Maddox's. It's all stuff I've seen around your father's office or stuff he's shown me over the years." Cooper shook his head as he lifted one of the items out of the box. It was a silver picture frame. "How he thought he could get away with taking this, I'll never know. It's clearly not his."

I took the picture frame when Cooper held it out to me, and then sucked in a painful breath when I turned it over and saw the picture inside the frame.

It was of my parents and me right after I was born. My father had his arm wrapped around my mother as she held me in her arms. He

was looking down at me as if I was the most amazing treasure he had ever seen.

If he felt that way, why did he abandon me like he did? Why let me spend almost all of my life letting me think that he didn't care when he so clearly did. Had something happened?

"Did my father ever say why he didn't contact me?" I wondered out loud, staring intently down at the picture.

"Not really," Cooper replied. "I know something happened a few months after you were born, but Buck never really discussed it with me."

My shoulders slumped. I had so been hoping Cooper knew something. I felt as if that part of my life was one big mystery and I had no clue on how to solve it.

I set the picture frame on the nightstand. I'd be damned if I was going to let Maddox have it. "What else you got in there?"

"Odds and ends, really," Cooper said as he looked down at the box of items again. "Maddox seemed to take anything that he thought he might be able to sell. Your father's watch, that picture frame, some gold bookends. Stuff like that."

What a rat bastard.

"Have you found anything more in the files?"

"Some," I said, "but I'm still trying to figure out what I'm looking at. There was a lot of ranching lingo in here I don't understand."

And I doubted I ever would.

Cooper set the box down on the floor and then sat down on the bed beside me. "Show me what you're confused about. Maybe I can help."

"I've been looking over the purchase receipts for the last couple of years and they don't make sense to me. There's normal purchases I would expect for a ranch like feed, tack, vet bills, and stuff like that, but what is hoof collection?"

Cooper's eyebrows shot up. "Hoof collection?"

I nodded as I pointed to the different entries for hoof collection. There were several of them to the tune of almost fifty thousand dollars. "What is hoof collection?"

"I have no idea," Cooper replied. "I've never heard of that before and I've worked ranches most of my life."

"The records go back each month for the couple of years."

Cooper shook his head. "I don't know. Like I said, I've never heard of hoof collection."

"Maybe one of the others will know what it is."

"Maybe," Cooper said, but he sounded doubtful. "What else have you found?"

"When was the last time you guys sent cattle off to market?"

"We usually go to market in the fall after the calves are weaned, so not since last year. We should be ready to take them in by the end of the month." Cooper's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"According to these records, you haven't sold any cattle for the last three years."

"No, that's not right. I was there the last two years when we took them to market."

"Was Maddox there?"

"Yeah, but..." The frown deepened. "He pocketed the money, didn't he?"

"I suspect this was what my father was talking about when he said Maddox was embezzling. He sold the cattle and kept the money instead of turning it over to my father."

"How could he get away with that?" Cooper asked. "If he came back with no cattle and no money, Buck would know."

"I think it goes back to whatever he had on my father."

I just had no idea what that was, and I really needed to know. It might be the clue to solving this whole mess. Too bad I had no idea who to ask or even if anyone knew anything.

I doubted Maddox would talk.

I grabbed a handful of files and handed them to Cooper. "Start reading. If anything stands out to you, let me know."

"There are a lot of files here."

"Yep, so get to reading."

The answers had to be here somewhere.

## Chapter Fourteen

~ Ethan ~

I smiled as I watched Cooper's eyelids start to flutter. I was close enough to him to feel his warm breath blowing out across my face. We had apparently fallen asleep while going through the files the previous night, although I don't quite remember curling up on the bed with Cooper.

I don't even remember covering myself up with a blanket.

When Cooper's eyelids lifted and then his eyes rounded, I smiled. "Morning."

Cooper cleared his throat before speaking. "Morning."

"Did you sleep okay?"

"I think so." A cocky little grin crossed his lips. "I was asleep so I can't be sure."

"What time did we fall asleep?"

"I think it was around three," Cooper replied. "Not quite sure, but the last time I looked at the clock it was a little after two-thirty and we fell asleep not too soon after that."

Cooper's eyes dropped to my lips and he inhaled a shaky breath. I knew what he was thinking, or at least, I knew what I wanted him to be thinking.

There was no doubting my attraction to this man. I totally understood the whole ethical thing when it came to employer and employee boundaries. I just wasn't sure I cared.

I almost groaned when Cooper licked his lips.

"Do it," I whispered.

Cooper's eyes snapped to mine.

"Do it," I repeated.

He reached out his hand slowly as if to give me time to stop him. When I didn't, it curved around the back of my neck and pulled me closer. Cooper started to lean in, but then he paused long enough to grin at me before his lips covered mine.

This time I did groan. Kissing Cooper was like kissing a light socket. I felt the sizzle all of the way down to my toes. His lips were soft and velvety, but firm at the very same time.

When his tongue slid along my lips, I opened my mouth and let him in. Our tongues fought for dominance, sliding against each other.

I lifted my hands and gripped Cooper's shirt. He pulled me closer until our bodies pressed against each other, ever line flush. I could feel the hardness of his chest and the even harder press of his dick through our jeans.

A needy sound I have never made in life slid past my lips when Cooper grabbed my leg and pulled it over his hip. His hand slid down my back to the soft curve of my lower and back to the rounded curve of my ass.

Not even the denim fabric covering me could hold back the warmth of his hand as he squeezed one ass cheek, nor the strength in his work hardened hand.

"Ethan," Cooper whispered breathlessly.

I could hear the want, the need in the man's voice. It was answered in the silent thundering of my heart. I grabbed the hem of Cooper's shirt and pulled it up over his head. My breath caught at what he found underneath.

He as absolutely breathtaking.



I knew he would be, but even I was expecting this. Hard contoured muscles and dark brown nipples graced Cooper's smooth chest. A rippled abdomen moved into a concave below the man's pant line. A small smattering of dark hair trailed down under Cooper's belt.

I traced the lean muscles of Cooper's chest then down past his belt buckle to the large bulge still wrapped in denim. I quickly glanced up at Cooper when the man hissed. I squeezed the hardness beneath my hands again, watching in awe as Cooper's head fell back on his shoulders.

A look of pure ecstasy played across his face.

I couldn't stand it. I quickly unbuckled Cooper's belt and unbuttoned his jeans, pushing everything down Cooper's legs until his full cock bounced free.

My hand trembled as I reached out to touch the engorged flesh. It was hot to the touch, silky, jerking in my hand. A small drop of liquid pooled at the tip. I was unable to stop myself from leaning forward and licking the drop away, the distinct taste exploding across my tongue.

The groan that fell from my lips sounded agonized and needy even to my ears. I felt my face flush at how wanton I appeared. But I couldn't keep the desperate look off my face as I tilted my head back and gazed up at Cooper.

"Do it," Cooper demanded fiercely. "Suck my cock, Ethan."

Elation flowed through me. It was quickly overshadowed by a desire so turbulent that my eyes almost crossed. I looked back at Cooper's cock, anticipation flooding me as I leaned forward and wrapped my lips around the thick shaft.

I ran my tongue around Cooper's cock, over the small slit in the hood, and then under the edges of the mushroomed head. Cooper's hands tightened in my hair. His hips bucked against me.

It was all the permission I needed to continue. I sucked the hard flesh into my mouth until the head butted against the back of my throat. The agonized groan that came from Cooper when I swallowed made me suck harder.

Cooper's legs tremble under my hands where I gripped them. The man's moans turned to continuous whimpers and cries of delight. I reached down and pushed Cooper's jeans the rest of the way down until Cooper was naked.

Every muscle he had was superbly defined, right down to the tight flat muscles of his abdomen and his thick thighs.

"Need some help?" Cooper asked, a small chuckle in his voice.

I looked up at him, grinning. "No, just admiring the view."

"Mind if I check out the view too?" Cooper asked, reaching for my shirt. When I shook my head, Cooper pulled my shirt off over my head and dropped it over the side of the bed.

Cooper chuckled at my groan as he reached over and began to slowly unbutton my jeans, so slowly that I would swear I could hear each tick of the wall clock.

It was pure torture.

Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore and was going to beg, Cooper pushed my jeans down my legs and off my feet.

"Oh, this is nice," Cooper groaned.

I cried out and grabbed at Cooper's shoulders as he wrapped his hand around my jutting cock and began sliding up and down my hard

flesh. My legs were shaking so badly I was sure I was going to melt into a pile of goo.

"Cooper," I cried out, my head dropping back on my shoulders at the exquisite torture. I had never felt anything like it in my life.

Pure, unadulterated lust.

Just as I thought I couldn't take anymore, and that my head was going to explode, Cooper let go. I wanted to protest, but Cooper rolled over on top of me, and that was good, too.

Cooper's large body settling at the apex of my thighs.

For a brief moment, I wondered what in the hell I had gotten myself into. I was lying naked on my bed with a complete stranger about to devour me. Instinctively, I knew that was exactly what Cooper was going to do.

"Cooper," I whispered hesitantly. The look on Cooper's face as he gazed up at me was almost feral. It was so savage, so possessive, that I couldn't look away. I was hypnotized by the intensity of it.

Within moments, I was nearly mindless with desire. My hard cock ached in a way that it never had before. I felt as if my entire body was sensitized to the lightest touch of Cooper's fingers. Everywhere he touched ignited with fire.

"More, Cooper, please, more," I begged as Cooper's fingers blaze a trail from my nipples, past my navel, to my groin. The simple brush of Cooper's hand against my cock had me nearly screaming in ecstasy.

When Cooper's hand trailed past my balls to the puckered hole beneath, I spread my legs as wide as they would go. I could hear Cooper deep growl of approval as he pulled my legs up to my chest.

"Cooper, please, I need—"

"I know what you need, honey," Cooper chuckled. "I just need lube and a condom."

"Jean pocket."

Cooper arched an eyebrow. "You keep a condom and lube in your pocket?"

"Yeah, don't you?"

"Condom, yes. Lube, no."

I shrugged. "Single use lube packets are great."

I was beyond being embarrassed at the moment.

"Yeah, but what if you want to do it more than once?" Cooper asked as he reached over the side of the bed and grabbed my jeans.

"You're fucking perfect," Cooper growled a moment later. "Look how sexy you are, just waiting for me. Do you want my hard cock in this tight little hole?" Cooper asked as he pushed one slicked finger deep into my ass.

I wanted more. I wanted to be filled by Cooper's cock.

Just when I was about to beg for more, Cooper pushed another finger in, and then another, moving them both around until I could only lay there and whimper. My entire house could have been on fire and I wouldn't have cared. I only wanted to feel Cooper.

Cooper chuckled as he grabbed the condom. He tore open the condom packet with his teeth and then rolled it down his engorged dick and then squeezed some ore lube between my ass cheeks before spreading it around a little.

Cooper tossed the packet away and then scooted up between my legs and guided the head of his dick to my aching hole. His hands holding onto my hips and his chest pressing against my legs, Cooper slowly began to push into me.

"Cooper!" I wailed.

"Just wait, honey. I'll make it good for you."

I had begun to thrash around on the bed as Cooper impaled me inch by slow inch. It seemed to take forever for him to push all of the way in. I didn't know if I could take it. I felt so full already.

Finally, Cooper paused. I watched his eyes close as if he was savoring the experience. When they opened and Cooper looked back down at me, the soft sparkles of light in his brown eyes again made me wonder if Cooper really was going to consume me.

But the moment Cooper began to move, thrusting his cock deep inside me, then slowly pulling out, only to thrust back in again, I didn't care. I just wanted more.

I didn't think I would ever get enough.

When Cooper moved my legs out of the way so that he could press his chest against mine, his lips going towards my jaw line, I wrapped my legs around him.

Each thrust of Cooper's hips had my cock rubbing between us until I didn't know where I ended and Cooper began. The friction of his skin against my dick was as frustrating as it was glorious.

With a loud cry, I exploded, my cock pulsing and filling the space between us with hot white cream. I couldn't catch my breath as my cock continued to be caressed by Cooper's thrusts.

The pleasure just didn't seem to end.

Just when I thought I was going to be able to be able to breathe again, Cooper's thrusts became erratic and uncontrollable. He arched his back, his head falling back on his shoulders as he roared out his release before collapsing down on top of me.

I let loose the hands I had anchored in Cooper's hair and let them drop to my sides as I waited for Cooper to move. This was the part I knew I was going to hate.

I always did.

I wanted to hold Cooper to me and never let him leave, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. It never did. It sucked to be a cuddler that always seemed to pick people who fucked and left.

When Cooper finally did move, I was shocked when he rolled to his side, pulling me along with him, wrapping an arm tightly around me before pulling the sheet over both of us. Cooper's face brushed against the top of my head just before he began to lightly snore.

I waited for him to move, wake up, something, but Cooper just continued to snore. After several minutes, I finally closed my eyes and let sleep take me...cuddled up in Cooper's arms.

\* \* \* \*

~ Cooper ~

I sucked in a breath the instant I opened my eyes and realized I held my boss in my arms, my very naked boss.

What in the hell had I done?

Fuck!

If I didn't get fired for this, I'd be really surprised. I understood that Ethan had been a full participant in what had happened between us, but there were lines you just did not cross.

I'd blown the fuckers up.

I slowly and carefully extracted myself from Ethan's arms and rolled to the side of the bed. I made sure to tuck the blanket back around him before reaching for my clothes.

Once glance at the clock on the nightstand and I knew I was incredibly late getting out onto the range. I might be able to brush it off since we'd been working late into the wee hours of the morning on those files, but there was no way to dismiss this.

As soon as my jeans were buttoned, I grabbed my shirt and boots and started tiptoeing toward the door. I needed a shower, a change of clothes, and a clear path to the field.

And hopefully no questions from the others.

"You know, we're both adults," Ethan said from the bed. "There's no need for the walk of shame."

Damn.

I was sure my face was flushed neon red when I turned around. "We were up late last night. I was trying to let you sleep."

Ethan snorted as he sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees. "Liar."

Okay, he caught me.

My shoulders slumped. "I was trying not to make this awkward."

It was so totally awkward.

Ethan stared at me for what felt like the longest moment in the history of moments before leaning back on his arms. "I don't see how it would be awkward unless you make it that way. I have nothing to be ashamed of and you shouldn't either."

"I slept with my boss," I pointed out.

"No, you slept with me."

My eye twitched. "Isn't that kind of the same thing?"

"Technically, yes."

I waited for Ethan to say more, but he didn't. He just continued to sit there staring at me.

*That was awkward.*

"Ethan—"

"First of all, you need to loosen up," Ethan finally said. "Second, did you enjoy what we did together?"

"Yes," I answered without hesitation. I refused to cheapen what had happened between us by lying about it. "I enjoyed it very much."

A slow lazy grin spread across Ethan's lips. "So did I, which is why I really wish you would drop the whole awkward thing. It's going to be really hard to convince you to get back in my bed if you're too embarrassed to do anything once you're in it."

My eyebrows lifted. "You want me back in your bed?"

"Yes."

I dropped my stuff on the floor, unbuttoned my jeans and pushed them down my legs, and then climbed back into bed with Ethan, reaching for him. If he wanted a repeat performance, I was going to give him a damn good one.



## Chapter Fifteen

~ Cooper ~

The sun was starting to set by the time we left Ethan's bedroom. We were both starving even if we had made several trips to the kitchen to grab snacks in-between fucking each other's brains out.

My dick was sore.

Never thought that would be possible.

I smirked when I saw Ethan walking a little funny. He should be sore. We'd fucked in his bed more than once, twice in the shower, once against the wall, and that last time on his bedroom floor.

We had gotten through more of the files between fucking, and even talked a bit. I felt a little less awkward about what we'd done until we reached the dining room and found everyone sitting at the table.

And they were all staring right at us with amused grins on their faces.

Ethan chuckled and slapped me on the ass as he walked past me, sauntering into the dining room as if he didn't have a care in the world. There was so much heat on my face I felt like flames were leaping off of it.

"We got through most of the files from Maddox's desk," Ethan said as if the air wasn't heavy with silence. "I have a few questions for you all."

Macon smirked before turning to look at Ethan. "Sure thing, Boss."

Ethan rolled his eyes. I think he was starting to get used to the idea that the others were going to call him boss and not Ethan.

"Do any of you know what hoof collection is?" Ethan asked.

Macon's amusement faded from one second to the next. "Ah... what?"

"There were several entries on the books for something called a hoof collection. They are listed each month for the last couple of years, to the tune of almost fifty thousand dollars. I was hoping one of you might know what that is."

Macon shook his head. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"I was afraid of that," Ethan said. "I think it was probably another one of Maddox's money making schemes."

"How would he justify that, though?" Levi asked. "You'd think someone would figure it out at some point. It's not like that's a usual purchase for a ranch."

"And I think that was part of Maddox's plan," Ethan explained. "I'm not a rancher. I had no idea if this was real or not. If he took the books to a regular accountant, who has no idea what life is like on a ranch, how would they know? I mean, hoof collection could be a thing."

"I see your point, but wouldn't Buck have noticed?"

"Only if Buck was the one doing the books," Ethan pointed out. "Maddox was ranch foreman for how long?"

"He was here when I came on ten years ago," Cooper said. "I don't know how long he was here before that."

"He arrived the summer you were born, Ethan," Cookie said. "Just a few months after actually. You and your Ma hightailed it to the city not too soon after that."

Holy fuck! I hadn't realized he'd been here thirty years. No wonder he had his hooks into this ranch.

I slowly panned to look at Cookie when the rest of what he said hit my brain. "You remember when Ethan was born?"

Cookie snickered. "Hell, boy, I done drove his Ma and Pa to the hospital. Buck was in the backseat with Lila. I had to drive them. Damn fool was a basket case. We practically had to scrape him off the ceiling of the car when we got there."

Ethan swallowed so hard, I heard it and turned to look at him. He'd gone suspiciously pale. "Do you know why my father let Maddox stay here so long?"

"I can't really say, but I suspect it was because Maddox was Buck's half-brother."

My jaw dropped.

"Asa Maddox was Buck's half-brother?"

Cookie shrugged. "Buck told me Maddox had papers proving it when he arrived, but I can't rightly say if they were real or not. Maddox has been known to fabricate stuff when it suits his needs."

I rubbed my hand down over my face before dropping it to the table. "I guess that explains why Buck let him stick around all this time."

"Yes and no," Ethan said slowly, drawing the words out. "But it might explain why Maddox was so shocked that my father filed a new will with the courts three months ago and why he didn't get the ranch."

"Care to explain to the clueless?" I asked.

Ethan chuckled. "Well, think about it. If Maddox arrived all those years ago with papers—fake or not—proving he was Buck's half-brother, he obviously expected to inherit the ranch, a ranch that has been in the Walker family for generations. But somewhere along the

way, Buck changed his mind, and his will, leaving me the ranch. It explains why Maddox is so insistent that it's his ranch."

"Assuming he is Buck's half-brother, I'd be pissed, too," I said. "That still doesn't explain why Buck let him fuck with the ranch for so long or even why he let him stay after he knew Maddox was embezzling from the ranch."

"Maybe Buck thought he had to leave the ranch to Maddox up until recently," Levi said. "Maybe he was able to prove Maddox wasn't his brother."

I knew where Levi was coming from. None of us wanted to think that a good, honorable man like Buck could be blood with a scumbag like Maddox.

"He changed the will three months ago," Ethan said. "Could he have known he was going to die?"

"He had a heart attack," I pointed out. "You don't usually see those coming, do you?"

"Had he seen a doctor lately?" Ethan asked.

I glanced at the others in the room, wondering if they had an answer for that question, because I sure didn't. "I don't know," I finally said. "There were parts of Buck's life he kept private from the rest of us."

"Did he see a doctor here in town?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what?" Ethan asked.

"Buck used to take a trip to Helena once a month. I kind of thought he was going up there to see someone, but..." I shrugged. If Buck was seeing someone, I didn't want to point it out to Ethan.

"About six months back, he took one of his normal trips. When he

got back, he spent a lot of time in his office. I didn't think a lot about it at the time, but now I wonder if he went there to see a specialist or something."

Maybe he had known he was dying. It would certainly explain why he suddenly changed his will. Maybe he was waiting for just the right time to take the ranch away from Maddox.

I looked Ethan square in the eyes as I said, "Getting you here for the reading of the will must have been Buck's last ditch effort to keep the ranch out of Maddox's hands."

Ethan grimaced as if the idea left a bad taste in his mouth. "He couldn't know I'd stay."

"No, but he made arrangements for what was to happen to the ranch if you didn't. It was supposed to be liquidated and given to charity, remember? One way or another, he was going to keep Maddox from getting the ranch, but I think he needed you for that to happen."

"Why?"

"You're a lawyer and Buck knew it. No matter what you decided, you would have made sure the will was enforced, even if it was just so everything was all legal like."

I knew I was right when Ethan sighed heavily.

"It would also explain why Maddox is trying so hard to get rid of you," I continued. "I'm pretty sure you eat bullies like him for breakfast, so he's not quite sure what to do about you."

"So, killing me is the answer?"

I shrugged.

Ethan's eyes rolled.

It was cute.

"We got that patrol schedule worked out," Macon said. "There will be two people on patrol around the house twenty-four seven, in three eight-hour shifts. We'll take turns with the rest of us picking up the slack with the ranch."

"Did you put me on the schedule?" I asked.

"Oh...uh...no." Macon's eyes darted to Ethan for a moment. "We figured you'd want to make sure no one does anything to the Boss."

True, I did.

"I appreciate the thought," Ethan said. There was a little bit of a bite to his tone. "But I can take care of myself. I'm a gay man living in New York City, for pete's sake."

Macon snorted. "New York ain't got nothing on small town bigots."

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "Do you guys face a lot of that out here?"

Every damn head nodded.

Guess that answered the question of whether they were all gay or not. I'd never asked because it wasn't any of my business. As long as they worked hard, didn't break any laws, and cared for the animals, what did I care who they slept with?

"I don't care if you are gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, questioning, kinky, or whatever," Ethan said. "I also don't care who you are sleeping with. That's your business, not mine. What I do care about is how you are treated as long as you are a part of the Eagle Creek Ranch. So, if you're facing issues in town, I want to know about it."

"It's nothing really big," Levi said. "There are just a few businesses in town we know not to frequent."

"We don't go to the bars unless we go in pairs," Macon added. "It's not that safe. Too many drunken idiots."

"I can't shop at Ray's Market," Colby added in a low tone. "They said they won't take my money because it's dirty money." Colby's eyes flooded with tears before he glanced down at his lap. His next words were whispered so low, I barely heard them. "They think I earn it by servicing all the ranch hands."

My jaw clenched.

"Who told you that, Colby?" Ethan asked in a very calm voice.

I was glad someone was calm enough to ask that question because it wasn't me. I wanted to punch something.

Colby shrugged.

"You know that's not true, right?" I asked.

"I know, but..." He shrugged again. "They won't listen to me when I tell them that it's not true. They think I'm lying."

"One of the things my mom always told me is that we are only responsible for our own actions," Ethan said. "You can't control what others think or do, even if you know they are wrong. You can only control the things you think or do. So, do you earn your money servicing the ranch hands?"

"No!"

"Then fuck 'em," Ethan said. "If Ray's Market doesn't want our hard earned money, we'll spend it somewhere else."

I blinked at Ethan before a smile slid across my face.

"Ray's isn't the only market in town," I pointed out, "but it is the biggest. The others are just Mom and Pop stores."

"Then I am sure they will appreciate our business," Ethan replied. "And anything we can't get at one of these Mom and Pop stores,

we'll order online. I do it back home all the time."

I lifted my eyebrows. "I'm not sure they'll deliver out here."

We weren't at the end of the earth, but we were damn close. Especially in the wintertime. Montana was known for its snow levels and blizzards. Only the hardy survived.

Ethan snorted. "They'd deliver on the moon if they could figure out how."

I wasn't so sure of that, but it would be nice to get our hands on some of the items we couldn't purchase unless we drove to the city. Not being able to frequent all of the businesses in town was a huge pain in the ass.

Things had been a bit better when Buck had been alive. The Walker family was one of the founding families in this town. Their name held a lot of weight. Ever since Buck had died, people had been giving us the evil eye, so to speak.

It made going into town somewhat uncomfortable.

I avoided it if I could.

I turned and glanced toward the front of the house when I heard a vehicle coming up the drive. Considering what we'd gone through over the last few days, my concern at who it might be was totally justified.

"Macon, Levi, go out the back and circle around the house. Sawyer, you stay here with Ethan and Colby."

I got up from my chair and started for the front door. I hadn't taken more than a few steps when I realized someone was following me. I knew who it was without even looking.

I stopped and planted my hands on my hips as I stared up at the ceiling. "Ethan, can you stay with Sawyer until I know who is here?"



"Nope."

Yeah, I didn't think that was going to happen.

I shook my head before starting for the front door again.

Someone knocked just as I reached it. I waved Ethan to the side of the doorway before pulling the door open.

Okay, it wasn't who I expected.

"Mr. Cross."

"Evening, Cooper, hope it's not too late."

"No, sir."

"I heard about Buck and just wanted to stop by and offer my condolences. I apologize for not stopping by sooner, but things have been a bit busy over at Cross Creek. Still..."

Yeah, that made sense. Monty Cross was one of the other ranch owners in the area. Granted, his ranch was about twenty miles on the other side of town from us, but ranchers tended to stick together.

I pulled the door open farther and stepped back. "Please, come in. Can I offer you some coffee?"

"No, I need to get back to the ranch. Like I said, I just wanted to drop by and offer my condolences."

"Actually, I was hoping I could talk to you for a moment." The Cross Creek Ranch had been around almost as long as the Eagle Creek Ranch. Monty might be able to give us some insight into what in the hell was going on around here.

God knows we weren't figuring it out on our own.

## Chapter Sixteen

~ Ethan ~

I was curious about the man Cooper let into the house, especially considering how much he'd been against anyone being here except those that lived on the ranch.

He was an older man, maybe around my father's age, and he used a cane as he walked. For some odd reason, I found that weird, especially considering he was a rancher.

"Mr. Cross," Cooper said, "this is Ethan Walker, the new owner of the Eagle Creek Ranch. He's Buck's son."

I held out my hand. "It's good to meet you, Mr. Cross."

"Monty," the man replied as he shook my hand. "Call me Monty."

I smiled. "Please, call me Ethan."

"So, you're the new owner, huh?"

I grimaced. "Looks that way."

"Know anything about ranching?"

"Nope."

Not a damn thing.

Monty stared for a moment before a burst of laughter shot out of his mouth. "I like a man who can admit his faults."

I wouldn't say it was a fault necessarily.

"I'm only here because my father made it a stipulation in his will," I admitted. "I'd much rather be back in New York City where there's civilization and flushing toilets."

I said it, but the words almost didn't ring true for me, which was odd. I knew ranch life wasn't for me, but I didn't hate it quite as much as I thought I would.

I would never admit that out loud.

I waved my hand toward the living room. "Why don't we go sit down and I can get Colby to make us some coffee?"

"Can you let the guys know they can head out?" Cooper asked. "I'm sure they all want to go relax for the evening."

I nodded before turning to head into the dining room. Everyone there glanced at me when I walked in. "Cooper and I are going to have a talk with Mr. Cross. Why don't you all head to the bunkhouse? Tomorrow will be here soon enough. We'll call you if we find anything out."

I waited until the men had stood and started out of the room before turning my attention to Colby. "Can you bring us some coffee in the living room?"

"Of course." Colby smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Can Sawyer stay with me?"

I blinked in surprise. "Yeah, sure."

"Thank you."

"Are you concerned with Mr. Cross being here?"

"No, he's always been nice to me. I just..." Colby shrugged.

I could see that he was uncomfortable with whatever was making him anxious. "Say no more, Colby. If you need Sawyer to stay here with you to make you more comfortable, I hope you get him to do the dishes at least."

Colby's chuckle was a little wobbly, but it was there.

"Get the coffee."

"Yes, Boss."

Good god, not him, too.

I sighed as I walked back to the living room. I was starting to get the impression that I wasn't going to get away from the "Boss" nickname. I knew the guys meant it with respect, but still, I really wish they would just call me by my name.

"So, did you hear about Maddox?" Cooper was asking when I walked back into the living room. "Not only did Buck say he had been embezzling funds from the ranch, but he fired him. Ethan here had me kick him off the ranch."

Monty's eyebrows rose. "You kicked him off the ranch?"

I shrugged when the man looked directly at me, and then moved to sit down on the couch next to Cooper. "He smacked one of my ranch hands around and two of his goons took pot shots at me and Cooper. He'll end up behind bars if he's lucky."

"If he's lucky?"

I grinned. "It's safer that way." If I ever got my hands on him, there wouldn't be anything left for the sheriff to put behind bars. "For him, at least."

Monty chuckled.

"That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about," Cooper said. "You ever heard of something called hoof collection?"

"Can't say that I have, no." Monty squinted at Cooper. "Why? What is it?"

"That's just it," I said. "We don't know, but the ranch has been billed for it for several months to the tune of around fifty-thousand dollars. We suspect Maddox was using it to steal money from the ranch."

Along with a lot of other things.

Monty huffed and leaned back in his chair. "I never took to Asa Maddox. Always something shifty about that man."

I snorted because come on. The guy looked like a used snake oil salesman and tried to con everyone he ran into. If that didn't work, he just outright stole what he wanted. And, if that didn't work, he became violent.

He was a real gem.

"The sheriff is looking for him," Cooper said. "He might have had something to do with Mark Anderson's death."

"I heard about that." Monty's brow flickered. "But I thought it was a car accident."

"It was," I said, "but it seems mighty suspicious to me that he was taking the papers I signed accepting the ranch back to town to be filed with the courts when he died, and then Maddox showed up here with the sheriff, demanding that we be thrown off his ranch the very next day."

Monty's eyebrows lifted. "Yes, I can see where that might be suspicious."

"Asa Maddox has tried to do a lot of stuff," I said. "He stole from Buck, this ranch, and even the ranch hands. He truly believes this ranch is his and that we're trying to take it from him. He needs to be stopped. If you have any idea where he might be, it would help us a lot if you could let us know."

"Well, like I said, I never warmed to him so we didn't have a lot of interaction." Monty reached up and rubbed his chin. "But if I remember correctly, Maddox used to hang out a lot with a bunch of guys down at Bobby's Place. You might try there."

"Bobby's Place?"

"It's a bar in town," Cooper explained. "It was owned by a guy named Bobby Gentry around the turn of the century. A few of the owners tried to change the name over the years, but everyone just refers to it as Bobby's Place."

I raised an eyebrow when Cooper grimaced. "What?"

"That's one of the places in town that we tried to avoid," Cooper replied. "Not one of our guys has ever come home from there without getting into a fight. Buck placed it off limits for anyone that worked here about two years ago. No one's been stupid enough to try to go against that rule."

Huh.

I turned to look at Monty. "So, you think Maddox might be hanging out down there?"

"Not if he's smart, but I do think the guys down there might know where he is."

"Brick and Jones?"

"That's two of them." Monty nodded. "There were a few more here and there. I don't remember all their names, but I'm pretty sure Maddox had them on his payroll even if Buck did not."

"I'll let the sheriff know." It was the least I could do for the man trying to kill me.

"There's one more thing," Cooper said. "Have you heard anything about Maddox being involved in transporting drugs or other illegal stuff?"

Monty's eyebrow arched. "Illegal how?"

Cooper shook his head. "We're not sure, but some things we've heard leads us to believe Maddox might be using cattle trucks to move drugs or something."

"Here?"

I could understand Monty's astonishment. The idea of shipping drugs up to Canada seemed farfetched to me, too, but I didn't have a better explanation for what Colby overheard.

"We aren't that far from the Canadian border," Cooper pointed out. "If he's trying to get drugs out of the country, transporting cattle might be a way to do it."

Monty rubbed his hand down over his mustache before twirling one end. "Not drugs, but you might have the sheriff get in touch with ATF."

My breath caught. "Guns?" I whispered. "You think he might be trafficking in guns?"

"About thirty years back, there was a big bust upstate. A bunch of idiots were trying to run guns over the border. The ATF came in and busted most of the people involved, but a couple got away. I remember Buck getting really upset because they came to question him, thought he might be involved."

"Why?" I asked. "How?"

"Buck never said, and after they questioned him, they left and I never heard another thing about it, but I always wondered how they'd think Buck was involved. He might not have been crystal white, but he wasn't about to do anything that might endanger his ranch."

I waited for those words to gut me, and I did feel a bit of a twinge, but it wasn't as painful as it normally was.

Huh.

That was weird.

"Do you remember the time when Maddox arrived on the ranch?" Cooper asked. "Cookie told us that Maddox had papers proving he was Buck's half brother and that might be why he allowed Maddox to stick around all these years."

"That's bull crap." Monty snorted. "Maddox ain't Buck's half brother. Ethan Walker adored his wife Massy. He'd no more be unfaithful to her than he would have cut off his arm, and Massy was the same way. Those two adored each other."

I never knew my grandparents so I couldn't say if that was true or not.

"Buck was an only child, right?" I don't remember my mother ever mentioning my father having any siblings.

Monty nodded. "He was. About broke Massy's heart, too. She wanted a little girl so bad, but the doctors advised against it after she had Buck. Her pregnancy with him was pretty rough."

So, Maddox couldn't be a cousin then.

I sighed before glancing over at Cooper. At his nod, I looked back at Monty. "We believe that Maddox might have been blackmailing my father somehow. We think that's why he allowed Maddox to stay for so long when it was clear that he's not a true rancher. Do you have any idea what he could blackmail my father with?"

If we knew that, maybe we could put a stop to it. Or at least figure out what Maddox was up to.

"It was you, boy."

I reared back, shock rendering me momentarily speechless. "Me?" I finally asked. "I haven't been here since I was a few months old. How could Maddox use me to blackmail my father?"



Before Monty could reply, Colby walked in with a tray of coffee and pastries. He set them on the coffee table and then turned and quickly walked out of the room. I wasn't sure if he was afraid of Monty or just trying to give us some privacy.

I guess it didn't really matter one way or the other. I had so many questions swirling around in my head, I was thinking of skipping the coffee and going straight for the whiskey.

Instead, I poured three cups of coffee and then handed one to Monty and Cooper. I left mine sitting on the coffee table. My hands were shaking a little and I didn't want to accidentally drop my cup.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at Monty as I tried to figure out what to say, what to ask.

"My father—"

"Buck wasn't an easy man," Monty said, "but he loved you and your mother more than air."

Okay, that one hurt.

I rubbed my stomach as I asked, "Then why did he send us away? Why did he never try to contact me or come visit me? He never even called. Not once, in all my years, did he call."

I didn't realize I was clenching my hands into fists until I felt Cooper's hand on mine. I tried to draw in a breath, but it sounded more like a sob.

"I don't know all that went on," Monty said, "I want you to understand that. Buck never talked about it much, but I know he was heartbroken when he sent the two of you away."

"*He* sent us away?" How did I not know that? I'd always thought my mother had left him for some reason.

"He had to, son," Monty said.

"Why?"

I wanted to know why. Why we had been sent away? Why I had grown up without a father? Why I only knew I was even related to Buck because of my birth certificate and a few pictures taken when I was just an infant.

"You have to understand, the world thirty years ago wasn't like it is now. We didn't have internet and smart phones and all that technology stuff. If Maddox was waving papers around stating he was Buck's half brother, it would be mighty hard to prove he wasn't."

"But he knew Maddox wasn't his brother, right?" Cooper asked.

Monty nodded. "Like I said, your grandfather would never be unfaithful to Massy. He loved her. He wouldn't have betrayed her that way."

"Why did my father send us away?" That's what I wanted to know more than anything. "And what did Maddox have to do with it?"

Monty chuckled before taking another sip of his coffee. "You're pretty smart for a city boy."

"Lawyer," I said.

Monty snorted. "Maddox wasn't even eighteen years old when he showed up at the ranch. Buck was pretty young himself, but Ethan and Massy were gone by then so he was in charge of the ranch. Why he didn't immediately kick Maddox off the ranch, I don't know, but he should have. Maddox started his shit within days of arriving here."

I cocked my head. "What sort of shit?"

"None of this can be proven, you understand?"

I nodded.

"It was little things at first. Broken fences, cows getting out, stuff like that. After a few weeks, it escalated. Cows started getting sick. A few of them even died, enough that other people began to take notice. People were starting to not want to buy stock from the Eagle Creek Ranch. They were afraid the cattle were tainted."

"Oh god," Cooper whispered.

I turned just in time to see a shudder ripple through him. "I'm guessing that was bad?"

Cooper nodded. "It could have ruined the ranch."

"When things started happening to you"—Monty pointed at me—"that's when Buck shipped you off to the East coast. I think he planned to deal with Maddox and then bring you home, but that never happened."

I was aware.

"About six months after you left, Buck showed up at my ranch. I tell ya, that man looked like he'd been ridden hard and put away wet. When I opened the door, he just brushed passed me and headed right for the liquor cabinet."

"Was he drunk?" I asked.

"No, but he wanted to be." Monty paused for a moment and stared off past my shoulder as if remembering the scene.

"Monty?" Cooper encouraged. "What happened?"

"He said someone had mugged Lila. She was okay, scared, but okay. They roughed her up a bit and took all of her money."

I squinted at Monty as I tried to figure out how that was connected to our conversation. "Monty—"

"Buck told me that he had been poised to kick Maddox off the ranch when he received Lila's call that she had been mugged. But

before she could tell him what happened, Maddox did. He said that he could get to you and Lila no matter where you were in the world, and he would unless Buck toed the line."

I sucked in a painful breath. "That's what he was holding over my father."

Monty nodded. "Maddox wanted the ranch, and until you told me Ethan here was the new owner, I thought Maddox had inherited it."

I slowly panned to Cooper. "That's why Maddox was so pissed when the will was read. He fully expected to inherit the ranch."

"We knew that already, Ethan," Cooper pointed out. "We've always known that Maddox expected to inherit the ranch."

"No, I know that, but...If he truly is using the ranch to traffic in drugs or guns, he can't be working alone. He has to have people he buys product from, not to mention the people who work for him like Brick and Jones, which means other people are involved."

Cooper frowned, looking so confused. "Right."

"He might even have people he has to answer to." Maddox might think he was a smart cookie, but I personally thought he was a dumbass. "If their supply line is gone, if the money is gone, who are they going to go after?"

Cooper's eyes grew bigger. "Shit."

I nodded. "If Maddox doesn't get me out of the way so he can have the ranch, then they are going to come after him, and he can't have that. He has to kill me."

And wasn't that just peachy?

## Chapter Seventeen

~ Cooper ~

"The fuck he will!" I shouted as I surged to my feet. "I'll kill him first."

And I was going to make it as painful as possible.

"Cooper, sit down," Ethan ordered. "As much as I am in favor of getting Maddox out of our lives forever, that's not the way to do it. He needs to be arrested and then face the justice system."

I started to argue until I saw the evil gleam in his eyes.

"I don't want his suffering over too quickly," Ethan said. "I think it's only fair that he serve the same thirty years without his freedom that he forced my father to serve."

I smirked at the vehemence behind Ethan's words. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

As much as I wanted to pound my fist into Maddox's face, making him live the next thirty years—essentially the rest of his life—behind bars was a much better justice than simply ending him.

"You might want to think about heading back to the city." I hated saying that. I didn't want to give Ethan the opportunity to leave the ranch, but I didn't feel I had any other choice. "I can't guarantee your safety."

"I can send Jos and a few of the ranch hands over to help keep the place safe," Monty offered. "A few more sets of eyes can't hurt."

True, but... "Can you spare Jos?" I asked.

Ethan frowned. "Jos?"

"Jos Nash, my ranch foreman," Monty explained. "He's been with me for about ten years now." Monty shook his cane. "Probably

couldn't run the place without him."

"He's a good man, Ethan," I added.

We didn't work together because we managed different ranches, but we'd been out to drink together a few times. He was an even-minded man even if there was always a dangerous glint in his eyes. Those stupid enough to take him on soon regretted it.

Ethan huffed softly and thrust a hand through his hair before crossing his arms and looking at Monty. "Can you spare this man? I don't want to put you out."

"I can for a few days. It's not calving season quite yet so Jos is mostly just fixing stuff up around the homestead. If you can put them up here, I'll send Jos and a few of the boys over for a few days, help you keep an eye on the place."

"It's much appreciated, Monty." A few more guys meant more eyes on Ethan.

"We'll only need them for a few days," Ethan said. "I'm calling in a team of men from the city where I live. I've worked with them on several occasions to keep clients safe during trials and such."

"People from the city?"

I tucked my lips in to keep from laughing. Monty's tone was almost disgusted. I understood the sentiment even if Ethan didn't. We tended to want to take care of things in-house, and not bring in outsiders, especially someone from the big city.

Ethan shrugged. "Keeping people safe is kind of what they do, and right now, I need to be safe."

I tried not to take it as a personal affront that Ethan didn't feel safe. Maddox was out to get him and he had been shot at. That would scare anyone, especially a city boy.

Still, it didn't sit well with me that he didn't trust me to keep him safe. I just didn't think there was anything I could do about it.

Logically, he was right.

Logic sucked.

"We still need to keep you safe until they get here," I pointed out.

Ethan nodded. "That would be good."

I stood when Monty did and then held my hand out to the man. I respected Monty Cross almost as much as I had respected Buck. They were both old time ranchers, dedicated to the cattle and the land. They could be hard at times, but they would give a stranger the shirt off their backs.

"Thank you for your help, Monty."

"Any time, Cooper. Just let me know if you need anything else."

"I will," I promised. "And if you think of anything else that might help us catch Maddox, please let us know."

Monty nodded. "I'll give it some thought."

"If you think of anything, you might give the sheriff a call. Ken is pretty damn pissed that Maddox keeps slipping through his fingers."

"My impression of Maddox is that he never does anything that totally crosses the line. He pushes it, certainly, but it's never anything that can put him behind bars. So, if he's doing what you say he is, it's going to be hard for the sheriff to connect it to Maddox."

Unfortunately, that was the impression I had as well.

"He's messed up somewhere." I was positive of it. "Maddox is smart, I'll give you that, but he's not a genius. He's messed up somewhere. We just haven't found it yet."

"We have, though," Ethan said. "We've already figured out he messed with the books."

"Did he?" I asked. "Can you prove he did that? Or was it Buck? Buck was the owner after all. Maddox was just the foreman."

"I..." Ethan frowned. "Okay, I get what you're saying, but..."

"This is how Maddox operates, Ethan. Unless we can find undeniable proof of him breaking a law, the sheriff can't bust him. Even if he caught Brick and Jones, it was them that took shots at us, not Maddox. He might have ordered it, but do you think they would admit to it?"

Ethan's shoulders slumped, but just for a moment. "I need to make some phone calls." He held out his hand to Monty and smiled, but that smile didn't reach his eyes. "Thank you for all your help, Monty."

I waited until Ethan walked away before stepping toward the front door. I know Ethan said he was calling in his security team, but it sounded like he had a few other phone calls to make.

My curiosity was eating me up.

"He's an interesting one," Monty said as he headed for the door.

"He is, but I think he's a good man, even if he knows shit about ranching."

"How's that working out anyway?"

"Well, he's going to be building the ranch hands a new bunkhouse and he plans on putting in a bunch of solar power so we can cut back on some of the bills." I chuckled as I remembered what else he wanted to do. "He wants to heat the barn for the horses."

Monty's eyebrows lifted in clear surprise. "He does understand that they are animals, right?"

"He says that they deserve heating just like the rest of us."

"Huh."



I chuckled at the confused astonishment on Monty's face. I knew that feeling well when dealing with Ethan. I was confused by some of the things he said, and amazed by the way he thought, but I was actually kind of excited to see what he'd do next.

"According to the conditions of Buck's will, he has to stay here for a year in order to inherit the ranch. I'm not sure what he plans to do with it after that, but the next year is sure to be interesting."

Monty snorted out a laugh as he started shaking his head. "A city boy running a cattle ranch. What was Buck thinking?"

I kept my sharp retort locked behind my lips because I respected Monty and he was trying to help us, but I wasn't sure I agreed with his assessment.

True, Ethan was a city boy and he knew shit about ranching, but he wasn't trying to say he did. He made no bones about the fact that he knew nothing about our way of life.

He was just trying to help in any way he could.

"Thanks again for your help, Monty," I said once we reached the front door.

The older man nodded. "I'll send Jos and the boys over in the morning."

The man turned and walked out the door. I closed it behind him before walking back over to the coffee table. I carefully packed up the coffee tray Colby had brought us and carried it into the kitchen.

I paused in the doorway as I watched Colby jump away from Sawyer, his face flushing red. I arched an eyebrow.

Sawyer snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. He glared at me as if daring me to say anything.

I wasn't sure what was going on in here, but I didn't have time to deal with it right now. It was really none of my business anyway. As Ethan was constantly reminding me, Colby was an adult and we needed to not treat him like a victim or an idiot.

Besides, I trusted Sawyer.

I set the tray down on the counter. "Ethan and I will be in the office. He has some phone calls to make. Tomorrow, Monty is sending Jos and a couple of his guys over to help us keep an eye on things around here. Colby, I'll need you to make up some rooms for them."

Colby nodded even though he refused to look at me. "I'll make sure they're ready."

"Thank you." I gave Sawyer a pointed look before turning and walking out of the room. I made a beeline for the office. Ethan was on the phone when I walked in. I took one of the chairs in front of the desk and waited for him to finish.

Ethan's phone call didn't take long, but they did give me time to think. If he was calling in these security guys of his, maybe we could have one of them go undercover at Bobby's Place. Even if he didn't see Maddox, he might learn something useful we could give to the sheriff.

It was definitely an idea to bring up with Ethan when he was off the phone. I also wanted to talk to him about maybe putting up some security cameras around the main homestead. If Maddox and his goons were going to try something, getting it on camera would go a long ways toward putting them behind bars.

I pulled myself from my thoughts when Ethan tossed his cell phone down on the desktop. "Problems?"

"I called my mother to ask her what happened when we moved to the city. I wanted to hear it from her. I was also kind of hoping she had a little more insight into Maddox."

"So?" I asked when Ethan grimaced. "What did she say?"

Ethan huffed. "She hung up on me."

That couldn't be good."

"Did you tell her what Maddox was up to?"

"Not all of it. I told her he was causing problems and that Buck had left the ranch to me. I didn't tell her the rest. I didn't want her to worry."

"You know you're going to have to tell her at some point, right? We need to know what she knows."

Ethan nodded. "I'll call her back in the morning."

I could only imagine how hard that conversation was going to go. My father had taken off when I was barely out of diapers and my mother had booted me out when I was seventeen to make room for her new boyfriend.

We weren't close.

"Were you able to get a hold of your security guys?"

Ethan nodded. "Boaz said him, Jasper, and Morgan will head out this way in the morning. They are flying in from Atlanta so they should be here around noon or so."

"I did have an idea about that. Would it be possible for one of his guys to come in separately and hang out around town, maybe drop into a few of the places we tend not to go, including Bobby's Place?"

"Send one of them undercover you mean?"

I nodded.

Ethan brightened, leaning forward on his elbows. "That's actually not a bad idea." He reached for his cell phone and then dialed a number before holding the phone to his ear again. "Boaz, it's me again. My foreman had an idea I wanted to pass by you before you guys headed out this way. We were thinking about having one of your guys go undercover here in town."

He nodded several times, making grunting noises before saying, "Here, let me put you on speaker so you can talk directly to him."

Ethan hit a button on his phone before setting it down on his desk. "Okay, Boaz, you're on with me and my foreman, Cooper."

"Ethan says you have an idea for one of my guys to go undercover?"

I blinked for a moment, a little shocked by how deep and rough the man's voice sounded. "Uh, yeah, I...uh...Well, I got to thinking. Maddox and his goons know all of us. They don't know you."

"There's also an issue with some of the ranch hands either being hassled or not allowed in some of the establishments in town, Boaz," Ethan added. "If Jasper or Morgan came in separate from you and got a room at the hotel, they could hang out in town and see if they hear anything."

I snorted. "Oh, I imagine they will hear a lot."

"Explain please," Boaz said.

I glanced at Ethan, not sure how much to reveal or even how to reveal it.

"A lot of the guys on the ranch are gay, Boaz. They get a lot of shit for it from some of the businesses in town as well as the patrons." Ethan's lips twisted into a grimace. "One of my ranch hands, a nice young man named Colby, told me that he's not allowed

to shop at the biggest grocery store in town because they refuse to take his money saying they believe he earned it servicing the other ranch hands."

Boaz grunted. "I hope you're working on a case for that."

Ethan smiled. "I will be. This Maddox thing seems a little more pressing. He is trying to kill me after all."

I frowned in confusion. "What case?"

"They're refusing Colby service because he's gay," Ethan explained. "I don't know exactly what the laws are for this state, but it's against Federal law to discriminate against someone based on sexual orientation. So, I'll be filing a lawsuit against them on Colby's behalf."

My jaw dropped.

## Chapter Eighteen

~ Ethan ~

I chuckled at the shocked look on Cooper's face. "This is kind of what I do, Cooper." It was actually exactly what I did. "Even if they had proof of Colby's sexual orientation, it would be against the law for them to discriminate against him and refuse their services because of that, but they don't even have that. They are guessing based on what? His looks? Where he lives? Because of rumors?"

I knew I sounded intense, but being a gay man myself, I felt very strongly about this. It wasn't okay for people to refuse service to me or people like me based on who we slept with. It wasn't even their business who we slept with.

"Colby isn't having sex in the middle of Main Street. He isn't making out with someone in the produce department. He's not even holding someone's hand while he shops. He's just trying to buy groceries. He shouldn't be kept from doing that simply because a tight ass and a set of abs turns him on."

"I agree," Cooper said, "but this is ranch land, Ethan. It's filled with cowboys, ranchers, and farmers."

"Cowboys, ranchers, and farmers can be gay, Cooper." I absolutely hated the stereotype that rough and tumble guys couldn't be gay. "You are."

Cooper sighed heavily. "I know that, Ethan, and I imagine just about every guy on this ranch knows that, too, but no matter how you spin it, there are a lot of people out there who don't agree with it."

"So what?" I asked. "This was a free country the last time I looked. We're allowed to sleep with who we want to sleep with as long as they are of legal age and give consent. If other people don't like it, then they have no business sticking their noses into my bedroom."

I glanced at my phone when I heard Boaz chuckle. Having worked with him and his team for several years, I knew they were gay, too. It was one of the reasons we worked so well together. We had a common goal.

"You do your thing, Ethan, and I'll do mine. Jasper and I will be there tomorrow. Once we land, I'll send Morgan to town to get a hotel room. Once he gets the lay of the land, he can start looking around."

"Have him hang out at a bar in town called Bobby's Place," I suggested. "I've been told that Maddox and a couple of his goons, Brick and Jones, hang out there."

"These the two idiots that took pot shots at you?" Boaz asked.

"That's them."

"Whoever this Morgan guy is," Cooper said, "he needs to be careful. Not all of the locals are warm and welcoming to strangers."

"Which is why I am sending in Morgan," Boaz replied. "His father owns a horse ranch down in Kentucky. Morgan knows enough rancher slang to fit right in."

I pursed my lips before glancing at Cooper.

"What?" Cooper asked.

"Do you think Monty would be willing to go along with a little charade?"

Cooper squinted at me. "What kind of charade?"

"If Morgan is up here on behalf of his father's horse ranch to meet with Monty about some horses, he can toss Monty's name around a little." I shrugged. "It would give him a good reason for being in town if anyone started asking questions."

Cooper grinned, clearly liking the idea, and reached for his cell phone. "I'll call Monty."

After quickly giving Monty the rundown of what we wanted him to do, and getting his agreement, Cooper relayed the information to me and Beau. We talked for a few more minutes, getting all of our ducks in a row. By the time we finally ended our calls, I was ready for a drink.

"Does my father have anything to drink around here?" I asked.

Cooper got up and walked over to the bottle of whiskey on the bookshelf. "Whiskey okay?"

I nodded.

Cooper poured two glasses of whiskey and then carried them back over to the desk. He set one down in front of me before walking around the desk to take his previous seat.

I took a sip of my whiskey. I coughed and pounded on my chest at the slow burn I felt as it went down. "Buck might have been a simple rancher, but he knew his whiskey. This stuff could burn the hair right off your balls."

Cooper just grunted and took a sip of his own whiskey.

I chuckled as I leaned back in my seat. "You think this undercover thing will work?"

"As long as no one figures out Morgan is working for us, yes. If they do, those that dislike Maddox will understand exactly why we



did it. Those that don't won't ever forget we brought in an outsider to spy on them."

That sounded delightful.

"So, not getting caught is the key here?"

Cooper snickered. "Pretty much."

I had to wonder if we could pull it off. I didn't doubt Morgan's ability to blend in or spin a tale, but we were dealing with a group of people who were wary of strangers in the first place. If we added in the fact that Morgan would be trying to ferret out information on Maddox, this had the potential to blow up really quickly.

"We should probably get to bed," Cooper said. "Morning comes pretty early around here."

"Oh, I am aware."

Way early.

I tossed back the last of my whiskey and then stood and started for the door. When I reached it, I turned back to look at Cooper.

"Coming?"

Cooper stared for a moment and then tossed back his whiskey, slammed the glass down on the desk, and joined me at the door. "I figured you'd be a little too sore. We did kind of go at it last night."

I grinned as I trailed a finger down Cooper's chest. "Who says I'm going to be the one to get fucked tonight?" My grin grew wider when Cooper swallowed tightly. "Come on, handsome."

Cooper was right behind me as I left the office and made my way upstairs to the second floor and the bedroom I'd taken over.

I leaned up on my toes and slanted my mouth over Cooper's when we reached the bedroom, trying my best to devour the man. I

pressed into Cooper, becoming familiar again with the sexy mouth I'd been dreaming about all day long.

Cooper's hard cock pressed against me as I took the man's lips in a kiss rife with need. My own cock jerked in anticipation. I couldn't seem to get enough of Cooper.

I wanted to consume him.

I was delighted with Cooper's eager response when our tongues slid together and tangled. Cooper whimpered when I leaned back. As much as I wanted to go on kissing him, I had other plans for the gorgeous muscular man.

Cooper's eyes widened and then filled with delight as I lifted my shirt and pulled it over my head, dropping it on the floor. He inhaled a shaky breath, his eyes riveted on my sleek chest.

I grinned as I grabbed Cooper's callused hand and brought it to my chest, pressing the palm against my hot muscled skin. "You can touch me you know."

I'd actually prefer it.

The soft stroke of Cooper's fingers on my heated flesh sent pleasant jolts through me. I held my breath and stood still as Cooper explored, moving from my collarbone down to the gentle swell of my pectoral muscles, and then to my nipples. The little buds firmed instantly, shivers of delight following Cooper's touch.

"You're stunning," Cooper whispered absently as his fingers moved over my chest.

"You're not so bad yourself." "

Cooper gasped when I cupped his face, pulling it down toward me once again. My eyes locked onto Cooper's luscious lips. Thick and plush, they were perfectly made for kissing.

They were made for me.

I grabbed Cooper's hips and then slowly slid my other hand up his side and wrapped it around him, pulling his bigger body closer before pressing our lips together. Cooper opened, allowing my tongue to do whatever the hell it wanted.

A moan of ecstasy slipped through my lips as our bodies rubbed against each other, the friction maddening, and not nearly enough. I slid my hands down Cooper's body to the zipper of his pants. The sound of a zipper being lowered ricocheted through the room like a shot.

I leaned back again and stared up into Cooper's dark brown eyes. What passed between us in that moment was more than desire. There was an awareness there, a deep connection that seared me right to my soul and inflamed me.

I pushed Cooper's pants down his legs, Cooper stepping out of them. His thick erection stood proud, jutting out of a nest of brown curls like it was waving hello.

It was a thing of beauty.

I could feel Cooper's eyes on me as I stepped back and unbuttoned my own jeans and pushed them down my legs. They were like a heated caress over my skin.

I toed my boots off and then kicked my jeans free. When I stood, the smoldering heat in Cooper's eyes made me square my shoulders and stand tall. There was a strong sense of pride that I could ignite such fire in this man's eyes.

I turned and started for the shower, holding my hand in the spray of water once I got there to check the temperature. After regulating

the water, I stepped into the shower stall. I turned and held out my hand, smiling.

"Coming?"

Cooper was in the large shower a moment later, drawing me into his arms.

I started caressing Cooper's shoulder and then skimmed all the way down his back, cupping his butt cheeks. I caressed Cooper's ass, trailing over the cleft between his cheeks. Cooper cried out as he spread his legs apart, arched his back, and pressed his ass into my hands.

Cooper shuddered against me when I dropped feather light kisses along his throat and down to his chest. I had never seen anything so erotic, never felt such an aching need in my life.

Cooper was coming apart in my arms.

"So sexy."

I pressed my lips against Cooper's wet skin again. Cooper leaned his head back against the tiled wall, gasping as I continued to caress him.

I slid my fingers between Cooper's ass cheeks again, ghosting them lightly over Cooper's tight hole. "Tonight I am going to take you here. I'm going to make you feel so good."

I reached past Cooper and grabbed the body wash off the shower shelf. I popped the top and then generously coated my cock. I reached around Cooper and rubbed some more of the slick body wash between his ass cheeks and gradually put one, two, then three fingers inside of him as Cooper pushed back against me, moaning.

I stopped when I heard Cooper gasp, "Now, Ethan, I need you now."

I lifted up on my toes, my tongue demanding against Cooper's lips. I gripped Cooper's hips and brought them closer. I caressed Cooper's mouth with my tongue, tasted him, and yet I wanted more.

I swung Cooper around and pressed him into the wall, pushing my body up against his. It wasn't a perfect fit due to the height difference, but it would do in a pinch.

It was all I could do not to shake apart as I pressed the blunt head of my cock against Cooper's stretched hole and slowly pushed into him. I began thrusting upward, driving my cock deeper into Cooper's ass.

All of a sudden, I was all the way in. I buried my face between Cooper's shoulder blades and cried out at the feeling of Cooper wrapped around my aching cock.

I had never felt anything like it in the world.

Waves of pleasure lapped at me as I started moving, pushing my hips into Cooper's ass. My body bowed at the sensations that were shooting through me.

I grew more frantic, wanting to be one with Cooper, needing to be closer. My strokes became harder, my cock filling Cooper over and over again. I swiveled my hips, driving my cock in and out of Cooper's tight ass like a piston.

I leaned forward and brushed my lips over the nape of Cooper's neck, teasing the wet skin.

"Ethan, oh my god. Ethan!" Cooper moaned between each word, his cum spurting all over the shower wall.

Just watching Cooper's release pushed me over the edge. My entire body stiffened, my muscles locking into place for a moment.

A hungry growl ripped from my lips before I drove my cock deep and buried my face between Cooper's shoulder blades. My strangled shout was muffled as I came in Cooper's tight ass.

It was the most intense climax I could ever remember having.

Cooper collapsed in my arms, his breathing hard. I held him, savoring the feeling of holding the strong man in my arms. After a moment, I gently pulled out and wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close.

I pressed kisses over Cooper's neck and shoulder. "Ready for bed?"

Cooper chuckled. "For my first time, that wasn't so bad."

My jaw dropped. "That was your first time?"

Cooper's face flushed as he shrugged. "Never let anyone top me before, so yeah."

"You should have told me." I would have been a whole lot gentler. God, I'd gone after him like a lust filled beast. "Coop—"

Cooper's sleepy grin said it all.

I blew out a breath. "You need to tell me these things in the future, okay? Communication is key in any relationship."

"Is that what we have?" Cooper asked. "A relationship?"

I wasn't sure, but I wasn't sure we didn't either. We had something. I just wasn't sure how to define it. "Well, I'm not sleeping with anyone else, am I?"

Cooper's eyes narrowed. "You'd better not. I don't share."

I grinned at the vehemence behind Cooper's words. "I don't either."

Never had, never would.

## Chapter Nineteen

~ Cooper ~

Mornings were never really my favorite time of day. For one, they always came way too early. For two, my brain didn't usually start working until after at least two cups of coffee.

Today was different.

My mind was instantly clear the moment I felt the warm body beside me. It was also slipping into the gutter faster than I could catch it.

It was a really great body.

The sun was barely up and I had an insane urge to roll over, cuddle Ethan, and go back to sleep. Not a good idea for a man who had just been promoted to foreman of a ranch. I had things to do.

I just couldn't remember what they were.

"Stop thinking so hard," Ethan whispered without opening his eyes. "It's too early."

I chuckled softly. "Ranchers get up early."

"Lawyers don't."

"You're not a lawyer anymore. You're a rancher." At least for the next three hundred and sixty-one days.

Ethan cracked one eye open. "I'll always be a lawyer."

I smirked at the indignation in his tone. "A ranching lawyer, which means it's time for you to get up and run said ranch."

Ethan groaned as he closed his eye and pulled the blankets up over his head. "I don't wanna."

God, he was adorable.

"I'll make you some coffee."

The edge of the blanket lowered. "Coffee?"

"Nice, hot, freshly brewed coffee."

"Okay." Ethan kicked the covers off and rolled to the side of the bed before sitting up. "You convinced me."

I chuckled as I climbed out of bed. I'd have to go to my room in the bunkhouse to get a change of clothes, but that wouldn't be too hard. "I'll meet you in the kitchen in ten minutes?"

"Make it fifteen," Ethan said as he stood. "I need to jump in the shower real quick."

Probably wasn't a bad idea.

"Let's make it twenty minutes. I need a shower, too." I needed time to get back to the bunkhouse, shower, and grab some clean clothes before heading for the kitchen.

Ethan nodded and waved his hand as he stumbled to the bathroom. He really wasn't a morning person. I quickly pulled on my clothes and headed out of the bedroom. I wanted to do what I needed to get done so I could get to the kitchen and make the coffee I had promised him.

The clanks and clatters of pots—and some humming—came from the kitchen so I knew Colby was up, and hopefully cooking breakfast. I headed in that direction. Maybe I could get him to start a pot of coffee while I went and got changed.

"Morning, Colby."

Colby jumped and spun around, his hand pressing to his chest. For a moment, fear was alive and wild in his eyes. When he saw me, he blew out a breath. "You need a bell."

I chuckled, trying not to make him too uncomfortable. "I need to run to the bunkhouse. Can you make a pot of—?"



Colby pointed to the full pot of coffee.

I grinned as I patted him on the shoulder and then started for the back door. "Good man."

I was out the door and halfway to the bunkhouse before I smelled smoke. I slowed and frowned, glancing around for the source of that smell. It shouldn't be anywhere around the main ranch. We had too much to lose if the place caught on fire.

I gasped when a whisper of smoke floated up from the roof of the bunkhouse. It was toward the back of the building, far away from the chimney.

The first licks of flame stopped my heart in my chest.

I yanked my phone out of my pocket long enough to call Colby and tell him the bunkhouse was on fire and to get the fire department out here and then hung up and started running for the bunkhouse.

I would have called the fire department directly, but I also needed to call in anyone who might be out in the field in case we had to evacuate the barn. Colby would know to call them in.

Besides, I had to make sure the bunkhouse was empty. I'd rather lose that pile of sticks than one of the ranch hands. I was also hoping we could put out whatever was burning before the place burned to the ground.

The door slammed open as I ran inside the bunkhouse. "Fire!" I shouted as loud as I could. "Fire! The bunkhouse is on fire!"

I raced for the stairs. Once I reached the second floor, I began banging on doors. "Fire! Get out! The bunkhouse is on fire!"

A door down the hallway cracked open and Macon stuck his head out. "What are you going on about?"

"The bunkhouse is on fire. Help me make sure everyone is out."

"Shit!" Macon ran back into his room. He was back a moment later, fully dressed. "You check the first floor. I'll finish up here."

I nodded and spun, racing toward my room. I had one thing I needed to grab before evacuating the building. Everything else could go up in a puff of smoke, but this one thing couldn't be replaced.

Luckily, I knew right where it was.

Once I reached my room, I ran in and pulled open the draw of my desk. I grabbed the old faded leather bound book inside and stuck it in the back of my pants. It was a breeding record for King and Mimi and my own notes I'd written over the years on how I would run a breeding program. It couldn't be replaced.

I would have liked to grab more, but I was more worried about making sure everyone was safe. Clothes could be replaced. People could not.

I could hear Macon banging on doors as I left my room and tore down the stairs to the first floor. I checked the main room, the kitchen, the bathroom, and the pantry.

The first floor was vacant.

Macon was coming down the stairs by the time I reached the main room again, Sawyer behind him. "Anyone else?"

Macon shook his head. "We searched every room. It's just us."

"Okay, let's get out of here." Smoke was starting to fill the upper level, telling me that the fire was growing.

The three of us hurried out the door and moved several paces away from the bunkhouse. The flames I'd see before were now licking their way across the rooftop.

The bunkhouse was going to be a total loss.

"Sawyer, go make sure Colby called the fire department and then wait for them to get here, show them the way back here."

Sawyer took off before I even finished speaking.

"Macon, grab a garden hose and start spraying everything down on this side of the bunkhouse. I'm going to go around to the other side and water down everything back there. Maybe we can keep this from spreading."

Macon nodded and headed for the hose wound up on the side of the house. I hurried around to the back of the bunkhouse, but as soon as I got there I realized the bunkhouse was a lost cause.

Flames leaped up the entire backside of the building, fully engulfing it, which explained why there had been smoke inside.

I was just glad I'd been able to get everyone out.

My jaw clenched when I spotted the pile of burnt wood and hay pressed against the side of the building. It never should have been there. It was a major fire hazard. My guys knew better, which meant whoever had put that there had not been one of my guys.

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed the sheriff. "Ken, you'd better get out here. Someone set fire to the bunkhouse. The fire department is on the way, but it's going to be a total loss."

Ken sighed. "I'm on my way."

I hung up and put my cell phone away before heading to the hose on this side of the building. I knew it wouldn't put the fire out, but maybe I could put a dent in it before the fire department got here.

After spraying the side of the building for a few minutes, I coughed at the amount of smoke it caused and took a few steps back. I hoped Macon was having better luck with the front of the building.

I started at the bottom, making sure I hosed down as much of the burnt wood pile as I could before moving farther up the wall. Standing on the ground, there wouldn't be much I could do about the burning on the roof, which I suspected would burn the entire thing down to the ground.

I did make sure to spray the ground around me and over to the bushes and trees by the fence leading to the barn. Hopefully, the barn was far enough away to not catch any embers.

The sounds of hoof beats pounding on the ground broke through the crackling noise of the fire. I glanced toward the field just in time to see the rest of the ranch hands racing toward the fence line on their horses.

They stopped before they reached the fence, jumping off their horses, and giving them swats on the rumps to send them out into the field. Levi and Nate ran toward the barn while the rest of them headed in my direction.

"What happened?" Maverick asked. "How did the fire start?"

I pointed to the pile of burnt wood and hay. "I think it was started on purpose."

"Fuck!" maverick shoved his hand through his hair. "What do you need us to do?"

I handed Maverick the hose. "Keep spraying this. Macon has the front of the building. I want the rest of you to go around the building and try and pull anything away that might act as an accelerant. The bunkhouse is probably a write off, but I want to minimize the damage if possible."

"Good thing the boss is planning on building a new one," Jackson said.

The boss!

Damn, I'd forgotten to tell Ethan the bunkhouse was on fire.

"Keep an eye out for the sheriff and the fire department," I said as I started to turn toward the house. "I need to go tell Ethan the bunkhouse is on fire."

Although, how he couldn't hear all the yelling or the unmistakable sounds of the bunkhouse burning down, I would never know.

It was really loud out here.

I started for the main house. The sound of a gunshot from inside the house made my heart freeze in my chest. I stumbled forward, almost losing my footing and falling flat on my face.

I quickly caught myself and took off running. When I passed Macon, he took one look at my face and dropped the hose, taking off after me.

When I crashed through the back door, I immediately tripped over something in the doorway and hit the floor. I rolled over and then forgot to breathe when I spotted the man lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

I scrambled toward him on my hands and knees, reaching him just as Macon stepped into the doorway.

"What the fuck?"

"It's Sawyer." It was kind of hard to tell with all of the blood, but I recognized the man as soon as I rolled him onto his back. It was also obvious where the blood was coming from when I spotted the red saturating his chest. "Call an ambulance. I'm going to go find Colby and Ethan."

I just prayed whoever had shot Sawyer hadn't gotten to them, too.

## Chapter Twenty

~ Ethan ~

I'm pretty sure I stood under the hot shower spray for a good ten minutes before my brain woke up. Granted, it wouldn't fully engage until I had at least two cups of coffee, but this was a good start.

I made sure to thoroughly clean all my nooks and crannies before rinsing off. I turned off the shower and reached for a towel. After drying my body from tip to toe, I toweled my hair dry.

I wrapped the towel around my waist and tucked the end in and then walked over to the bathroom counter. I had to wipe my hand over the mirror to remove the steam, but I liked what I saw when I did.

I looked surprisingly rested. There were no bags under my eyes, no major wrinkles at the corners of my eyes. Not even my usual stress wrinkle between my eyes.

Maybe there was something to say about ranch life.

I chuckled at the mere thought.

I fluffed my fingers through my hair before turning toward the bathroom door. I needed to speed up my morning. Cooper and coffee were waiting for me, two things that could quite possibly be my favorite things in the world.

I didn't know Cooper that well, but what I did know, I liked.

A lot.

It wouldn't be too much of a hardship to spend more time with him, even if I did resent being hobbled here.

Actually, was starting not to resent it quite as much as I thought I would. I didn't know if that had to do with Cooper, the ranch, or the

chance to figure out why it held such a special place in my father's heart.

That didn't mean I wasn't planning on hightailing back to civilization the first chance I got, but I could be convinced to come for a visit, especially if Cooper was the one inviting me.

As soon as I opened the bathroom door, I stopped. My eyes flickered to the man kneeling on the floor of the bedroom to the guy holding him by a fistful of hair to the gun in the guy's hand.

I tried to act nonchalant as I stepped into the bedroom, but I was acutely aware of the gun in Maddox's hand, and the fact that it was pointed directly at me. "It's usually polite to wait for an invitation before entering someone's bedroom."

"My ranch." Maddox shrugged. "I don't need permission or an invite to go anywhere on it."

"It's my ranch, actually." I knew I should keep my mouth shut and play this man's game, but I was getting tired of playing by his rules. "And you're trespassing."

I cried out as the gun went off and something that felt like an ice pick slammed into my arm and spun me around. I stared down at the ragged hole in my arm and the blood leaking out of it in mute shock.

That asshole had shot me.

It did tell me two things, though. One, Asa Maddox was bat-shit crazy, and two, he was a damn good shot.

I pressed my hand over the wound and slowly turned to look at Maddox. "So, what's the plan here? You're just going to shoot me? You have to know you'd be the first person the sheriff would look at if I die."

Maddox snorted. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Kind of, yeah.

"I don't leave things to chance, boy. That imbecile is being taken care of as we speak and the new sheriff knows better than to mess with me." Maddox's wide grin was almost fiendish. "He'd sell his mother for a buck."

Note to self, find out who in the sheriff's department had suddenly come into a large amount of cash. I also needed to figure out how to warn the sheriff that his life was in peril.

My eyes darted to my cell phone, which was sitting plugged in on the nightstand behind Maddox and Colby.

I took a step and purposely stumbled forward. Once I straightened, I nodded toward the bed. "Do you mind?"

Maddox shrugged before taking a step back, pulling Colby along with him. He was making sure there was plenty of space between us. That was smart of him. It wasn't like I planned to jump him or anything, but I wouldn't pass up the chance if it came.

When I got close to the bed and nightstand, I purposely stumbled again, making sure I crashed into the nightstand.

My brain engaged just as I grabbed my cell phone. Instead of trying to take it and hide it so I could call Cooper, I hit the record button, and then left the phone plugged in right where it was. With any luck, it would pick up the entire conversation.

If Maddox thought he was going to get away with killing me, and whoever else he planned to kill, he could think again. I might not be a rough and tumble rancher, but I was a damn good lawyer, and what I needed was evidence.

When I sat down on the side of the bed, I made sure I sat closer to the middle of the bed, far enough away from the phone that



Maddox wouldn't think I was going to reach for it or anything. I didn't even want him to think about the device.

"Even if this new sheriff is in your pocket, how are you going to explain killing the current sheriff and shooting me? People will ask questions."

Maddox pulled a piece of paper out of his breast pocket. "This is Buck's original will. Once I explain that you falsified the new will and came here to take my blood right away from me and"—His grin grew as he tightened his hand in Colby's hair and yanked his head back hard enough to make the man cry out—"you kept my boy here from being with me, I'm sure they will understand that I was merely defending myself when you jumped me."

Tears were streaming down Colby's pale face and abject terror shook his entire body. He looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else than where he was.

I couldn't say I blamed him.

"You actually think Colby is going to agree to that?"

Maddox's eyes narrowed and the smile slid off his face. "He'll do what he's told to do. He knows the consequences if he doesn't."

Colby whimpered.

"Buck paid Mr. Anderson to file his new will with the courts. You can't explain that away, especially since you killed him."

"I didn't kill him." That wicked grin was back. I had an overwhelming urge to wipe it off his face, with my fist. "That's what you don't understand, my boy. I never do my own dirty work. I pay other people to do it."

"Oh, so you paid someone to kill the lawyer?"

Maddox shrugged.

Damn it.

A shrug could not be recorded on audio.

"Did you kill my father?" I asked just to keep the conversation going.

"No, but only because it would get too many eyes pointed in my direction. His heart attack was like a gift from heaven, though. I'd grown tired of listening to him bleat about how much he missed you and that slut he was married to. I'd been listening to it for years, and frankly, it was nauseating."

I bristled at Maddox calling my mother a slut, but now didn't seem like the time to argue about it. "Why do you have such a hard-on for my father? I know that story about you being his half brother is bullshit."

Maddox's chuckle left a cold chill in my chest. "Figured that out, did you?"

"It wasn't that hard."

"It's very simple. He owes me."

I frowned, confused by that statement. "How?" I asked. "You were a teenager when you arrived here and told everyone you were his half brother. You even had fake papers saying you were related to him."

"What makes you think they were fake?"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, please, anyone who knew my grandparents knew they were totally devoted to each other. Neither one of them would have ever been unfaithful."

That's what I'd heard at least.

"I never met them so I have no idea, but Buck was never able to prove those papers were fake."

"So, you just decided to fuck with a man's life for shits, grins, and giggles?"

"He owed me!" Maddox stormed, all signs of his earlier amusement gone. "He took the most important thing in my life away from me so I decided to do the same to him, and before you decided to stick your nose in where it didn't belong, I'd done just that."

"Me? What did I do?"

"I'd taken his family from him, his life, and I was about to take his precious ranch when you showed up. Well, I've worked too long to have this all end now. I won't stop until this ranch is mine."

"What did he take from you?"

"He took my father."

My head snapped back. "Buck took your father? How? Who was your father?"

Maddox released Colby and started pacing. "My father was a great man, and Buck had no right to take him away. He spent the last years of his life behind bars because Buck couldn't keep his big mouth shut."

A whisper of a memory came to life in my mind. Before it could solidify, Maddox spoke again.

"All he had to do was keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't even do that." Maddox banged the gun against the side of his head, making me wonder if he was just a bit crazier than I thought. "My father wasn't hurting anyone. He just needed to use the cattle trucks for a little while. He would have returned it when he was done. Buck didn't have to turn him in to the feds. My father would have even paid for the gas he used."

And just that fast, the idea formed into a complete thought. "Your father was one of the men who was arrested all those years ago, the ones who were running guns across the Canadian border."

Maddox turned his murderous glare on me. "My last sight of my father was through prison bars. I was just a kid, barely fifteen years old. No child should ever see their father behind bars."

"I agree." Maddox should have been right there behind bars with his father. "But that doesn't explain why you decided to go after me and my mother." I cocked my head to one side. "Did you really pay someone to attack my mother in the city?"

"I was young back then, but I had my father's brains. Buck needed to know that I could reach his family wherever they were, and it worked, too. Once I had your mother beat up, and I threatened to do the same to his precious baby boy, he did anything I wanted."

When Maddox started pacing again I stared at Colby until I caught his eye, and then I nodded toward the bathroom. If Maddox went off—and I was positive that was going to happen at some point—I wanted Colby out of the line of fire.

Maddox seemed so agitated, I doubted he knew exactly what Colby was doing as he slowly scooted toward the bathroom. I just hoped he kept talking as loud as he was because every word was being recorded for posterity...and the courts.

"I had it all, and Buck didn't say a word. Whatever scheme I came up with to milk this ranch of every last cent, he just zipped his lips and looked the other way. It was glorious."

Maddox was practically giddy.

"Every day for the last thirty years, I've found ways to rip this ranch out from under Buck's feet and there was nothing he could do

to stop me. Stealing, using the cattle trucks to move drugs, guns, and bitches over the border, anything I could think of."

I gulped at the animated glee on Maddox's face when he turned to look at me. If I hadn't known this man was insane before, I knew it now. The glint in his eyes made him seem totally insane.

"And I made sure it was all laid at Buck's feet. All of it was in his name. I was just the foreman. Buck was the owner. If the feds showed up again, they'd be putting him behind bars this time."

"Then why are you fighting so hard to get the ranch? I'd think you'd be happy to have me in charge."

Maddox shook his head. "If you'd stayed in New York it might have worked, but I can't have you here. You ask too many questions."

Oops. My bad.

"I'm only going to be here for a year," I pointed out. "Why can't you just lay low until then?"

"I've got too many things in the works right now, business deals that are time sensitive. The people I work with would never allow a lawyer to be all up in their business and I doubt you'd be willing to look the other way. Of course, I thought about threatening your mother again, but my guys in the city say she disappeared."

"What?" I croaked out. "My mother has disappeared?"

I'd talked to her just last night.

Wait..."You sent people after my mother again?"

"Oh, don't worry," Maddox was quick to assure me. "They weren't going to kill her or anything. Just rough her up a bit. I just needed a way to get you to go back to the city."

Oh, yeah, that made all the difference.

"So, what's the plan here then? I'm sure someone heard that gunshot by now. You have to know help is coming."

Maddox snorted. "If you think you're going to be rescued, think again. I waited until everyone but Cooper headed out to take care of the stock before setting the bunkhouse on fire. That bastard is going to go up in a ball of flames for what he did to me."

My heart skipped a beat as fear swamped me. "You set the bunkhouse on fire to kill Cooper?"

Maddox shrugged. "I watched and waited until I saw everyone leave except him. I knew he was sleeping. He deserves to burn for kicking me off my own ranch."

It dawned on me then that Maddox had no idea Cooper had spent the night in the house with me. I could only hope that he had seen the fire and gotten out before succumbing to the flames.

"So, what now?" I asked, afraid I already knew the answer when Maddox turned his gun on me.

"Now, you die."

## Chapter Twenty-One

~ Cooper ~

I started to head out of the kitchen when I heard sirens. I prayed one of the vehicles coming up the driveway was the sheriff. Instead of going upstairs as I wanted, I raced out the backdoor. I needed Ken to help me rescue Ethan from whoever was doing all of this.

Well, I knew who was doing this, or at least who was behind it. I just didn't know if Maddox was here with Brick and Jones or if they were operating on their own.

Didn't really matter. They were all going down.

A fire engine stopped in front of the bunkhouse. I was surprised when the sheriff jumped out of the cab and hurried over to me. He looked a little less primed and pristine than he usually did. His hair was ruffled and there were a few dirt stains on his uniform.

"Ken, what are you doing on—"

Ken shook his head. "Some fucker blew up my squad car."

My jaw dropped.

"What in the hell is going on around here?"

"Fuck if I know," I replied. "I—"

The rest of my words were cut off as I heard glass shatter above us. I had just enough time to push Ken out of the way before Ethan and Maddox crashed on to the ground.

Ethan groaned and rolled onto his back.

Maddox didn't move.

I raced over to Ethan and dropped down to my knees. "Ethan, honey?" I wasn't sure where to touch him. He had a nasty wound on

his arm, and there was blood all over him, but nothing looked broken. That didn't mean he didn't have internal injuries.

He had fallen out of a second floor window after all.

"Ken, call an ambulance."

"Already done," Ken said as he walked over to squat down next to Maddox. He reached out and pressed his fingers to the man's neck and then shook his head as he dropped his hand. "He's gone."

I couldn't say I was disappointed.

"Ethan?"

Ethan's eyelids lifted slowly. "Hey."

"What hurts?"

"Everything," Ethan replied with a sputter of laughter. "Where's Maddox?"

"He's dead, Ethan."

Ethan's eyes widened. "Dead?"

I nodded.

"That fucker shot me. He said he set the bunkhouse on fire to kill you." Ethan clutched at my arm. "You have to call the sheriff. Maddox is going to kill him."

"He's dead, Ethan. I just told you that."

Ethan shook his head. "He's not working alone. He has someone else, someone in the sheriff's department. Maddox has been paying the guy off."

I was not surprised to find a frown on Ken's face when I glanced over at him. "Do you have any idea who Ethan might be talking about?"

"No, but I'll look into it."



"Follow the money," Ethan whispered as his eyelids slid closed.  
"Always follow the money."

"Ethan?" I reached down and grabbed his hand. "Open your eyes, honey. Come on, open your eyes and look at me."

Ethan's eyelids fluttered before lifting. A small smile crossed his lips. "Hey."

Damn.

"I need you to keep your eyes open, Ethan. Can you do that for me?"

I was terrified he had a concussion or a brain injury, or worse.

"Maddox—"

"Maddox is dead, Ethan. He can't hurt you anymore."

Ethan's brow flickered and he licked his lips. "Colby, he's..."  
Ethan glanced toward the house. "Have to save Colby."

I looked up and glanced around to see who was near. When I saw Macon, I called out to him. "Go find Colby. He's inside somewhere."

"B-Bathroom," Ethan whispered. "I had him hide in my bathroom."

"Look in Ethan's bathroom," I told Macon.

I looked back down at Ethan when he pulled on my arm. "What is it, Ethan? Do you hurt somewhere?"

I didn't see how he couldn't.

"My cell phone," Ethan said. "On the nightstand. N-Need to get it to the sheriff. M-Maddox had a...a lot to say. R-Recorded it."

Fucking-A.

I grabbed Ethan's hand off my arm and held it between my own. His eyes were drifting closed again so I knew I only had seconds. "I'll

get it to the sheriff, Ethan. I promise."

I'd make sure it happened if it was the last thing I did.

"Macon, grab the cell phone off Ethan's nightstand and bring it to me. Don't let anyone else have it."

Macon didn't say anything. He just took off.

That was good enough for me.

I glanced up when I heard a vehicle coming up the driveway. I don't think I was ever so glad to see an ambulance in my life. I waited until the paramedics reached me before letting go of Ethan's hand and moving back to let them work.

"Can anyone tell me what happened?" one of the guys asked.

"He fell out of the second floor window."

The man looked up, let out a low whistle, and then started taking Ethan's vitals.

"There's another one inside," I said. "Gunshot wound to the chest."

There was a slight widening of his eyes before he ordered the other paramedic to go start an examination of Sawyer. "What about him?" he asked as he glanced at Maddox.

The sheriff shook his head. "He's already gone."

It seemed to take forever for the paramedic to finish his examination and wrap Ethan's arm to keep him from bleeding out.

"Well?" I asked as soon as the guy started putting his equipment away.

"I don't think he has any internal injuries, but he does have a GSW to the left arm, and I'd bet money he has a concussion. He's going to need to go in even if it's just to get the bullet out of his arm."

"I can—"

"I know you want to go with him, Cooper," Ken said, "but I need you here to explain what is going on. Send someone else to watch over Ethan."

Ken knew me well.

I glanced around again, looking for the men who were loyal to the ranch. "Maverick, get over here."

The man looked up, spotted me, and then hurried over to me. "What's up?"

"I need you to ride to the hospital with Ethan and make sure no one gets to him. Brick and Jones are still out there somewhere and someone working for Maddox tried to kill the sheriff. You need to stay on your toes. Ethan doesn't go anywhere without you."

"You got it."

I didn't like sending someone in my place, but I knew Ken was right. Things had gone to shit and I had a duty to the ranch to figure out what had happened and make sure this was a safe place for Ethan to come back to.

"Call me with updates on Ethan and Sawyer."

Maverick gestured behind me with his head. "I think he's going to be fine."

I turned and then chuckled.

Sawyer was strapped down to a gurney being moved toward the ambulance, but he had a strangle hold on Colby's hand as the smaller man hurried alongside the gurney.

I don't know what Sawyer was saying to Colby, but at least he was speaking, which meant he was alive.

When the other gurney was brought out, I helped the paramedic load Ethan up and then walked him to the ambulance. When we

reached the doors, I leaned down and brushed a kiss across Ethan's forehead.

"I'll see you soon, Ethan."

I doubted he heard me, but his hand did tighten in mine.

I took that as a win.

Stepping back and allowing Maverick to climb in and then shut the door before the ambulance took off for the hospital might have been one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

Everything in me screamed to go with Ethan, that he was much more important than the ranch, but Ethan wasn't the only one that needed me to make things right. There were a lot of people who depended on the ranch to make a living and have a home.

I waited until the ambulance disappeared from sight before turning back to look at the smoking bunkhouse. Most of the fire had been put out, but it was clear the building was a total loss. The fire damage was pretty extensive.

I doubt we'd be able to salvage much.

"Someone blew up your car?" I asked as I turned to look at the sheriff.

Ken snorted. "If I didn't have a remote start on the damn thing, I wouldn't be talking to you right now."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Remote start?"

"As soon as I hung up with you, I grabbed my stuff and headed out of the station. I hit the remote start as soon as I reached the front doors so the motor would already be going when I got to it. Save time and shit." Ken's jaw clenched. "Damn thing went sky high."

"I take it you don't think it was an accident?"

"Hell, no, and that was before you boy started spouting off about Maddox. I took it into the mechanics for a tune-up just last week. Wasn't a damn thing wrong with it. Ain't no reason for it to blow up unless someone messed with it."

"Do you have any idea who could have messed with it?"

Ken nodded. "I have a few ideas. One of my deputies has been making mischief with his mouth for the last couple of months. I ignored it until Ethan said something about following the money and I remembered the tricked out new truck the fucker just bought and paid cash for. I know exactly how much Deputy Hartwell makes and it's not enough to pay for a fifty thousand dollar vehicle."

"This is really fucked up, Ken. If Maddox wasn't already dead, I'd wring his neck."

"Unfortunately, he was not working alone, and we both know that. We might not have to deal with Maddox anymore, but that doesn't mean this is over, not until we catch the idiots working for him."

I was afraid of that.

"Hey, Cooper." Macon walked up and held out Ethan's cell phone. "This thing was still recording when I grabbed it. I turned it off, but there's probably going to be a lot of dead air on it."

"Thanks, Macon."

"What do you need me to do now?"

"Make sure the others have the animals well away from the fire and then take my truck and go into town to help Maverick keep an eye on Ethan and Sawyer. Maddox may be dead, but there are others still out there. Until they are caught, we can't let our guard down."

I almost jumped out of my skin when Ethan's cell phone rang. I stared at the screen for a moment before answering it and lifting it to my hear. "Hello?"

"This isn't Ethan."

I recognized the voice, and as soon as I did, I realized there was a new wrinkle in my day, but it might not be a bad one. "It's Cooper, Beau."

"Hey, man, is Ethan around?"

I wish.

"Ethan is on his way to the hospital. He was shot as was one of our ranch hands. The fucker who did this also set fire to the bunkhouse and tried to kill the sheriff."

"Fuck man, I thought ranch life was boring."

I glanced at the body on the ground. "Well, the main instigator is dead, but his evil minions are still out there."

"You want us to head to the ranch or the hospital?"

"Hospital. I've already arranged for a couple of my ranch hands to keep an eye on Ethan and Sawyer, but—"

"That the other guy that got shot?"

"Yes."

"Okay, we can do that. Are we still a go for Morgan?"

"Yes, until we catch all these bastards, we have to assume they are still hostel. And, while Maddox has been dealt with, these guys still need to be caught."

"You got it."

I hung up before glancing at Macon. "A couple of friends of Ethan's are going to meet you at the hospital. Beau and Jasper. They can help you keep an eye on things there."

Macon's lips twisted for a moment before he said, "We can take care of our own."

"These are the security guys that work with Ethan. He requested that they come in and help us. I don't like it either, but I understand where Ethan is coming from. This is what these guys do."

"Fine." Macon turned and headed for my truck. He got about half way there before stopping and turning back to me. "Keys."

Right.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and tossed them over. Macon took off to my truck so I returned my attention to Ken. I blew out a breath and then brushed my hand over the top of my head. "This is a nightmare, Ken."

Ethan had already been planning on moving everyone into the main house so he could build a new bunkhouse, but I doubted he intended to do it this way.

"Walk me through what happened and then we can listen to that recording."

I quickly went over what had happened since I left the house earlier up until Ken arrived. It didn't take long. Not that much time had passed. Ken asked a few questions here and there, but that part of the conversation was over relatively quickly.

When I was all done, we listened to the recording Ethan had made. That was a little harder to get through, especially when I heard the gunshot and knew that was when Ethan had been shot.

"I need a copy of that recording, Cooper. This might be what we need to nail Maddox's ass to the wall."

"Um, he's dead, Ken. What's it matter now?"

"Because you and I both know Maddox wasn't the only one in this mess." Ken pointed to the cell phone. "He might not have named names, but there is enough there to get a warrant to start an official investigation and put a few names to those working with him."

I was really glad I was a ranch foreman and not a sheriff because that sounded like a massive headache to me. I just wanted to take care of the ranch and all the men on it.

"You might need to get the fire inspector out here," I advised Ken. "There was a large pile of wood and hay stacked against the back of the bunkhouse. I suspect that is where the fire originated."

"Starting the bunkhouse on fire?" Ken shook his head as he glanced at the smoldering building. "What was he thinking?"

"You heard the recording. He was trying to create a distraction and kill me at the same time." I snorted out a laugh. "If he wasn't such an idiot, he would have figured out I slept in the main house last night."

I realized what I'd said the second Ken's eyes widened. "I mean..."

Damn.

"He's only been here for four days, Coop. That might be a new record."

I narrowed my eyes.

Ken laughed as he held up his hands. "I'm just saying—"

"Well, don't. What happens between me and Ethan is just that, between me and Ethan. I don't need anyone spreading rumors about and giving him a bad name."

"Hey." Ken frowned. "You know me better than that. I would never spread rumors."



My shoulders slumped. "No, I know you wouldn't, and I'm sorry for jumping your case. This thing between me and Ethan is just so new. I don't want him to decide it isn't worth it and head back to the city."

I was kind of hoping he never decided to head back to the city.

"Sounds to me like you like him."

"I do," I readily admitted. "I had this whole idea what a man like him would be like, and he's totally blown them all out of the water in just a few days. He smart, but that's expected out of a lawyer, but it's more than that. He uses those smarts to make the lives of others easier."

I chuckled on the frown that pinched the skin between Ken's eyebrows. "He's decided to build a new bunkhouse because he believes if he takes care of the ranch hands, they will be loyal to the ranch. He wanted to build a total new building, with more bedrooms and private bathrooms for each ranch hand."

Ken's eyebrows lifted. "Private bathrooms?"

"And full medical and retirement plans, the works. He also wants to bring in solar power to heat the bunkhouse, main house, and the barn."

Ken sputtered before a laugh shot out of his mouth. "He wants to heat the barn?"

"He was appalled that we weren't already heating the barn because horses need warmth, too. That's what I'm talking about. He's always trying to do for others. That's not how I thought city people were."

"I think ranchers and city folk have good people and bad people. Maddox is a perfect example of bad people just like Ethan is the

perfect example of a good people. Doesn't matter where they are from."

True, but meeting Ethan had been an eye opening experience in more ways than one. I just hoped he decided to stick around long enough for other people to figure that out.

I glanced back to the burnt out building, wincing at the senseless destruction. "So, what do you need from me? I want to get up to the hospital so I can be there when Ethan wakes up."

"I need to get an official statement from you and the others, investigate the scene, and then get the fire inspector out here."

"If I give you my statement, do you need me for any of the rest of that?"

"No, I suppose not."

"I want to get up to the hospital." My stomach was in a knot and I didn't think it would unwind until I knew Ethan and Sawyer were ok. "So, take my statement so I can leave. I'll have Levi walk you through the house."

"Sounds like a plan," Ken replied as he pulled a small pad of paper and a pen out of his pocket. "Okay, what did you see?"

I rolled my eyes as I started talking, going over what I'd seen again. He should have taken notes when I told him before. Luckily, it didn't take too long.

Still, by the time I got done with my statement, made arrangements for the men to move into the main house, checked on the animals and got them all back in their stalls, and gave the men orders to stick around the house and help Ken out with his investigation, over four hours had gone by.

It would be dark soon. I needed to get to the hospital. Only one problem. Macon had taken my truck.

"Ken, I need a ride."

Damn it.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

~ Ethan ~

Saying I had a headache was the understatement of the millennia. It was as if I was suffering from a hangover times a million. Jack hammers pounding inside my head would have felt better.

It didn't help that pretty much my entire body ached, especially my arm. Granted, they had numbed it up pretty well when they took the bullet out, but it was starting to ache again.

The rest of my body was pretty painful, too. I wouldn't be surprised in the least if I turned into one big bruise by morning.

Falling out a window could do that to someone.

What had I been thinking? Was that the bonehead move of all time or what? I'd seen Maddox start to pull the trigger and remembered that he was a damn good shot.

I didn't want to die.

Rushing him to get the gun away had been my plan. The both of us going through the second floor window had not.

I would have asked for pain medication, but I wanted to keep my wits about me until I knew this was all over. I was still waiting for the sheriff to come question me, but so far, he hadn't.

I turned my head and glanced at the man sitting in the chair beside my hospital bed. Macon had been there since right after I arrived and hadn't left my side. I was kind of grateful for that. I felt a little safer with him here, even if I wished it had been Cooper. I understood why Cooper wasn't there after Macon explained it to me.

"Any word on Sawyer yet?"

Macon shook his head. "He's still in surgery."

Not good.

"Where's Colby?"

"He's in the surgery waiting room. He refused to leave until Sawyer came out and he knows he's okay."

I frowned and then wished I hadn't when an ache of pain shot through my head. "He's going to be okay, isn't he?"

Macon's face was solemn when he looked over at me. "I don't know, Boss. He was awake when they loaded him up in the ambulance, but the paramedic said that bullet was awfully close to his heart."

Damn, damn, damn.

"When he wakes up, let him know all of his medical bills will be covered by the ranch and his job will be waiting for him. I don't want him to worry about anything except getting better."

"You know he's got a long road to recovery, right?"

"Then we'll hire a nurse around the clock so he can be home in his own bed just as soon as the doctors release him."

"The bunkhouse is a total right off, Boss. He ain't got no home to go to."

"Yes, he does. You all do. I was planning on moving you all into the main house while I built a new bunkhouse anyway. I see no reason we can't up our time schedule and start building one just as soon as we get that mess cleaned up."

Macon's eyebrows lifted. "You want us in the main house?"

"Yes, unless you prefer to sleep in one of the horse stalls."

"Wasn't really planning on it."

I didn't think so.

When the door swung open, Macon jumped to his feet and placed himself between me and the tall man that had just walked in. I knew Macon was trying to protect me, but I knew that tall, beefy, bearded man well.

"Hey, Beau, glad you could make it."

Macon took a step back, but didn't take his eyes off of Beau. "You know this guy, Boss?"

"I do, Beau and his team have been working for me for several years. This is one of the men I was expecting today."

Some of the tension left Macon's shoulders, but not all of it. He moved around to stand on the far side of the bed instead of taking his seat again.

Beau raised a dark bushy eyebrow as he watched him before walking over to take my hand. "What's this I hear about you having a fight at the O.K. Corral?"

I snorted, but immediately winced when another shard of pain shot through my head.

I needed to stop doing that.

"Turns out working on a ranch is just as exciting as walking the streets of New York, and just as dangerous."

Beau looked me up and down. "I can see that."

"Where's Jasper?"

"Walking the hallways."

That made sense.

"And—"

Beau gave a shake of his head. "It's just the two of us right now. The rest of the team is on standby and Morgan had some stuff to do for his father."

"Oh." I knew what that meant. "I hope he remembers to stay safe. As recent events have shown me, these idiots are crazy."

"So, I see." Beau glanced at Macon for a moment before looking back at me. "So, when do you think you're going to get out of here?"

"I don't know. I'm kind of waiting for the doctor to come tell me when I can leave."

"You okay here if I leave?"

"Yes, of course." I gestured to the man standing on the other side of my bed. "Macon is here to keep an eye on me. He'll keep me safe."

"Okay, then I'm going to go see if I can track down the doctor."

"Can you go up the surgery waiting room and check on Colby?"

"Colby?"

"He's one of my ranch hands. Another one of my ranch hands, Sawyer, was shot just like I was, but his injuries are more severe. Colby is in the waiting room waiting for word on his condition."

Beau nodded. "I can do that."

"Go easy on him, okay? Colby is pretty jumpy and today was really hard on him. Maddox knocked him around after taking him hostage again. Colby was terrified."

Beau patted my good arm. "I'll make sure to treat him with kid gloves."

"Just don't treat him like he's broken, okay?"

"I know how to do this, Ethan. I've dealt with enough of your clients. I know what they are going through."

I knew that. Beau and his team were one of the best because they were well versed in dealing with people who had been abused in one manner or another.

"Colby is important to the ranch, Beau."

"Important?"

"He's the cook." He was more than that, but Beau was ruled by his stomach and everyone on his team knew it.

Beau chuckled as he started for the door. "I'll be careful."

I waited until he walked out of the room before turning to look at Macon again. I smirked when I found him glaring at the door. "He's a good guy, Macon. I promise. Beau and his team have been working with me for several years. Granted, I'm not usually the one they are protecting, but it's happened a time or two."

Some people didn't like losing to a gay man in court. I'd had more than one of them come after me. I'd even had an obsessed client come after me once, and after I won his case for him.

People were weird.

"We protect our own at the ranch," Macon insisted. "We don't call in outsiders."

It was nice that Macon included me in that statement.

"They aren't here just to protect me. There are a few other things going on that I can't talk about right now, but Cooper and I discussed it at great lengths last night. Beau and his team are here to help us, not interfere."

Macon grimaced, but walked around to sit in his chair again. "I don't like calling in outsiders."

"No, I get that, but everyone on the ranch is well known around these parts." I winked at Macon. "I needed someone no one has ever seen before."

Macon stared for a moment, and then his eyebrows lifted. "Okay, I can see that. Outsiders do have their place, I guess."



I knew he'd get it.

"How long does it take to get to the waiting room?"

Macon shrugged. "It's one floor up, so..."

"Let's give them a few more minutes. If Beau isn't back then, maybe you can go track my doctor down."

I really wanted out of here.

"You know they might insist on keeping you overnight, don't you? You were shot and you have a concussion. I also suspect you're going to be black and blue by morning. Maybe sticking around the hospital wouldn't be a bad thing."

"I hear what you're saying, but I'd be much more comfortable at home in my own bed." With Cooper tucked in beside me, but I wasn't going to mention that fact. Not everyone needed to know about my love life.

Macon smiled. "You called the ranch home."

Huh...I had.

"Yeah, well." I didn't really have an answer for that. "Don't get used to the idea."

"What is it about living on a ranch that you don't like?"

"You mean besides the fact that it's totally alien to what my life is usually like?"

Macon chuckled. "Yeah."

"When I first arrived here, my hatred of the ranch stemmed from my anger at my father. The ranch represented everything I hated because it took him from me. Now, after getting to know about what sort of man he was, I'm not so sure why I hated it. I mean, don't get me wrong, I miss the city. I miss my penthouse apartment and my friends. Hell, I miss my swanky coffee. But the ranch isn't so bad."

Stating that did not mean I wanted to spend the rest of my life here. I was going with the idea that I was required to be here for a year and I wasn't going to think about the future until it arrived.

"Go find the doctor," I said as I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed. I blinked for a moment when the room spun.

"You okay?"

"Yes," I said even if I wasn't sure I was. I didn't want to stay here one more minute than I had to. "Go find the doctor, Macon" I said again. "I want out of here."

Macon nodded and got up, heading for the door.

"And find me something to wear." I was not walking out of the hospital in an open-backed hospital gown. Maybe I should have concentrated on putting on pants instead of not getting shot by Maddox, because that had worked out for me so well.

I sat there for what seemed like forever before sliding off the bed and opening the nearest drawer. I really was tired of sitting there in a hospital gown. Maybe I'd luck out and there would be something in here somewhere I could change into.

I opened drawer after drawer, finding absolutely nothing useful, before moving to the cabinets by the door.

Bingo!

I grabbed a set of scrubs off the pile inside the cabinet. They weren't really my style, but anything had to be better than the open-backed gown I was currently wearing.

I pulled the loose fitting blue drawstring pants up my legs and tied them off. A stack of shirts sat on the next shelf up. They were just as ugly as the pants, but again, beggars couldn't be choosers.

I'd take what I could get.

I was surprised to find socks and crocs on the lowest shelf.  
Did they really stock this stuff at a hospital?

I grabbed a set of socks and then searched through the pile of crocs until I found a pair in my size. I never once in my life envisioned that I would be wearing crocs, but whatever.

Again, beggars couldn't be choosers.

After getting dressed, I tossed my gown across the end of the bed. Macon still wasn't back. Neither was Beau. I walked over and pulled the door open and looked down both ways of the long corridor.

Nothing.

I was starting to wonder if something had happened. Was Sawyer more hurt than originally thought? Could they be waiting with Colby to talk to his doctor?

I huffed and walked back into my room. I spotted my medical chart in a holder on the end of the bed and reached for it. It was nothing more than a white binder with all my information in it, and I doubted I would understand most of it, but boredom and curiosity were an evil bastard.

Okay, I didn't recognize most of the medicines listed, but I understood the procedures listed. It basically explained what I already knew. I had a gunshot wound on my arm and a concussion.

Not really all that exciting.

I snorted and started to put the chart back when the door behind me pushed open. I turned with a smile on my face, but it almost instantly turned into a frown when I spotted a deputy standing there.

I did not like the disdainful way he looked me up and down and then dismissed me as if I wasn't important.

"I'm looking for a patient that is supposed to be in this room," the man said.

"Is there a problem, Deputy?"

"No, I just need to ask him some questions."

"Oh, um..." I glanced back at the bed.

"Has he been released?"

"No."

The deputy huffed. "Then when will he back in his room, nurse?"

It was the contemptuous way he said nurse that did it for me. Male or female, nurses were hard working people. They deserved respect simply because of what they did for a living, which was keeping other people alive. For a deputy to disrespect me simply because he thought I was a nurse sent my temper soaring.

I smiled as brightly as I could. "The patient was taken for some tests. Would you like to wait for him?"

The deputy snorted before turning and walking out, the door swooshing closed behind him. I waited a few minutes before stepping over to the door and cracking it open.

There was no one else in the hallway so I slipped out and started making my way toward the elevators. I didn't know what sort of questions that guy had for me, but the sheriff could take my statement.

That deputy was an ass.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

~ Cooper ~

Considering the sheriff was in the passenger seat of the truck I had borrowed, I tried to keep my speed within reason as we headed into town, but my need to get to Ethan might have given me a bit of a lead foot.

Ken glared at me more than once.

"He's going to be okay, you know," Ken said. "It's a simple GSW in the arm. You've had worse falling off your horse."

I knew that. Still didn't make me feel good.

"I can't believe Maddox actually shot him," I mused, mostly to myself. "I mean, what was he thinking? How did he think he was going to get away with that?"

It boggled the mind.

"His ego was bigger than he was," Ken replied. "He really thought he could get away with all of this and not pay the consequences."

"But how?" I glanced at Ken real quick and then back out the front window. "Maddox was a bastard, but he was a smart bastard. He never would have tried something like this without a backup plan. What was it?"

"That I couldn't tell you. I'm not a bastard. My parents were married, thank you very much."

I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean."

"I do, but I don't have an answer for you. To me, it seems insane to try half the shit Maddox pulled. I just can't figure out how he pulled it off for so damn long."

That one was easy. "People see what they want to see."

And I was seeing a truck coming down the road toward me with a police car in hot pursuit. Both vehicles were moving at a high rate of speed. I started to pull over to the side of the road to let them by—and because it was the law and the law enforcer was literally sitting in the truck beside me—until I spotted the man behind the wheel of the fleeing truck.

"That's my truck."

And Ethan was driving it.

I did have to move off to the side of the road as both vehicles went flying past me simply because Ethan was all over the road. I'm pretty sure he had never been in a high speed chase before.

If he made it out of this alive, I was going to strangle him.

As soon as they two vehicles passed us, I swung the truck around and took off after them. "Call the station and find out why in the hell Ethan is being chased."

"On it," Ken replied as he pulled his cell phone out. "Don't make us dead."

I knew it was an epically bad idea to split my attention, but I pulled out my own cell phone and dialed the ranch, putting it on speaker so I could have both hands on the wheel. I was pretty sure Ethan was headed to the ranch.

I hoped Ethan was headed to the ranch. He could have been headed back to New York City via the scenic route for all I knew.

"Hello?"

"Levi," I started, "I need you to rally everyone together in front of the main house. Ethan is in a high speed chase headed back toward the ranch."

"I'm sorry, did you say Ethan was in a high speed chase?"

Yeah, I almost didn't believe it myself and I was watching it live.  
"Yes."

"Who's chasing him?"

"The police."

Levi snorted. "Ethan Walker is being chased by the police?"

"Ye—"

"No," Ken said as he hung up his phone. "Deputy Hartwell did not call in a pursuit. In fact, he didn't even come to work today. He called in sick."

My jaw clenched and I pressed my foot down on the accelerator, making the truck shoot forward. "Isn't he the deputy with the new truck you told me about?"

Ken tapped the end of his nose. "Got it in one."

Damn it.

"Levi, go into the office and get the guns out of the gun cabinet. Break the lock if you have to. I want everyone armed and ready when we get there."

"No shooting unless a life is in danger," Ken said. "I don't need to be arresting any of you for murder."

I shot Ken a look real quick before saying, "We're about five minutes out, Levi, so hurry."

"I'm on it, Cooper."

I hit the button to end the call before dropping my phone in the cup holder. "Are you going to call anyone to come help?"

"No," Ken replied. "I don't know who I can trust down at the station at this point. Until a full investigation is done, I'm going to assume I'm on my own."

That was not good.

I winced when Ethan's truck fishtailed as he took a hard right onto the ranch driveway, taking out a fence post with the bumper. The police car was right behind him as he straightened out and shot up the driveway.

I tried to use a little more caution as I turned onto the driveway, but we still slid a little. I raced up the driveway behind the squad car, sliding to a stop right behind it when both vehicles in front of me suddenly stopped.

I jumped out and started to run to my truck when I realized that the deputy was out of his vehicle, but standing behind his open car door. He had his pistol pulled and aimed directly at the truck.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I shouted.

"Sir," the deputy called out. "You need to get back in your vehicle."

"The hell I do!" I was going to rip this guy's arm off and beat him with it if he didn't lower his gun. "Put your gun away."

"I can't do that, sir." The deputy's eyes dared between me and the truck. "You need to get back in your vehicle so I can handle this situation."

"What situation?" I caught movement out of the corner of my eyes as I waved my hand toward the truck and realized Ken had climbed out of the truck and was working his way toward the deputy. "You're holding a gun on the people in that truck."

"Sir, I'm not going to tell you again. Get back in your vehicle before I arrest you, too."

I clenched my hands because I seriously wanted to wrap them around this guy's neck. "You can't arrest them. You have no grounds for it. They haven't done anything wrong."



"Sir, you need to let me do my job. The driver of that vehicle is a suspect in a murder. He is considered armed and dangerous. Until I have him in custody—"

"And what will you do with him once you have him in custody, Deputy Hartwell?" Ken asked as he came up behind him and pressed the barrel of his handgun to the back of the deputy's head. "Would Ethan Walker even make it to the station alive?"

The deputy lifted his hands out to his sides, his gun dangling from his fingers. "Sheriff, you don't understand."

"You're right, I don't, but I always believed it was against the law to take bribes and arrest people for things they didn't do." Ken leaned in a little closer. "Tell me, Hartwell, were you the one who messed with my squad car?"

Instead of answering, Hartwell gripped his gun and swung around. My jaw dropped when Ken simply reached out and clocked the guy on the back of the head with his pistol.

Deputy Hartwell dropped like a rock.

Ken walked over and picked up Hartwell's pistol before rolling the guy over onto his stomach and handcuffing his hands behind his back. When he stood up, Ken dragged a hand down his face.

"Sometimes, I really hate this job."

"Is it safe to get out yet?" Macon shouted from the truck.

I felt like an idiot for forgetting they were still in the truck. I ran over to the truck and yanked the driver's side door open. "Ethan."

Ethan smiled up at me from a face that was way too pale. "Hey."

I reacted without thinking, grabbing him and dragging him into my arms. It wasn't until he grunted that I remembered he was injured.

"Let's get you inside."

"That would be good."

I knew exactly what he meant when we started walking toward the house. Ethan held onto me because he was a little wobbly on his feet. I was pretty sure if I let go of him, he'd hit the ground.

"Macon," Ken called out, "come help me with this idiot."

Instead of heading for the house, Macon turned and hurried over to Ken. I helped Ethan to the top of the stairs and then waited for them.

I growled when Ken started walking Hartwell toward the house. "What are you doing?"

I didn't want this guy anywhere around Ethan.

"I need to call a friend of mine in the state police," Ken replied. "There ain't no way I'm putting this jackass in my jail, not until I've cleared everyone there."

I hated that that made sense.

"Fine, but if he makes another try for Ethan, putting him behind bars is going to be the least of your worries." I knew a lot of places on this ranch where I could hide a body.

I helped Ethan into the house and led him over to the couch. After settling him on the cushions, I grabbed the throw on the back of the couch and covered him up.

When Macon and Ken brought Deputy Hartwell inside, I glared at the man until they walked him over and sat him down in one of the dining room chairs.

"Any word on Sawyer?"

"He's okay. He's out of surgery," Macon said. "They have him recovery now. Colby and Ethan's friends are keeping an eye on him."

That was a relief.

Anger flickered like a flame across my skin as I glared at the man who had chased Ethan and Macon from town. "What happened? Why was this idiot chasing you?"

Macon snorted as he waved a hand toward Ethan. "Ask him."

I turned to look at Ethan.

Ethan rolled his eyes. "He came into my hospital room and started going on about how he had some questions for me, except he didn't realize who I was because I'd changed into hospital scrubs."

He was still wearing them so I could see where that could be confusing. "Go on."

Ethan grimaced. "I didn't like him or his attitude. I figured the sheriff could ask me whatever questions he needed answered. After the deputy stormed off, I left my room and went looking for the doctor so I could be released."

"How did that go to you being in a high speed chase with the police?"

Ethan pointed to the deputy, a mulish look coming over his face. "I happen to come across this moron while he was on the phone with someone complaining that he couldn't find me. He promised he'd keep looking and when he did get a hold of me, he'd make sure no one got the chance to question me. He promised that he would take care of the problem"—Ethan pointed to himself—"me, permanently."

I growled as I spun to look at the deputy again. "You planned to kill him?"

"Look," the deputy said, "I don't know what this guy is saying, but he's from the city so you know he's lying. City folk don't know how things are done in the country. He has no business being here."

Ken rubbed his chin, drawing my attention. "You know, I might have believed that if I didn't know you were taking money from Maddox and his buddies."

"I never—"

"Don't bother lying, Hartwell," Ken snapped. "Once we tear your life apart, I'll bet we'll find all sorts of things you've been doing. We'll start with how you paid for that fancy truck of yours and go from there."

Hartwell's lips snapped together and he glanced out the window.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

I glanced back at Ethan when he snorted. "I still don't understand how you ended up in a high speed chase."

"Oh, um, well, when I heard him talking about killing me, I tried to hightail it in the other direction, but I ran into a medical cart. He must have heard me because before I knew it, he was chasing me down the corridor. I was able to get to an elevator and get the doors closed before he got there. When I reached the main floor, I ran outside. I spotted your truck and decided getting out of there was the best thing I could do."

Macon chuckled. "You could have pushed me over with a feather when I came out the front door and saw the boss driving out of the parking lot in your truck. I thought I was going to pass out."

My brow flickered as I frowned. "Why?"

Macon held up my truck keys. "He didn't have these."

My lips parted as I glanced toward Ethan. "You hotwired my truck?"

"Of course I did. I needed to get away. I wasn't going to let that moron get his hands on me."

"How?" I asked.

Ethan's eyes rolled with exasperation. "I did grow up in New York City, remember? Knowing how to hotwire a vehicle is practically a prerequisite of living there."

Like I could forget where he lived.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

~ Ethan ~

I was done.

My ability to deal with people had flown the coop. My ability to deal with bullshit had gone up in flames. I didn't care if this was city shit or country shit or man on the moon shit. I was beyond being able to deal with it anymore.

I wanted sleep, quiet, and then more sleep. Hopefully, wrapped up in Cooper's arms. At this point, I wasn't sure I could sleep without the assurance of him by my side.

When in the hell had that happened?

I'd dated here and there and had more than my fair share of hook-ups over the years. I'd even had a couple of relationships. I had never been in a position where I couldn't think of going to sleep without my love interest by my side.

I knew some of my anxiousness came from the events of the last several days. I had been insulted, threatened, and dealt with an attempt on my life, all while dealing with the emotional upheaval of being on the ranch I had thought my father loved more than me.

If I was a little wigged out, it was perfectly understandable. But I was way wigged out. I was ready to climb the walls. I needed a drink. I doubted I'd get one.

Concussion and gunshot wound.

Wasn't happening.

"Colby called," Cooper said as he walked over and sat on the coffee table facing me. "Sawyer is awake and responding well. The doctors say if he continues to improve, he can come home from the

hospital in a few days. Colby is going to stay with him tonight, but he'll be back in the morning in time to make breakfast for everyone."

I shook my head. "Find someone else to do it. Colby needs to come home and sleep. No one gets rest in a hospital." That had been half the reason I had wanted to leave so badly. "We can rough it for one morning."

Maybe.

Colby really was a great cook.

"Is Ken about done?"

He'd been on and off the phone for the last few hours. Another man I didn't know had shown up an hour ago. Ken and him had gone into the dining room and started asking the deputy a bunch of questions. I'd tuned them out after a few minutes. I really didn't care what they had to say as long as that idiot deputy was headed to jail.

Cooper nodded. "They're done questioning Hartwell. They're going to take him to jail here in a few. Ken wanted to get copies of everything we'd found so they can start their investigation into Maddox and his friends."

"Did he listen to the recording I made?"

"He did, and that's one of the reasons he called his friend in. That's FBI Special Agent Jay North."

Okay, that piqued my interest.

"Why is the FBI interested in Maddox?"

"Because it looks like his friends are transporting people, not guns or drugs."

"People?" I frowned. "As in..."

As in what?

"From what Agent North said, it's a slavery ring working between Canada and Las Vegas. They are transporting girls down from up north to work in their illegal brothels in Vegas."

Huh.

"Is that what they meant when they said they were transporting cattle?" I shuddered just thinking about it.

"I think it was code," Cooper said.

It would have to be.

"How did Maddox get mixed up in something like that?" I asked. "I mean, he said that his father had been involved in that bust all those years ago, but trafficking in guns is a lot different than trafficking in women."

"From what Agent North said, it's actually the same people involved. Remember what Monty said, some of them got away. The FBI has been tracking them for years. They've busted some of them, but not all of them."

I was surprised when Cooper chuckled. This didn't seem like a laughing matter. "What?"

"Between what they were able to get out of Hartwell, what they got out of the records we provided for them, and the stuff they found on Maddox's phone, they're going to be able to blow this thing wide open. North thinks they will be able to start making arrests by the end of the week."

"Not us, right?"

"No, honey, not us. Maddox's friends, including Brick and Jones. He put out an APB on them. They are now wanted by the feds."

"Beau should—" I gasped as I realized I had totally forgotten about my friends. "What happened to Beau and Jasper?"



"Oh, they stayed up at the hospital to keep an eye on Colby. Until everyone was caught, they didn't want to leave him unprotected."

"Oh, that is a good idea." I wish I'd thought of it. "I'll call Beau in the morning. Hopefully, Morgan will have heard something we can give the FBI to help them find Brick and Jones."

Cooper nodded. "You can call them when you wake up, but I think for now, you've had about all you can take. It's time to go upstairs and get some rest."

"Oh, but—"

"I've already arranged for everyone to have a room in the main house for the night and I'll wait down here until Ken and North leave with Hartwell. I want you to go upstairs and go to bed."

"Coop—"

"I'll be up to join you just as soon as I am done down here."

That's what I wanted to hear.

I held out my hands. "Help me up?"

Cooper stood and then reached down to help me to my feet. As soon as I was standing, his arm went around my waist and he started leading me toward the stairs.

It was slow going, but only because I was practically asleep on my feet. Yes, my head and my arm throbbed, but not nearly as bad as I thought they would.

"Can someone get used to pain?"

"How so?" Cooper asked.

"I feel like I should be hurting more than I am, but since I'm not, I wondered if someone could get used to pain."

"I think you have to build up a resistance in order to get used to it. I think you're not feeling as much pain right now because you're so

tired. Your brain can only process so much and right now. It's a bit overloaded."

Just a bit.

"I suspect come morning, you are going to be feeling every bit of your injuries."

Oh, lovely.

"I'm guessing since the doctor didn't sign you out that you didn't get any pain meds."

"Nope," I said, with a heavy emphasis on the "p".

"That's what I thought. I have something in my room that—  
Damn."

"What?" I asked as I glanced up at Cooper.

"My room burned down."

Oh damn.

"That's okay, you can share my room."

"Oh yeah?"

I thought Cooper was humoring until I saw the delight in his beautiful deep brown eyes. "Yeah." I turned and wrapped my good arm around Cooper's neck. I rested the hand of my bad arm on his wide chest.

"You've been sleeping in my bed for the last few nights and then sneaking back to your room. If your room is gone, then you can just stay here and not have to sneak anymore. It's not like everyone on the ranch don't already know we're sleeping together."

It was pretty obvious.

Cooper reached down and brushed the hair back from my face, his eyes searching mine. "Are you okay with them knowing you're sleeping with the help?"

I snorted at that comment. I wasn't sure I liked the idea that we were just sleeping together. It felt like more.

I wanted it to be more.

"I'm okay with them knowing I'm sleeping with you because I'm in a relationship with you. If they have a problem with it, they can get the hell off my ranch."

That felt like a happy compromise.

Cooper grinned, and god, that was a good look on him. "Oh yeah?"

I tugged on the neckline of Cooper's black cotton shirt. "Why don't you go downstairs and get rid of everyone and then come back up here and we can talk about it?"

"As inviting as that sounds, I think it would be better for you to get some rest. Your arm is going to be screaming at you come morning. Besides, I still have to wake you up every few hours because of that bump on your head."

I groaned and dropped my head against Cooper's chest. "See? It really is a relationship. You're already making up excuses not to sex me up."

Cooper chuckled as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Or I care about you enough to want to make sure you're healthy enough for me to sex you up."

I knew he was right, but I still didn't like it. "Fine, tuck me into bed, all by myself, cold and alone, no one to snuggle with."

"Not for long, I promise. As soon as I get rid of Ken and North, and get the others settled, I'll come up and cuddle you."

I suppose that was the best I could hope for.

Cooper helped me undress and get into bed before tucking me in. He pressed a kiss to my lips before brushing the back of his hand over the side of my face.

"I won't be long, honey, promise. Try to get some rest."

"You'll make sure everything is locked up?"

"I will."

Cooper pressed one more kiss to my lips before getting up, turning the light off, and walking out of the room. The door shut quietly behind him, leaving me all alone.

I didn't like it, but I knew he'd be back soon. He'd promised, and one thing I'd learned about Cooper was that he kept his promises. He'd be back soon to cuddle me.

I just had to hold it together until then.

Unfortunately, lying there with just the moonlight shining in through the window to give me light, and way too much moving through my head, kept me awake.

My mind started to wander through everything that had happened to me since I arrived in town, and it was a lot. Between my father leaving me the ranch, deciding to take the ranch, dealing with Maddox, finding Cooper, and learning about life on the ranch, I really hadn't had a moment to breath.

There had been good things and bad things. Cooper definitely fell into the good category. So did the men on the ranch. The jury was still out on the ranch itself.

It certainly wasn't as horrible as I'd always thought it would be, but it wasn't great either. Luckily, most of that seemed to be cosmetic stuff, things on the surface that could be fixed. The bones of the place were rock solid, and I wasn't just thinking about the ranch

house. The solid foundation came from the men who worked the ranch...and my father.

The bad could all be laid at the feet of one man. If Maddox hadn't gotten it into his head that he needed revenge because his father got caught breaking the law, none of this ever would have happened.

I could have grown up on the ranch with my father a prominent figure in my life instead of just some guy who sent me a hundred dollars every year on my birthday.

If Maddox wasn't already dead, I'd shoot him myself.

I was almost angry that he had died before I could. It didn't seem fair. He had torn away a very important part of my life and he'd gotten off easy when he had broken his damn neck. He should have had to spend the rest of his life behind bars.

I was a lawyer which meant I was a strong believer in people taking responsibility for their actions. If they broke the law—and Maddox had basically blown it up—then they needed to pay the consequences.

Maddox had gotten off easy.

My breath caught painfully in my chest when I heard glass shatter downstairs. I pushed myself up on my elbows and turned my head toward the bedroom door.

I didn't hear anything. In fact, it was eerily silent. Granted, this late at night, I didn't expect to hear a lot of noise, but there should have been something, even the low murmur of voices from downstairs. It wasn't until that moment that I realized even that had stopped.

I swept the blankets back and swung my legs over the side of the bed. My world swirled around me when I sat up. Cooper might have

been onto something when he said I needed to rest.

I wasn't going to tell him that.

I grabbed those stupid hospital scrubs and pulled them back on before walking to the door and cracking it open. With the door open, I could hear a whisper of voices coming from downstairs, but I couldn't tell who was talking or what they were saying.

My steps were silent on the hardwood floors as I slid out into the hallway and tiptoed to the head of the stairs. I was really glad I hadn't decided to put shoes on.

Especially when I heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh and someone grunted in pain. I crouched down when I saw a shadow as someone moved around in the dining room.

The voices weren't getting any louder, but the intensity in the tones being used was growing darker.

After a moment, I crept down the stairs, staying as close to the wall as I could. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, instead of turning toward the dining room or the living room, I turned toward the hallway that led to my father's office.

If I remembered correctly, Cooper had told me that there was a gun cabinet in there, and I was pretty sure I was going to need a gun.

I slowed when I reached the end of the hallway and found the door standing partially open. I hesitated for a moment before reaching out and pushing the door open the rest of the way.

It immediately became apparent where the shattered glass sound had come from when I spotted the broken vase on the floor. I was more concerned with the man lying on the floor next to the shards of glass.

I squatted down and pressed my fingers against Ken's neck, only breathing out a sigh of relief when I felt a steady pulse beneath my fingertips. He was alive, but he had a nasty bump on the back of his head.

The broken vase made more sense now.

I grabbed his shoulder and gave him a little shake, trying to wake him up, but I didn't even get an eyelid flicker.

There were a few papers on the floor around him. When I picked one up and scanned over it, I realized it was a copy of the ranch accounts. I vaguely remembered Cooper mentioning something about Ken wanting copies of everything. I could only assume he'd been here making copies when he was attacked.

Question was, who had attacked him?

## Chapter Twenty-Five

~ Cooper ~

I clenched my jaw as I watched the man pacing back and forth in front of me. I couldn't believe Brick and Jones had gotten the drop on me. On us. One ranch foreman, a sheriff, and an FBI agent, not to mention all of the ranch hands sleeping upstairs.

And Ethan.

I prayed with everything in me that Brick and Jones didn't go upstairs. So far, they had stuck to the first floor. Jones was making a bunch of phone calls while Brick paced and Hartwell looked on as if waiting for something.

I had no idea what.

Levi had been outside on patrol. At this point, I had no idea if he'd been taken out like Ken had, or if he was still out there patrolling and had totally missed Brick and Jones breaking into the main house.

If he had, we were going to have words.

My eyes darted toward the opening to the dining room when I saw a flash of blue fabric. I tried to keep the movement hidden as I wasn't exactly positive of what I had seen. I was hoping it was either Ken or Levi, or maybe even one of the guys Ethan had called in.

My heart sank when Ethan peeked around the corner. I wanted to shout at him to run, to escape while he could, but that would mean acknowledging that I had seen him, and I couldn't do that.

I didn't want anyone to know I'd seen him.

"You can't think you're going to get away with this," I said, trying to draw attention to me and not the doorway. "Maddox is already



dead and the FBI is investigating him. They will find out about you eventually. You have a better chance of you give yourself up now."

"Shut the hell up!" Brick shouted. "If you had just done what you were supposed to do, none of this would have ever happened."

"Me?" I was actually shocked by the accusation. "What did I do?"

"Maddox had everything planned out, but you had to go sticking your nose in where it didn't belong."

I blinked at the guy in surprise. "You can't be serious. Maddox was an idiot and everyone knew it. He was stealing from everyone."

"Maddox was an idiot because he allowed you to stay on the ranch. Jones and I have been trying to get rid of you for ages." Brick grinned as he pointed his gun at me. "And now it looks like we are finally going to get our wish."

I closed my eyes and braced myself, waiting to hear the gun go off and the bullet to hit me.

I did hear a gun go off.

When I didn't feel a bullet slam into me, I opened my eyes and glanced around. Brick was lying on the floor, unmoving, and Jones and Hartwell were standing by the window, holding their hands in the air. Both men were looking toward the dining room entrance.

"I am getting really tired of people fucking with me," Ethan snapped as he stepped into the room. "You may think I am some stupid city slicker, but I am not someone you want to fuck with. I grew up on the streets of New York. I teathed on bullies like you and made it my mission life to put every damn one of you behind bars. But since you seem to think things are done differently out here in the country, then fine." Ethan cocked the hammer on the pistol in his hand. "Let's do it the country way."

"Um, babe," I hedged. "Maybe shooting them isn't a good idea."

I couldn't believe I was trying to keep Ethan from shooting these assholes. I must be losing my mind.

"Oh, but it would make me feel so good."

I wanted to snicker because it would make me feel better, too, but I doubted Ethan really meant it. He wasn't the killing type.

"How about you untie me and the nice FBI agent here, and he can take them away and toss them in a deep, dark hole."

Ethan cocked an eyebrow.

"You'll do that, right, North?"

Agent North snorted. "Oh yeah, these idiots are never going to see life without bars again. Not only are they neck deep in this shit with Maddox, but they assaulted a law enforcement official and took an FBI agent hostage. They'll be lucky if they don't get the needle."

"Is this the last of them?" Ethan asked. "Is anyone else going to come after me, break into my house, or try and kill me?"

"These are the last of the guys working for Maddox directly," North said. "That's all I can promise you."

Ethan's shoulders slumped. "Maybe I should go back to New York."

"No!" I tried to jump up, but I was tied to the damn chair. I turned to glare at Hartwell. "Untie me."

I don't know what the man saw in my face, but he quickly moved over and untied me before moving on to untie the FBI agent. I jumped up from my chair just as soon as I felt the ropes give way and hurried over to Ethan, making sure I didn't get between the gun and those Ethan was pointing it at.

"Why don't you let me take that?" I suggested as I reached for the gun.

"It's Ken's," Ethan said. "All the guns were gone from the gun cabinet."

Right.

"I had Levi get them while you were in your high speed chase. I wanted everyone armed in case things went sideways." I glanced at the two men standing by the wall and the one on the floor. Boy, had they gone sideways. "I guess I should have left one in there, huh?"

"I need to make sure my conceal carry license is valid in this state," Ethan said as he released the gun. "I want to be armed from now on. If any more of these fuckers come after me, I'm going to take out their kneecaps."

"Effective," I said as I uncocked the gun.

And just a bit scary.

I led Ethan over to one of the chairs and helped him sit down. He was weaving a bit. I wasn't sure if he wasn't fully awake or if this was all too much for him, but he definitely needed to sit.

He also needed a drink, but I wasn't sure that was a good idea considering he had a head injury. But I wasn't sure it wasn't either. He was clearly in shock. He'd shot someone.

If he didn't fly back to the city after this, I'd be highly surprised. I rubbed the middle of my chest at the ache the mere thought of Ethan going back to New York created. I'd hate the idea, but I couldn't blame him if he ran as fast as he could. Nothing about his new life here had proven to him that this was a good place.

I'd run, too.

I handed the gun to North. "Keep an eye on them," I said, gesturing to Jones and Hartwell. "I need to get some of my men down here and then go check on Ken."

"I need to make some phone calls, get some of my guys to come and get these idiots."

I pointed toward the kitchen. "There's a phone on the wall in the kitchen."

North grimaced. "I'll wait until you get back. I don't want to take my eyes off these guys."

I could understand that.

I turned and started for the dining room entrance only to be brought up short by the sight of several ranch hands standing there, every damn one of them with a gun or rifle in their hands.

"We heard a gunshot," Levi said.

I nodded to the body on the floor. "He pissed Ethan off."

Levi's eyebrows lifted. "You don't say."

"Someone might want to check and see if he's alive." I didn't. "I have to go check on Ken."

"What about these guys?" Levi pointed to Jones and Hartwell. "What do you want us to do with them?"

"Shoot them if they move."

Levi grinned. "Yes, sir."

My guys were a little blood thirsty, but I guess they had reason to be. Not only had Maddox been stealing from them and the ranch, threatening their home and livelihood, but these guys had broken in here and threatened their boss. If Jones, Brick, and Hartwell came out of this alive, I'd be very surprised.

I hated leaving Ethan, but I really needed to check on Ken. When Jones had appeared in the dining room entryway and pulled guns on us, Brick hadn't been with him.

For a moment, I thought Ken might be able to save us until I heard glass shatter and a moment later, Brick had appeared, no sign of Ken. He had told Jones that the sheriff was taken care of.

I wasn't sure why they hadn't shot us directly and run, but they had tied us up instead. Jones had started making phone calls, Brick had started pacing, and Hartwell had just stood there with a dumb look on his face, almost as if he wasn't quite sure what was going on.

His elevator clearly didn't go to the top floor.

Ken was standing and leaning back against the desk when I reached the office. He had a bleeding gash on the side of his forehead. I hurried to the bathroom and grabbed a hand towel and took it to him.

"Here."

Ken grimaced as he took the hand towel, but then winced when he held it against the side of his head. "I'm going to beat the shit out of Brick when I find him."

"He's in the dining room."

Ken paused for a moment. "He's in the dining room?"

"Brick and Jones both. Levi and North have them under guard. I was coming in here to check on you."

"Fucker broke a vase over my head. I wouldn't have known it was him if he hadn't started laughing hysterically. I've heard that laugh before, every damn time I arrested the bastard for being drunk."

"We need to get back to the other room. North wants to call in reinforcements to come get Jones, Brick, and Hartwell, and I want to get back to Ethan." I swallowed tightly. "He shot Brick."

Ken snorted. "He's my new best friend."

I was kind of hoping he'd be my new best friend too. I had to convince him not to go back to the city first.

"Do you need help?"

Ken rolled his eyes and pushed passed me. "The day I need help after getting hit over the noggin is the day I turn in my badge."

Alright then.

I followed Ken back into the main room. When we reached the dining room, I headed right for Ethan, taking the seat next to him. I smiled when Ethan scooted a little closer and then leaned into me.

He was doing it right in front of everyone.

I saw smiles and approval on the faces of the men that worked on the ranch, disdain on those who did not. Well, except for Ken and North. They stood over by the kitchen entrance talking between themselves.

"I want these people out of my house, Cooper."

"I know, honey." I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer into my side. "I'll get them out just as soon as I can. I promise."

"I have so much to do, but I'm tired."

"What do you have to do?" He needed sleep more than anything. "I can take care of it for you, whatever it is."

"I have to call and get my penthouse packed up and get all of my stuff shipped out here. I need to make arrangements with my partners in my law firm to take over my open cases. I need to call my

mother and let her know I am staying here. And god, I need an interior designer something fierce. This place is stuck in the nineteen sixties. It needs a complete overhaul. And we have to arrange for someone to clean up the mess outside so we can start building the new bunkhouse."

I stilled.

Well, most of me stilled. My heart thundered in my chest. "You're staying?"

Ethan had the cutest little frown on his face when he lifted his head. "Of course I'm staying."

I think it said a lot about my level of control that I didn't jump up from my chair and start dancing around. Instead, I smiled down at him.

"What can I do to help?"

## Chapter Twenty-Six

~ Cooper ~

I walked into the office just as Ethan hung up the phone. I sat down in one of the chairs across the desk from him and took in the deep frown on his face.

It had been two weeks since Brick, Jones, and Hartwell had been arrested and taken away by the FBI. We were still waiting to hear what was going on with the investigation. Due to the sensitive nature of said investigation, Special Agent North hadn't been able to tell us much.

I really hoped that hadn't put that frown on Ethan's face.

"Everything okay?"

"That was Special Agent North on the phone. You remember that disc I found with Maddox's laptop?"

I nodded.

"Turns out that the people he worked with were just as slimy as he was, and he knew it. He kept records of all of them and what they were doing. It was his version of insurance in case they ever decided to betray him. With the things the FBI found on the disc, plus the things Morgan discovered while working undercover, they were able to bust the entire organization."

I sat up straighter. "All of them?"

"All of them."

"Shit." I hadn't expected that.

"It'll take awhile for the investigation to be cleared up, but they won't be shipping girls down to Nevada anymore."



At least until the next moron decided to make money off of illegally shipping girls to brothels.

"North also said they looked into all of the members of our local sheriff's department as part of their investigation. Aside from one other deputy and a records clerk, everyone was cleared, so Ken can rest easy now."

"I'm sure Ken will be thrilled to hear that." It had been two weeks since his car blew up and he was still pissing and moaning about it.

"I also had an interesting conversation with my partners in my law firm."

I swallowed tightly at the lump that statement formed in my throat. "Oh yeah? What about?"

"They want to buy me out."

I pressed my hands into my thighs where Ethan couldn't see them, a small ball of hope blossoming in my chest. "Did they say why?"

"They want to take the firm in a different direction."

"Different how?"

"They want to concentrate more on criminal cases instead of discrimination cases. Since most of my clients have been discriminated in some manner, they feel it would be easier to simply buy me out and offer the partnership to another lawyer."

"Are they still going to be doing LGBTQ cases?"

"Yes, just not discrimination cases."

"How do you feel about that?"

Ethan blinked at me. "Strangely enough, I'm kind of relieved. I think this time away from the fast pace in the city has given me some time to think."

God, it was hard to ask questions when I just wanted to grab Ethan and kiss him. "And what conclusions have you come to?"

"I really enjoy the work that I do. It's fulfilling in ways I can't even begin to describe, but there's something to be said for slowing down a little bit, too." Ethan rubbed his hand over his face before dropping it on the desktop. "I've spent so much time working that I've forgotten to live."

"I'd be more than happy to show you how to live." I'd be more than happy to show Ethan anything that would keep him here on the Eagle Creek Ranch.

Ethan snickered. "I'm sure you would."

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked, holding my breath as I waited for his answer.

"I think I'm going to sell. I'll be here for the next year at least. If I decide after that point to go back to the city, I can always open up another law firm."

"You can open a law firm here, you know." It wasn't like we had a discrimination lawyer in town.

"No, I think I want to play at being a rancher for awhile." A mysterious little grin crossed Ethan's face. "You never know. I may decide I like it."

I could only hope.

I got up and walked over to the door, locking it before turning to look at Ethan. "What can I do to help you decide?"

Ethan's emerald green eyes blazed to life as he sucked in a shaky breath. "Lose the shirt."

Done.

I whipped my shirt off and tossed it into the chair.

"Now the jeans."

That was a little harder.

I kicked my boots off, unbuttoned my jeans, and slid them down my legs. When I was done, and standing there naked, I held my hands out to my sides. "What now?"

Ethan crooked his finger at me.

I was all too happy to comply. I couldn't keep my grin off my face as I walked around the desk, my hard cock bobbing in front of me.

Ethan's hands shook a little as he pressed them against my abdomen. "Sweet Jesus, you're built well."

I chuckled. "Comes from working the ranch."

"I'm a fan."

I could see that. There was a light glowing in Ethan's eyes as he ran his hands up my washboard abs, gently caressing me. It felt as if he wanted to devour me.

I wouldn't say no if that was the case.

My breath caught on a moan when Ethan's hands moved down to my hips. His hot breath blew out across the tip of my dick, making me grow even harder.

"Ethan."

The man's chuckle was pure evil. Ethan knew exactly what he was doing to me, and he was enjoying his power.

I shuddered when his tongue flickered across my hyper sensitive skin. I'd been around here and there, but I don't think I'd ever truly understood how pleasurable a blow job was until I met Ethan. It was like an art form and he was a master.

He certainly played me like a master. I was shaking within seconds, eager for one more flick of his tongue, a longer lick, or—

god save me—Ethan's whole damn mouth.

He fingered my balls, cupping them gently in his hand as he ran his thumb over them. "These are hanging pretty heavy, Mr. Cooper. In my expert opinion, they need to be drained."

"D-Drained?"

I had no idea how Ethan kept a straight face when he spoke. "Something like this can really cause problems if not dealt with effectively. Swelling in the groin area, an insatiable desire to lick things, or an involuntary need to hump your hips. There really is only one cure."

"Cure?" If my voice was a little high when I asked, I wasn't going to admit it. Ethan had my by the balls, literally.

"Oh yes, let me show you."

My knees nearly buckled when Ethan's lips wrapped around the head of my cock. I caught a fistful of his hair as I thrust my hips forward. "Holy shit, Ethan, your mouth."

Ethan's lips were great, but his tongue was even better. He licked up one side of my cock and down the other like he was eating an ice cream cone. I moaned as the man swirled his tongue around my cock before pressing the tip into the slit in the flared head of my shaft.

It took all of his control not to thrust deep into Ethan's heavenly mouth over and over again. The suction on my cock made my toes curl. Ethan's mouth tormented me, wringing searing pleasure after pleasure from my hard, aching dick.

I pushed my cock to the back of Ethan's throat, waiting for his reflexive swallow to squeeze the sensitive tip before retreating and thrusting into his mouth again.

I growled when I felt the tip of my cock hit the back of Ethan's throat. I tangled my hands in Ethan's light brown hair, holding him in place so I could fuck the world's most perfect mouth.

"Fuck, Ethan," I shouted, "don't stop."

Something possessive suddenly surged through me as I gazed down and watched my cock slide in and out of Ethan's mouth, something unlike anything I had ever experienced before. I wanted to brand this man to let everyone know he was mine.

I grunted loudly as the most intense orgasm of my life ripped through me. Pleasure built inside me, pooling in my balls and drawing them tight to my body before that pleasure erupted and I flooded Ethan's mouth and throat with hot, salty liquid.

I shuddered, another wave of possessiveness swept through me at the sight of the man still kneeling between my legs, licking his lips. "Drop your pants and bend over the desk."

While Ethan did as I demanded, I opened the side drawer and grabbed the bottle of lube I'd stashed in there the other day. We hadn't had sex in the office yet, but we had done it in a few other rooms. I wanted to be prepared.

I groaned when I stepped behind Ethan and saw the nice rounded curve of his ass. I'd come mere moments before, but already my cock was giving a valiant effort at hardening back up.

He had a really great ass.

Ethan almost came off the desk when I leaned down licked a line up between his ass cheeks. I grinned and pressed my hands against Ethan's hips, holding him down to the desk as I continued to lick every bit of soft skin I could reach.

The groan that had been building in my chest was going full speed by now. My started to ache. Ethan was unlike any lover I had ever had. The man was a marvel, accepting everything I had to give him and begging for more.

I was in heaven, and his name was Ethan Walker.

I poured some lube out on my fingers and then pushed them between Ethan's ass cheeks. They slid along easily until I reached Ethan's tight hole. The tightness of Ethan's puckered opening made me shudder in anticipation. I couldn't wait to have that tightness wrapped around my cock.

I started brushing my fingers against Ethan's hole, putting more pressure into my touch with each caress, until they slipped inside. Ethan groaned, stiffening.

I started pushing my fingers into the man's ass again. This time, I met no resistance. Two fingers slid right in. It didn't take me more than a few moments of stretching Ethan before I could get in a third finger and then a fourth.

I wasn't a small man.

Once Ethan was stretched, I scooted forward and lifted Ethan's ass in my hands. I gripped his hips and thrust forward. My body quaked as my cock sank into Ethan's sweet body. I dropped my head back on my shoulders and just breathed once I was fully seated.

"You have me, honey," I groaned. "Every inch of me."

"Move, damn you!"

My eyes widened when Ethan smacked me on the arm. I glanced down at the man, shocked by the fierceness in Ethan's voice. "If that's what you want, that's what you shall get."

I raised Ethan's hips into the air and angled them. I flexed my hips and slowly withdrew my cock until only the head remained encased inside Ethan's body, and then I slammed forward. Ethan screamed as his head arched back.

I did it again and then again, moving faster and faster with each deep thrust. Only by gripping Ethan's hips as I pounded into him did I keep the man from shooting over the top of the desk.

I was getting close. I could feel my balls drawing up tight against my body again. I knew I only had moments before I flew over the edge with abandon.

I wanted Ethan to go with me.

"Come for me, Ethan," I demanded right before I sank into Ethan's ass again. The sweet cries of Ethan's release flooded my ears.

I teetered on the edge of my own orgasm.

One thrust and my orgasm grabbed me by the balls, dragging me over the edge at the speed of light. One moment I was savoring the exquisite feeling of being balls deep inside Ethan's tight ass. The next moment, I was roaring out my release as I filled Ethan's ass with shot after shot of cum.

I shuddered at the feeling of Ethan's body spasming around my cock. Each little tremor rocked through me, prolonging my pleasure until I thought I was going to pass out.

When I could finally breathe again, I carefully slid from Ethan's body and stood back, allowing him to stand up. When Ethan turned to look at me, I smiled.

"I like this cure."

Ethan snickered. "I thought you might."

"Did you decide if you liked being a rancher or now?"

Ethan pressed his body against mine. "It may take some more input. Lots and lots of input."

I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him close to me. "I can do that." He'd have to stay here for that input to happen.

Ethan groaned when his phone rang. "At least they waited until we were done."

I don't think that had anything to do with it, but I wasn't going to tell Ethan that. He might refuse to fool around in the middle of the day if I did.

There was something to be said about being the foreman.

"You'd better get out to the range," Ethan said as he reached for his pants and pulled them up. "I heard your boss is a real ball buster."

I smirked as I walked around the desk to my own clothes. "I think he has to be. He's a city slicker."

A moment later I was laughing as I ducked the stapler Ethan threw at me. I hopped on one leg as I pulled my pants on. I didn't bother pulling on my shirt or my boots. I just grabbed them and yanked the office door open.

And ran right into Colby.

The man's face was fire engine red.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Problem, Colby?"

"Um, there's a car coming up the drive."

"Did you recognize it?"

Colby shook his head.

"Who's manning the front gate?" I'd assigned someone to be on the gate down by the main road twenty-four hours a day.



"Maverick," Colby replied, "but he didn't call it in."

That wasn't good.

I turned and glanced at Ethan when he walked up to stand next to me. "Are you expecting company?"

"No."

"Then we should go and greet our guests." I yanked on my shirt and then pulled on my boots. "And Ethan? Don't forget your gun."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

~ Ethan ~

I snorted at Cooper's statement. Like I would forget my gun. The only place I went without it now was to bed. Even when I took a shower, the gun sat on the counter. I wasn't going to be shot again by anyone, or taken hostage, or be harassed or whatever.

I'd had enough of that dealing with Maddox and his goons. Maddox might be dead now, and the men in his organization were in jail, but I wasn't taking any chances.

If someone was here to cause more problems, I had no problem putting a bullet in them. I was sure the guys on the ranch would help me hide the body.

I hurried to the bathroom to clean up and then righted my clothes and smoothed out some of the wrinkles. I'd actually grown used to wearing jeans and T-shirts.

Who knew?

I hurried back to my office, got rid of all signs of what Cooper and I had been doing in there, and then placed my pistol in the plastic holster attached to my belt. My gun wasn't a western six shooter. I carried a Glock. It required a different kind of holster.

I cast one last look around the office to make sure nothing was out that I didn't want people to see before hurrying out of the office. Cooper was standing at the window that looked out over the front yard. His arms were crossed over his chest and a furrowed frown pinched the skin between his eyebrows.

"Cooper? What's wrong?"

"That's a city car."

I glanced out the window to the four door silver sedan coming up the drive. "I doubt it's Ken."

Cooper snorted. "Oh, hell, no. Ken would never be caught dead in a sedan."

Yeah, I didn't think so. Ken didn't seem to me like the sedan type.

"Colby, go get Sawyer," Cooper called out. "Tell him we have visitors, and then I want you to stay in the kitchen with him until we know who they are."

After everything the cook had been through, I appreciated Cooper making sure he was safe, and he seemed to feel safer with Sawyer.

Something had occurred between the two men while Sawyer was recovering in the hospital. I wasn't sure what, but when they came home, Colby was smiling more and not jumping quite so much.

As long as Colby was happy, I wasn't going to ask.

"Holy fucking shit!"

"What?" I swung away from watching Colby walk to the kitchen and looked out the front window. "Is that...How...Holy shit." I blinked rapidly to make sure my eyes weren't seeing things. "Is that my father?"

It sure looked like my father, or at least the pictures I'd seen of my father. And the woman helping him out of the front of the car looked an awful lot like my mother.

But I had to be seeing things. My father was dead and my mother was in New York City. After Maddox telling me my mother was missing, I'd called her just to be sure.

Cooper left me standing there as he raced over to the door and ripped it open. "I thought you were dead, old man."

"The reports of my death may or may not be premature," Garret Ethan Walker replied. "It could still happen."

I was frozen in place as I listened to Cooper and my father talking. I couldn't move, not a muscle. I wasn't even sure I was breathing. I never expected to meet my father, especially after I heard he died.

How was this happening?

Why was this happening?

And why in the hell was my mother with him?

When the trio walked into the house, they paused in the entry. I slowly turned to look at them. Cooper was staring at Buck as if he'd never seen him before and was afraid if he looked away, the man would disappear.

My mother and father were both staring at me.

It was a bit unnerving.

"You're not dead," I finally said.

Considering those were the first words I'd ever spoken to my father, I should have been embarrassed. Instead, I felt a slow burning anger ignite in my gut.

"How are you not dead?" My gaze darted to the woman I thought had my back my entire life, but maybe I was wrong. "And how are you here? Are you planning on faking your death, too?"

"We can explain, son."

My eyes narrowed as they snapped back to my father. "I'm not your son."

I could see the pain my words brought my father in his eyes.

I didn't care.

I had years of pain to make up for.

Decades.

"We'd like to explain, Ethan," Buck said.

I crossed my arms. "So, explain."

"Ethan Walker," my mother snapped. "I taught you better than this. Where are your manners?"

"Oh yes, we must remember our manners, especially when dealing with a man who never took responsibility for his own family and then faked his death, forcing me to leave the life I had built for myself to come to this godforsaken place."

Buck winced. "All of that is true."

No shit.

"Honey," Cooper began as he took a step toward me. "Maybe—"

I shot him a glare.

"Ethan," he started again. "Hear him out. If nothing else, it might answer some of your questions. If, once he is done, you want him to leave, then he will leave."

"Kind of hard to force a man out of his own house, and if he's still alive, then the will was bogus and this is no longer my house."

"It is actually your house," Buck said. "The will wasn't bogus. I did leave you the ranch. I just transferred into your name a little bit early."

Wait...what?

"What do you mean early?"

My mother sniffled. "Your father has cancer, Ethan. That's why he transferred the ranch to you. He didn't want Maddox to get it."

"Maddox is dead."

"We know." Buck nodded. "That's why it was safe for us to come see you."

Okay, now I was confused. That didn't mean I was ready to let bygones be bygones, because I wasn't, but I was willing to listen. Mostly because I had questions.

A lot of questions.

"Let's go sit down in the living room." I was pretty much already standing in the living room, so I walked over to sit on one of the couches. When Cooper came over and sat down next to me, I latched onto his hand like it was a life preserver and I was standing on a sinking ship.

My mother and father took a seat on the couch across from us. I was a little unnerved with how much my mother was hovering over Buck. As far as I knew, they had stayed married after we left, but they had spent the last thirty years apart. There shouldn't be that much affection between them.

"So, are you two together now?" I asked.

Buck grimaced as he glanced at his wife. "We were never apart."

"You..."

My mother sighed. "What your father is having such a hard time saying is that we might not have been able to live together as husband and wife, but that did not mean we stopped loving each other."

Buck smiled as he covered his wife's hand with his own. "We did have our visits."

Lila smiled. "We did."

"Your visits?" I asked.

My mother frowned at me. "Didn't you ever wonder where I went every month?"

"Well, yeah, sure, but...Are you saying you went to see my father?"

"That's exactly what I am saying. Once a month, I flew to Helena and Buck met me there. We'd spend the weekend together and then I would fly home until the next month."

I released Cooper's hand reached up to rub my chest when it began to ache. "Why did you never say anything? Why did you never take me with you? Did you think I wouldn't want to see my own father?"

"In the beginning, you were too young. As you got older, you were so angry, I wasn't sure you could keep our secret. Once you were an adult, there just never seemed to be the right moment to tell you. You were always so busy with your work and your friends." Lila shrugged. "I just didn't know what to say."

"Why did it have to be a secret?" I asked, but even as I said the words, I knew. "Maddox."

Buck nodded. "Asa Maddox would have killed you and your mother to get what he wanted, and what he wanted—"

I held up my hand. "I know what he wanted. He was very clear about that after he shot me."

"He shot you?" my mother cried out. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to worry."

"Seems to me," Cooper began, "that you and your mother both kept secrets to keep the other one from worrying."

My head snapped around as righteous indignation filled me. Keeping the fact that I had been shot a secret from my mother was a whole lot different than her keeping my father from me for thirty years. "Are you condoning what they did?"

"No, but I can see both sides of it." When Cooper went to grab my hand again, I tried to pull it away, but he wouldn't let me. "Ethan, I know you're upset because they lied to you, but I think you are failing to see the big picture here."

I glared at Cooper through narrowed eyes. "What picture?"

I was having a hard time seeing past the red haze filling my mind.

"You now have a chance to get to know the father you never knew, but it sounds like you need to grab that chance while you can. He might not have died then, but he has cancer. No one can say how much time he has left. You can take this time to get to know Buck or you can hold onto your anger. It's up to you."

I stared at Cooper for a moment before slowly turning to look at Buck. "Why are you here?"

"Like your mother said, I have cancer. It's being treated, and I may live through it, but I'll never be a rancher again. My body just can't take it." Buck grabbed both of Lila's hands. "Your mother and I have decided to spend the rest of my days living our lives together, no matter how many I might have left. I was kind of hoping you'd want to be a part of that."

"What about the ranch?" I asked because I couldn't think of anything else to ask.

My mind was reeling.

"I wasn't lying about that, Ethan. The ranch is yours just as the horses I left Cooper are his."

"So, the whole reading of the will thing was...?"

"Just for show. Mark Anderson had already filed all of the paperwork giving you ownership of the ranch. I just needed everyone to think I was dead. Unfortunately, that meant you, too."



"Why me?" I asked. "You could have told me what you were trying to do."

"Would you have come?"

Honestly, no.

Damn it.

I glanced at my mother. "Is that why you encouraged me to come here for the reading of the will?"

Lila nodded. "I knew there was no other way I could get you here. Your anger and resentment at your father was too great."

That was probably true.

Lila smiled as she glanced at Buck. "You're just as stubborn as he is."

I wasn't sure how I felt being compared to a man I hardly knew, but I didn't think now was the time to bring it up. I had a hundred other questions to ask, and damned if I could think of a single one.

"I'm sorry we had to wait until Maddox was dead to meet, but I couldn't trust he wouldn't send people after your mother again. If he ever caught wind of the fact that I was going up to Helena once a month to see Lila, he would have killed her."

"Why did he hate us so much?"

"He didn't hate us, Ethan," my mother said. "You and I were a way for him to control your father. Every time your father tried to kick him off the ranch, something would happen to us."

I swallowed tightly at her words. "Every time? I thought it was just that one time right after we left the ranch."

Lila shook her head. "There were several occasions. Sometimes, people would follow us and take pictures, sending them to your father. When you were about five years old, someone broke in and

ransacked the apartment we were living in. I've been mugged three times. Usually, they just took my money and roughed me up a bit, but..."

"But what?" I snapped. "Did they...?"

I couldn't even form the words.

"No, no, they didn't hurt me like that," my mother was quick to assure me. "They just beat me up and put me in the hospital."

"I don't remember that."

I would have remembered.

"You were away at law school at the time. After discussing it with Buck, we decided not to tell you." My mother gave me a pointed look. "Kind of like you decided not to tell me that you got shot."

My face flushed as I glanced away from the censure in my mother's eyes. "Yeah, well." I had nothing to say to that.

"So, what are your plans now?" Cooper asked.

It was a good question.

"Lila and I got a little place right outside Helena. It's close to the hospital where I'm getting my treatments. If everything goes well, once the treatments are done, we want to do a bit of traveling, see something of the world outside of Montana."

"What are your chances?"

"Fifty-fifty at this point. I'm not as young as I used to be, but I was in pretty good health before I was diagnosed. The doctors are optimistic if I can survive the chemo treatment."

I wasn't sure how I felt about the little jump my heart gave at those words. Yes, I was glad that my father was still alive, but the knowledge that I could lose him all over again at any time was like a ten ton truck landing on my chest.

"You could stay here," I found myself saying, much to my surprise.

Buck smiled, but it was a sad smile. "I wish I could, Ethan, but I have to be close to the hospital in Helena. Besides, the ranch is yours now and you need time without me underfoot to make it into your ranch."

"It's a big ranch," I insisted.

Buck smiled. "We would certainly like to come and visit, but I've spent a large portion of my life on this ranch. I'd like to spend what time I have left with the real love of my life."

I had kind of thought the ranch was the love of my father's life, but watching him smile at my mother, I realized I might have been wrong.

"Wait," I said when a sudden thought hit me. "That whole staying on the ranch thing for a year, that was bogus?"

Buck chuckled. "The ranch is yours, son, for however long you want it."

Well, damn.

I guess this city slicker just became a rancher.

~ The End ~

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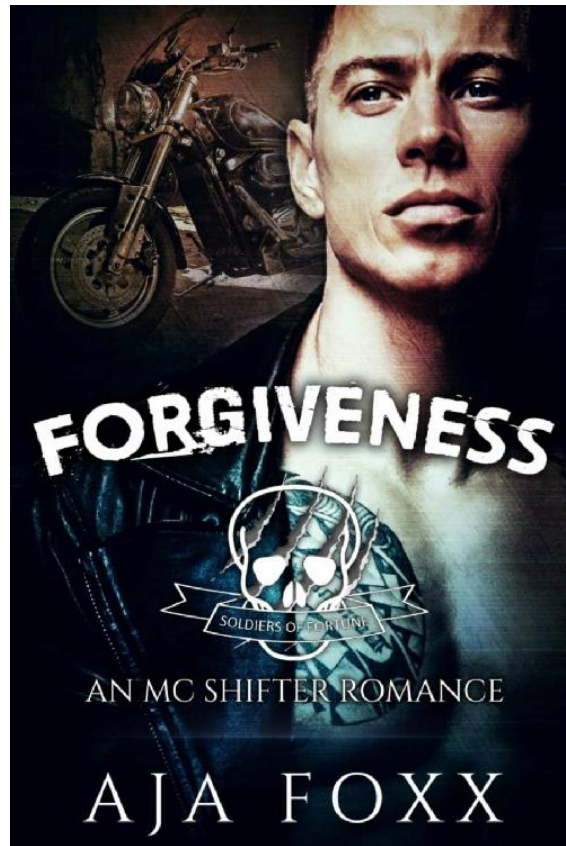
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His name was Bug. I assumed it was because he was nuttier than a bed bug until he saved me when I was attacked. For reasons known only to him, Bug thought it was his duty to keep me safe. I was the sergeant-at-arms of the Soldiers of Fortune MC. I didn't need saving, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him so, especially not after I discovered he was my mate.

**STORY EXCERPT**

"Roses red, violets blue, sugar sweet and so is you, but roses wilting, violets dead, sugar lumpy, and so is you head. So is you head. You head. You head. Lumpy you head."

I cracked an eye open and looked up at the man softly singing as he stroked his fingers through my hair. I wasn't exactly sure what was going on. The world around me was a bit fuzzy, all except the man hovering over the top of me.

Pale skin, a thin face with high cheekbones, hollow, sunken eyes, and a wicked looking scar that went from his cheekbone back into his hairline. Long, stringy hair that might have been blond if it hadn't been so matted and dirty. But it was the pale moss green eyes that held my attention the most. There was a world of pain and anguish in those little green orbs.

I frowned when a flower was placed on my cheek. When I went to reach for it, the grungy little man gasped then scurried back several feet. He stayed crouched on the floor, hunkering down as if trying to make himself as small as possible and covering his head with his arms.

"Lumpy, lumpy, lumpy," the man whispered, but maybe he was more of a boy.

I couldn't quite tell.

I started to sit up then groaned when shards of pain sliced through my skull. When I reached up and felt the nice sized egg on the back of my head, I suddenly understood what the man had meant by lumpy.

No wonder my head ached so damn much.

I sank back down onto the cold concrete and closed my eyes. I breathed in through my nose then out through my mouth, trying to calm myself enough to get through the pain slamming into me.

I opened my eyes again when I heard a scraping noise. The man moved closer, once again placing flowers on my face and down my

neck, then over my chest as if the last thirty seconds had never happened.

He started chanting that stupid rhythm again.

"What is your name?" I asked.

The man froze. He didn't even blink. He might not have even been breathing.

"What is your name?" I asked again, in the softest tone I knew how to make, which wasn't easy. I didn't exactly have a soft tone, but I didn't want to scare him.

"Bug. I'm Bug. I scurry around and hide in dark, so yeah, I'm Bug. Not bad Bug. Not cockroach Bug. Good Bug." He held up a handful of flower petals. "Maybe ladybug, but not lady. No, no, not lady. Boy Bug. Boy Bug. So, I'm Bug."

Okay then.

"I'm—"

"Bear." Bug nodded and started with the flowers again. "Bear. Bear. Big, bad Bear. Teddy Bear." Bug patted my chest just open the collar of my shirt. "Furry Bear."

Okay, apparently he knew who I was.

"Where are we, Bug?" It was dark and all I could see were shadows cast by a sliver of light coming in through a crack in the wall.

"Hole. Hidey hole. Small little hidey hole." Bug's brow flickered. "No bad guys here. No. No. Safe here. Bug keep Bear safe." Bug shot up and hurried over to the corner. I watched as he dug into a pile of stuff stacked on the floor. It looked like garbage, but what did I know.



When he came back, he set a gun down on my chest then held his closed fist out. When I opened my hand, he dropped a handful of bullets into my palm. "Safe. Yes, Bug keep you safe. No more wilting flowers. No more lumpy."

I moved slowly when I sat up, trying not to scare Bug, but he still scurried out of arm's reach. I checked over the pistol. It wasn't mine. I had no idea who it belonged to.

"Is this your gun, Bug?" For some odd reason, it didn't sit well with me thinking that Bug needed a gun to protect himself.

"No, no." My eyebrows shot up when Bug laughed. "Bug no like guns. Guns hurt. Guns loud. Guns make people go away. Guns bad."

All of that was true.

"Where did you get the gun, Bug?"

"Mmm," Bug hummed to himself as he tapped the side of his head with his fist. "Bad man, bad, bad, bad man. Hurt Lumpy. Hit Lumpy. Make Lumpy bleed. But Bug got him, yes he did. Bug make bad man go away. Bug keep Lumpy safe."

Holy shit!

"Someone hurt me?"

"Mmm," Bug hummed as he nodded.

"And you...made him go away?"

Bug nodded again as he patted his own chest as if proud of himself. "Bug protect Lumpy."

I wasn't thrilled with being called Lumpy, but it seemed like I had something to thank Bug for, so I let it slide. For now. "Where is this bad man, Bug?"

"Alley by bike. Yes, he is. Left him in alley by bike. Bike, bike, big shiny Lumpy bike."

"My bike?" I growled.

Bug hummed.

Well, shit.

The last thing I remember was parking my bike in front of a warehouse where I was supposed to be meeting a contact. I had turned off the engine and climbed off my bike, then nothing but darkness until I woke up with Bug putting flowers on my face.

"Is my bike still in front of the warehouse?" I asked, hoping Bug knew about the warehouse. I'd be pissed if something happened to my bike. I'd spent four years customizing that damn thing.

"No, no, no." Bug chewed on his thumbnail for a moment. His eyes moved to mine then darted away. "Moved big shiny bike. Hide big shiny bike. Bug protect Lumpy. Bike belong to Lumpy. Bug protect bike."

I just had no idea what to say to that other than, "Thank you, Bug."

The corner of Bug's mouth twitched before lifting just a bit at the corners. "Welcome, welcome, welcome," he sang softly as he tucked a flower into the pocket of my shirt. "Lumpy welcome."

Still wasn't thrilled being called Lumpy.

"I need to get my bike, Bug. Can you take me to it?" I felt as if I was dealing with a small child. Bug was sketchy and jumpy. He chewed on his fingernails a lot. They were practically nubs. "I really need my bike, Bug."

I also needed to check in with Butch. I don't know what happened, but if someone jumped me, I wanted to find the bastard

and teach him the error of his ways. Filling my MC President in on who I was going to rip apart before I did it was always a good idea.

I patted my vest down, looking for my phone. I was not happy when I didn't find it. "Bug, did you take my phone."

Bug frowned. "Ring, ring, ring. Not good for Lumpy. Too much noise. Lumpy hurt. Need rest. No noise."

"I need my phone, Bug. I have to call my...uh...boss."

Bug huffed before turning to the pile in the corner. He rooted around for a moment before coming back with my cell phone. "Call boss man," he snapped as he slapped the phone down in my hand. "He not protect Lumpy. He...he...he bad."

I sighed. "He's not bad, Bug. I promise." Well, he was kind of bad. He wasn't exactly a law abiding citizen, thank god, but I trusted him with my life. I needed Bug to trust him, too. "He didn't know I was going to get hurt."

"Jumped. Lumpy get jumped. Bad man with pipe hurt Lumpy. Was waiting behind dumpster for Lumpy." Bug's green eyes grew a little wild. "Bad man wait and wait and wait. Smoke a lot and wait more. Make phone call when Lumpy come then hurt Lumpy."

Holy shit.

## About The Author



The vicious bite of an enemy, a shout, a cry in the dark. A lover's touch, the whisper of a kiss. A sigh, a groan, heart beating faster, desire surging through a body. Love words spoken in the shadows. The yearning for a soft caress. I'm a writer of fiery passion in all its glorious forms. Paranormal, Contemporary, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, MM Romance books. There is no limit to my imagination.

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