



Prancer
&
GRUFF

**JADE
CRYSTAL**

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

PRANCER AND GRUFF

By Jade Crystal

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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PRANCER AND GRUFF

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Photo Description

A cowboy stands alone in a grassy field, a saddle dangling from his grip by the saddle horn. He stands comfortably, feet apart and shoulders wide. He is looking down, his dark hat obscuring his face and throwing shadows over one shoulder. He is bare-chested, sporting an impressive upper body physique; he is wearing only belted jeans and boots. A river, some brush, and a wooden fence can be seen in the distance.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Being a cowboy is the only life I've ever known and I wouldn't change that for anything. Running the ranch keeps me too busy to be lonely but at night, when I'm lying in bed waiting for exhaustion to take me, I can admit I wish there was someone there beside me. Then you pranced into my life in response to a housekeeper wanted ad I posted online. You are nothing I expected and everything I need. My opposite in every way, your softness to my strength, your sass to my gruff, and yet we just fit. I'm stubborn and set in my ways, but I know I can be your happy ever after if you give me a chance. How do I convince you to be mine?

Sincerely,

Laura

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, housekeepers, kiss, sweet/no sex, boss/employee, ranch, pretty men

Word Count: 26,019

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A huge thank you to Dan Skinner and his model for the cover photograph and to Adrienne Wilder for turning that already awesome photo into the gorgeous cover for this book. It makes me feel giddy every time I look at it.

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PRANCER AND GRUFF

By Jade Crystal

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong.

“I’m comin’! Just hold yer horses!” Cliff Haywood yelled toward the front door, almost falling down the stairs as he tried to pull on a pair of jeans.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

“Just a minute, dammit!”

Who in hell is ringin’ my doorbell this time of night anyway? Half past ten is late for people who have to get up at the crack of dawn. I live too far outta the way to have unexpected visitors, he thought as he grabbed his Stetson off its peg on the wall. *Daddy always said a good cowboy is never without his hat.* A bit breathless, he skidded to a halt and yanked the door open.

Standing on his porch, with one finger paused in its mission to irritate the sanity right out of him with the incessant doorbell ringing, was the most beautiful man Cliff had ever seen. He looked both incredibly out of place and yet completely at home standing on the porch of a ranch house. A little on the short side, slender with a dancer’s body, dark hair that was short on the sides and longer in the front with short messy curls, chocolate brown eyes, and very kissable lips. The most charming inquisitive expression on his face. And a tee and skinny jeans that had to have been painted on. There was no other way Cliff could fathom that this man had gotten into those clothes. Every muscle, every line, and every curve was exquisitely visible, leaving little to the imagination.

Cliff stood in the doorway for several seconds, gawking at the divine vision before him, until the man shifted his weight on his feet and cleared his throat to break the reverie.

“Um, hi.”

Oh, right, I have to actually say something. Aloud, he asked, “You have any idea what time it is?”

“I’m so sorry, mister, I know it’s late! I never show up places this late uninvited! Well, I guess *never* isn’t really true, but I didn’t mean to disturb you—”

Cliff cut off the chatter, more interested in why the man was standing on his front porch. “Never mind. Can I help you?”

“I sure hope so. I don’t even know if I have the right ranch. There hasn’t been anyone to ask for miles and miles. I’m trying to find Cliff Haywood,” the beautiful man said, his words running together in his haste. He wasn’t from anywhere in the western part of the country; his clothing screamed big city, but that didn’t fit the drawl underlying his accent.

“Well, you found him. I’m Cliff Haywood. Is there somethin’ I can do for you?”

“Just the man I need,” he replied, then held up a creased piece of paper. “You put a want ad online for a housekeeper?”

“That’s right,” Cliff answered, looking the man up and down. He looked like he would be very skilled with his hands—to fulfill certain personal needs for single men—but Cliff doubted that housekeeping was one of those skills. “You’re a housekeeper?”

“Only the very best kind, Mr. Haywood—sassy and fabulous!” he declared with a grin, his face lighting up as he propped a hand on his hip and struck a pose. It sent all sorts of visuals through Cliff’s mind of what those hips could do, and his eyes grew a bit wider. When the man noticed that, his face fell, and he straightened and said, “I can tone it down if you’re not into that.”

“I’m interested in the quality of your work and your work ethic, not your personality,” Cliff responded gruffly.

That wasn’t entirely true; he found that he cared very much about this young man’s whole being for some reason he couldn’t put into words. But he needed someone to help him keep the large ranch house clean and habitable, not entertainment. He could find that on the internet whenever he wanted.

“Do you have any experience? References?” he asked.

The man produced a résumé and handed it to Cliff. It was clean and professional, if a bit more colorful than was generally acceptable. Just like this man, this Troy Balhaus, according to the sheet of paper in Cliff’s hands. He glanced over it quickly, noting the numerous entries in the employment history

section as well as the fact that those entries originated in the Southeast and led in a progressively northwestern direction. Some jobs Troy had only worked a few months, some longer, and a few over a year. As Cliff was about to ask, Troy offered him a small stack of documents.

“Those are letters of recommendation from some of my previous employers, Mr. Haywood. You’ll find that I come highly recommended.”

Cliff looked over the seven recommendations and compared them to the résumé. Each of the letters was printed on fine-quality paper with a company letterhead or personalized stationery, and each of them matched up with an employer for whom Troy had worked for a longer period of time. It was the two or three jobs that had lasted only a month or so that gave Cliff pause.

“I gotta ask, Mr. Balhaus, what’s the story with these jobs that didn’t last long?”

It was obvious from the look on his face that Troy hadn’t wanted him to focus on those, but he answered without a missing a beat, “Those just weren’t a good fit for me.”

“Weren’t a good fit how?”

“Those families had small children,” Troy replied with a dramatic sigh. “Not that I mind kids. I like them a lot, actually. I just don’t like cleaning up after them. Especially when there was no mention of it in the job description or interview.” He was speaking rapidly again, making it difficult for Cliff to understand him. “It was just like, ‘Oh, hey, we’ve got a kid who’s potty-training and he can’t pee in the toilet to save his little precious life, so we need you to clean up the pee on the floor and the wall and everywhere but in the toilet twelve times a day. And we need you to do it for peanuts. ’Kay, thanks, bye!’ Maybe with a little warning, you know? But just being thrown into it—”

“Okay, okay, I get it. It sucked,” Cliff interrupted, cutting him off. “Well, your résumé looks good, and these recommendations speak highly of you, like you said. You mind if I call some of these people in the mornin’ to ask about you?”

“If I said that I minded, would you just take my word for it?” Troy countered with a grin.

It wasn’t the answer Cliff was expecting. He raised an unimpressed eyebrow at his potential housekeeper.

"It was a joke!" the young man hurried to say, throwing his hands up in surrender.

The rancher noticed the nail polish on his fingers then; his fingers made a rainbow, a different color for each nail to match the bright colors on his tee. Nail polish wasn't something Cliff was usually into, but on Troy it looked good. It matched his bright, expressive personality, which was the polar opposite of Cliff's natural state of solitary gruffness. On any other day, Cliff would have immediately dismissed someone like Troy, yet today, for some reason he didn't understand, he found himself attracted to the man.

Maybe someone like this is exactly what I need in my life.

"Okay, I admit it was a terrible joke. Bad timing," Troy apologized, trying to find his way into the rancher's good graces. "Of course you can call them and ask about me. Except for the one couple who was not thrilled that they would have to clean up their kid's piss themselves, they should have good things to say about me."

"Things like how well you did the work, not about how you're a flaming gay man?"

For a few seconds, Troy couldn't seem to be able to force his mouth to work before he stuttered, "I-I'm not... I mean, I am but..." He took a deep breath and said in a steady voice, "My sexuality has nothing to do with my ability to clean your house, Mr. Haywood. In fact, as a gay man, I am, by reputation at least, far more qualified to do this job than any straight man."

"Calm down, Mr. Balhaus. I wasn't trying to offend you," Cliff responded. That was true; he hadn't meant to offend Troy. Most people didn't understand his gruffness. Then he added, as a truce of sorts, "And I'm gay too."

"Really?" Troy blinked in surprise, looking him up and down. "No way you're gay. I mean, that is a *fine* chest, Mr. Haywood, but those jeans... No self-respecting gay man I ever met would be caught dead in jeans like those."

He couldn't help but chuckle at that. "What do you expect a gay cowboy to wear? Assless chaps and a rainbow flag? We're all about the practical and functional out here." *He likes my chest*, he thought with a touch of excitement at the idea.

"There's a difference between practical and awful, and those are just awful. A self-respecting gay man would wear jeans that show off his ass no matter what he's doing. You know, like mine," Troy shot back, shaking his head at the lack of fashion sense as he twisted to show off his firm ass.

Cliff could only shrug in confusion. Apparently, it was a terrible violation of some gay code, though he wouldn't know anything about that. What he did know was that Troy Balhaus had an ass that deserved to be shown off. *Thank God for skinny jeans, wonders that they are!*

Then Troy propped one hand on his hip as he said with flare, "It's like that fabulous gay man once said, 'I'd rather my flame burn bright than be some puny little pilot light.'"

"Well, Mr. Balhaus, I don't care how bright your flame burns, long as you can do the work I need you to do in a reasonable amount of time. I spend all my time keepin' this ranch runnin', and I don't have any extra time or energy to keep up the house too."

"I do great work," Troy said quickly. "I'm not the fastest thing on two legs, but I make sure to give each and every task my very best effort."

"That's what I want to hear," Cliff replied, ignoring the "thing on two legs" comment as much as he could. *Why did that sound sexual to me?* he wondered. Then he thought, *Because it's been too long, and everything starts to sound sexual when it's been too long. But good to know he can last a while.* A half-grin crept over his features for a moment before he said aloud, "Look, it's late for me—I have to get up early—so just come on in, I'll show you to your room, and we can work out the specifics in the mornin'."

"That's it? I'm hired, just like that?" the young man asked in surprise as he picked up the backpack resting by his feet on the porch.

"No, it ain't quite that simple," he answered, ushering him to the stairs. "Unless I find out somethin' that's cause for not hirin' you when I make those calls tomorrow, you'll be on a probationary period for two weeks. I'll tell you what I expect and see if the way you keep my house in those two weeks meets my expectations. If it does, you're hired and your room and board will be included in your pay, considerin' that the nearest town is two and a half hours away. If not, you'll be given two weeks' pay and let go immediately." He paused at the top of the stairs to look the man in the face. "Sound fair?"

"Sounds great, Mr. Haywood," Troy agreed, following the rancher down the hall.

"Good. This'll be your room," Cliff pointed to the last door on the hallway, then indicated another door closer to the stairs. "That's the bathroom. It's the only one on the second floor so we'll be sharin' it."

“Not a problem,” he said. At Cliff’s questioning glance, he explained, “I mean, I have a lot of products that I use, but I can keep them in my room or in a cabinet somewhere or something. I promise I won’t leave them all over the bathroom.”

“I don’t care, long as you leave ’em neat and they aren’t in the way when I need to shave,” the rancher said with a shrug. He gestured toward the backpack and asked, “That all you brought?”

“No sir. I have more stuff in my car, but I have everything I need for the night in here. I can get the rest in the morning.”

Cliff nodded. “Make yourself at home. If you’re hungry, you’re welcome to anything you can find in the kitchen. Same goes for breakfast. I’ll be up and out of the house ’round dawn, so we’ll talk more about my expectations later if I don’t see you then. If you need anything, I’m the door just before the stairs. Any questions?”

Troy shook his head as he said, “Nothing that can’t wait until later. Thank you, Mr. Haywood.”

The rancher acknowledged the thanks with a grunt and mumbled, “G’nite” before heading back down the hall to his bedroom and shutting the door.

Troy Balhaus watched the rough-around-the-edges rancher go and decided that, awful jeans and not so fabulous home décor aside, the man had a very fine ass to go along with that magnificent chest and those glorious abs. He sensed a lonely man who worked every waking second just to keep from feeling that loneliness. And maybe his gruffness was a defense mechanism all on its own, preventing anyone from getting too close so he wouldn’t have to feel the pain of losing them later.

Troy smiled as he saw the strip of light disappear under the door. *I’ll just have to work extra hard to make this great big house a home and give him a reason to spend more of his time here... with me. Then maybe we can help each other out*, he thought as he closed his bedroom door behind him and flopped down on the big, comfortable bed—a bed that was more than big enough for two people.

Maybe this will be the place where I can finally settle down, he pondered as he pulled a few essentials out of his backpack. *Oh yeah, this feels good. Really good.*

It was still dark outside when Cliff dragged himself out of bed. Any other morning, he might have taken a moment to look out the window, see the sky beginning to turn pink and orange with the impending dawn, and appreciate the beauty of the land on which he made his living. It was nearly impossible to take such splendor for granted, except when he had gone to bed late and lacked sleep. His gritty eyes refused to stay open, and he stumbled over the jeans he had dropped on the floor the night before. Growling as if it was the fault of the jeans, he headed into the bathroom to take a shower, more to wake up than out of necessity. The fact that the bathroom was still warm and steamy from an earlier shower also escaped him as he let the hot water cascade over his body for a few glorious minutes. He felt a little less like a zombie after drying off and getting dressed.

That's a step in the right direction, at least. Now for some coffee so I can join the land of the living and avoid scaring the horses.

Rolling up his shirtsleeves as he made his way downstairs, his nose picked up some of the most delicious smells Cliff could remember since his mother had been in charge of the house. He rounded the corner to find Troy in the kitchen, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and busy making breakfast. Every burner on the stovetop was occupied with a pot or pan, and even the wood-burning stove that had served as little more than a heater for the last few years hosted a steaming tea kettle. Cliff paused in the doorway, a little stunned by the spectacle, when Troy glanced up from the skillet he was tending. He grinned at the rancher and started talking a mile a minute.

“Oh good, you're up! Hi! Good morning! Isn't it a great morning? It's so beautiful out there. I can see why you love it here so much. Are you ready for breakfast? I wasn't sure what you'd like so I made lots for you to choose from.” He gestured toward the various pots and pans on the stove. “Oatmeal, scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes. Fresh biscuits in the oven—they're almost done. Toast and fresh fruit on the table. Or you could just have some cold cereal if you want, I guess, but I worked really hard making all this delicious food so I hope you'll try some of it—“

“Looks good,” Cliff said with a grunt, a bit overwhelmed by it all. There was enough food to feed a small army.

“—and I wasn't sure if you preferred coffee or tea so I brewed up some of both,” Troy said without missing a beat. “I don't personally drink coffee, but I know a lot of people do—a *lot* of people—it's like they can't survive without it,

you know? Like they need an IV drip of pure black Colombian roast or something. Isn't that insane? If you can't be nice early in the morning without coffee, then just spare the rest of us and sleep later! That's what I think anyway. Anyway, I don't drink coffee, I drink tea—any kind of tea, just give me the tea and I'll drink the hell out of it. That's what I like, tea. Not coffee, stuff tastes so nasty to me and has too much caffeine. I don't think I need the caffeine, do I? No, definitely don't need the caff—”

Cliff put up a halting hand to quiet the incessant babbling. “I think you're doing just fine without it. Is this your usual irritating morning perkiness?”

“Well, I am, uh, perky in the mornings, usually. I'm a morning person, that's just part of who I am—” Troy closed his mouth as Cliff stopped him from going off on another rapid verbal voyage. “Sorry, Mr. Haywood. I guess I'm a little nervous.”

“A *little* nervous?” Cliff said with raised eyebrows.

“Okay, a lot nervous,” he admitted as he turned off the burners and began transferring the food to serving platters.

“You don't have anything to worry about,” the rancher remarked as he piled his plate high with a little bit of each of the foods on the table, even a small helping of oatmeal. “You have two weeks. Just do what I ask in those two weeks, and you've got yourself a job.”

“Thank you, Mr. Haywood,” Troy replied with sincerity, serving himself from the platters.

Cliff had never figured out how to respond to sincere gratitude, so he just gave a grunt around a mouthful of pancakes to acknowledge that he heard it. *God, he put a ton of food on his plate. I wonder if he can eat it all, slender as he is, or if his eyes are bigger than his stomach.* He glanced up and mentioned, “For future reference, I'm one of those people who can't be civil without coffee first thing in the morning.”

To his surprise, Troy laughed. “I should've figured that you would be a coffee man just because I opened my big mouth and said that,” he said, still smiling as he got up to retrieve the coffee pot and place it on a trivet on the table. “Or shall I just save us both some time and get you an IV drip?”

The rancher glanced up at the grin on that beautiful face and bit back his automatic response. *The sass on that man! That beautiful man with that beautiful smile. I want that smile to stay right where it is. I will not be so*

grumpy today, I will not be so grumpy today, he repeated mentally. It remained to be seen whether or not he would succeed, though. Instead of biting the man's head off for the remark, he simply stated, "I take my coffee with a splash of milk and two sugars."

"I'll remember that—splash of milk and two sugars, splash of milk and two sugars, splash of milk and two sugars—and I'll have it ready and waiting for you as soon as you come downstairs from now on," Troy said with another beaming smile. "Do you have a favorite mug? I could make sure to always put it in your favorite mug."

He was speaking so quickly that his words were running together again, and Cliff without coffee had a difficult time understanding him. He was used to a slower pace, the natural way of things on the ranch, and all this fast talking made his head spin. He sliced his stack of pancakes and speared the pieces, then pointed with his fork toward the mug in the dish drain as he chewed, not wanting to add to the chaos by speaking.

"Hey, cool! It has Loki on it!" Troy exclaimed as he grabbed the mug and poured the coffee before sitting back down at the table.

"Yeah, gay cowboys like superheroes too."

"Superheroes?" he questioned, confused for a moment. Then, as if the light bulb lit up above his head, Troy picked up the pop culture reference. "You must mean like Loki from those movies about all those other superheroes. I don't watch much television or films so it took me a minute," he explained.

"That's one thing we have in common then," Cliff said. "I don't even own a TV."

"Seems like such a waste of time to me. Besides, I've been told I make plenty of my own noise," Troy replied with a grin.

"Whoever told you that was an honest individual."

"Brutally, but I didn't mind. I can't get mad when somebody tells me the truth," he pointed out, making a miniature Mt. Vesuvius out of his stack of pancakes, syrup, and pieces of bacon. He scooped up a forkful of maple goodness, then said, "Well, those movies didn't portray Loki accurately. I mean, I get that it was about entertainment and all, but still. The actor is hot, though. Anyway, in mythology, Loki was a trickster through and through. Would do whatever it took to get his way. He even transformed into a female horse once to distract the stallion Svaðilfari from helping the Hrimthurs from building the wall of Asgard because the Aesir didn't want to have to pay him."

"I don't want to hear about that," Cliff said, unimpressed, as he devoured his scrambled eggs.

The look on Troy's face made it clear his train of thought had been derailed by the terse remark, and it took him a moment to recover and pick up the conversation. "Oh, okay. You don't like mythology?"

"Never paid it much mind. It's too early in the mornin' for this."

"Then drink your coffee faster. I might have to mark your mug so I know when it's safe to converse without living in fear of you eating me for breakfast," the young man laughed. When he got a glare in return, he cleared his throat and tried again. "That's a relief, though. I thought you were mad about Loki becoming a female horse. Mythology is fun. Thor once bashed a guy's head in while disguised as the Goddess Freya. Lots of mythological figures crossdressed or changed genders/sexes to get what they wanted. Zeus, for example—"

He stopped short and snapped his mouth shut as Cliff shot him a more intense glare. His gaze dropped to his plate in disappointment, and he picked up his knife and fork to attack his food as he slouched down in his chair.

"Not a breakfast table topic. Got it."

Why in hell does it bother me so much to see that dejection in his eyes or hear the disappointment in his voice? Why do I care? I shouldn't care, but I do. I can't help it. Cliff couldn't stand it, so he offered, "Food's good."

I'm such a softie. Now he's probably going to start talkin' fast again.

Troy visibly brightened and sat up straighter in his chair. "Glad you like it. If you tell me what your favorites are, I'd be happy to make what you want instead of guessing."

"Can't pay you any extra to cook for me," Cliff said. "That wasn't in the job description."

"That's okay. I love to cook, and it's just as easy to cook for two people as it is to cook for one person. I'm not a sandwich-every-day kind of guy, so I'll probably cook most of the time." He paused, then amended, "I mean, as long as you don't mind. It is your house and your food."

Who in their right mind would turn down that offer? Sounds like a good deal to me, Cliff thought as he shrugged and nodded. "Just make a list, and I'll get what we need when I go to town. And make sure everythin' is on the list, okay? I only go to town once every couple of weeks."

"I guess you can't just run to the store to pick up something way out here, huh."

"Not really. If we don't have it, we don't have it 'til it's time to go to town again. I don't make special trips except for emergencies. Can't afford the extra gas or time away from the ranch."

"Got it." Troy thought about what he had already found in the kitchen and pantry while he was looking for ingredients to make breakfast and what he needed from town. Swallowing another mouthful of Mt. Pancakes-and-Bacon, he said, "You're running low on some things. When is your next trip?"

"Monday. Not as busy then," Cliff replied briskly and shoveled another spoonful of oatmeal in his mouth. It was just as warm and delicious as when his mother used to make it so many years ago. *Good memories. I like this man.*

"That's three days from now," he said, then smiled. "I'm used to being thrifty. I can make it work until Monday."

He looked like he could pull off thrifty, but Cliff kept his mouth shut on that, unable to think of a nice enough way to say so. He got the impression that Troy could go shopping in a dollar store and get everything he needed to keep the house running smoothly for two weeks. And he could probably get a fabulous new outfit for five bucks at Goodwill while he was at it. Today's ensemble consisted of the skinny jeans from yesterday along with a white tee that looked like someone had thrown paint all over it, like abstract art.

It makes him look like a work of art, Cliff thought before he caught himself, a little shocked at where his mind was going. *Whoa there, cowboy. Glad I didn't say that out loud. Wonder what he'd think if I did say it, though...*

Cliff glanced up at his new housekeeper now and then as he went back to rambling and running his words together. *Hope he can break that habit. The pace of the ranch, of this whole part of the country, is laidback and easygoing. It's what the animals need... what I need. He's just too intense, but he'll learn. I hope.*

Then again, maybe it'll be good for me to be around him, just like he is. He definitely adds excitement and a little chaos to my life, and those aren't necessarily bad things. There's plenty I could learn from him. Like how to smile and actually mean it. Maybe I'm just stuck in a bad rut and he's exactly what I need to find my way out of it.

Please, God, let him do satisfactory work for the next two weeks. I want to keep him around. That smile really does light up the whole room and not in the way that makes me want to claw my eyes out in the mornin'.

Once his plate had been wiped clean, Cliff leaned back in his chair and remarked, "I ate too much. It was delicious."

Troy smiled, genuinely pleased, as he gathered up the dishes and took them to the sink. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you know."

"That right?" the rancher mumbled, sipping his second cup of coffee.

"It is, it is, indeed it is," he replied in a singsong voice.

"Sounds like somethin' a mornin' person would say."

Troy laughed at that, a beautiful, musical-sounding laugh. "Coffee does not a breakfast make, Mr. Haywood. You work hard, and you need a nutritious meal to start your day."

"So you made me bacon?" Cliff asked, something that might be described as a half-smile turning up one corner of his mouth.

"And eggs and oatmeal and fruit, don't forget. And you ate some of all of it."

Cliff got up and placed his coffee cup in the sink. "That I did. I'm headin' out now, but I'll be back for lunch 'round noon."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Haywood!" Troy called as the rancher paused at the back door to step into his boots and grab his hat. "That's it?"

"Uh, yeah. Did ya need somethin'?"

"Well, I have some questions." He ticked them off on his fingers. "What do you want me to make for lunch? Where can I find you if I need you? How do you want me to answer the phone if anyone calls? What if someone stops by? And most importantly, what do you want me to do around the house today?"

"Alright, alright, slow down," Cliff said, trying to remember all the questions so he could answer them. He didn't want Troy to worry all day. "First, people usually make sure I'll be reachable before they come by. They know I run this ranch by myself and I'm usually out all day. I'll have to take you 'round the land one day so you'll know where to look for me if you need me. Second, if someone calls, answer Wild Prairie Ranch, take a message, and tell 'em I'll call back. And last, I don't need a big meal sittin' heavy in my

stomach in the middle of the day. I need somethin' that'll keep me goin' but not weigh me down. Just a sandwich is fine."

It was the most he had said all morning, and he could tell Troy was cataloging each answer in his mental files. He waited until the man said, "Okay, I got all that, but you didn't answer my question about the housework."

"Well, that'd take more time than I can give it right now," Cliff admitted. "So 'til we can talk more about it—say, after dinner—just do the basic housekeepin' stuff like sweepin', moppin', cleanin' the bathrooms. That sort of thing."

"I can handle that. Just those things should keep me busy all day," Troy replied, throwing a conspicuous glance around the kitchen area.

"I know. Sorry things aren't very tidy. I haven't had time to keep up with everythin'."

"No worries, Mr. Haywood," he said with a wink. "That's why you need me, right?"

"Right," Cliff agreed. For a split second, he thought, *I hope he doesn't clean me out and disappear*. Then he inwardly laughed at himself. *Funny how I didn't think 'bout the fact that he could've murdered me in my sleep, but I worry about him stealin' from me. I don't even have anythin' valuable enough to take. Besides, he don't seem the type*. He tipped his hat and headed out the door, calling back over his shoulder, "See you at lunch."

He heard Troy yell some sort of farewell, and he put a hand up to wave without looking back. *If I look back now, I'll never get to work*, he thought with a half-smile. The beautiful man had captured his attention but good. The half-smile morphed into a full-blown grin as he saw the dogs gathered at the barn door and the horses lined up at the fence, all waiting for their breakfast. *Captured my attention so good I'm late feedin' the animals. Hope they don't decide to stop talkin' to me*.

"Hey, boys and girls, breakfast is comin' right up," he said, ducking into the barn to grab a bale of hay. On his way out, he nearly tripped over a barn cat who clearly thought he should be able to see her through the dense hay. "Sorry, kitty," he offered with a chuckle as she hissed at him and climbed to the safety of the rafters.

"Come and get it!" he called as he approached the pasture fence.

The small herd of five mares and three geldings responded immediately as he spread out the hay. He touched each horse's neck in turn and greeted them

all by name. Taking just a moment to appreciate and reinforce the bond with every horse was something he had learned from his daddy and granddaddy. *They're livin' creatures, after all, not machines*, he had heard countless times.

After filling the water troughs, he went back to the barn and put some feed in a bucket. It was a nutritious special treat for the horse that he would be working with for the day. Singling out one of the horses, Cliff led him to a paddock close to the barn where the tack was already spread out on one of the fence rails. He hooked the handle of the bucket over a fence post and rubbed the big blue roan gelding's nose. "Here ya go, Dante. Finish up yer breakfast while I feed the other animals and then it's time to go to work."

Dante snorted in response, and Cliff patted his strong neck with a chuckle. "Easy, big fella. I got things to do before we can head out. Everybody else has to eat too, not just you."

He went about his chores with calm, quiet composure despite getting a late start. If his energy levels were high, the energy levels of every animal on the ranch would rise, and things could get out of hand in a hurry. So Cliff banished from his mind the fact that he was already behind schedule; the work would get done. If he tried to rush things and triggered a riot in the yard, it would serve no purpose except to waste more time and cause stress to him and all the animals.

"Daddy always said, nobody ever made friends with a horse by yelling at 'im. Ain't that right, Bandit?" he said, glancing down at his best cattle dog as he doled out portions into each of the dogs' food bowls. Bandit yapped in agreement. He dove into his bowl snout-first as soon as his master set it on the ground, chomping away as if he was starving.

Cliff chuckled, scratching behind a floppy brown ear. "Hungry, weren't ya, boy? Sorry, I was a li'l bit distracted this mornin', new housekeeper and all."

Very pretty new housekeeper, he thought as he spent a quiet moment with each of the cattle dogs, using their names and scratching their favorite spots. They were working dogs, and it was important that he didn't treat them as pets. But that didn't mean he shouldn't care for them and bond with them the same way he did with the horses.

Even as he spent a few minutes with his dogs, he couldn't get Troy out of his head—the outfit that was every bit as formfitting as the one from the previous night, the fact that he had taken time to apply a touch of eyeliner before making breakfast, the irritating yet endearing way he ran his words together when he was nervous... Cliff smiled, remembering Troy's quip about

the IV coffee drip. *Been a long time since anyone made me smile like this. Don't screw this up, Haywood. This man is good for you.*

Good for me, yes, but just look at him. He don't belong here. He sticks out like... well, like a damn rainbow after a storm. The folks in town'll eat him alive, and when they see me with him, they'll chew me up and spit me out too—

Whoa there, Haywood! What the hell's got into you? Since when did you start carin' what the folks in town think, or anyone else for that matter? You like him. That's all that matters. Nothin' and nobody else.

And when they see you with him, you damn well better be proud as hell he has the balls to be himself. That's the least you can do for him.

Cliff didn't realize that he had stopped in his tracks, staring into space while he argued with himself in his own head, until Bandit let out a sharp yap that made him jump. "It's alright, pup," he soothed, inwardly chuckling at his reaction. "I'm okay, just figurin' out some stuff."

Better get back to workin' or I'll never get to go back in the house... where Troy is. Is it lunchtime yet? Shit, this is going to be a long day...

When all the animals had been fed and all the regular chores had been checked off his mental list, Cliff strolled out of the stable and headed for the paddock where Dante waited, snorting and snuffling and ready to go. The rancher's heart felt lighter than it had in ages, and there was a liveliness in his step that wasn't quite a spring but was perhaps its distant cousin.

On his way to the paddock, he noticed Troy's car in the yard near the house. It was an old Buick on its last legs, from the look of it. The sight of it jogged his memory, reminding him that he had been meaning to check on the heavy equipment used for harvesting the hay. He didn't want to be stuck with broken-down tractors on the first day of cutting. With a quick apology to Dante, he turned on his heel and went to tinker with his large toys.

"Have a good morning!" Troy yelled back from the back porch, giving an enthusiastic wave.

He watched the rancher disappear into the barn and return a few minutes later with an armload of... stuff. He laughed out loud then, realizing that he didn't know the right word for it. He could see a saddle and a blanket and maybe a halter. *Halter... is that even right? Maybe it's a bridle, who knows? I'll just have to ask him later.* For a moment, Troy faltered, wondering, *I hope*

he doesn't mind me asking so many questions. Oh well, I'll never know if I don't ask. Knowledge is power!

Troy turned to go back inside the house to get started on the dishes when he noticed the dust and grass all over the porch. *Might as well sweep it off while I'm thinking about it.* He stepped back inside and looked around until he found a small door that looked like a closet. *Bingo*, he thought, then couldn't help finishing the tune, *was his name-o!* With a chuckle, he grabbed a broom and proceeded to sweep off the porch, humming and singing as he went. After he finished, he walked around the house and swept off the front porch. *Might as well do both while I'm at it.* Once both porches had been swept clean, he indulged himself a bit and twirled the broom like a dance partner.

“Thank you for the lovely dance, Mr. Broom, but now it's time to get back to work,” he said as he dipped in a low bow to the broom. Then he laughed out loud at the silliness as he pranced inside to start the dishes.

There was a large window located over the kitchen sink, and Troy was able to keep his mind occupied looking out over the seemingly endless lands belonging to Wild Prairie Ranch while his hands were busy washing the breakfast dishes. Had the window not been placed exactly there, he would have had a difficult time standing still long enough to get the job done.

Contrary to what he first thought, there was plenty to see outside. Chickens doing their thing strutting around the yard, some goats munching away on the other side of a fence, several horses eating their breakfast in a nearby paddock, a couple dogs following the rancher around as he did his chores, and even a barn cat came into view now and then through the open barn door. It was all fascinating to a transplanted city boy.

After he had dried and put away all the dishes, Troy realized that the way the kitchen was laid out made no sense and was not functional. The pots and pans were in a cabinet on the opposite side of the kitchen from the stove, and he'd had to walk around the room two or three times to collect all the dishes, glasses, and flatware to set the table for breakfast. It would be so much easier and more pleasant to cook if he rearranged the whole kitchen and made everything more functional...

Whoa, nelly! he thought as he stopped himself after emptying one cabinet. *You crazy queen, this is not your house. You can't just go flip-flopping rooms around all willy-nilly. You need to ask Mr. Haywood first. And since when did you start flip-flopping anyway?*

Hehe, I said willy.

“God—or Goddess, as the case may be—it’s a good thing nobody can hear what goes on inside my head,” he said out loud, laughing again. “At least I entertain myself.”

He put everything back in the cabinet, then thought about what he should do next. He found himself thinking out loud, as was usual, because saying his thoughts out loud helped him organize them. It also helped fill the silence.

“Every surface in here needs a good scrubbing, and the floor could definitely use a thorough mopping,” he mused, looking around the kitchen. He made his way into the hallway as he went through his options, walking up on the balls of his feet as if he was wearing a fabulous pair of high heels instead of worn sneakers. “These hardwood floors are gorgeous, but they need some work. Sanding, staining, sealing—I’ll have to talk to Mr. Haywood about that, though. That would be a big project. For now, they need sweeping and mopping. But it’s always wonderful to have clean bathrooms—I bet he would love to be able to soak in a hot bath in a sparkling clean tub after sweating outside like a slave all day. How divine that would be!”

An inspection of the house turned up a full bathroom and a washroom downstairs in addition to the bathroom upstairs, and they all needed to be cleaned from top to bottom. Troy had visions of scrubbing grout on his knees with a toothbrush in his not-so-distant future. “Not the way I like to spend time on my knees,” he grumbled. “Has the man never heard of cleaner? He simply *cannot* be gay.”

There were plenty of other things that needed to be done as well. There was dust everywhere, the drapes needed to be cleaned or at the very least vacuumed, the windows washed, the rugs shaken out and beaten, the baseboards scrubbed, the cobwebs swiped out of the corners of the ceiling, the ashes cleaned out of the fireplace, a few fixtures around the house polished, some light bulbs changed. Troy had no idea when the bed linens or bath towels had been changed last, and he was sure there was laundry somewhere that needed to be washed—

“Ahhh! Mental overload!” he screamed dramatically. “Where do I even begin? There’s so much to do! I can’t get everything done, especially if he adds more to the list, and if I can’t get it all done, he’s going to let me go!”

He ran upstairs, flopped on his bed, and pulled his pillow over his head. It was only then that he realized he had forgotten to make his bed after getting up

early. "Make your bed and stop being so dramatic, you silly queen. Prioritizing and tackling one thing at a time will get the job done."

Making his bed and tidying the room allowed him to check one thing off his long list, and the sense of accomplishment spurred him on to the next thing on his list. He decided that he should clean the toilets, sinks, and counters in all the bathrooms first. *There's not many things worse than peeing into a nasty toilet*, he thought with a shudder. After that, he would tackle the kitchen so it would be clean when he prepared meals. *I can work out what to do next after I finish those things. One thing at a time.*

Hours later, Cliff came back inside and was greeted by the harsh smell of cleaners. *Gross*, he thought, wrinkling his nose. *On one hand, it means he's been cleaning. Fantastic. On the other hand... now my house smells like bleach and Pine-Sol. Note to self: pick up cleaner that smells better when I go to town.*

"Troy!" he yelled from the back door as he hung up his hat and stepped out of his boots.

"In here!" came the immediate response from the kitchen.

He rounded the corner and saw that everything formerly located on the kitchen counters had been neatly displaced onto the table. Then he saw pristine countertops, a spotless stainless steel sink, a sparkling chrome faucet, and a gleaming cooking range. The oven had been set to self-clean. He also noticed that every cabinet had been scrubbed clean, doors and sides, which was made evident by the fact that Troy was sitting cross-legged in front of the last cabinet scrubbing it with a sponge.

"Hi!" he said with a bright smile as soon as Cliff came into view. Then he sprang up off the floor, stunning Cliff with how quickly he moved when it was obvious he had been sitting that way a long time. "Is it noon already? It can't be, I haven't made lunch yet! Give me just a few minutes and I'll have a sandwich ready lickety-split!"

The rancher raised an eyebrow at "lickety-split" but didn't comment on it. Instead, he reassured his housekeeper, "It's late mornin', not noon yet, don't worry. I just came in to tell ya that I won't be back for lunch after all."

"Oh. Is everything alright?" Troy asked, pausing in the middle of frantically grabbing things out of the fridge to make sandwiches.

"Been trying to wrangle stubborn machinery all mornin'," he explained, washing his hands and taking care not to get dirt and dust on the clean surfaces.

“Glad I didn’t wait ’til it was time to cut the hay before I checked. Finally got the tractor to start, but now I’m behind for the day.”

“What do you have left to do?”

Cliff let out an amused laugh at that. “What do I have left? I barely got started.”

The look on Troy’s face made him regret laughing. *Idiot. How’s a city boy like this one s’posed to know what I do outside from sunup to sundown?*

He cleared his throat and reached past his housekeeper to grab a bottle of water out of the fridge as he said, “This is a cattle ranch. But I can’t just turn ’em loose in a pasture and leave ’em alone forever. I gotta check on the herd every day to make sure none of ’em are sick or injured and to make sure there’s no signs of predators preyin’ on the herd. If somethin’ like a cougar or a pack of wolves gets a taste for calves, it could decimate the herd, and losin’ even a few head of cattle would cause a financial burden for any rancher in this economy. I gotta check on the calves and make sure they’re healthy so they’ll sell well enough at auction to at least break even. And I gotta ride the land as often as I can to make sure it’s safe for the animals and check all the fences for breaches.”

“I had no idea there was so much to do,” Troy admitted. “Whenever I see pictures of ranchers, they’re always walking around without shirts and carrying saddles or doing, um, other things—”

“Like layin’ around in the hay blowin’ each other?”

Those gorgeous chocolate brown eyes grew wider. “What?”

“Cowboy fantasies. They’re all over the internet. Most of ’em are models—their muscles come from liftin’ weights in a gym instead of hard manual labor. And no real cowboy would ever have sex buck ass naked in the hay. You’d be covered head to ass in scratches.” Cliff stopped and eyed him closely, trying to gauge his reaction. “Oh, c’mon now. Tell me you ain’t a prude.”

“I’m not a prude!” Troy shot back. Then a sly grin settled on his face. “Cowboy fantasies, huh. You know about that from personal experience, do ya, cowboy?”

“Your ass only gets covered with angry red scratches once before you learn to take the extra five seconds to put down a saddle blanket,” he answered with a derisive snort.

“And that concludes our first session of Lessons from the Ranch 101. Class dismissed,” Troy joked with an adorable giggle.

“On that note, I need to be heading out. I gotta lot of ground to cover today. Should be back for dinner, though,” Cliff said, grabbing an apple on his way to the door.

“You have a picnic lunch already packed up in your saddlebags, right, Mr. Haywood?” he asked, standing with his hands on his hips. When he was met with a blank expression, he went on, “Because I know you don’t plan on walking out of here with just an apple when I can make you a delicious, stick-to-your-ribs sandwich in a flash.”

A couple minutes later, the rancher walked out the back door carrying his apple and a sandwich thick enough that he would have to stretch his jaw to get a decent bite. Troy watched him mount his horse and ride off into the wild blue yonder—or the rolling plains, as it were. He went back inside with a smug smile on his face. *No hot boss of mine is gonna go hungry, not while I have anything to say about it.*

Hey, I have a totally hot boss!

Troy looked at all the ingredients spread across the countertop that was no longer spotless. It would need to be wiped down again before he could move on to cleaning the fridge and eventually the floor. With a dramatic sigh, he said out loud, “That’s the problem with housework—it’s never really finished. There is always something else to do.” Then he shrugged. “But that’s a good thing, I guess. It keeps me employed.”

Then his stomach rumbled, and those sandwich ingredients began to look a bit more appealing. He had been working nonstop since before dawn; he hadn’t had time to realize that he was hungry. “Might as well eat something before I put everything away so I won’t have to take it back out again. That’s efficient, right?” His stomach rumbled again, and he lowered his voice and said Cookie Monster-style, “Belly say ‘feed me’! That good ’nough for me.”

One large PBBLT later, he rubbed his stomach and asked, “How’s that, belly? It’s been a while since we had real bacon, lettuce, and tomato for our peanut butter, bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches. Yummy deliciousness, that’s what it is. Okay, back to work then. With whom shall we flirt—I mean, work next, hmm? Mr. Mop?”

He glanced around at all the work that needed to be done before he could start mopping and shook his head. “No, my apologies, Mr. Mop. It would be

absolutely scandalous to work with you out of turn. I couldn't possibly. Mr. Broom, then? Nope, not him either. Gasp! Ms. Dishcloth, have you put on your best dress just for little ol' me? I am flattered, just flattered!"

The beautiful housekeeper danced and twirled and pranced and sang his way through cleaning the entire kitchen first with Ms. Dishcloth until the counters gleamed, then with Mr. Broom until there was not a speck of dirt to be found, and finally with Mr. Mop until the stone floor was cleaner than he suspected it had been in quite a long time. Troy looked around the pristine kitchen, proud as a peacock at how fantastic it looked, and realized that he couldn't wait to cook again. But since it was early afternoon and nowhere near time to start dinner, that would have to wait.

"Oh well, it's not like I'm hurting for things to do," he said to no one in particular.

Bowing gracefully to his dance partners, he declared in a sophisticated tone, "Gentlemen, and my fair lady, it has been a true pleasure, but sadly, I must go on to new things. This is but one room of many that so desperately need my attention. You, my dear," he said, gently wringing out and hanging Ms. Dishcloth where she could dry, "must be absolutely exhausted, so just rest here a while. You two gentlemen," he went on, gesturing grandly to the mop and broom, "have performed valiantly, but alas, your work is not yet finished. Mr. Mop, Mr. Broom, I fear I shall have further need of your accompaniment. Onward and upward to the second floor we go!"

In the upstairs bathroom, Troy met a toothbrush with whom he ended up spending a great deal of time, just as he had feared. The toothbrush, who preferred that he not use gender pronouns and to whom he referred only as Lovely, worked like a slave until that grout was as white as it could possibly be. And even though his knees screamed at him after kneeling so long on the hard tiles, Troy twirled that toothbrush around with as much grace as if he was a giant and Lovely was a little person.

"That's exactly how we look in my mind, Lovely," he said aloud to his faithful scrubbing friend. He refused to look in the mirror, lest the spell be broken. "And 'Lovely' is the perfect name for you, my little friend," he added, admiring the once bright, now faded colors on the toothbrush's handle. "I always thought they were marketing your kind to us Rainbow Warriors. Turns out I was right all along, huh?" He giggled out loud, and the pair moved to the downstairs bathrooms to get more heavy-duty cleaning done.

Once all three bathrooms sparkled and shone just like the spotless kitchen, Troy returned all of his new friends to their places so they could rest, then he flopped down on the couch to have a rest himself. He kicked off his sneakers, propped his feet up on the arm of the couch, and wiggled his toes in the air.

“Feel that cool breeze! Be free, little piggies, be free!” he yelled, then descended into fits of giggles. “You must be delirious, you crazy queen. Talkin’ ’bout piggies. Bless your heart.” He shook his head in that way the old biddies from back home in the Deep South used to do when he let his gay hang out around his family’s friends, but he couldn’t hold the mock seriousness for long. “There aren’t even any pigs on this ranch... that I know of. Hmm, I should ask. More questions for the boss. Speaking of that positively delicious man...”

His voice trailed off as he craned his neck to see the grandfather clock on the other side of the room. The hands counted down the seconds until the clock chimed five times. Troy let his head fall back down on the couch as he lazily remarked, “It’s five o’clock.”

Suddenly sitting straight up on the couch, he repeated, “It’s five o’clock! And the boss will be back for dinner! Wait—I have no idea when dinner is,” he realized. “Oh well. Any time’s a good time for cooking, I say. Especially when I’m hungry. Don’t you think so, lonely ranch house?”

He didn’t wait for a response. None of his inanimate companions ever answered him, and that was just as well. *I’m sure there’s a DSM-worthy diagnosis in there somewhere, but who cares? I amuse myself.* He jumped up and pranced into the kitchen. *Prancing is so much fun. Who would ever want to walk normally—whatever “normal” is—when you can dance and frolic and cavort and prance?*

Plundering through the fridge and pantry, he made a mental list of what ingredients he had available to work with, and from that list, he managed to come up with enough dinners to last until the trip to town on Monday. And there would be leftovers he could use for lunch. Proud of himself, he pulled out an assortment of odds and ends along with the ground lamb he found in the freezer and threw together what promised to be a delicious shepherd’s pie.

“Just like Grandma used to make,” Troy said to the old wooden spoon that had taken on a sort of grandmotherly persona in his mind. He put the heavy ceramic baking dish in the oven and set a timer, amending his previous statement. “Well, sort of like Grandma used to make. Hers was a bit more precise. This one... is really just leftovers and odds and ends and such, but with

the ground lamb it should be pretty tasty. And it will stick to the boss's ribs, don'tcha think, dearie?"

There was no sign of the rancher or the horse he had ridden anywhere in the yard, the pastures, or on the horizon yet. Troy found himself a bit disappointed as he gazed out of the kitchen window for a sign of the boss coming home. *Still nothing*, he sighed.

"This is ridiculous. Disappointed that you can't see him yet—what are you thinking, you silly queen? He's your boss, not your next ride. This whole 'waiting for the master's return' nonsense is just... ridiculous. Utterly. There's plenty to do until he gets back. This house is certainly not up to our standards of clean and acceptable." He cracked an imaginary whip in the air. "*Tssssssh!* So get a move on, little doggie!"

Laughing at himself, he twirled into the laundry room and put the towels he had collected from all the bathrooms in the wash. As he closed the lid and started the wash cycle, he belatedly hoped that those towels weren't the only ones in the house. *Should've checked first. Oh well.* Troy checked the dryer and found a load of wrinkled work clothes crammed inside.

"Good God Almighty," he exclaimed, using one of his grandmother's favorite phrases, "how on earth did he ever get all those clothes to dry crammed in there like that?" He started pulling them out of the dryer, feeling for damp spots and sniffing for mildew, when he caught himself with his nose buried in the crotch of a pair of worn jeans and laughed. "Sniffing the boss's clothes. Yeah, that's not weird or anything."

By the time he ran upstairs to the linen closet he'd found by chance earlier in the day and placed fresh towels in all the bathrooms, folded the load of laundry, then ironed the things he felt needed to be ironed so his boss wouldn't look completely uncared for and transferred the towels to the dryer, the shepherd's pie was done and sitting in the warm oven with the lid on and Troy was having a difficult time resisting the urge to indulge in a taste. *Or two or three. I'm hungry!*

As if on cue, Cliff walked in the back door, hung his hat on its peg, and stepped out of his boots the same way he did every time he came inside. Mere seconds passed before the delicious fragrance of a home-cooked meal wafted into his nostrils, overpowering the harsh odor of cleaners, and his beeline to the bathroom to take a long, hot shower took an immediate detour into the kitchen to see what his housekeeper had conjured up for dinner.

He was greeted by a noticeably tired but still bright and perky Troy jumping up from a chair to greet him in what he was coming to consider typical Troy fashion. "Hi, Mr. Haywood! Did you have a good day? How are the cattle? Everything good?" Then he stopped himself and pointed to the washroom near the back door. "Go wash up, Mr. Haywood. Dinner's ready, and you are not sitting down at the table like that."

Blinking a bit at the unmistakable tone of command given without a thought in that sweet voice, Cliff replied, "How could I say anythin' but *yes sir* to someone who makes food that smells like that?"

"Oh, don't you start with that *yes sir* business, Mr. Haywood," he laughed. "Troy is just fine, and right now, Troy is very hungry. Go wash up!"

"Just hold yer horses, I'm agoin' right now."

That beautiful, musical laugh. I need that in my life. Never realized what's been missin' 'til he knocked on my door. Or rather, rang the doorbell a million times. Cliff chuckled at the memory still fresh in his mind as he washed his face and hands. It was a wonderful feeling to have someone to come home to at the end of a long, hard day, even if that person was just his housekeeper. *Glad I didn't yell through the door for him to go away. What a treasure I'd've missed out on.*

The two men sat down together when he returned to the table presentable, each of them taking a careful bite of the steaming hot meat, vegetables, and potatoes. It melted in their mouths, and Cliff had to bite his lip to hold back a sensual moan. He held it back out of respect for Troy; he didn't want his housekeeper to misunderstand the meaning, though in his mind the pie did warrant such a response. *The mashed potatoes are so fluffy and the meat is so flavorful. What kind of meat is it anyway? The whole thing is just so moist and delicious. I even like the veggies. I never like veggies. I usually just tolerate 'em as long as they don't attack me, but this... this is makin' me rethink that.*

Troy wasn't quite so discriminating. "Oh my *God*," he moaned out loud, savoring the flavor. "That is *good*! Isn't it good, Mr. Haywood?"

Cliff mumbled an affirmation then shoveled another huge spoonful into his mouth.

"I agree, it's just divine! Thank you for the recipe, Grandma. May you rest in peace," he said as he glanced skyward with reverence. The glance lasted only a second or two, and then his focus shifted back to his boss. "It's a keeper, don't ya think?"

The rancher didn't stop eating long enough to voice a reply this time; he merely nodded, scooping up another spoonful before he finished swallowing. *Rinse and repeat*, Troy thought. *Is he that hungry, or does he not want to talk to me that badly? I know I'm more irritating than a swarm of mosquitoes sometimes. I make a lot of noise, and he's kinda laidback, but he didn't even look up or anything that time. What if he's mad that I didn't get more done today? But I got a lot done! I cleaned the kitchen and all three bathrooms top to bottom—he could eat off those floors now! Maybe I should ask—Nope*, he decided resolutely. *Not gonna annoy him with more questions. If he wants peace and quiet, then peace and quiet he shall have.*

His resolve began to falter after only a few minutes. Troy had never been especially good at waiting, or patience, or taking hints. Cliff sat across the table, hunched over his plate as if prepared to defend against someone trying to snatch a forkful. His head stayed low, his eyes remained focused on his dinner, and he made not a sound other than chewing and swallowing. Finally, Troy could no longer stand it and the words blurted out of his mouth before he could stop them.

“Is there something wrong, Mr. Haywood? Did I say or do anything to upset you?”

“What?” Cliff asked, looking up from his plate in bewilderment.

“You've barely said two words since you started eating, and you won't even look at me,” Troy replied as he set his fork down. “It was me, wasn't it? I did something you didn't like.”

The rancher stared at him for a few seconds, genuinely confused. *Thought we were just havin' a nice, quiet meal...* “No, no, you didn't do anythin'. Well, I reckon I don't really know if you did or didn't—haven't been here all day, remember?—but that's not why I haven't said anythin'.”

“Oh. Well, why then?”

“Cause dinner is delicious,” Cliff answered honestly. “Don't need conversation to enjoy every last drop on my plate.”

Troy watched him soak up the last of the liquid with a piece of toast before shoving the whole soggy mess in his mouth. “You were concentrating so hard on eating that you couldn't talk to me? That's all, really?” *Insecure much? Good lord, you ridiculous queen.*

“That's all. Really,” he repeated, serving himself a second helping. “Why? You need to talk to me about somethin'?”

"No, I-I just—" Troy stopped himself before his mouth could shoot off a mile a minute and let out a breath. "Still nervous, I guess."

"What'd I tell you about that? Nothin' to worry 'bout, right? I meant it." At the smaller man's nod, Cliff switched gears and asked, "What kind of meat is this?"

"Lamb. I found it in the freezer," Troy answered, perking up a bit at the budding conversation. "I was surprised to find it in there, but I just knew shepherd's pie would be the perfect thing to make with it."

"Not somethin' I'd ever buy on purpose. One of the neighbors brought it by a while back and asked if I wanted it. His kids refused to eat it, and he didn't want to waste it. I threw it in the freezer and forgot about it."

"I used all of it. I hope you don't mind."

"I told you, feel free to use whatever you can find," Cliff said with a shrug. "Don't think I've eaten this good since my mama could still cook for me."

Troy had a brief flash of panic thinking that there might have been someone else in the house to see him talking to and interacting with inanimate objects all day long. Then he remembered he had been in, or at least seen, every room in the ranch house by now, and he was sure that nobody else was around. Unless they were hiding in a closet or something.

"Did she get sick or move away?" he asked out of genuine curiosity.

"Move away? No, nothin' like that. Folks don't just leave their family ranch. Some of the ones 'round these parts are third or fourth generation."

"Oh, I thought maybe the life of a rancher got to be too hard for her and she moved into a retirement village or something."

"A retirement village?" Cliff echoed in bewilderment. He had no concept of such a thing. "Don't know what that is, but I'm pretty sure we don't have 'em in Montana."

This place certainly isn't Florida or California, Troy thought as he finished his pie and wiped his plate clean. Then he said aloud, "That would probably be a safe bet. Do you mind if I ask what happened to your parents?"

"Go right ahead."

That made Troy giggle to himself. *This man is so very literal, I love it.* "Okay, what happened to them?"

Cliff let out a heavy sigh and leaned back in his chair. His eyes fell closed in what looked to Troy like pain as he admitted, "They were killed."

"I'm so, so, so sorry." Troy could have kicked himself. *How the hell did a nice conversation end up with dead parents and obviously awful memories? Hello, my name is Troy, and I have the unfortunate inability to socialize in any sort of acceptable way with Montanites—Montanites... Montanans... Montanians? Ranchers? Whatever—C'mon, squirrel brain, we have to focus here!*

"What're ya sorry for? It wasn't your fault."

"I know, but I can't help it. Saying I'm sorry is my default response when I hear news like that." The rancher didn't offer anything else on the topic, so Troy let his imagination tumble out as he asked, "How did they die? Bandits? Cattle thieves? Wolves?"

"Nothin' as excitin' as all that," Cliff replied with a short chuckle before turning somber. "They were killed by a drunk driver on their way to town early one mornin' years ago."

"People who drive drunk or even buzzed live on a whole different plane of stupid than anybody else," he stated with disgust, less interested in dinner than he was before. "Wanna talk about it?"

Cliff seemed to consider the offer for a moment or two, glancing up at Troy as he leaned back down over his plate, as if on guard. He stabbed a pea precisely with the tine of his fork then seemed to deflate as he exhaled.

"It was just the three of us for years and years, ever since I was a kid. Daddy taught me everythin' I know 'bout bein' a rancher and bein' a man. Mama took care of the house mostly, but she also helped Daddy and me out on the ranch when we needed it. We made a good team. One day, he didn't feel well so I told him to stay in bed and I would handle everythin' myself 'til he felt better. It was the first sign that somethin' was wrong with him.

"You have to understand, my daddy never got sick. Man was strong as an ox and had an immune system like a fort. Livin' out here, we aren't exposed to as many germs as townsfolk, and we're used to what occurs naturally here. But he'd been to town recently, and I guess maybe Mama hoped that he caught somethin' there. Anyway, he wasn't gettin' any better, and she finally took him to see his doctor. Did a whole mess of tests and found out he had cancer. The doc said he had a good chance of beatin' it so he was doing chemo and

radiation, everythin' he could to beat the cancer and get back to livin' and workin' like he always had."

Cliff smiled. Those memories were good ones. "That was all he wanted, just to get back to runnin' the ranch. Back to his horses and his dogs and the cattle. I remember how upset he was that he couldn't go on the cattle drive that year, and he was so picky about the guys I hired to help me get the cattle to auction. Broke my heart to see him sittin' on the porch when I rode away. Anyway, Mama and Daddy left before dawn one mornin' so they could get to his chemo appointment first thing, but they never made it. Drunken bastard had just left the bar and hit 'em head-on. Old truck, airbags didn't work. I was told they were killed instantly."

"God, that's a terrible story. I'm so sorry," Troy said again. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He didn't think there was anything else to say. The man had lost his family in a tragedy, and nothing he could say would fix that. "I hope the guy who killed them was convicted."

"Don't change anythin'. My parents are still dead, but yeah, he's servin' his sentence," Cliff replied, nodding. "I just want him to learn his lesson and never drink and drive again. Don't want another family to have to go through this. Other than that, I couldn't care less where he is or what he's doin'. Ya know the worst part?"

"What's that?"

"The guy who killed 'em, the drunk? I had just broken things off with him before this happened because he was aimin' for some big city somewhere and I was aimin' to stay here on the ranch."

Troy's eyes were huge. He felt like they were bugging out of his head. "Oh my God, your boyfriend killed your parents?"

"It wasn't like that. Would've never called him my *boyfriend*. Whatever we had was pretty casual, I guess," Cliff mused. From the look on his face, that part hadn't been so bad, Troy noted with more than a hint of jealousy but didn't say anything. The rancher went on, "But yeah, the guy I was sometimes seein' killed my parents. That was six years ago. Haven't seen anybody since. Too much to do 'round here."

Yes, he's single! Troy exclaimed in his head. Then he mentally kicked himself. *Wipe that inappropriate grin off your face, you stupid queen! He's telling you about losing his family and his ex-whatever. You aren't supposed to*

be happy about this. He forced a more somber expression on his face and managed to keep it from cracking as he thought again, *But he's single!*

"So you have to do everything by yourself now that you and your dad used to do together?" he asked, trying to cover his inner struggle.

Cliff nodded. "It ain't so bad. Only time it's much of an issue is when I have to move the cattle or when it's time to cut the hay. I have the dogs to help me, though, and a good cattle dog is worth at least three men, probably more."

"I never knew dogs were so useful."

"They're essential. Couldn't do this without 'em," he said. He pushed his plate away and stretched mightily. "I lost my best cattle dog about a month after I lost my mama and daddy. I think that old girl died of grief. Had to shell out a ton of money to get a new dog and have him trained, but it was the best money I ever spent. Bandit's my best dog now. Makes workin' with the cattle so much easier for me. They know he's the boss."

"He's the boss? Not you?" Troy asked with a smirk.

"Never's a truer truth been spoken," the rancher replied with a grin, and they shared a laugh. "Alright, I spilled my guts. Now it's your turn. What's your story, pretty boy?"

It took a second or two for Cliff to realize the words that had slipped out of his mouth. *God, I just called him a pretty boy... to his face. I didn't mean to say that out loud! I hope he don't think me a hateful bastard.*

Troy nearly choked on the bread he was chewing. *Did he seriously just call me "pretty boy"? Does he really think I'm pretty? Don't you dare be mocking me, cowboy. My stilettos are sharp as hell.* After drinking a sip of water and regaining his voice, he remarked flatly, "You just called me pretty boy."

"I did, didn't I?" Cliff responded, trying to gauge the other man's reaction. "I'm sorry, I—"

"You're sorry for what? You don't actually think I'm pretty?" Troy asked, trying his damndest to inject humor into his voice instead of hurt.

"Oh, no, it's not that at all. I swear I'm not making fun of you. I do think you're pretty," Cliff said, still stumbling over his words. He stopped himself, cleared his throat, and said in a quiet voice, "I like pretty."

"And I like muscles, so if you could wear a little less shirt now and then, that would be fantastic," he shot back without missing a beat.

“Okay,” the rancher replied, slowly stretching those two syllables into three or four. *He likes my muscles. He wants me to wear less shirt so he can stare at my muscles! God, why does that make me so happy?* “I can do that. Not outside—sun and wind would scorch me—but inside, sure, I can wear a little less shirt.”

“PrettyBoy and MuscleMan... or MuscleMan and PrettyBoy—we’d make a great superhero team, don’tcha think? I wanna be the trusty sidekick.” Troy wagged his eyebrows at his boss in a suggestive, silly manner. “I’ll be your Boy Wonder, Batman.”

“You do know there are all kinds of stories out there ’bout Batman and Robin,” he remarked, thinking. “What’s it called? Slash?”

“Yeah, but what do you know about that kind of stuff, huh, cowboy?”

Cliff shrugged and said in a matter-of-fact way, “A man could get bored in this big ol’ house all by his lonesome at night sometimes. I do have a computer. And the internet.”

“No way—you have a computer?” Troy repeated, surprised. “You don’t even have a TV, but you have a computer.”

“How else am I s’posed to keep track of several hundred head of cattle and all their vaccinations and such?”

“Your incredible memory superpowers?” he quipped.

“I could remember a lot of things if I had to, but that ain’t one of ’em,” Cliff said, shaking his head. “My daddy had this big ol’ stock book he used to keep up with all that. Each animal had its own line where we wrote in the data. After Daddy died, I decided to jump into the twenty-first century and get a decent new computer. The book’s still upstairs somewhere. Nostalgia, I guess. But keepin’ up with spreadsheets is a helluva lot easier than luggin’ that heavy book around.”

“So you use your computer for livestock stuff, slash fics, and porn,” Troy summarized, ticking them off on his fingers one by one. “Sounds about right.”

“And to keep all my financials straight.” The other man’s eyebrows rocketed skyward at that remark, and he added with a sort of half-grin, “That’s the only thing that’s straight about me, though, I swear.”

Troy let out another one of those beautiful, musical laughs. Cliff audibly cleared his throat, shifted in his seat, and said, “Well, that’s ’nough about me. You ain’t answered my question yet. What’s your story?”

“That’s complicated.”

“Then it’s lucky we have the whole rest of the night. Fire away.”

For a moment, Troy just sat stiffly and looked at him. Cliff wondered what he was thinking. *Maybe he’s tryin’ to figure out which skeletons to leave in the closet and which ones to drag out*, he thought, amused. *Or maybe he’s tryin’ to decide if he can trust me. Pretty boy like him prob’ly had a hard time growin’ up in the South.*

He was glad he had kept his mouth shut when Troy relaxed his shoulders and went back to his dinner, seemingly at ease, as he began to talk. “You know how you pegged me for a flaming gay man when I showed up on your porch?”

“Yeah, my filter usually works a li’l better than that. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I *am* a flaming gay man. You figured it out in two seconds,” he replied with a grin. Then his expression turned somber as he regarded the remains of the shepherd’s pie. “It was obvious to my family too. I never came out to any of them, but I never had to. They just knew.”

“Guessin’ they didn’t take it too well,” Cliff ventured.

“Understatement of the century,” Troy said with a derisive snort. “I was one of six boys, second youngest, and every last one of my brothers was super masculine. Football, baseball, track—jocks, all of them. The only sport I was interested in was swimming, and according to my brothers, that wasn’t a ‘real sport’,” he explained, making quotation marks in the air for emphasis, “so I still didn’t fit in. Didn’t matter that I placed well in all of my meets.”

“That must be where you got that great body from,” Cliff said without thinking. Then he felt his face flush with heat as he realized what he had said. *Dammit, where’d that filter go? This is why I hate chitchattin’.*

“Competitive swimming is a fabulous workout. It kept me in shape, and I worked damn hard.” Troy beamed at the compliment. “Anyway, I couldn’t hide the fact that I was different, so I didn’t even try. My older brothers bullied me worse than anybody else ever did. I actually heard my dad tell them once to make a man out of me. Then my mom told some of her lady friends that I was her daughter.” He took a deep breath and looked at his hands in his lap. “That one really hurt. Not that there’s anything wrong with being a girl—’cause girls are awesome—but that’s not what I am.”

“Nobody should have to live like that, and I’m very sorry you did.”

“Don’t be sorry, Mr. Haywood. You didn’t do it,” the housekeeper countered, throwing Cliff’s words from moments ago back at him with a smile.

He smiled back, but it faded quickly. “Did you have any friends?”

“Oh, sure. At school, I always got along pretty well with the girls. Most of them, anyway. I mean, those girls were the only ones who treated me decent. The cheerleaders loved me, and I loved doing their dance routines with them. Not officially part of the squad—’cause in my family, guys couldn’t be cheerleaders, I guess that’s not really the jock thing to do—but it was fun. I had my grandma too. I think she was the only person in my family who ever really loved me.”

“That can’t be true. Family loves family.”

“Maybe that’s how it worked in your family. I guess in mine we did things a little differently.”

That gave Cliff some pause. *I always thought the way I grew up was different. Felt like I was standin’ on the outside lookin’ in at something amazin’ that I could never have. All the other kids I knew were townies*, he considered, with his childhood friends in mind. He was the only ranch kid he had known at the time. It wasn’t until his preteen years that he realized there were ranch families all over and no few kids grew up the same way he had.

I’d rather be alone and secure in myself and my sexuality than in the middle of a crowd of people questionin’ everything about me. And to have no support system at home? That must’ve been terrible. My mama and daddy were opinionated, sure, but they loved and accepted me as is, no strings attached. Every kid in the world deserves that.

He stayed silent, resolving to let Troy speak uninterrupted, and his housekeeper continued, “I loved my grandma, and she loved me right back. She never cared that I was a little different, not quite like the other boys. And when I told her that I’m gay, she just said, ‘I know, baby. Don’t make no difference to me.’ Then she smiled at me, and that was that.”

“That was it? No drama at all?”

“None.” A smile spread across his face. “I told her once about this boy at school I liked—total babe but oh so regrettably straight—and instead of calling me a fag or telling me I was a sinner and going to hell like other people did, she said that he would look better with less clothes on.”

That coaxed a genuine laugh out of the gruff rancher. “She sounds wonderful.”

“She was my best friend,” Troy said with a sad smile. Cliff hated to see the joy of life fade out of those chocolate brown eyes, replaced by sorrow. “I went to live with her when my family disowned me. A coach caught me kissing another guy in the locker room after a swim meet. I guess it looked a lot hotter than it actually was—we *were* both wet and half-undressed—but I swear it was just a sweet little kiss, that’s all. My parents looked at me like I was the spawn of the devil himself. My older brothers roughed me up pretty good while my parents were in the school office, and nobody said a word to them. They broke one of my ribs but not one damn word was said to any of them about it. Fuckers.”

How could anyone do that? He’s the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen, and he has the most amazin’ laugh, and those soulful eyes, and that sharp wit... and I’ve never seen a pair of jeans look better on a body in my life! Cliff thought but kept it to himself. Troy wasn’t fishing for compliments; he was reciprocating by sharing his history, and Cliff respected him a lot for that. But the experience he was hearing about made him angry. *Hope I never meet his brothers. Not a single one of ’em would walk away unscathed.*

Before he lost control and spoke what was on his mind, Cliff asked, “What about your younger brother? You said your older brothers roughed you up, but you didn’t say anything about him.”

“He didn’t totally disown me or walk away from me like everyone else did. At first,” he added. “At first, we emailed, sometimes called or texted. The only reason I got a cell phone was so I could keep in touch with him. He would come to Grandma’s house just to hang out sometimes. I was so grateful that I got to spend a little more time with my younger brother. He was a good kid, but he’d been brainwashed like all my other brothers.”

“Don’t sound like it lasted very long. What happened?”

“The fucking religious, conservative family got to him, that’s what happened to him,” he almost spat. He was fuming. This was a touchy subject, Cliff could tell. Troy elaborated, “I mean, he never agreed with my ‘lifestyle choice’—no matter how many times I told him it wasn’t a choice, he still said that—but he thought our parents were wrong for kicking me out. ‘We’re still family,’ he said, and I loved him for it. Then he started growing distant, coming to Grandma’s house less. He went from being the guy who wanted to help me

paint my nails to the guy who changed the subject or stopped talking to me anytime I mentioned anything even remotely gay.”

Anger drew the skin tight on his face, and Cliff could feel the negative energy pouring off him. In the next second, it was gone, vanished, and weariness caused his shoulders to slump. “One day we’re texting and I innocently mention something that’s important to me, and he says, ‘Dude, that’s so gay.’ And I knew that he meant it in a derogatory way, like stupid. So I call him on it, and he accuses me of trying to force the ‘gay agenda’ down his throat.”

Cliff couldn’t help himself that time and a derisive snort escaped his lips. “The ‘gay agenda’? Since when did wantin’ to be treated just like everybody else become some sort of agenda?”

“I know, right?!” he exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. “I mean, if I had some sort of gay agenda, I would’ve made over my entire high school. Those people need an intervention something fierce!”

A deep, rumbling chuckle rolled through the kitchen as Cliff replied, “Those people would’ve never been better dressed.” He saw the spark light in Troy’s chocolate eyes again and prayed it stayed there even as he asked, “So you don’t talk to your little brother anymore either?”

It was Troy’s turn to snort. “Nope. Nothing for a few years now. I finally gave up on him and stopped sending him messages that I knew in my gut he would never answer. Probably just deleted them as soon as he got them. Finally cut ties with the last of my family.” He met the rancher’s eyes then and a brave smile lit up his face. “It’s okay, though. I’m okay. In fact, I’m better off now. No looking back.”

“They had their chance to have you in their lives, and they blew it,” Cliff replied and nodded. “It’s your life to live, not theirs. You don’t need ’em if that’s how it’s gonna be.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself. It’s hard, though, being transient and not having any place to call home.”

That caught Cliff’s attention. He thought back to the résumé Troy had given him, the many jobs he had worked, and the hundreds of miles his employment history spanned. *I have no idea what that kind of life is like. I’ve always had a home. He hasn’t had one in a long time. It’s about time to change that, I think.*

“Well, you don’t have to be transient anymore, Troy. Just do what needs doin’ ’round here, and this can be your home too.”

“Working someplace doesn’t make it home,” Troy countered, shaking his head. “Been there, done that, already made that mistake more times than I want to remember.”

“I know, but it can be home—if you want it to be.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, wary of what his boss might be thinking.

“Just means that I’m lonely and it would be mighty nice to have someone to come home to at the end of long days in the saddle.”

“You mean like roommates?”

“Yeah, sure, like roommates,” Cliff agreed. *No, not like roommates! I want more than that!* he screamed in the safety of his mind. But it didn’t seem like the right thing to say out loud so he kept it to himself and waited for Troy’s answer.

Oh my God, yes, yes, yes! A thousand times, yes! A million times, yes! YES!!! For a fleeting moment, Troy imagined screaming those words out loud, jumping into his cowboy’s arms, and covering every square centimeter of beautifully tanned bare skin with hot and hungry kisses... except that the man had said roommates, he realized, crushed. Roommates. As in, not lovers.

Of course he did, you stupid fucking queen! You only met the man yesterday and already you’re begging him to take you to bed? Pull yourself together, Troy! This is the best thing we’ve had going for a long time—so much better than we ever hoped for in a place like this—and you are not going to screw it up for us! Get your head out of your ass and in the game!

“That’s moving a little too fast, don’tcha think, Mr. Haywood?” he casually mentioned, putting both hands in his lap where his boss wouldn’t see the nervous twitching. “I mean, you only promised me two weeks. Who knows what might happen by then? You might not want me for a roommate anymore.”

“Don’t think that’s likely to happen,” Cliff replied, trying to scrutinize his housekeeper without appearing to look too closely. He noticed the tension in the man’s shoulders and neck. *Dammit, now he’s all uncomfortable. I shoulda just left well ’nough alone.* “I already decided I’m not gonna bother calling around for your references ’cause I want you to stay. But if you want to stick to the original plan for these first two weeks, that’s fine with me.”

“I think that would be good,” Troy declared in a light tone, rising from the table and gathering dishes as he headed to the sink. He continued to speak over his shoulder, “If you’re happy with my work and we haven’t killed each other by the time two weeks is up, then we might have a better chance at getting along as roommates.” *And hopefully a lot more.*

“Glad that’s settled,” Cliff remarked but knew it was far from the truth. What he was glad for was that Troy wasn’t looking at him to catch him in the lie. He glanced around at all the carnage from dinner and offered, “Want me to help you with the dishes before I go upstairs to shower?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Haywood! Never! You worked hard all day out in the sun, and you deserve to have a nice, hot shower and some time to yourself to relax and rest before you have to go and do it all over again tomorrow. Go on now, upstairs with you!”

Going upstairs to shower was the last thing on Cliff’s mind as Troy chased him out of the kitchen brandishing a dishtowel as a whip. The playfulness of it loosened up a bit of his gruffness; he felt himself genuinely laughing, and he was rewarded with the musical laughter of a beautiful man. He was loose enough to give his dick and balls some long-needed attention in the shower. And for the first time in six years, he fell asleep feeling not nearly as lonely and perhaps even a bit hopeful.

The next morning, Cliff was surprised to smell coffee brewing when he finished his morning routine and headed downstairs bare-chested, his long-sleeved work shirt slung over one shoulder. *Ya wanna see more of my muscles, pretty boy? You got it,* he thought with a roguish half-grin. *But what’re ya doin’ up so early when I heard ya up so late workin’ in the kitchen?*

The banging and clanging of cabinet doors and various household items on granite countertops had stopped around midnight. *Which is very late when a body has to rise before dawn. I sure as shit thought he’d still be in bed sleepin’ at this hour.* The corners of Cliff’s mouth turned down a bit as he contemplated, *I hope he isn’t wearin’ himself out tryin’ to impress me. I already know I want him to stay. Didn’t I make that clear last night?*

The fragrant dark roast called to him like a Siren to a sailor, inviting him to join her in the depths and breathe no more. Fortunately, coffee had the benefit of making him feel more—rather than less—alive, unlike the Siren. Cliff

rounded the corner and started on the shortest path from the doorway to the life-giving nectar of the gods.

He nearly crashed into his housekeeper as Troy turned to greet him and grace him with a beautiful smile that made his stomach do somersaults. "Hi! Good morning, Mr. Haywood! Did you sleep well? What are your plans for the day?" he asked in a rush.

Cliff barely managed to contain the growl before it escaped his throat. *He's blocking the coffeepot. He's beautiful, but he's blocking the damn coffeepot!* "Need. Coffee. Now."

"Gotcha covered, boss," Troy replied with a grin as he held out the Loki mug filled to the brim with steaming coffee. "Freshly brewed, splash of milk and two sugars, in your favorite cup. Have at it."

A grunt was all Cliff could push past his lips before he dropped into a chair and indulged himself. It was perfect. *The guy's good, I'll give 'im that.* After he drained the mug and set it down on the table with a *thunk*, Troy appeared at his side and refilled it. A bowl of apple cinnamon oatmeal was placed in front of him, along with toast and some of the leftover fruit. He glanced up to meet Troy's gaze as the housekeeper joined him at the table with his own breakfast.

"Is it safe to attempt conversation with you yet, or are you still Mr. Don't-Talk-to-Me-Before-My-First-Cup-of-Coffee-Or-I-Will-Cut-You?"

Cliff felt the corner of his mouth quirk upwards in spite of his efforts to stop it. "No zombie ranchers here. Back to the land o' the livin'. How'd you know this was my favorite breakfast?"

"I didn't. I mean, I didn't know it was your *favorite* breakfast."

"My mama used to make me apple cinnamon oatmeal every mornin'," he said, shoveling a spoonful in his mouth. *It tastes just like hers. The man is good!* "It's perfect. How did you—?"

"I, uh, found her recipe box in the cabinet when I was moving stuff around last night," Troy admitted with a guilty look. "The recipe for the oatmeal was in the front so I figured she used it a lot." Then he smirked and remarked, "Then there was the phrase 'Breakfast of Champions' written in the top corner. I figured she wasn't talking about the horses."

"The horses only wish they ate this good," Cliff replied around another mouthful.

"I take it you like it? I had to guess some of the measurements. They don't make measuring spoons for a pinch or a dash." He got nothing more than a grunt in response so he continued, "I meant to ask you about it yesterday and forgot, sorry, but I switched things around in the kitchen cabinets so they would make more sense. You don't mind, do you?"

Cliff looked around. Nothing seemed out of place. "What do you mean?"

"Like, putting all the pots and pans near the stove instead of across the room. Or like, putting all the plates and bowls and stuff in cabinets that are next to each other, instead of having plates over here and bowls over there and glasses back over this-a-way."

"Makes sense to me," he said with a shrug.

"You're not mad I moved things around in here?"

"Why would I be?" Cliff asked, demolishing a piece of buttered toast. "You're the one who needs to be comfortable cooking in here."

"But it was your mama's kitchen," Troy said in a small voice. "I should have asked, but I wanted to do it while I was thinking about it and while the kitchen was clean and before I had to cook again but you were already in bed and I didn't want to wake you up just to ask you a stupid question—"

"There's no such thing as a stupid question," Cliff stated firmly. The next instant, he wondered, *Was that the best thing to say to a man who can talk a mile a minute? Hope he doesn't start askin' a shit ton o' questions now.* Then he gave a mental shrug. *So what if he does? Might be nice to see things through his eyes. Everything's all new to him out here. I needed somethin' to shake up my life, right? And Troy Balhaus is definitely somethin'.* "My mama's been gone for a while now. It'd make her smile knowin' that there's somebody busy in her kitchen again. Lord knows I'm not good at much more than boiled water or toast in here."

"You really think so?" Troy asked a little too earnestly.

"Yep. Now pass me that bowl of oatmeal. I'm good for a second helping."

He passed the serving bowl, then said with a blatant stare at firm pecs and abs, "Thanks for leaving your shirt off, by the way. I'm really enjoying the view."

Cliff dug into his second helping of oatmeal with a rare grin on his face. After he swallowed his last bite and leaned back in his chair, he remembered

that he wanted to mention something. He cleared his throat to get Troy's attention and stated, "I noticed that you were still workin' and cleanin' after I went to bed last night."

Troy swallowed the last bite of his first helping of oatmeal and replied, "I didn't disturb you, did I? I was trying to be quiet."

"No, you weren't botherin' me. Just wanted to say that evenin's and weekends are free time. You don't have to keep workin'. You can do something else."

"Oh, I know," he said, then corrected himself, "I mean, that's what I figured."

"So why—?" Cliff started to ask, but his housekeeper seemed to anticipate his question and answered before he could finish asking.

"I like it, keeping house. It's why I'm a housekeeper. My grandma taught me a lot about life from keeping house. A job well done makes me feel good, and a clean house is something for me and my boss to be proud of."

The rancher raised his eyebrows at that. *Am I gettin' buttered up for somethin'?*

"And I don't expect to get paid extra," Troy added with a wink.

"So you enjoy it?" Cliff asked, puzzled. "For me, it was always somethin' that I didn't have time for but still needed doin'. Another chore. Not somethin' I enjoy like workin' outside with the animals around the ranch."

"I guess I feel the same way about the outside work as you do about the inside work," he chuckled. "To each his own, right?"

A grunt was all his boss had time to utter before Troy asked, "You know what my fantasy is?" He didn't wait for an answer, quickly saying, "To fall in love with a big, strong man who will take care of me, and I'll keep his house clean and beautiful and make his life as magical as a daydream, and he'll be so proud to be mine and call me his."

He suddenly stopped, realizing that Cliff was staring at him from where he sat in his chair, bare-chested and looking like a very strong man. Troy felt the heat rise to his cheeks instantly, embarrassed, as he got up and started clearing the table. "I'll, uh, just start on the dishes then."

Cliff sat for a few moments, stunned, while the other man gathered up the dishes and started arranging them in stacks in the sink. *Did he just read my*

mind? he thought, as he watched that lean body moving underneath a different pair of tight jeans and yet another colorful tee. *I never imagined the part about fallin' in love with a man who cleans houses for a livin'—not that there's anythin' wrong with that, it's an honest day's work—but how many nights've I fallen asleep wishin' there was someone in bed beside me? How long have I been this lonely?* He shook his head, not wanting to even try to guess. It didn't take much thinking for him to realize that he wanted to be the big, strong man in Troy's fantasy.

Can't very well just come out and say it, though.

In an effort to start up the conversation again, he said, “You did a great job yesterday. I don't recall if I mentioned that before I went upstairs last night, but it's true. This kitchen hasn't been this clean since before Daddy got sick, and I could eat off those bathroom floors.”

Troy grinned to himself. *That was exactly what I thought yesterday!* Then he said over his shoulder, “I was a little worried that I didn't get enough done.”

Cliff's eyebrows shot up. *I thought he got a lot done.* Aloud, he said, “I'd rather you take your time and get the house really clean than rush through and do a half-assed job of it.”

“Good. I think I'm going to work on the upstairs today. Downstairs tomorrow. Clean top to bottom, Grandma always said.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Cliff grunted, pushing away from the table as he realized that the conversation was drawing to a close.

“Just to make sure,” Troy called as he headed for his boots next to the back door. “You do want me to clean your bedroom too, right? I mean, I don't want to take a flying leap over the boundaries or anything.”

“Yeah. I picked up the things off the floor last night. I think it's mostly tidy now, but just toss anythin' that's left out in the closet. I'll deal with it later.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Haywood. Have a great day!” Troy said and stood on the porch waving as the rancher headed to the barn to start the morning chores.

He looked around and noticed that the porch was again covered in dust and grass. “Didn't I just sweep this yesterday? I bet the front porch is dirty again too. Oh well, might as well have a twirl with Mr. Broom while the dishes are soaking.”

Two swept porches and a sink full of dirty dishes washed later, Troy cradled Mr. Broom and Mr. Mop in one arm and a bucketful of cleaning supplies he

had met the previous day in the other as he all but skipped up the stairs. He had to make a second trip for the vacuum, an ancient and very heavy thing he dubbed Sir Sucks-A-Lot. There was no skipping as he lugged that thing up the stairs. Once at the top, he took a moment to catch his breath as he looked around.

“It looks like we’ve got our work cut out for us, doesn’t it, Sir Sucks-A-Lot?” The vacuum didn’t answer him. None of his friends ever did. “Let’s get to it then.”

He started by stripping all the bed linens in each of the three rooms. The sheets on his bed and the ones on the bed in the empty room seemed clean enough—*probably because they hadn’t been slept on in a while*, Troy thought—but the sheets on his boss’s bed were in dire need of a washing in scalding hot water.

“I wonder how long ago Mr. Haywood even thought about putting these in for a wash,” he muttered with a slight cringe as he put an armload in the washing machine. “This will definitely be a weekly thing from now on. Gotta get the man used to sleeping on clean sheets again.” It didn’t occur to him as he skipped back upstairs that the thought was one with the vision of a future for the both of them in the ranch house.

Back in his boss’s bedroom, Troy climbed on top of a desk chair to pull down the rods that held up the heavy draperies. *Damn it all to hell, these things weigh a ton!* He would have cursed out loud, but he couldn’t spare the breath as he tried to keep his footing on the small seat of the chair. When he was able to tilt the rod, the draperies slid off one end and dropped into a pile of fabric on the floor with puff of dust that made him sneeze. He replaced the rod, dusted his hands on his pants legs, and coughed, waving the dust away from his face.

“Dreadful news, Sir Sucks-A-Lot. I do believe these lovely old ladies are beyond your chivalrous help. It’s outside for a beating and then a spin in the wash once the sheets and quilts are done. What say you, Sir Sucks-A-Lot?” he asked, bending closer to the vacuum and pretending to listen. “You say it is impolite to speak of beating a lady? Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps it would be more satisfying if she was to receive a spanking instead, hmmm?”

He giggled as he rounded up all the draperies on the second floor, grateful that the rest were lighter than the first set by a significant margin, and took them outside to the back porch. One by one, he stretched them out over the porch railing and gave them each several good *whacks* with Mr. Broom before collecting them in the laundry room.

“My heavens, Mr. Broom, you are getting quite the fabulous workout today!” he exclaimed as he paused to catch his breath in between beatings. “Spanking all these lovely ladies—you are a naughty fellow, aren’t you!”

Looking around the porch, Troy realized that he would have to sweep again as he noticed all the dust from the drapes on the floorboards. He shrugged, saying with a smile and a wink at Mr. Broom, “I would never pass up the chance to dance with a great partner. But let’s get all the carpets beaten first.” He caught himself and grinned wider. “Not beaten. I meant spanked, of course.”

The pair repeated the process with the rugs and hall runner that Troy collected from upstairs. Those were left hanging over the railing like banners in a ballroom overlooking the pair as they twirled around the porch, banishing dust from their path. When the porch was spotless, Troy bowed to his partner and said, “Always a pleasure dancing with you, Mr. Broom.”

A lovely feather duster named Marguerite with a skirt that reminded him of a cancan dancer helped make quick work of the dusting in all the rooms. Troy regretted having to put her down so soon. “Don’t cry, Marguerite darling, we’ll see each other again real soon. Like tomorrow, downstairs,” he promised as he placed her back with the rest of the cleaning supplies, then ran downstairs to put the sheets in the dryer and start another load of washing.

“Now, loves, what to do next, hmm? So much to do, I’m not sure where to start... vacuum the mattresses and upholstery, polish the wood surfaces, wash the baseboards, sweep and mop the floors...” he trailed, trying to decide what should logically come next in his grandma’s top-to-bottom cleaning program. “Not the baseboards or the floor, for sure. Those will be last. Sir Sucks-A-Lot, it looks to be your turn at long last!”

Trying out the ancient Sir Sucks-A-Lot on the flat mattress seemed like a better idea than rushing into hoses and attachments so soon. “Gotta give an old geezer time to adjust, ya know,” Troy quipped to Mr. Broom and Mr. Mop lounging in the corner. He fired up the old vacuum... only to have it sputter and die. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it, honest! C’mon, my knight in not-so-shiny armor, you can’t do this to me. I *need* you to work,” he pleaded as he tried again and again to start it. He fiddled around with it, changed the vacuum bag, and switched to a different outlet, and finally Sir Sucks-A-Lot roared to life.

Troy let out a whoop of excitement and said with a smirk, “Thank God! That’ll do, ya cranky old bastard.”

After vacuuming the mattress, struggling to flip it over by himself, vacuuming the opposite side, and moving on to the upholstery, furniture, and cobwebs in the corners, Troy was ready to start on the floor. The padding on the bottom of the floor attachment promised to glide across the floor without scratching the hardwood, and Sir Sucks-A-Lot made quick work of the bedroom floor. The last place that needed vacuuming was underneath the bed.

“Can’t have any dust bunnies escaping now, Sir Sucks-A-Lot. I don’t want them to attack Mr. Haywood in his sleep. Or any other time, really,” Troy mumbled as he knelt down to peek under the bed. It was all clear except for one box. He stretched to grab it and pull it out from under the bed with the innocent intention of being able to vacuum unimpeded. But the lid popped off and slid to the floor as he yanked, providing him with a clear view of its contents.

To his abject horror, it was a big box full of sex toys—butt plugs, anal beads, vibrators, dildos of various shapes, sizes, and colors—hiding under his boss’s bed.

My boss has a big box of dongs under his bed!

Troy shrieked inside his head, unable to give voice to those particular words. It was a hot fantasy, the boss/employee trope, but not when either of those people was someone he knew. Plus, it just seemed dirty to see all of his boss’s toys laid out in the open like that. Then he looked closer and saw that there was more than just dongs in the box. *Not sure if that makes it better or worse...* Still, he couldn’t seem to make up his mind as he continued to stare at the box, and thoughts began to spill out from his lips faster than he could regulate them.

“Oh my God, what a perv! What a freaking awesome perv!”

“No, no, no, no, NO! He can’t be a bottom! Two bottoms in a relationship don’t work!”

“Hey, there’s a Fleshjack... maybe he will at least consider being versatile...”

“Maybe he’ll want to use some of them on me—that could be fun. But what if he used them on Mr. Drunken Bastard that killed his parents? Gross!”

He violently slammed the lid back on the box, sealing it shut. “Gotta get out of there! That’s Mr. Haywood’s business and nobody else’s—especially not mine. But some of it looked like so much fun! Like you, ya li’l beauty,” he purred to one of the realistically shaped dildos, popping the lid again and

reaching inside the box toward it. He stopped short of making contact, though, and wailed a bit dramatically, “What have I done? I have to tell him I saw all of this stuff. I *have to*. He’ll know and then he’ll think I’m lying or not being honest with him about accidentally finding it.”

The vacuum cleaner sat beside him, all but forgotten, as he snapped the lid shut again. “You’re chivalrous and loyal and all that, right? What should I do, Sir Sucks-A-Lot? Pretend like I never found this and let life carry on as usual and hope Mr. Haywood doesn’t find out, or be honest and tell him that I found his giant box of dongs but that it was a complete and innocent accident and then beg his forgiveness?”

Troy sat in silence for a few moments, feeling like the walls were closing in on him the longer he sat there in indecision. *This is the best job I’ve had since Grandma died and I left Mississippi. He isn’t paying me as much as some of those other jobs, but money isn’t everything. Hell, money isn’t even all that important to me as long as I have a place to sleep and food to eat. This job is perfect in so many other ways—Mr. Haywood is perfect! As a boss, I mean.*

Who do you think you’re kidding, huh? The man is perfection and you know it, you stubborn queen. Just admit it.

“Okay, fine. *Fine*. I admit it. I’m an honest guy, to a fault, but I’m terrified that I’m going to somehow screw this up and Mr. Haywood—who is absolute perfection—is going to send me packing in a heartbeat. And there goes that fantasy that might actually have had a chance of coming true.” He glared at the vacuum. “There! Are you happy now?”

There was no reaction, of course, but Troy could just imagine Sir Sucks-A-Lot raising his imaginary eyebrows, encouraging him to continue. *Go on*. With a sigh, he plowed ahead. “I think he likes me. He likes me, right? He said he likes pretty and he left his shirt off at breakfast this morning like I asked. Wasn’t that view amazing? Oh, you didn’t see it, but trust me, he is oh so very lickable. Oh, how I would just love to lick him up and down...” He paused, realizing he had taken off on a tangent and shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Wait, where was I going with this? Oh yeah, I just want so bad to have a chance to see where all this might lead, ya know? I don’t want to screw up and get tossed out before we even find out if there could be something between us. I mean, that’s a valid concern, right? We are talking about me here—Mr. Pretty-But-Screws-Everything-Up-and-Can’t-Settle-in-One-Place-Long-Enough-to-Develop-A-Significant-Relationship.”

Dead silence, and yet Troy felt like Sir Sucks-A-Lot was smirking at him as hard as his ancient imaginary features would allow. *Ye are making a mountain out of a molehill, ye are*, he imagined the old vacuum chiding him.

“God, you don’t even have to say it. I’m such a drama queen, *I know!*” he said with emphasis as he shoved the box back under the bed. Then he yanked it right back out in frustration. “Dammit, I got so flustered by my own drama that I forgot we haven’t vacuumed under there yet. Ye aren’t slacking, now, are ye, good Sir Knight? That would be unbecoming of one of the Knights of the Petite Cleaning Closet.”

With a giggle, he went back to work as the pair vanquished every dust bunny under the rancher’s bed. When he switched off the machine, he praised, “That’ll do and a job well done, good Sir Knight. Now I won’t have to worry about any of those bloodthirsty buggers going for the boss’s throat in the middle of the night while he sleeps.”

The clock on the nightstand caught his eye. Noon was fast approaching. *Better head downstairs and take care of some of that laundry before it’s time to start making lunch.* “Alright, Sir Sucks-A-Lot, time for you to take a break,” he said as he dragged the heavy appliance back out into the hallway. “Not to worry, though. You’ll get plenty of action after lunch is over.”

He skipped down the stairs, taking the advice of Snow White and her forest animal helpers and whistling while he worked. A few minutes later, he skipped back up the stairs carrying freshly laundered and folded bed linens. He decided to take the extra few minutes to make up his boss’s bed before stopping for lunch so that he could look around the room and feel a sense of accomplishment. A proud smile lit up his face as he headed down to the kitchen.

It turned upside down into a disappointed frown as soon as he caught sight of the scrawled note on the counter.

Gotta fix a breach in the north pasture fence and still have to check on the herd. Should be back in time for dinner. Don’t worry—I made myself a sandwich.—Cliff

“Shit. Not only do I have to wait the whole rest of the day to tell him I found his Big Box o’ Dongs, I don’t get to look at him or spend any time with him until dinner either,” Troy grumbled under his breath. He began to gather the ingredients to make himself another PBBLT. “Never thought I’d say this, but I really hate those big ol’ dongs right about now.”

Before heading back upstairs, he pulled a package of frozen chicken out of the freezer and set it in a bowl on the counter to thaw. There was no microwave in the Haywood house, which meant that he couldn't defrost it like he would have at any of his previous employers' homes. He was channeling the late Mrs. Haywood again for the evening meal, having selected another worn and, hopefully, well-loved recipe from her box after plundering through the pantry for ingredients. *It seems like a good idea to break the awkward dong news while the boss is eating a comfort meal. I hope he likes it.*

Hours later, the entire second floor of the ranch house gleamed and sparkled, and Troy wanted nothing so much as to plop down on the couch, put his feet up, and take a nap. But if he didn't start dinner soon, there wouldn't be anything hot to feed his hungry boss when he got home.

In an effort to distract himself from his aching feet, Troy imagined that he was making dinner while wearing perfectly applied makeup, a bit of jewelry, and his favorite pair of shiny bubblegum pink high heels. Feeling pretty always made him happy, and it was a lot more fun to make dinner when he was in a good mood. He danced in place while sautéing the chicken and mashing the white beans, and he twirled and spun and laughed while the concoction simmered away on the stove.

Secretly, he imagined his boss dancing around the kitchen with him, wearing that grin he had only caught a glimpse of but had already fallen for. But in reality, Troy hoped that the rancher never found out about the duffle bag stuffed with pretty things that he had brought in from his car the night before. He doubted he could handle the rejection. And he just knew he would be rejected, like all the other times. Just because Mr. Haywood liked pretty men didn't mean that he would be fond of his housekeeper prancing around in lipstick and high heels.

Troy heard the sound of running water in the small washroom by the back door just as he turned the burner to the lowest setting and covered the pan. *The boss is back. Oh God, he's back! You've been wanting to see him all day, so why are you suddenly so nervous?* He pulled out the dishes and occupied himself with setting the table, trying to mask his anxiety and the clatter of plates and glasses clanking together. *It isn't just the whole box of dongs thing I need to talk to him about. This is a good thing I've got going here and Mr. Haywood's a good man—and damn fine too—and I just really, really, really don't want to screw this up. Even if that doesn't happen with the dongs, I'm so afraid I'll manage to do it some other way.*

It hit him like a punch to the gut, and he stopped in his tracks, realizing that he had a far greater chance of shooting himself in the foot if he kept that kind of attitude. *Just be yourself, you silly queen! If he really is as good a guy as you think he is, then he won't drop you like a bad habit the first time you fuck up. And if he does... well, we didn't need him anyway.*

Admitting that was the easy part. The hard part was accepting and believing it.

"Smells good in here," Cliff said when he strode into the kitchen a moment later. He headed straight for the stove, lifting the pot lid and inhaling the aroma. "Southwestern Chicken and White Bean Soup—another one of my mama's well-used recipes."

"I figured I could get to know what you like to eat if I work my way through her recipe box. That and I had to find something I could make with the little bit of food left in the pantry," Troy admitted with an awkward grin.

"I know supplies are runnin' low, but I go to town day after tomorrow. We can just have sandwiches and leftovers 'til then."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Mr. Haywood. I have a plan all worked out," he replied as he ladled a generous helping of soup into each of their bowls, added a dollop of sour cream, and sprinkled a bit of grated cheese on top.

The pair sat down and savored their first spoonful before either of them spoke. After watching his boss devour several mouthfuls, Troy couldn't help asking, "How is it?"

"Better than my mama's used to be."

"No way, it can't be."

The rancher shrugged. "It is. Seasonin' tastes a bit different. I like your version better."

"Well, color me surprised. Guess this one's a keeper too."

Troy allowed his boss a few moments of peace and quiet before he took a loud, crunchy bite of his toast. "You know, Mr. Haywood, this bread is kinda old—"

"Yeah, I know. Only get to town every couple weeks, remember?"

"I remember. My memory isn't that bad yet," he quipped, eliciting an amused smirk, before he went on, "I was going to warn you—I mean, ask you!"

I was gonna ask you if it was alright if I add some things to the shopping list. It'll be a long list this time, but once I restock the fridge and pantry, you shouldn't have to get so much on every trip."

"Sure. Whatcha need?"

"Flour, sugar, yeast—you know, baking things. If I bake, we'll always have fresh bread. Sandwiches are better with fresh bread," he explained with a wink. "I can also make muffins, cookies, scones, brownies, cakes, pies. You tell me what you like and what you're in the mood for, and I can make it in no time."

"Could you make me a chocolate lava cake or a lemon meringue pie?"

"Yep. All I need are the ingredients."

"Write it down and I'll get whatever you need," Cliff said, licking his lips. "I could hurt myself eatin' a lemon meringue pie, or a chocolate cream pie, or blueberry cobbler..."

"Okay, you can stop any day now!" Troy exclaimed with a wide grin. "That is pure torture! I can't make any of those right now!"

"Ya know," the rancher pondered, scratching his chin, "I think there's some chocolate cream pie in the freezer."

Troy made a face. "How long has it been in there?"

"Not that long." Cliff let his eyes roll as he shoved away from the table and headed to the freezer. "The lady who lives on the ranch 'cross the highway brought it, said she thought I would enjoy it. I did, way too much. That was maybe a week and a half ago."

He brought back a tin with half the chocolate cream pie missing. Troy blinked at it a couple times, then looked back up at his boss. "She brought you a whole pie?" At Cliff's nod, he said, "Tell me she stayed for a while to help you eat it. Tell me you did not eat half a pie in one sitting."

One corner of Cliff's mouth curled up in a smirk. "I ate half a pie in one sittin'. I could've eaten more, but I stopped myself."

"I bet you could have eaten the whole damn thing if you'd really wanted to, couldn't you?" Troy asked as he ran a knife under hot water to make it easier to cut through the frozen pie.

The rancher gave Troy one of those rare grins that he adored. "You're gettin' to know me pretty good."

He cut a generous slice for each of them, and they ate for a few minutes in comfortable silence. *Have to say, it's... interesting to have this dessert following a Southwestern-style dish, but it's good. And Mr. Haywood doesn't seem to mind at all,* he thought, glancing up to watch him eat. The man took his pie every bit as seriously as he took his meals, and Troy realized that he may have underestimated the appetite of a man who worked outside with his hands all day.

I am so stalling so I don't have to tell him about the box of donges. Dragging it out is only going to make it worse, not better. So out with it, you scaredy queen!

"Mr. Haywood, I have something I need to tell you."

Cliff paused, forkful of pie raised halfway to his mouth, and asked, "What is it? Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, it's just... I found this box while I was vacuuming under your bed..." he trailed off, hoping that his boss would figure it out and spare him having to elaborate further.

But Cliff didn't understand and prompted him to continue. "And?"

"And I wasn't snooping, I swear I wasn't, but the top came off when I moved it out of the way and—oh God, Mr. Haywood, I'm so sorry!" he apologized, his nerves making his words spill out and run together.

"Sorry for what?"

"I saw them." Cliff looked at him, blank-faced, so he took a deep breath and went on, "The toys in the box, I saw all of them! I didn't mean to but I saw everything in your big box of donges!" His cheeks flaming red, Troy dropped his gaze to his hands fidgeting in his lap. He couldn't look his boss in the eyes. It was just too embarrassing.

"Oh, that." Cliff let out a loud roar of laughter, realizing what had happened.

Is he making fun of me? Troy wondered. What if he set me up on purpose? "Please don't laugh at me. I didn't think it was very funny."

"I wasn't laughin' at you, Troy. I was laughin' at me. I completely forgot that box was under there."

"So you're not mad?"

“Course not. You didn’t do anythin’ wrong,” Cliff said with a chuckle. “Thanks for vacuumin’ under there. God knows the last time that happened.”

“That’s my job,” Troy replied with a hesitant smile. “Mind if I ask how you forgot there was a big box of dongs under your bed?”

“They’re not mine.”

He raised his eyebrows, confused. “Well, Mr. Haywood, they say that possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Cliff laughed again, and Troy had to admit that however awkward the confession had been, it was worth hearing the rancher really laugh. Cliff explained, “I guess they are mine, technically, but I don’t use ’em. Total top. I got no use for dildos unless I’m usin’ ’em on somebody else, and I haven’t had anybody else in years.”

“So, um, why do you have a whole big box of them?”

“Remember me tellin’ you about the guy I used to see sometimes?” He waited until Troy nodded, then explained, “Well, he’d give me a new one for every gift-givin’ occasion there was. Even gave me a big orange one for Halloween one year.”

“He didn’t know you were a top?” Troy asked with a grin.

“He did. He thought it was funny, even when I told him I didn’t want ’em. It was kind of a thing between us, I guess. Just somethin’ we did. It stopped being even mildly amusin’ when he showed up the mornin’ of the last Christmas I spent with my parents and gave me yet another giant dildo. I opened that thing in front of my mama.”

Troy cringed, feeling his pain. “Ouch. She knew you were gay, though, right?”

Cliff nodded, then said, “Just ’cause she knew I was attracted to other men didn’t mean she wanted to think about how her son would have sex. Or use a sex toy. She told him he wasn’t welcome to come back. I broke it off with him shortly after that, when he tried to convince me to run away with him to some big city somewhere.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Whatever fun we’d had was over and I wasn’t leavin’, so I figured it was better to be honest with him.”

“Honesty is always better,” Troy agreed. *I sure am glad I told him that I found that box instead of trying to hide it. Awkward... oh my God, yes! But still so much better than having to live every day wondering if he knows I found it.*

"I've always wondered if me breakin' things off with him is what drove him to start drinkin' so hard," Cliff mumbled in a tone so low that Troy almost missed it. But he heard it, and it broke his heart.

"You mean you've always wondered if you breaking up with him led to him killing your parents, making the whole thing ultimately your fault?" he asked, as blunt as a billy club. Cliff blinked at him a few times, stunned into silence. "It's normal to feel guilty about things that aren't your fault, Mr. Haywood, and that was not your fault. Maybe it's time to let it go. Six years is plenty long enough to have held onto it, don't you think?"

"Maybe you're right," the rancher mused. Then, all of a sudden, he asked, "Hey, you didn't touch anythin' in that box, did you?"

"No. Why?"

"Cause the toys he gave me were never wrapped in any kind of packagin', and I have no idea if he ever used 'em on himself or anybody else," he replied with a grin.

Even though that adorable grin had made several appearances since they sat down to eat dinner, Troy couldn't stop his natural reaction. "Oh my God, Mr. Haywood! That's so nasty!"

He let out another guffaw that Troy both loved and hated simultaneously. When he caught his breath, he remarked, "By the way, Mr. Haywood is what people called my daddy and granddaddy when they were alive. Just call me Cliff. I think we're on a first name basis now. I mean, you did find my dongs."

"Okay, then, Cliff," Troy replied then repeated the name a few times, trying it out. It was exhilarating calling the man by his first name but it was also strange. "It's kind of weird, calling you that, since you're my boss and all. I've never addressed an employer by their first name. But it fits. I like it."

"I like it too."

The way he said it and the look he gave Troy made the younger man feel a bit lightheaded. *He likes me! Nobody looks at an employee that way unless they want a harassment charge. Wait—why the hell did my mind go there?* He gave himself a mental shake. *He is so interested in me as more than just his housekeeper. I know that look!*

Whoa, slow down, killer, he thought, derailing his train of thought. *Days. You've been here days. Not even a full week yet. Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we? He seems like a genuinely nice man, so maybe he's just*

being nice to you and isn't actually interested in you at all. Ever thought of that, huh? You don't know him well enough to tell the difference. You're such a hopeless queen.

The one thing he knew for certain was that he needed more time, and privacy, to sort through the turmoil in his mind, so he did what he did best: change the subject. "So, Cliff, you just gonna leave 'em under your bed for all eternity?"

"Nah, I'll throw the whole box in the back of the truck and get rid of it when I go to town."

"Good. I don't think I could sleep at night knowing those things are just hanging out under there. So creepy," he said, giving a pronounced shudder then winking at his boss.

Troy smiled while cleaning the main floor, thinking about the previous evening. In all of the places he had worked before Wild Prairie Ranch, such a conversation as the one he and Cliff had would have ended in awkward, uncomfortable silence, later followed by avoidance and/or cold professionalism. Instead, he and Cliff had shared easy conversation and comfortable companionship. Cliff insisted on helping clean up after dinner, drying and putting the dishes away as Troy washed them, and then they spent no short amount of time convincing Troy's refurbished laptop and the wireless router to get along so that Troy could have internet access during his free time.

And Cliff had imposed no restrictions on how or when he could surf the internet. He trusted Troy's work ethic that much.

It was refreshing and exhilarating and motivating and terrifying all at once. Troy was still afraid he was going to screw up, but he chose to listen to the voice in his head that kept shouting, *You don't have to be perfect, you silly queen! You just have to be you!* instead of the one that tried to paralyze him with fear.

You're getting comfortable here, in the ranch house and with Cliff, in whatever capacity that is. And that's scary too because that's usually when things creep up on you and surprise you, right? When you're in your comfort zone and things seem to be going well...

"Nope, little asshole in my head," he said out loud as he geared up to beat the dust out of the rugs from the living room. "Not this time. This is different.

Cliff is different. Doesn't seem to be interested in taking things any further like I wish he would, but that's okay. Maybe someday. But until then, he's a good man, he treats me well, and we have a good thing going. Not letting negativity screw it up for me."

I'm happy, he thought, surprised. For the first time in, like, ever, I'm happy and content with where I am and what I'm doing.

Thoughts of Cliff and his grins and smirks and chuckles and belly laughs and the way only one side of his mouth seemed to smile sometimes filled Troy's head as he cleaned. He whirled and twirled and danced while he dusted and polished. He sang out loud, even though he couldn't carry a tune to save his life, because there was no one around to tell him to shut up. He pretended that he was all made up, twirling on the tips of his killer black high-heeled ankle boots across the hardwood floor.

He stopped in his tracks, polishing cloth hanging from his fingertips and wondered, *Why not get all made up? Cliff won't be back until late. He said he would be out all day repairing one of the shelters in some pasture somewhere and doing lots of last minute things so he can go to town tomorrow. He'll never know.*

Part of him felt like that would be deceiving Cliff, which would be wrong. But another part of him desperately ached to feel pretty again. *I'm safe here. No one will know, and it's been such a long time...* The old familiar battle raged in his mind and his heart, the what if's versus the why not's. *What if Cliff finds out?*

He's not here. How will he know?

But what if he does find out and fires me? What if he doesn't want to have anything to do with a man who wears pretty things and kicks me out? What then?

C'mon, you ridiculous queen! You have to be able to live with yourself no matter what Cliff or anybody else says or does. You've never been able to stay in the closet in your life. Why start now? Why not get all made up and feel pretty?

No matter what anyone else thinks, I'm the only one responsible for my own life and my own happiness. That realization always won in the end. That, and the duffle bag full of pretty things waiting for him upstairs.

Running up the stairs two at a time, Troy raced to his room, dragged the bag out from under his bed, and started rifling through it. He knew exactly what he

wanted, and he might have made a less than manly sound when he found it, though he would never admit to it. He ducked into the bathroom, vowing to take only a few moments to get ready. *Can't take too long and risk not getting my work done.* He stripped down to his underwear then wriggled into the tightest jeans he owned. Next came the fingerless black gloves adorned with rhinestones, a couple bracelets on each wrist, a gorgeous antique necklace he'd discovered in a thrift shop, and his shiny bubblegum pink heels. Some product to style his curls, a bit of eye makeup to make his eyes pop, a touch of rouge to emphasize his cheekbones, lipstick the same shade as his shoes, and Troy stood in front of the bathroom mirror grinning and feeling like he hadn't felt in a very long time—pretty and powerful.

“Watch out, world, Troy Balhaus is back and better than ever!” he proclaimed to an imaginary crowd of his admirers. He turned to look at his ass and noticed how long his legs looked in the tight jeans. Grinning wider, he added, “Takes one helluva man to rock heels like these!”

With dinner already in the oven and most of the dirty work done, Troy felt like he could really let go and have fun while sweeping and mopping the floor. He grabbed his iPod and little portable speakers and strutted down the stairs, feeling fierce. He set it to play loud enough to hear wherever he was on the main floor and retrieved his favorite dancing partner from the closet as David Bowie's “Let's Dance” blasted from the little speakers.

“Care to dance the blues with me, Mr. Broom?” he asked with a giggle. He paused, as if listening to the response, then shrugged. “I know, the revered god of the dance commanded me to put on my red shoes, but these heels are the best I can do right now. Maybe someday.”

He was so captivated by sweeping and dancing and humming along to the music that he didn't hear the back door shut. Cliff had ridden back to the barn to retrieve tools and supplies since the repair job ended up being larger than he had anticipated, and he had heard noise he didn't recognize coming from the house. Realizing it was music by the time he started up the porch steps, he decided to stop in and speak to Troy anyway. It was still nice to know that there was someone waiting for him to come home.

The housekeeper wasn't in the hallway or the kitchen, so Cliff headed to the living room and stopped dead in his tracks in the doorway, shocked. The man dancing around his living room was not the same man he had left early that morning. He had left the Troy he knew and had returned to... this gorgeous, smoking hot man with smoky eyes, pink lipstick, jewelry, and high heels dancing with a broom around the room.

Cliff was tongue-tied and rooted to the spot. He couldn't seem to make his mouth work, but his mind was at no loss for words. *Is that even the same Troy? It looks like him, but damn, that is so hot! I thought the pants he had on the night he got here were tight! And that ass... that ass makes me want to do naughty things.* He shook his head to try to clear his mind. *He's so beautiful. That confidence looks good on him. Wonder what it would be like to kiss those lips...*

His thoughts trailed off as Troy swung the broom wide, turning to face Cliff. Then he froze in place as well, a look of horror spreading across his face as he realized what was happening. Cliff drew in a breath to assure him that everything was fine, but Troy interrupted him, the words tumbling out too fast for Cliff to get a word in edgewise.

“Oh God, Mr. Haywood, I'm so sorry! I didn't think you'd be back so soon, I thought I had the rest of the afternoon by myself! This isn't what it looks like—well, actually it's exactly what it looks like but, but—God, I am so, so sorry! It won't happen again, I promise!”

He stopped speaking as abruptly as he had started then fled from the room. Cliff heard the bedroom door slam before he was able to wrap his head around what had happened. Then he began to sort through the mess. *So we're back to Mr. Haywood again. Well, why not? He thinks I'm gonna reject him for dressin' up like that. Wonder how many times that's happened before,* he thought, already angry at the idea of anyone mistreating Troy for something as harmless as wearing pretty things. *Well, it ain't happenin' this time, or ever again if I got any say in it. But how do I get him to see that?*

Cliff noticed a pile of dirt and dust and saw that only half the living room floor had been swept. He picked up the discarded broom and absentmindedly swept the rest of the floor while pondering that question. The oven timer started beeping as he emptied the dustpan. Having no idea if whatever Troy was making for dinner was done or what the timer was for, he took the heavy pan out of the oven and took a whiff of the aroma. *Smells good, whatever it is.*

He's probably upstairs worryin' himself sick about what I'm gonna say and do about this, Cliff realized. *I don't hafta know the perfect thing to say. I just hafta get up there and let him know that it's okay.*

A few minutes later, Cliff knocked on the closed door and asked, “Can I come in?”

“It's your house. You can go wherever you want,” came the shaky response.

He frowned. That wasn't what he expected. "Well, do ya mind if I come into *your* room?" he tried again.

"Okay."

He eased the door open and slipped inside. The sight that greeted him broke his heart. Troy sat on his bed with his back to the wall, his arms wrapped his knees, and his face buried. The jewelry was missing, and Cliff caught a glimpse of the shiny pink shoes shoved under the bed. He could tell Troy had been crying; his shoulders shuddered as if he was trying to gain composure. It struck a protective nerve in Cliff's core. *I will never be the reason he cries like this again. And nothing else will either, not if I have anything to say 'bout it.*

"Troy—" he began but was immediately cut off.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Haywood, so *very* sorry. I'll stop! I promise I won't do it again. Please don't fire me, I don't have anywhere else to go!" he exclaimed, sounding close to tears again.

"Whoa, slow down, Troy, it's alright. I'm not gonna fire you. Why would you think that?"

"Because that's what every other employer did as soon as they found out."

"Well, I ain't every other employer now, am I?" Cliff asked gently, leaning against the doorjamb.

"No sir, you're sexy as hell—" Troy looked up and gasped, another horrified look flitting across his face. "I didn't mean that! Yes, I did—I mean, yes, you are—oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

"Calm down, I'm not mad. Why would I be? There is nothing wrong here."

"Nothing except the fact that I'm a man dancing around in high heels, makeup, and jewelry, you mean."

"Yeah, like I said, nothing wrong here."

Troy looked at him with suspicious eyes. "You don't mind?"

"Course not. You didn't do anything wrong. This is a ranch, there's no dress code here. You can wear whatever you want," Cliff said with a smile. Then he winked and added, "Besides, I really liked the view."

"You-you what?" Troy asked, his eyes wide in surprise, slowly relaxing into a cross-legged position on the bed.

"I said I really liked the view."

No way. No fucking way. He's fucking around with me, right? He can't be serious. Big, tough cowboys don't go for wimpy, girly guys like me, Troy thought. "I, uh, I don't even know what to say to that, Mr. Haywood."

"It's Cliff, remember? Nothing's changed."

"Okay, Cliff, but I'm having a hard time believing that nothing has changed."

"Why? 'Cause I accidentally caught you dancin' with a broom in my livin' room?"

"With makeup and jewelry and high heels—pink high heels, no less."

"You're the one makin' a big deal out of this. I'm tryin' to tell you it don't matter to me," Cliff said with a chuckle.

Troy's face fell and his shoulders slumped. "That's, uh, great, I guess."

"That's not really true. It does matter to me," Cliff admitted. Troy's gaze shot up to meet his, and Cliff saw fear there. He took a deep breath. *Out with it, big man! Put both of us out of our misery!* "When I said I liked the view, I meant it. I already told you that I like pretty."

"And you think I'm pretty?"

"No, I think you're beautiful, with or without the makeup and stuff," Cliff answered truthfully. It was such a relief, not holding that in anymore. "And don't you dare ask me if I mean that."

Troy laughed that beautiful, musical laugh that he loved. "I won't. And since I already blurted out that I think you're sexy as hell..."

"Everything fits just perfect then," Cliff said, taking his hand and pulling him gently to his feet.

"I guess it does." Troy stepped closer, then looked up at the rancher and stepped back again with one eyebrow quirked up. "I didn't realize I'm so much shorter than you."

Cliff gave him one of those lopsided smiles and crouched down to reach under the edge of the bed. "Here's one way to make you a few inches taller," he said as he stood up and offered the pink heels.

Troy slipped them on and stood at his full height, now only a couple inches shorter than the rancher. He looked up and met the gray-eyed gaze with a shy smile. "That's better."

Brushing his thumb along the edge of a smoky eye, smoothing out smudges the tears had left behind, Cliff agreed, “Yeah, it is.” Then the same thumb brushed across a pink lip. “Ya know, I’ve wondered what it would be like to kiss these lips since you got here.”

“Well, then, why don’t you try it and see, cowboy?”

Cliff hesitated only long enough to look into his eyes and make sure that he meant it. Then he leaned in close, gently pressing his lips against the plump ones he had seen in his dreams the past two nights.

The kiss was soft, patient, and giving, not anything like the hard and demanding kisses Troy had known before. He found himself short of breath and holding on for dear life, afraid that if he let go, he would melt into a gooey puddle on the floor. And there wasn’t even any tongue involved. Troy had no idea that a kiss could be so sweet, so hot, and so breathtaking all at the same time. When Cliff finally pulled away, they were both breathing hard.

After catching his breath, Cliff licked his lips and grinned. “A man could get used to that,” he said, leaning in for another kiss.

Troy laughed his musical laugh. “Only one more, cowboy. Can’t have you spoiling your dinner.”

The End

Author Bio

Jade Crystal is easily distracted by the shiny things in the world. She often rambles and at times makes little sense to anyone but herself. She is most focused when writing the contemporary, paranormal, urban fantasy, and sci-fi romances of all her sexy men—in other words, her characters. It's their story, after all. Jade merely records it. Sometimes her imagination runs away with the stories they tell. Other times, they are infuriatingly quiet. But don't let them fool you... she loves every single second she spends with them. Her favorite thing to do besides writing their stories: leaving the real world behind and getting lost in books on rainy nights with a cup of hot tea and a handful of chocolates.

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