Phoenix

by Xenodike

Summary

It’s a nineteen hour drive from San Francisco, California to Evergreen, Colorado. When Jensen drives out of the roundabout and onto the compact dirt road leading towards the two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres of The Phoenix Ranch, it’s nine o’clock in the morning and he’s been traveling for twenty-three hours straight.

Coming home to the ranch Jensen left ten years ago, he has to face his past, present and decide what he wants going forward. All while juggling a baby, a broken relationship, his grandpa, dad, part-time stepmom, four uncles, a cousin, the mother who abandoned him and Jared fucking Padalecki.

It’s complicated…
Phoenix

Notes

Disclaimer
1.

In this story there's mentions of mental health issues. Despite the research I’ve done, I’m not a mental health professional and I make no claim that my portrayal or description is accurate. If you have been diagnosed or are close to people diagnosed, please understand that I’m aware the issues I depict in this story are infinitely more complicated and multifaceted then I portray in this story.

2.

There are no Disney villains in this story. If you like your stories black and white with the line between good and bad clear and uncomplicated, maybe this is not for you. This is a story about real people who are complex and capable of both good and bad actions and choices. There are a lot of gray areas and no heroes or villains, only people doing the best they can.

Author Notes

Archiving: This story is posted at my fan fiction journals on [Dreamwidth](https://www.dreamwidth.org) and [Livejournal](https://www.livejournal.com) and here on AO3

Rec’s and links back to this story is always appreciated but I don’t want it posted or archived anywhere else, please respect that.

Music: As always there’s a playlist with the music that’s been playing while I wrote this story. There's a separate lists to every chapter but you’ll need a Spotify account to be able to listen.

Art by: [meus_venator](http://meus-venator.tumblr.com)

Acknowledgments

Trendykitty - thank you for being my ever present sounding board, for challenging and pushing me out of my comfort zone. Listening to me whine and comforting me when I’ve had a breakdown over my characters. For talking me down when I’m neurotic and smacking me over the head when I’m being ridiculous. As always, you made this story so much better.

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To every person who’s ever commented on my previous stories. I know most of you think your comments are something I read and forget about as soon as I have. Nothing could be further from the truth. I’ve read every single comment I’ve received on every single story at least a hundred times. I know some of them by heart. For every Tweet or LJ/DW post whining about my writing there are at least twenty times I don’t openly express my lack of
confidence or my doubts about my ability to write. Those are the times I go back and read all your lovely, lovely words until they convince me again that I’m not terrible at this.

So to all of you, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

And finally

This is the longest story I’ve ever written, and it’s taken over my brain like no other. It’s full of characters, both familiar faces and new ones, all demanding their own place in this story. In truth this is more a family saga then a J2. I know the length and the large, unknown cast will dissuade a lot of readers. But for those of you willing to dive in, welcome to The Phoenix Ranch, I hope you’ll enjoy getting to know the family that lives there.

Xenodike
Chapter 1

PROLOGUE

In nearly every great civilization exists mythology about a bird of fire. The ancient Egyptians had Bennu, who was born in the flames of a burning holy tree standing in the temple of the sungod Ra. The Persians had Huma, known for its compassion and to bring good fortune. In Hinduism, Garuda served as a chariot for the god Vishnu, the beginning of all souls and worlds.

The Greeks, Romans and in time, Christians, had the Phoenix.

The bird is a stunning creature with long beautiful feathers, its color ranging from a bright, fiery crimson to royal purple. It’s been the symbol of ancient gods and medieval kings, known for bringing peace and as a symbol of virtue and unity.

In China, Feng-huang symbolizes completeness and the joining of yin and yang.

The essence of this magical bird and the thing joining each of these incarnations and civilizations, eons and continents apart, is the possibility of rebirth. The bird is said to hold an unnaturally long life. When it ends, it’s engulfed in flames and then from the ashes is reborn.

As she walked across the never-ending stretch of land, all two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres of it, the woman in billowing skirts lifted her hands to her hair and freed it, letting it fall down her back in a waterfall of dark curls.

She held her hands turned towards the ground and let them rest at the sides of her hips as she walked across the land, the long, untouched grass tickling her palms. Every direction she turned was wilderness. Empty, unspoiled wilderness.

There were no factories spitting out their filth into the air, no carriages making the streets unsafe and turning them into mud soiling the hem of her skirts. They might be just plain cotton, but still, she wanted them clean.
Here there were no loud noises from the taverns, no drunks or prostitutes littering the alleys. No husband falling in through the door, the stench surrounding him telling her that the week's wages were already gone.

Everything was new and whatever came out of it, would be up to her. Looking down at her feet on the small boy sitting by them, she smiled and then turned her face up to the sun and spread her arms, as she reveled in a freedom she’d never before experienced.

Here, she would build her home and leave a legacy her son could build on. Under this Colorado sun she would become engulfed in flames and be reborn into the person she had always wanted to be.

On these two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres, she would build The Phoenix Ranch.
Chapter 2

It’s a nineteen hour drive from San Francisco, California to Jefferson County, Colorado. It’s a straightforward trip on Highway 80, passing Sacramento into Nevada and Reno’s blinking lights. The road continues forward, carrying you from sin to redemption as you pass the border into Utah. In Salt Lake City you turn onto the smaller Highway 40, crossing the state line to Colorado, wheeling onto Highway 70 and the last leg to Jefferson County.

The small community of Evergreen sits at just over seven thousand two hundred feet in the Rocky Mountains, forty minutes from Denver. It’s eleven point six square miles is home to around nine thousand people and three thousand households. The temperature shifts on average from a comfortable seventy-five to eighty-one degrees Fahrenheit in June through August, to a not so comfortable ten to eighteen degrees during the winter months.

It’s a place of four seasons surrounded by thousands of acres of Denver mountain parks.

Thirteen minutes from downtown Evergreen, near the Evergreen memorial park and the roundabout which leads you from Highway 73 onto North Turkey Creek Road, lies the two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres of The Phoenix Ranch.

When Jensen drove out of the roundabout and onto the compact dirt road leading towards the main building, it was nine o’clock in the morning and he’d been traveling for twenty-three hours straight. You can’t do the drive from San Francisco, California to Evergreen, Colorado with a bruised body and a five-month-old baby in the backseat without stopping a few times.

Approaching the two-story house built from gray stone and logs, Jensen knew it would be empty, everyone hard at work since dawn. Stopping and getting out of the vehicle, cradling his bruised ribs with one hand, he walked to the back door, opened it and unlatched the basket holding his sleeping baby from it's car seat base.

The front door wasn’t locked, it never was. Had he been in better condition Jensen might have taken
the time to look over his surroundings, searching for improvements or changes in the house he had grown up in but so seldom visited the last years. Instead, he walked over the creaking, light wood floors of the foyer, through the open door to the immediate right leading into the great room.

He set the basket down on the coffee table in front of the large stone fireplace, giving a silent thanks that his baby was the most low-maintenance infant on the planet. Face set in an agonized grimace, he lowered himself onto the couch. Eyes on his sleeping child, Jensen reached out behind himself, hand grabbing at the thick crochet blanket he knew he’d find hanging over the backrest and pulled it down over himself.

With eyes stinging from exhaustion, Jensen Ackles tried to make sense of the last twenty-seven hours of his life.

Whenever he had to reply to the inevitable comments about how unusual his name is and endless curiosity surrounding its origins, he always said it’s stems from his family's Scandinavian heritage.

As far as Jensen knows, his family doesn't have a Scandinavian heritage. But it’s easier than explaining that his dad heard it somewhere he can’t remember and liked the way it sounded. That answer never seem to satisfy people.

Richard liked “Jensen”. It fit his vision of their image as a couple climbing the ladder to the finer society of San Francisco. He always thought Richard sounded pretentious when he’d introduce his partner, “Jensen.”

But he never minded Richard's more showy side. He took it as a quirk. Or one of those small annoying habits you put up with when you love someone.

There are things Jensen will never put up with.

He’ll be the first to admit that their relationship wasn't perfect, but what relationship is? There are always ups and downs. No matter what Hollywood or romance novels say, living with another person is difficult. Just because you love someone doesn't make their annoying habits or different views on mundane everyday things like, who should do the dishes or tackle the enormous mountain of laundry, any less infuriating.

Often, sharing your life with another human being means swallowing whatever comment is on your tongue, taking a deep breath and counting to fifteen.

The problem is, that since Falabella joined them, Jensen has been counting to fifteen too often and it’s not been because of the baby. It was Richard's idea. He’d thought about it, knew he wanted to be a dad at some point. But Richard brought it up, did the research, he’s the one who found the surrogate and egg donor. It was even his idea that Jensen should be the biological parent, not him.

During the whole procedure until the exact moment they stood in that hospital room, Jensen holding their red-faced baby girl, Richard had been the driving force. He’s not sure what Richard expected, what he wanted out of fatherhood. Laid out before him, Jensen can see it was image, nothing more. An idea of how their life should appear, the modern day Gay American Couple, not a genuine interest in being a family. Falabella being nothing more than a fashionable political statement. Jensen's views and opinions on fatherhood were the opposite, weighing the pros and cons, considering the changes required at bringing a child into their lives he’d scrutinized himself to be sure he wanted to make them.
He’d decided that he was, Richard wasn’t.

The last couple of months there had been too many arguments, ridiculous ones. In his mind you don’t have a baby and then leave it with a sitter, so you can go to yet another gallery opening or new restaurant. You’re two adults allowed to enjoy a night away from home but not four nights a week and not when the child is a few days old.

Richard saw it another way. Believing life could continue as before and taking the baby out when it looked good. He’d arranged for the live-in nanny weeks in advance not even consulting Jensen on his choice or if he wanted a nanny. That was their first fight about Falabella, thirty-six hours after she became part of what Jensen believed was meant to be a family.

In retrospect he can’t believe he could be so stupid. His and Richard's views on everything related to being a family were so different. He’s amazed they went through the whole process without he himself even once, stopping to wondering if this was the right choice. Not that there’s any point dwelling on that fact now, Jensen didn’t notice and now he’s learnt a very painful lesson.

It doesn’t matter, he can do this, be a single father. It’s becoming a family tradition of sorts, his dad raised him by himself. Well, that might be an overstatement, he had help from Jensen's grandparents, his full time ranch hands and the numerous seasonal employees at The Phoenix Ranch. Jensen's mom left long before he could form any tangible memory of her.

If it wasn’t so sad, Jensen would laugh at the irony of him repeating his father's mistake, having a child with someone who didn’t want one. Still, he turned out ok. The knowledge that one of your parents left you is not an easy thing to come to terms with, but his childhood had been so filled with people and warmth he never sensed anything was missing.

It hadn't been a conscious choice, being gone this long. When he left, Jensen had been twenty years old and could see his life play out in one long monotonous scene. Wake-up, feed and water the horses, breakfast, groom the horses, clean stalls, feed and water the horses, lunch, take guests riding, feed and water the horses, dinner, check and clean horse tack, barn “bed check”, evening snack, shower, bed. Rinse and repeat.

He wanted a choice. To see more of the world than blue mountains, tree clad hills and green meadows. It’s a beautiful view, but at twenty he hadn't known that.

Now every time he comes home, the sight of the endless landscape laid out before him makes his entire being shiver. Valleys, long grass in deep shades of green contrasting against hardy mountain flowers in bright yellow and deepest blue.

Forests with their tall Blue Spruce, gangly Lodgepole Pine, proud Narrowleaf Cottonwood, thick far stretching branches and heavy crowns creating the perfect shade to rest under on a hot day. The bushy Rocky Mountain Juniper and swaying Quaking Aspen, with its slim trunk in white and black. Small leaves clinging to the tiny branches during fall storms making the hillsides tremble in bright yellow.

Deep lakes, water so clear you can see right to the bottom and in the winter frozen solid, people braving the deep snow and icy cold to skate it’s solid surface.

And spring, when the rivers and creeks come to life, the ice moaning as it breaks and a narrow slit opens, water flowing once again.

Now, at thirty, Jensen has seen his fair share. He’s done the things you are “supposed to do.”
He’s got a bachelor of Science in Business Administration from the University of San Francisco. He backpacked through Europe and Asia to “find” himself. He found Richard instead. They met when he worked as a sales manager at a company with four-star hotels all across North America. Jensen had been trying to convince Richard, and the large publishing house he was representing, that Jensen's particular hotel chain was the one they should choose for all their hotel needs.

That meeting got him his first big deal, his first promotion and a relationship. Six years later it got him Falabella. It also got him a swollen eye, busted lip, bruised jaw, aching ribs, what might be a concussion, and a massacred sense of self-worth.

He didn’t see it coming. No matter how bad their fights got, Jensen never imagined that it would turn physical. He’s been in his share of bar fights, his adolescent temper no different from most young men. But, you don’t hit the person you profess to love, no matter what gender you are.

You just don’t.

That’s why it happened the way it did. Jensen is not a small guy, he’s not huge, but he’s tall, well built. The first twenty years of his life he cleaned barns, stacked hay bales, carried saddles and did every other kind of heavy manual labor involved in running a ranch. That got him a well-toned, strong body that he’s kept in shape even after he left.

Richard isn't larger. He’s in good shape, he would never allow himself to become “flabby” but he’s got a lithe, more Mick Jagger type of build and not as strong. So Jensen shouldn’t have had any problem holding his own in a fight, but the shock caught him off balance.

It wasn’t even a real fight. More like a heated discussion brought on by Richard's foul morning temper and Jensen’s own sleep deprived biting comments. Richard had always had an expressive body language, arms and hands waving in front of him on those rare occasions when his temper flared. Jensen didn’t even register the hand getting closer and closer.

The first punch came out of nowhere, Richard’s fist catching him below his right eye. Jensen staggered backwards, grabbing for the stone countertop of the kitchen island they were standing to the side of. Convinced that it had to be an accident, Richard's wild hand movements getting out-of-control and hitting him by mistake, he had not prepared to counter another blow. Looking up, he had expected to see a worried expression and apologies already forming on Richard's lips. Instead, another blow split his lower lip open. His brain switched on, but too late. Another blow was already on the way. Landing on his jawbone, it forced his head to the side and his body followed as he tumbled down, his head bumping on the corner of the countertop on his way to the floor.

It’s hazy after that. He remembers Richard's bulk, so much bigger with Jensen curled up on the floor. Eyes black and empty as he stood above him, his fist raining blows on his arms, legs, back, everywhere they could reach. The first kick forced every ounce of oxygen out of Jensen's lungs. There was nothing he could do. It was too late to fight back and he curled in on himself as much as possible, waiting for it to be over. His open eyes on the baby sitting quiet in her rocker on the floor in front of him, large eyes locked with his own.

The silence unsettled him more than the violence. The only sound in the room grunts, his own from pain and Richard's from the physical exertion. Richard didn’t utter a word, not until the end.

When the blows stopped, Richard stood up, looming over him, eyes no longer black yet void of any affection. He stepped over Jensen, walked over to the sink, washed his hands and dried them on a kitchen towel. Hands dry, he picked up his keys lying on the kitchen counter. His eyes observing Jensen's curled up form with a detached look.
“You need to get your priorities straight, Jensen. My needs come first in this relationship, not the child’s.”

And then he left.

He’s not sure how long he lay there. The handmade oak wood floor that Richard had imported from France cold against his aching body, eyes still locked with his infant daughter's. It was a small crease in that tiny face, a slight tremble of a lower lip that propelled him into motion, checking the damage done, limb by limb with tiny, slow movements. His voice sounded foreign to his own ears as he began a mumble of comforting words, the taste of iron tangible on his tongue.

“Everything is fine. Daddy’s ok, Bella.”

He forced himself to sit up, grunting from the painful effort. He kept his voice calm and light even as he could hear his body groaning and creaking.

“Daddy, is all right. Everything is fine, baby girl.”

His feet unsteady he struggled to keep his body upright as his knees buckled, thighs trembling when he stood.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Bella. Daddy’s ok.”

His hands held on to walls and doorframes as he stumbled towards the bathroom, his voice keeping up a constant stream of reassuring words. He’s not sure which of them he was trying to comfort.

In times of crisis, you can never predict your own reaction. The kindest person becomes ruthless, trampling people as they fight for survival. The bravest freeze in terror, the calmest descend into a state of panic.

Jensen, meeting his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, took in his ashen complexion. His right eye was bruised with only a slit of vibrant green visible between the swollen lids, the left one still a wide almond shape, but bloodshot, making the deep green iris appear dull. There was a trail of blood running from his straight nose with it's ever so slight, almost undetectable curve, to the side and a deep cut in his plump, lower lip. A steady, icy calm came over him. His head was clear despite its collision with the counter top. He kept the water running, washing his face when it turned biting cold then patting it dry with light touches, pushing a few, damp, blond strands of hair from his forehead.

He reached out and opened the medicine cabinet, taking out and swallowing two Advil with a few handfuls of water, rinsing his mouth from the taste of iron.

The pill bottle still clutched in his hand, Jensen's body switched off as his brain told the rest of him to stop, that they would deal with the damage, but not now. Now they had to leave. He might not have seen it coming, but when Richard's fist connected with his flesh their relationship ended.

He took little, the need to leave far exceeding any thoughts of material possessions. Falabella's sonogram pictures, her birth certificate, his own important papers, two or three sentimental items. A few changes of clothes for the both of them and Falabella's diaper bag with her bottles and formula, a few toys and everything else she needed.

He lifted the tiny girl, changed her, then placed her in the basket of the mobile car seat with the toy arch, its vibrant colors clashing with the car's interior and the reason for another long and ridiculous fight. He heated water and poured it into a small thermos and then left, leaving his set of keys in the mailbox.
Jensen was an hour outside of San Francisco before his pulse slowed and he pulled over at a rest stop. He moved to the back seat, using the warm water in the thermos to fix a bottle of formula and feeding his tired baby. One hand holding the bottle, Jensen used his other to call his job claiming family emergency and quitting over the phone, hanging up to the sound of wild protests. Something deep inside telling him he would never live in San Francisco again.

Staring out of the windshield at the busy highway beside them Jensen exhaled, trying to understand how the life he spent the last ten years building had disintegrated in a few short hours.

What to do now?

He closed his eyes, drawing in a slow, painful breath to help keep the icy focus from leaving him, holding the oxygen in his lungs for a few heartbeats and then exhaling once more. He opened his eyes, blinking at the strong morning sun, everything clear. What he needed to do, was to get in the driver seat, start the car, and drive the thirteen-hundred miles to Evergreen, Colorado.
A pair of rugged, well worn cowboy boots was the first thing Jensen saw when his eyes opened, blinking, still irritated from the lack of rest. Jensen would know those boots anywhere, quite a few versions of them having walked around this ranch all of his life. This pair looked like they were getting close to the end of their lifespan. The leather hinting in small creases where sun and dirt didn’t quite reach that what used to be a deep, rich brown had now faded into a light sand color.

Jensen’s earliest memories involved those boots. The muted, melodic sound they made walking over wood floors. His hands held tight over his mouth to stop the giggle from forcing it’s way out as he hid under the dining room table. The large tablecloth hanging down the sides so he could spy on the world from behind it. Those boots getting closer and closer and then throwing himself out from under the tablecloth, getting a tight grip on one boot, small hands gripping onto to the pull-on straps.

A tanned face looking down on him, eyebrows arched, blue eyes laughing, smile almost hidden by the blond full beard groomed to perfection.

When he was four years old, the boots reached all the way up over his things scraping against the floor, too big and heavy to lift as he tried to walk in them. Two denim clad thighs came to stand in front of him, secure hands taking hold under his arms lifting him straight up, the boots staying on the floor as Jensen rose high in the air on straight arms.

“I was looking for those.” A mock frown in the smooth face. Jensen, winding tiny arms around his neck, blinding smile as he said,

“When I’m older, I’m gonna have a pair just like them.”

That time Acorn reared and Jensen ended up flying out of his saddle, the snap and sharp pain when he landed, arm underneath him and air forced out of his lungs. He kept his eyes closed while lying still and trying to catch his breath, knowing this fall was a bad one. Then opening one eye and seeing those brown boots running towards him he knew that everything would be fine.
The week he turned seven, the two of them driving all the way into Denver, and the iconic “Rockmount Ranch Wear”. His dad's large hand meeting the owners far above his head in a friendly and well practiced greeting. The owners blue eyes, old and watery but still full of life and mischief, looking down on those boots.

“Time for a new pair then?”

His father nodding, the man already turning, walking toward the storage in the back, not bothering to ask about size or style. But stopping when his father's soft baritone sounded again.

“And a pair for the boy.”

The owner looking at Jensen and asking, “How old are you, Boy?”

“Seven.”

The man nodding and saying with a note in his voice that showed he understood how important this moment was.

“Well then, it's about time. Pick a pair.”

Jensen remembers his eyes going wide and holding his breath, looking over at his father to be sure he heard right. The still shallow lines around those warm eyes had crinkled as he smiled and nodded toward the shelf with children's boots. His whole body had fluttered in excitement when he reached the shelf, walking along side it seeing boots in all styles and shapes. Fancy ones with horses and cowboys stitched on the sides.

His father's voice had spoken once again.

“You can pick any pair, but they're meant for work on the ranch, Jensen. So pick a pair you’ll be comfortable in.”

He needn't have worried. At the far back of the shelf, behind the flashy ones with its patterns and fancy embroidery, Jensen had seen them. Simple, no frills’ boots. A dark brown leather, sturdy black rubber sole and a slight heel and just above it on one side, burnt into the leather the circle and inside of it the double H. Even at seven, Jensen would know those boots in his sleep. His hands had reached back and pulled them out, holding them close to his chest as he turned around, a hopeful look on his face as he held them out for approval.

His dad had barked out a laugh and sealed the deal with a simple nod. The owner's voice had been amused but warm as he put them in a box, covering them in flimsy silk paper with tiny, black cactuses printed on it.

“Daddy’s boy, huh?”

A warm hand settled in his hair. “Daddy’s boy.”

The next morning he’d woken to the sound of hands slapping on muscular thighs and a deep, rich laughter. His well-loved stuffed horse was at the foot of the bed and a pair of brown boots were by his pillow.

That summer after he turned fourteen and he was so in love. His body sunk down in soft hay in the barn, a heavy weight on top of him, holding him down. Eager, inexperienced mouths and fumbling hands above jeans and shirts. Then the sound of boots echoing against the wooden floor, turning his head to the side faded brown boots came into his field of vision. Two sets of huge, scared eyes
meeting a pair of laughing ones.

“You’re so busted.”

Jensen had never worked as hard as he did that summer. There was no end to the number of exhausting chores that needed to get done all of them in plain view of at least one supervising adult.

Nothing defines Jensen’s childhood more than those simple brown boots.

Eyes leaving the boots, Jensen followed them up the tall, sinewy body, the worn but well-fitting blue jeans and the faded, brown leather belt with its buckle.

It was nothing special, not one of those high quality silver belt buckles so many wear. This one was tin or some other cheap metal. It had an oval shape with a mountain scene painted in some kind of metallic paint in shades of blue, green, brown, gold, white and silver. In the middle there was a figure from the same, silvery metal, showing the silhouette of a cowboy on a grazing horse.

It was a cheap, tacky buckle, but when Jensen was nine, it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen and eighteen dollars was all the savings in his piggy bank. The lady in the store helped him wrap it and his Grandpa’s hand was warm on his cheek when Jensen, nibbling his lip looked up and said,

“You think he’ll like it?”

Jensen gave his dad that tacky belt buckle for his thirty-fourth birthday, twenty-one years ago. He’s worn it everyday, ever since.

Farther up, Jensen saw the khaki green henley tucked into jeans, and over it, the ever present tight fitting leather vest, this one brown, matching the belt. Sometimes it’s a henley underneath, sometimes it’s a shirt, but there’s always a vest. Jensen’s father was the classiest cowboy in Colorado. His face was a little more lined, but it only lent him an air of experience, his nose straight and proud and cheekbones high and sharp. His blue eyes set deep, and even though they were closed, Jensen knew they were still piercing. His full beard, still hiding the shape of his mouth, was now a deep silver as was his thick hair that fell without effort in bouncy waves. It curled at the tips around his ears and the nape of his neck in a way that made women of all ages sigh when he walked by.

At fifty-five, Jensen’s father was a handsome man, giving a face to the expression “silver fox” in Evergreen, Colorado.

Colt Ackles sat stretched out in one of the deep, comfortable leather chairs, hands resting on his stomach, feet propped up on the coffee table, eyes closed. But Jensen knew he wasn’t sleeping.

“When are you going to change that belt buckle?”

“It’s been a perfect belt buckle for twenty-one years. I see no need to it.” Colt's voice was soft but his eyes worried when they opened.

“After that long I would have thought you’d have grown tired of it.”

Colt shook his head. “No. Tell you what though. When that little girl gets old enough to buy me a new one, I might consider switching every other week.”

Noticing the baby's absence Jensen should have been concerned, both at the fact that she was missing and at his own failure to notice before now. But this was home and the people family, by blood or by choice. This was the one place on the planet Jensen knew Falabella would always be
safe, no matter who might hold her.

“Where is she?”

Colt stretched, long arms rising high in the air as he said threw a yawn, “She’s with your Grandpa. Last I heard he was taking her to the stables to introduce her to the horses.”

Jensen smiled. “Of course he is.”

Colt copied his smile for a short moment but then his face turned serious and his voice became worried again as he said, “You know, when I called you last week saying I was getting impatient to meet my grandbaby and to get your ass up here, this is not what I had in mind.”

Jensen’s voice was subdued as he answered, “Believe me, this was not how I planned it.”

Colt leaned his head against the backrest his eyes facing the ceiling.

“Tell me one thing Jensen. Just one, and I won’t pester you with questions. I can see you’re too tired and confused to answer. Tell me this was the first time something like this has happened and that he’s never hit you before.”

Jensen didn’t feign surprise at his dad’s words or his already formed opinion of what’d happened. Colt Ackles had never been fond of Richard. He’d been hospitable and courteous when they’d visited the ranch. But, he’d never been a fan and over the years the visits home had more often than not been only him. Jensen opting to schedule them when Richard was in the middle of some big work thing. It’s an arrangement that had suited all three parties.

“He’s never hit me before, Dad. Richard can be snappish and condescending but for the six years we’ve been together, I’ve heard him raise his voice in real anger once. Aggression and violence is not his thing, he thinks it’s trashy. I don’t know what happened. It’s like he became a different person when we had Falabella.”

His dad let out a heavy sigh, saying in a quiet voice, “Yeah, that happens sometimes. Some people, they build up this idea of how things will be and then when reality doesn’t match-up to their expectations, they can’t handle it.”

It remained unspoken but Jensen knew he was speaking of the woman who walked out on them both when Jensen was three months old.

“Alona should be here soon. She had two more house calls when I rang, but said she’d come over as soon as she wrapped those up.”

“You called Alona, why?”

“Why?” Colt looked at him, one steel gray eyebrow raised. “You mean except for coming home to eat lunch and finding my son, who I though was in San Francisco, passed out on the couch looking like he’s been moonlighting as a practice dummy in an MMA gym?”

Jensen’s hand reached for his face ghosting over the sore parts, he hadn’t looked in a mirror for over twenty-four hours.

“That bad?”

“You’ve looked better, Boy.”
Jensen rolled his eyes and said, “You know, I thought turning thirty meant you’d stop calling me boy.”

“That’s funny. I had the same though about your grandpa when I turned fifty. Guess we were both wrong.”

“Wrong about what?”

The two men looked up to see the striking form of Lance Ackles standing in the doorway. At eighty, his grandpa looked more like Colt's older brother then his father. There were a few more lines in his face, but not many. His tall frame was less muscular and fit with a slight roundness at the middle, but he was still an impressive man and in excellent shape for his age. He had the same thick, steel gray hair but instead of a full beard had a big, fluffy handlebar mustache, combed at each side from the cupids bow and out, waxed and twirled at the sides so they curved upwards. It was a spectacular mustache.

Colt brought him into the conversation by saying, “Jensen, said he thought I’d stop calling him, `Boy ` when he turned thirty. I said I thought the same about you when I turned fifty.”

Lance Ackles huffed, throwing himself down into the other leather chair with too much ease for a man who’d spent a lifetime working as hard as had. With a voice full of amused affection he said, “The day you stop being my boy, is the day I close my eyes for good.”

Colt smiled while shaking his head and saying, “You’ll outlive us all, old man.”

Lance looked at his son a serious look in his eyes.

“I hope you’re wrong about that. That’s not the way it’s supposed to go. Anyway,” his eyes switched from his son to his grandson, “I saw your cousin coming up the driveway. You know I’m gonna take out my shotgun if that ass comes to this ranch.”

“Alona? I don’t think she’ll like that.” Lance's mustache twitched as he made a face. “Don’t get smart with me, Jensen you know damn well who I'm talking about.”

Jensen didn’t answer and steered the conversation in another direction. “Not that I don’t trust you, Grandpa but, you mind telling me what you’ve done with my baby?”

Lance made a dismissive hand gesture and said, “Relax, she’s with Omundson. He’s introducing her to the cattle.”

“Of course he is.”

The sound of the front door opening and closing followed by determined steps coming closer put an end to their conversation. A second later, his cousin walked through the door coming to stand in front of the couch. She put her hands on her jean clad hips, her tight fitting western shirt open, a white tank under it. Her blond hair was pulled up out of her face in a messy bun and her brown eyes were furious as she took in Jensen’s face.

Her voice was tense and her jaw jumped as she said, “I’m gonna shoot him.”

Lance gave Jensen a ‘see, it’s not just me’ look, before facing the woman and saying, “Get in line.”

She didn’t answer, instead she walked over towards the couch and sat down on the coffee table in front of Jensen, reaching out to touch his face. He flinched when her fingers traced over the bump left by the counter top.
Her voice was soft when she asked, “What happened here?”

“Banged my head on a kitchen countertop.”

Colt stood up, pacing the room and his voice had lost its composure as he said, “He banged your head on a countertop?”

Jensen dragged his hand over tired eyes. “No, he punched me. I lost my balance and hit my head on the way down.”

Alona looked at him and asked, “Have you experienced any nausea or headache? Any other symptoms?”

The woman in front of him was only three years older than he. She wasn’t really his cousin, the twists and turns of the bloodlines were complicated. Alona’s mother, Callie, was Lance’s paternal cousin. Callie's mother had died when she was five and her father had sent her to this ranch and into the care of his brother Jameson, while he got his life together. What he got was a new wife and a life that had no room for Callie. She never left The Phoenix and in everyone's eyes she was Lance’s little sister.

Callie married Jim Beaver, who had worked and lived at The Phoenix Ranch since he was sixteen and was Lance’s best friend. Her father's second marriage eventually resulted in a son, Timothy Omundson, at thirteen he was sent to live with his sister to work one summer. That summer eventually turned into fall and then winter and as it tends to do, history repeated itself and Timothy Omundson never left The Phoenix. It was all too complicated and jumbled to explain when people asked, so everyone said Alona and Jensen were cousins.

They’d grown-up together on this ranch. For the first ten years of his life, Jensen thought the two of them would run the ranch together one day, Alona being as horse crazy and in love with ranch life as he had been. That changed when Alona was thirteen and her mother died. Jensen remembers Callie's illness and her passing as a quiet time. Grandma May’s radio that would always play music out through the open kitchen window, stayed silent. Omundson, whose loud laughter could always be heard booming all around the ranch, was silent. His expressive face still and ashen. Everyone became muted, their voices soft and brittle. Sometimes at night the door to his bedroom opened and Alona would come in, her feet cold and damp from the dewy grass she'd run though. She’d climb into bed with him and lay her her head on his shoulder.

They would lie in Jensen's small bed, not speaking but sharing a bond from the knowledge that they’d drawn the short straw when it came to mothers. For different reasons, but still, everyone else had mothers, they didn’t or wouldn’t, very soon.

After Callie died Alona didn’t speak to him. She wasn’t unfriendly, but it was obvious she was avoiding him. It took almost six months, but one day when he was hiding from the rain and his chores, she found him on the hayloft. She’d laid down next to him, seeming so much older than he, the difference between fourteen and eleven staggering.

“I hate that your mom is alive.”

Jensen’s voice had been quiet, like he was speaking forbidden words when he said, “I hate that your mom wanted you.”

Her hands had been warm and her cheeks wet as she’d reached out and grasped his hand, lacing her fingers with his.
With defiance in her voice and a bravado they both knew was false she said, “Who needs mothers anyway?”

After Callie died, Alona didn’t dream of being a rancher anymore. She left for college when Jensen was fifteen and straight through to medical school after that. Jim had been so proud. When Jensen left too, they drifted apart the way you do when you’re in different parts of the country, busy with college and your twenties. But like Jensen, she’d come home. It seemed to be the way it was. At least half the people Jensen went to highschool with, left to go into Denver or other parts of the country for college or work and a lot of them stayed for a good few years. But one by one, as they all heard the call of the mountains most of them returned home.

At her question, Jensen felt the bone crushing weight of his exhaustion and confusion come over him as his body switched on again. His voice reflected it as he said, “Alona, I haven’t slept a whole night in five months. I drove here from San Francisco in a day, I can’t remember the last time I ate and the man I’ve lived with for six years has lost his goddamned mind. I’m not in a place where I can give you an accurate description of my symptoms or their cause.”

She gave a crooked smile. “Fair enough. Anything else beside your head and face hurt?” At his blank expression she made a hand gesture and said, “Sit up for me.”

Alona looked at him as he made a move to sit up, his whole body freezing as every single muscle tensed up in a tight cramp. The air rushing out of his lungs in a forceful involuntary exhale.

Her voice was dry but worried as she said, “That answers my previous question. Alright. Jensen, put your legs down on the floor and then I’ll help you sit up.” With a combined effort Alona helped him up into a sitting position.

“Do you wanna put your arms up so I can help you out of this sweater?”

Jensen, already sweating from the pain and effort gave a small involuntary shake of his head and said in a strained voice,

“I’d rather not.”

He could see the sympathy in her eyes but her voice was professional as she said, “Let me rephrase that. Lift your arms as much as you can so I can take off your sweater and get a look at you.”

It took a great deal of swearing and the additional help of Colt to get Jensen out of his sweater and the tank-top underneath. The room turned quiet. The hope that Jensen had taken two or three punches to the face nothing more, shattered with his battered upper body coming into full view.

“Is that a shoe sole?” Lance’s voice was quiet, calm, and it made everyone else in the room look up with apprehension, knowing that the only time the senior Ackles was ever so quiet and calm, was when he was using all available willpower to keep his temper in check. Lance Ackles didn’t get angry often but when he did, everyone who knew him turned and headed in the opposite direction.

Alona walked to the back of the couch and Jensen flinched as light fingers gently prodded the place on his lower back that Lance was staring at. Jensen couldn’t turn around and see for himself, but he remembered a shoe clad foot sinking into his flesh and it didn’t surprise him to learn that the bruise it left had the shape of Richards shoe sole.

He could see Alona observing him in quiet contemplation then saying with a soft but decisive voice, “Grandpa, Uncle Colt, I need to talk to Jensen alone.”

Jensen could see the two older men opening their mouths to protest but Alona gave them a firm stare
and continued without letting either of them utter a single word.

“I need to examine Jensen and neither I nor he needs an audience for that, especially not you two. Now at best, his ribs are only bruised, at worst, they’re broken. Either way, an Advil or two will not cut it. Grandpa, you need to go to the pharmacy, I’ll prescribe him some Percocet and strong Tylenol. Uncle Colt, talk to Chris, Jensen needs to eat and with that jaw, the less chewing involved the better. Then you need to get his room ready, get fresh linen in the bed and see if you can find something for him to sleep in that’s easy to get into and out of.” Alona stopped and both men looked like they were about to talk but she ignored them and continued. “Oh and get shower ready for him. Make sure there’s a good amount of hot water ready, a long warm shower will be good for him, loosen up those tight muscles.”

To their surprise, Alona reached into her cleavage and pulled out her prescription pad.

“You keep your prescription pad in your bra?” Lance's look was a mix between curiosity and embarrassment.

“It’s the only place I can be sure the pill junkies can’t get to it when I’m out like this. You have no idea the lengths an addict will go to in order to get their hands on this.”

She wrote out the prescription, handing it to Lance while saying, “You should have no problem picking it up, everyone there knows you and Jensen. In case you do, have them call me and I’ll confirm it. Now, get out of here.”

Colt opened his mouth, that small action made Alona’s eyebrows shoot up and her voice was harsh as she said, “What the hell are you still standing there for? Get out and do what I told you. I’ll call you when we need you. Go!”

They shuffled out of the room, casting kicked puppy looks over their shoulders. Alona ignored them.

As the door closed, she turned back to Jensen and asked, “Are your legs as bad?”

Jensen shrugged his shoulders as he said, “You were kind of rough with them, Alona.”

She sighed and gave a little guilty smile.

“I know, but those two are the biggest pair of mother hens I have ever met, not counting my dad. It was better to give them something to do then keeping them here. We don’t need Grandpa to take out his shotguns. Let’s see if we can get you to stand up and take your pants off so I can get a look at your legs.”

Lance was Alona’s Grandpa the way Jensen was her cousin, being the oldest living relative on the ranch, Lance was Alona’s grandpa and May had been her grandma. It was Phoenix logic, it might not be technically correct, but it worked for them.

Jensen, exhausted and embarrassed by the whole situation tried to protest. “Alona, nothing's broken I don’t.” But she wasn’t having any of it and her voice reflected the emotion as she caught him off and said, “Jensen, I know this is a foreign experience for you. But when a woman tells you to drop your pants, just do it.”

It helped to lighten the mood and Jensen gave a small silent laugh and his reply was cheeky.

“Only for you, Alona.”
She put a hand to her chest and faked a flattered look. “I’d feel special if it wasn’t so incestously creepy.”

As Jensen unbuttoned his pants, letting them drop, Alona’s face turned serious again and her words were hesitant as she said, “Jensen, did he do anything else?” Seeing Jensen’s blank face she continued, her manner becoming gentle, but there was no mistaking how uncomfortable she felt. “Could there be any internal damage?” She let the question hang open and after a second or two Jensen understood what she was trying to ask him.

“No! No, Alona. There was no-” Jensen went quiet, settling for shaking his head when words failed him. He had been about to say that Richard would never do that, would never force himself on someone. But up until thirty-something hours ago, he’d never thought Richard would hit him either.

The rest of Alona's examination was quick but thorough. Jensen could hear her muttering and cursing as she cataloged the damage done. When she was finished, she straightened up and said,

“Well, nothing is broken. Your ribs will give you hell for a few weeks but-” A soft, tentative knock interrupted her. She gave Jensen a look, rolled her eyes and called out,

“You can come in, Uncle Colt.”

He came walking into the room carrying a tray with a steaming bowl, a glass of milk and two thick slices of a white bread so fresh, Jensen could see the generous amount of butter spread over them melting. He felt dizzy with hunger.

He put the tray down in his lap and Colt's voice was concerned as he asked, “Is this ok? Or does it hurt?” Jensen shook his head, eyes zoomed in on the food in front of him as Colt continued, “Chris made vegetable stew for lunch. I figured it might be mushy enough to eat even with your bruised jaw.” Colt turned to Alona and said, “I asked Omundson to put Jensen up in the on-suite downstairs. I figured not having to walk up and down the stairs for a few weeks might be a good idea.”

Jensen, mouth already filled with stew and savoring the sweet taste of smoked paprika and melted parmesan cheese looked up, swallowing before saying, “I can’t believe I’m about to ask this again but, if Omundson is getting a room ready for me. Where the hell is my baby?”

Colt’s voice was dismissive, like the fact that his granddaughter was being passed from one person to the next was completely normal. On this ranch, it was.

“Bella’s with Chris. Last I checked he was pureeing organic peas for her, muttering about chemical cocktails or something. You how fussy he is with food.”

Jensen nodded and said, “Maybe we can bring the old cot down from the attic, put it in with me for now.”

“About that...” Colt rubbed the back of his neck as he spoke. “Me and your grandpa, we kind of…” He trailed off for a second, looking a little self conscious as he continued speaking, “Well, my bedroom needed a new coat of paint and so did his. So we decided that while we were at it, we might as well do all four bedrooms upstairs. And while we did that, you called and told us about getting a surrogate so, well we made Chris’s old bedroom into a nursery for when you and Bella came to visit. Don’t forget your food, Jensen.”

Jensen opened his mouth but couldn’t make a sound past the lump in his throat, so he did as he’d been told and took another mouthful of stew. Colt cleared his throat trying to dislodge his own lump before continuing, “Anyway, I talked with your grandpa and Jim and we all agreed that while you’re
recovering and sleeping downstairs, Jim would sleep in your old room and we’d take turns getting up with her at night.”

Jensen put his spoon down. “Dad, I can take care of Bella.”

“I know you can. But Jensen, you’re battered from head to toe, you are not in any shape to get up three times a night. We know how to take care of a baby.”

Jensen tried his hardest to not make it sound like he didn’t trust his dad with Bella.

“I know you do. It’s not that I don’t think you can take care of her, I know you can. But, I don’t want her to feel like I’ve abandoned her.”

“Jensen.” Colt's face held a patient expression but you could tell he was more worried about Jensen than his granddaughter's sleeping arrangements. His voice reflected that as he continued speaking, “You’ll be together during the day and if she needs you at night, we’ll bring her to you. The best thing you can do for her is to take care of yourself.”

“I know, but-”

“Jensen.” Alona joined the conversation, interrupting his objection as she said, “Listen to Uncle Colt. Your body will not heal if you don’t sleep. They’re all family Jensen, why are you so worried about this?”

Jensen looked down at the red-tinted stew.

Colt walked over, sitting down on the coffee table right in front of him so close their knees were almost touching. “Jensen.” It was always the same, every time Colt Ackles wanted to coax something out that he couldn’t say, it was always like this. His name, said in that deep voice and then a patient silence until he was ready to talk.

Jensen could taste the guilt and he heard the misery in his voice when he said, “She was in the room, Dad. She was sitting right in front of me, looking at me the whole time. She saw all of it.”

“I’m gonna shoot him. More than once.”

It wasn’t a long drive to the nearest pharmacy, ten minutes at the most, so Jensen shouldn’t be surprised that his Grandpa was already back. But he’d lost all sense of time and he flinched in surprise when Lance's angry baritone sounded in the room.

As he walked in, small white paper bag in hand, Lance turned to Alona. “I got all the pills, now what do I do with them?” As Alona gave Lance strict directions on dosage, Colt turned back to Jensen.

“She won’t remember, Jensen.”

“I don’t know, what if-” Colt didn’t let him finish.

“Fine, why don’t you tell me about one of your memories from when you were five months old.”

Jensen knew his dad was right but still opened his mouth to protest. Colt caught him off as he said, “Jensen, when you were three months old, your mother up and left you. Disappeared one night and never came back. Babies are resilient. Falabella will be fine, she’s not the one we need to worry about. You are. Your body will heal in a few weeks and then Bella will keep you up at night for at least another eighteen years. You’ll get your share of sleepless nights.”
“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating, just a little?”

“Sure, I got a few years of peace between say, four and thirteen where you at least slept through the night. Then you turned fourteen and Jared Padalecki figured out how to climb up to your bedroom window. I didn’t sleep again until you graduated High School.”

Jensen turned his head when Lance jumped into the conversation, pointing at Colt he said, “That was payback, Boy for Joanna Boyer. As I remember it, her father took down the trellis under her window.”

Jensen let out a spontaneous laugh, but regretted it at once, the stabbing pain made him cradle his ribs as he looked at Lance and then at Colt, arching an eyebrow.

“Joanna Boyer?”

Colt ignored Jensen look but the side of his mouth twitched as he pointed back at his father and replied, “Old man, pay attention to your granddaughter. Jensen, finish your lunch.” The older and younger Ackles’ eyes met across the room promising that this topic of conversation was far from over.

Alona ended her conversation with Lance, turning back to Jensen, it was not his cousin but a doctor that spoke to him. “I’ve given Lance instructions on dosage. Percocet is addictive so don’t exceed the dosage prescribed. But it’s just as important that you don’t skip it and try to tough it out. It’s pure luck that your ribs aren’t broken, if you don’t manage the pain and instead try to not cough or keep your breathing shallow, you could develop a chest infection or even a pneumonia. Got it?”

Jensen nodded, and she continued, “You’ve taken a lot of damage, Jen. Even though there are no acute injuries, broken bones, or bleeding wounds. Your body is in shock and for the next couple of weeks I don’t want to hear about you doing anything other than sleeping, eating and resting. Nothing else.”

“Alona, I have a five-month-old baby, I-”

“Jensen!” His mouth snapped shut as Alona went from nice, country doctor to Army drill sergeant in a matter of seconds. Her voice leaving no opening for a discussion as she continued speaking, “We had that conversation. I know it’s hard, but this ranch is full of people, of family, who are all capable of helping you with Bella while you are recovering. No lifting, no walking up and down the stairs, no nothing. You will do as you are told. Don’t think for a second that me not living on the ranch at the moment, means I won’t know. One word, one, from anyone here that you are not following my orders, I’ll come up here and you won’t like how that turns out, trust me on this. Now, you go take a shower and then you go sleep until dinner.”

Even if Jensen had been brave enough to protest, which he wasn’t when his cousin put this side forward, he knew it was pointless. Alona might be petite, but she had Lance’s fiery temper and when she told you to do something you did it or all hell would break loose. She looked away from Jensen to the two senior Ackles’ as she continued to bark out orders.

“I’ll check up on him before family dinner on Sunday. If he feels nauseous or vomits, call me right away. He isn’t showing any signs of a concussion but you never know. The body has an amazing ability to keep itself going when needed and he might show symptoms now when he’s here and the shock is wearing off. The same goes for anything related to his breathing. It will be uncomfortable for a while but if it becomes so painful it affects his breathing pattern even with the painkillers, I need to know at once. Oh, and no alcohol as long as he’s on the Percocet.”
Both men listened, nodding as she spoke, walking out of the door she looked at Lance and Colt one last time and said, “Remember, eat, sleep, rest. Nothing else.”

The walk from the great room to the downstairs master bedroom was slow and painful and Jensen could have done without the audience. With Lance and Colt holding him up on either side, they made their way straight across the foyer into the family room. There, propped up on two large, comfortable couches made from dark wood and brown and white cowhide, sat four men and a baby.

Jensen’s pants were back on but his upper body was still bare and there were several sounds of surprise and anger when he came into sight.

“Son of a bitch, I’m gonna shoot him.”

The three of them looked over at Jim, lines carved out by the elements in his round face, three day stubble and angry, hooded blue eyes glimpsed under the light suede canyon hat.

Lance answered, “You’re third in line after me and your girl.”

One of the other men looked like he was about to talk, but Colt cut him off saying in a voice that left no room for a discussion,

“Not now, get the door.” Lance nodded to the door at the far side of the room leading to the master bedroom. Jim stood up and opened it for them. No one lived in the room, it was there for visiting friends or paying guests who wanted a more homey experience.

“You sure you don’t need this room?”

“Jensen, stop.” It was Colt's voice again, calm but firm. “No one is coming for a visit and it’s still slow season. The first booking we have on it is two months from now.”

When they reached the on-suite Jensen put his foot down. “This is where the two of you leave. I can handle it.” They looked like they wanted to protest but considering the awkward situation of helping their thirty-year-old son and grandson to undress and shower, they both backed down.

Colt pointed at a pile of clothes lying on the bathroom counter and said, “It’s a pair of sweatpants and a loose t-shirt. I think you should be able to get in and out of them without too much trouble. Call us when you’re ready or if need help.” He stopped for a second and then continued, “I realize this is an awkward situation but Jensen, don’t be stupid. If you need help ask for it.”

Getting into the shower was not pleasant. The actual shower was heaven. Warm, soothing water cascading down his aching body helped for a short moment to soothe aches and pains.

Dressed in the soft comfortable clothing, Jensen opened the bathroom door and found Colt turning down the covers in the large bed. He opened his mouth to speak but seeing Colt's look he opted to close it again and instead lowered himself onto the soft mattress. A second later, Lance came in with a sleeping Falabella in his arms. Colt arranged a few pillows along the side of the bed opposite to Jensen creating a barrier so they could lay the sleeping child down next to him without putting her at risk of falling off the bed.

Lance walked over to the window facing the front yard and shut the heavy drapes. Then he walked into the bathroom and came out carrying a glass of water and the prescribed painkillers, making Jensen swallow one Percocet and two Tylenol. Then he left the room, Colt followed, stopping in the doorway to say, “You follow that girls example and sleep. We’ll wake you when it’s time for dinner.”
Jensen did as he’d been told.

The Ackles-Omundson-Beaver Family Tree

Ackles/Omur
Falbella Ackles
Born 5 Oct 2015

Printed from Fæ
Chapter 4

When Jensen opened his eyes, he found himself staring directly into another pair observing him. Chris had always had the most amazing and intense blue eyes. Dark blue around the outer edges and a lighter, almost icy blue at the center around the pupil. When the light hit them at the right angle, they appeared luminous.

Jensen was four when Chris came into his life. Lance and Grandma May had driven down to some backwater town in Oklahoma to look at a mare they were interested in. They came back without a horse and with a sixteen-year-old kid in the back of the truck. No one except Chris and them knows the full back-story. But the consensus among everyone is that wherever Chris came from, it was poor, violent and riddled with drugs.

Jensen can’t remember how everyone else took his arrival. All he remembers is his own awestruck reaction to the teenager. The way his pointy boots slid against the ground, the careless way he tied his plaid shirt around his hips, how strong his tanned arms looked in that white tank-top he always wore. The careless way his shoulder length, brown hair flopped around his face and how cool he looked in his raffia cowboy hat.

Jensen figures it was around this time he realized boys were a lot prettier than girls. From the day Chris came to The Phoenix Ranch Jensen idolized him. He doesn’t remember it himself but he’s been told that during the first months Jensen was the only one allowed to get close. Chris shying back from everyone with squared shoulders and distrustful eyes. In the evening they’d find him sitting in the rocking chair on the front porch. Jensen curled up in his lap, small fingers playing with his hair as Jensen told him about how he got to name the new foal or how huge the horns were on the new bull. During the incessant babbling Chris would sit with one foot propped up against the porch railing rocking the chair, head leant back and eyes closed.

No one really knows what was said to get Chris to come to the ranch. But if he had any romantic ideas about life as a wandering cowboy, reality must have been a disappointment. Lance and Jensen’s Grandma May made him finish High School with an iron will and more love than Chris
most likely had ever experienced.

Jensen can still hear the loud arguments. Once, Chris slammed the front door open and left, a duffle over his shoulder and eyes blazing, Lance hot on his heels. Hours later his grandma had come out of the kitchen, looked at her watch, sighed, and with her hand outstretched to the five-year-old Jensen she had said, “Come on, honey it’s almost time for dinner. Let’s go get Grandpa and Chris.”

The ride had seemed endless, the black tar of the road going forever until Jensen could see them in the windshield. Chris walking with long angry strides and Lance’s calm steps beside him talking all the time, even though Jensen never heard what he said. May had driven up behind them, parked by the side of the road and called out for Lance through the open window. While he walked over she had turned and said,

“Jensen, I have to talk to Grandpa, go get Chris.”

It was a dirty move. Jensen knows that now, but back then he’d jumped out of the car and run after Chris who hadn’t stopped walking, calling out after him when his short legs couldn’t run fast enough to catch up. The first time Chris’s body had twitched. The second, he’d slowed down like he was about to stop but then changed his mind and sped up again. The third time Jensen called out, voice trembling, Chris had stopped, his duffle dropping to the ground with his head hung low and a hand dragging over his eyes. Jensen had caught up, his small hand fitting into Chris's bigger one and looked up smiling as he said

“Chris, we have to go home, dinners almost ready. Grandma said you and me can ride in the back if I sit in your lap and you hold on to me really tight.”

Jensen still remembers how Chris's hair, blowing in the wind, had tickled him in the face as he’d leaned his head on Jensen's shoulder, arm secured around his waist. Chris never tried to leave again. In time, he found his place, molding into the family, his edges getting a little smoother.

Chris is a good cowboy, a great rider. But more than anything, he’s a fantastic chef. It was in Grandma May’s kitchen they discovered that when you put Chris in front of a stove, magic happens. Jensen remembers walking into the dining room to find Lance and Chris in front of mountains of papers and catalogs. By the time Chris graduated High School, he’d scraped together enough grants to enroll at the Art Institute of Colorado, commuting to Denver every day. Four years later Chris had an Associate of Applied Science degree in Culinary arts and one in Baking and Pastry.

He’s a natural talent. He’s won numerous culinary competitions, every year he gets dozens of offers, one more ridiculous than the other, from big five star resorts in Aspen, Avon and Veil. He turns them all down. Chris could work in any four star Michelin restaurant he wanted, he chooses the rustic kitchen of The Phoenix Ranch.

Once, and only once, Jensen had overheard Lance breach the subject with him, voice encouraging, as he said, “You know you don’t owe us anything, Chris. You don’t have to stay for our sake. Go to New York or any of those other places you’ve got offers from. Meet new people, work in one of those high tech kitchens. We love you and that won’t stop even if you live someplace else.”

Chris had leaned back in the chair, taking a long drag from his beer. There was no longing or held back desire as he spoke, “I hate high tech and the only people I like are on this ranch. I’m not leaving.”

That was the end of the discussion. Chris runs the kitchen at The Phoenix Ranch, the food has awarded them multiple prizes and recommendations and people drive across several state lines every time he does a pop-up restaurant or hosts a barbeque. The best food though, those most sacred
recipes are the ones he cooks only for his family.

Chris’s hair was held back from his face by a blue and white paisley bandana tied around his forehead. His cheeks were red and his temples sweaty from the kitchen heat he’d emerged from.

He stood by the bed and held out a glass of water in one hand and three pills in the open palm of the other. Chris had a soft, husky voice, that with certain words or phrases, hinted at some unidentifiable country style dialect. But you never really knew with Chris. He was smart and had so many layers Jensen wasn’t sure he’d ever get underneath them all. But he played the redneck gigolo to perfection, enhancing that unnamed dialect and the country charm, with it’s yes mam’s and big smiles, when it suited him. Not with his family though, they got the real Chris and the words sounded round and pleasant as he spoke,

“It’s time for your pain meds.”

After a week on Percocet Jensen was tired of them. They dulled the pain, but they dulled the rest of him as well. Everything became tilted, and it felt like that state of intoxication where the edges of world was padded and things moved a little slower. It was a comfortable place for a few hours but not seven days in a row. He knew he sounded petulant and whiny but he couldn’t stop himself as the words poured out in a slur, his tongue to big for his mouth.

“They make me all fuzzy, Chris.”

“I know.” He gave Jensen a sympathetic look. “I also have cake.”

The people on The Phoenix didn’t have many vices. They could all kick back a six pack on a Friday night. But the horses and cattle had the same needs on Saturday morning as any other day. Ranch work and a hangover didn’t go well together so they all drank in moderation. Drugs was out of the question and tobacco had been banned since May forced Lance to quit smoking back in the sixties. The one weakness they all had was sugar. Chris spoiled them all with pastries, cakes and pies. There was dessert after dinner every day, sometimes after lunch too, and there was always a plate of something to nibble on with the afternoon coffee. It was lucky ranch work was so challenging or their jeans might not have fit as well as they did.

Jensen had a sweet tooth a mile wide and at the mention of cake he looked around the room.

“What kind?”

Chris grinned and said, “Do you care?”

Jensen didn’t. Instead he kept looking around the room, his eyes searching.

“How big a slice?”

Chris turned so he could pick something up from the top of the dresser he was standing in front off and turned back, a large plate holding what appeared to be half of an average size cheesecake in his hands.

“That’s a lot of cake.”

Chris nodded. “And it’s all yours, as soon as you take the pain meds.”

“Fine, give me the stupid pills.” Jensen sat up with a grunt, taking the glass and the three pills swallowing them all at once. “I don’t know why people get high on purpose. It’s like having a head full of cotton balls instead of a brain. I don’t like it.”
“That’s why I love you.” Chris put a big glass of milk on the side table and the large plate in his lap. He got comfortable in the giant bed, with its strong, dark cherry wood frame and the padded headboard, clad in the black and browns speckled hide of a texas longhorn.

When the spoon entered his mouth, and it’s contents melted on his tongue, Jensen let out a contented sigh and his voice, slurred but happy said, “Oh my god, it’s chocolate cheesecake. I love you. You’re my favorite person on the planet.” Jensen shoved another spoonful of cake into his mouth, closing his eyes as the flavors coated his tongue. Cake was so amazing. He finished it in a matter of minutes.

“Is there more?”

A short, spontaneous laugh came out of Chris's mouth and he looked at him with a raised eyebrow as he said, “Jensen, that was half a cheesecake.”

Jensen didn’t see what that had to do with anything. “I know. Where’s the other half?”

Chris laughed again and his expression was filled with fondness. “You’re kind of adorable doped up on pills.”

“Don’t change the subject, where’s the cake?”

“It’s gone, Jensen. I gave the other half to Alona when she came by.”

“Alona was here, why didn’t she wake me?”

Chris put his arms behind his head, biceps bulging. “She had a house call in the area and came by and look in on you. But you were sleeping and everything was fine. There was no point in waking you up.”

Jensen looked at Chris, and even in his muddled state he managed to raise a questioning eyebrow. “Alona examined me yesterday. You do realize she came by to see you, right?”

“Jensen, she didn’t.”

“Chris, she’s had a crush on you since she was in High School. Now she’s moved back, and she’s waiting for you. Believe me, Alona is already planning your wedding.”

“Yeah, well you’ve had a crush on me since you were four and we ain’t married yet.”

Jensen leaned his head on Chris's shoulder, sighing as he said, “That’s only because you had the bad taste of being born a heterosexual. If you were gay you wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

Chris leaned his face into the top of his head and he could feel him smiling into it. “No, I wouldn’t. But, Alona is not happening. She's family and too nice.”

Jensen felt that maybe he wasn’t in the best state for this conversation. It was hard getting your point across and being convincing when your lips felt too big for your face and your tongue slipped on every other word. “She is your family but you’re not related, there is nothing stopping you two from happening. You can continue screwing around with the local skanks at those road side bars you love so much. But I know Alona and you’ve been on her to-do list for at least fifteen years. Just go buy the ring and save yourself a lot of agonizing.”

“Skanks?” Chris lifted his head and looked at him and his voice was chastising as he replied, “Jensen Ross Ackles, I do not screw skanks.”
“Oh, I’m sorry.” His words dripped with sarcasm as he continued, “Those really classy ladies who blow you in back alleys, have a discount at the local motel and then go home to their husbands pretending to be housewife of the year.”

“You’re being very judgmental, Jensen. I’ll have you know they’re all very nice women.”

“I’m sure they’re charming, but you deserve something better. Alona’s an eleven and you know it.”

Chris sighed and gave him a look that said loud and clear that he had run out of good arguments. “Shut-up.” The words might have been hard but Chris's voice was affectionate and the red tint to his face had nothing to do with any kitchen heat.

“You shut-up.”

Chris got off the bed making a dismissive hand gesture as he said, “Go back to sleep, Jensen. You’re being all grown-up and shit. It’s annoying.”

“You’re annoying. Go make more cake.”

Chris shook his head a little, a smile forcing its way onto his lips. “What kind?”

Jensen, eyes drooping, the strong painkillers kicking in, sank down into the bed again.

“Strawberry cream cake.”

Chris rolled his eyes but as he headed for the door he said, “Strawberry cream cake, got it.”

As he walked out the door Jensen called out, “No! Lemon meringue pie. No, no, that peach cake you do. No wait, apple spice cake.”

The last thing Chris heard when he closed the door was Jensen's mumbled voice saying, “Banana pecan cake.”
Jensen does his best to follow the rules, he really does. But by week two, he hates his bed and the couch in the family room more than he can put into words. He can’t stand sitting or lying in either of them for a single second longer. He’s almost healed, there are still bruises, aches and pains, but most of them have begun to fade. Jensen’s down to only Tylenol to manage the pain in his ribs, now a dull ache that doesn’t get much worse, as long as he doesn’t make any sudden movements.

Colt has gone to town and taken Bella with him and everyone else is hard at work with their daily chores. No one is there to stop him when Jensen slides out of bed and for the first time in two weeks puts on clothes that have actual buttons.

It’s not a comfortable walk, he can admit that he’s not a hundred percent yet. But walking out the front door and into the clear, crisp March air, Jensen feels better than he has in weeks.

The Phoenix Ranch lies about a five minute drive from the main road. As you drive up the compact dirt road, you pass into a forested area before entering a valley. The open space is surrounded by a small river to the right, a large hill to the left and in front, far in the distance, the white peaks of Bear and Squaw Mountain.

The first building that comes into sight when you drive into the valley is the large, rectangular structure, of the indoor riding area. There the road forks into two. Straight forward, you pass the stables and to your right two paddocks, one smaller, next to the stables and one larger further down almost by the river. The road curves and passes the large barn, made from the same reddish brown timber as all the other buildings.

If you choose instead to turn left at the fork, you pass two large maintenance buildings. The first housing everything from large machinery like tractors and snow plows, to tools, rakes, ropes. Everything needed to maintain a ranch. The other houses a large workshop, with space for every kind of work from carpentry to mechanical. Further away from those buildings stands a bunkhouse that serves as staff housing during the busy summer season when the ranch is overflowing with
guests and a lot more hands are needed. From its roof covered porch you have a lovely view down over the meadow at the back of the main building and the pond below it.

Eventually both roads join again as you reach the timber and stone house Jensen's Great, Great, Great, Great Grandma once laid the foundations on. What started as not much more than a small shack in eighteen-ninety-three, has grown into a well loved and meticulously cared for two thousand five hundred and eighty-eight square foot house. Six generations of Ackles have called this their home, seven with Bella. Every generation has cared for what was already there and added something of their own.

As far as anyone knows, the Ackles family started with Bess. Which isn’t true since she came from somewhere but somehow, it’s been passed down through every generation that whatever was before, wasn’t worth thinking about.

In the great room there’s a large oval picture frame with a black and white portrait of a tall woman in a billowing skirt and a long coat made from cowhide, a wide belt around her slim waist. A mass of curls can be seen trailing down over one shoulder, most of her face shaded by the brim of a large, black felt hat. Bess Ackles, born in the filthy slums of New York in eighteen-sixty-nine, married Avery Moore at twenty-one, became a mother to Amos Ackles at twenty-two and a widow by twenty-three. As the story goes, the widow part wasn’t all that traumatic since Avery was a drunk, a notorious gambler and used Bess as an outlet for his frustrations. The only good Avery contributed to the Ackles family was Amos, winning a decent amount of money in a poker game and having the good sense to get himself killed in a bar brawl before he could spend it.

At twenty-four, widowed and with her two-year-old son on her hip, Bess threw away her married name and took the name Ackles, reinventing herself into the woman she wanted to be. Driven by an urge to get away from the filth of the slums and a burning determination to never, ever marry again, she got on a train to the untamed lands of Colorado and its newly legislated right for women to vote.

With Avery's poker winnings, she bought some land and a small herd of cattle and The Phoenix Ranch was born. She did eventually marry again. In nineteen-nineteen, fifty years old, twenty-six years after she came to Colorado and two months after the wrangler who’d been working for her all that time, came home in one piece from the Great War, Bess Ackles married Tim Adams. She did however not change her name. He did.

Amos married Montana Ellis, a miner's daughter, in nineteen-twelve. Of their three children Josephine was the youngest, born in nineteen-eighteen. She married Jameson, intent on living out her life as a bankers wife in Denver, but by nineteen forty-five neither of her two older brothers had made it home from the war. So, at twenty-seven, she packed-up her husband, a nine-year-old Lance and a seven-year-old Althea and took them up into the Rocky Mountains and The Phoenix Ranch.

It was Josephine who transformed the cattle ranch to a dude ranch. The Great Depression had drained Colorado of what little prosperity it had. But the tourism market, people looking for time away from the bustling cities and untouched nature changed all that and Josephine and Jameson knew how to capitalize on it.

The first cabin was built just above the pond near the main building. These days, Chris lives there, but through the years the tree clad hillside fencing in the left side of the farm has had eight more cabins added to it, all in a comfortable distance from each other and in a way that allows them to melt into surrounding nature.

Above the main building and barn, stands the guest bunkhouse that also houses the ranch’s recreation
area, dining room, reception, office and the large kitchen used when the dude ranch is filled with guests. When it’s only a few they eat in the ranch house with the family.

There are more features on the ranch. There's a campfire area Chris uses to arrange his barbeques, a few more storage sheds. Chris's greenhouses and organic vegetable garden are there as well and beside them, Grandma May’s herb garden.

Lance married May in nineteen fifty-nine . Jensen is not sure who she was before she became May Ackles and the undisputed matriarch of The Phoenix Ranch. It was a subject that wasn’t discussed. Jensen remembers being eight, standing in the kitchen, her hands deep in the dough she was kneading. Chris standing beside her, hands as busy as hers.

“Grandma, what was your name before you married Grandpa?”

“It was May, darling.”

Jensen made a face and rolled his eyes. His grandma had a way of saying things with a soft voice that sounded almost like she was laughing at you, not in a mean way, but still laughing.

“I know that. I mean your last name.”

She kneaded the dough hard and looked at him, her large deep brown eyes staring right into him.

“Why are you asking, Jensen?”

Jensen only had one Grandma and one Grandpa. Almost everyone else he knew had two of each, but Jensen only had one. So, he always felt he had to be extra careful with those he had, because unlike everyone else he knew he didn't have a spare set.

“Well, we have this assignment in school, we have to make our family tree.”

“Well, you know your family tree, honey. It’s Great Grandma Bess, Amos and Montana, your Grandpa’s Momma Josephine and her Jameson. Me and your Grandpa, Aunt Althea. Uncle Jim and Aunt Callie, Alona and Uncle Omundson, your Daddy, and then there’s you.”

Sometimes, Grandma May’s voice would become soft as a horse mule and as sweet as maple syrup. The accent of wherever she came from seeping through the soft Colorado one she had most of the time. It was a strange but mesmerizing mix and Jensen could listen to her talk for hours.

“Yes, but my teacher said we should ask about all sides of the family and I guess I’m more than just an Ackles. I mean, where you come from matters too, right?”

“Not really, honey.”

He hadn’t been sure how to reply to that. So he stood by the counter, fingers playing with some flour that had escaped to where he was standing.

“Jensen, darlin’.” She stopped for a few moments and then she said something Jensen has kept with him to this very day. “Some people are lucky enough to end-up where they’re supposed to be right from the start. Your grandpa, your daddy, you. You were all Ackles right from the start and you’ve always known where home was. You all belonged to this ranch and this family from the start. But some people, like Great Grandma Bess, or Uncle Jim and Jeff, Chris and me. We…”

A look that Jensen still can’t quite understand had passed between his Grandma and Chris.
“People like us, we have to wait until we can come home. Where you are born and what name you start out with isn’t always the way it’s supposed to be. Where I come from and what my name was before doesn’t matter. I was always supposed to be an Ackles, and I was always supposed to live on this ranch. Where I lived before The Phoenix was not a home, and the people there were not my family. I didn’t live with my real family until I came here. Do you understand, Jensen?”

He had. Jensen can’t recall how he processed it all. But he remembers that it was that small conversation that made him understand, there were people that didn’t get to come home from school to a kitchen that smelled like freshly baked bread. That didn’t have a Grandma who smiled and kissed their head or a Chris who sneaked a warm cookie into his hand when she wasn’t looking. There were people who had to live in places that weren’t really a home.

He had thought about it all day and all evening. It had gnawed away inside keeping him from falling asleep. After midnight he had made his way out of his room to the one beside his where Chris slept. He’d opened the door and stood hovering in the doorway looking at Chris’s sleeping body. After a short while he’d tiptoed his way into the room, coming to a stop in front of Chris sleeping face, he had lent down and whispered,

“I’m really glad you came home.”

He didn’t know why he needed to tell him that. But he figured his Grandma and his Uncles had been on the ranch forever and his Grandpa had already told them all, and Uncle Omundson must have told Uncle Jeff. But, Jensen wasn’t sure anyone had remembered to tell Chris. As he tiptoed back to the door Jensen had paused in the doorway when Chris’s rough, gravelly voice had sounded in the quiet house.

“Me too, Jensen.”

At this time of year, Grandma May’s herb garden is just barren, dark soil fenced in by neat rows and curves made from smooth rocks found at the riverbank and flat gray stones creating footpaths. But in another three months it will be a small oasis of colors and scents. Butterflies and bumblebees hovering above the tall purplish, blue lavender. Chris and Lance keep the garden in perfect condition, replanting it every spring, tending to it just the way she used to.

It was Chris who found her. She’d been sitting in her favorite chair in the kitchen, newspaper open on the small table. It was her afternoon ritual, get dinner going and then sit down for a cup of coffee and crossword puzzle for half an hour or so, before getting back to all the daily tasks needing to be done.

They said it was a brain aneurysm. It was instantaneous, and she didn’t even have time to react. From one minute to the next she was just, gone. It was meant to comfort, but the very center of the foundation Jensen and the whole ranch stood on shattered in a few minutes. They cremated her. They walked to the top of the hill above the ranch and let her get carried away by the strong October winds and settle over the land that had been her home, even before she came there.

After, Lance took a backpack with supplies and rode up into the mountains. He didn’t come back until the first snow fell. Jensen grew up that day. Not so much because of his own grief but because other people needed him to step up. Lance had lost his wife, Colt his mom, and Chris... That night after they’d spread the ashes was the only time Jensen has ever seen Chris mind numbingly drunk and the first time Jensen understood that May hadn’t had one son, she’d had two.

Jensen remembers getting the call from the bar late that night and realizing that none but him was in any condition to answer it. Lance up in the mountains, Colt, ashen faced, lost in his thoughts in front of the fire. Everyone else gone, having retreated to their own safe places to lick their bleeding
wounds.

At the bar, Chris's body had been so heavy, swaying and stumbling as Jensen thanked the bartender and somehow got Chris into the passenger seat. He didn’t have the courage to try to get him up the stairs. Instead walking him into the on-suite at the ground level pushing him back on the bed, somehow getting him out of his jacket and dragging off his boots. He climbed up in the bed on the other side trying to get Chris into a better position, a hand had grasped his wrists and Jensen had looked into bloodshot eyes.

“I loved her so much, Jensen.”

His hand had stroked a few stray hairs from Chris's face, the silken strands soon replaced by tears. That night, Chris had cried until Jensen felt like his heart would shatter. In the early hours of the morning, fingers gliding through the thick hair, Jensen had allowed himself a few short hours of imagining a different life. As the sun rose and his eyes had slipped shut, he’d taken a long breath and with a final exhale before sleep, let all dreams of that reality go.

It was those months after May’s death, when everyone was hampered by their grief and Jensen felt the entire weight of The Phoenix Ranch on his shoulders, that made his body itch to escape. It was never a matter of him not wanting to run the ranch. But he wasn’t ready.

It’s an early spring this year, the snow already melted and the ground a mix between brown grass and muddy puddles. Jensen kept his eyes glued to the ground, making sure not to misstep. If he fell or anything else happened during this little act of civil disobedience Alona would have his head. Jensen didn’t have a plan he only wanted out of the house. But it didn’t surprise him when he rose his head and saw the stable in front of him.

It was empty of people when he walked in, the smell of horses and hay meeting him. Jensen walked along the rows of stalls, at this time of day most of the stalls were empty, all the horses out in the paddocks, but at the end of the stable he came to the stall he was headed to all along. Her forehead and muzzle were gray now, instead of the deep brown they used to be. But in the back she still had a white area with deep brown patches making it look almost like her back half had giraffe markings.

Acorn was a Colorado ranger horse, a breed born in the early nineteen-hundreds. A cross between two desert horses, one Arabian and one Barb, given as a gift to General U. S Grant from the sultan of Turkey, and Appaloosa mares. She was born the same year as Jensen and she’s been there all his life. Jensen learned to ride on Acorn. Although, unlike Jensen who’s still in the prime of his life, Acorn was nearing the end of hers.

Her muzzle might gray but it was still soft, Jensen let his fingers glide up her face, her eyes boring into his, Jensen smiling as she made a huffing noise as if asking,

“Where the hell have you been?!”

She’d gotten moody in her old age. “I’m sorry, lady. I didn’t mean to be gone so long.”

She butted her muzzle into Jensen's chest and he rested their foreheads together while his hands traveled up the sides of her face.

They could have stood like that forever, but the sudden start of rhythmic hammering bought Jensen back to the present. Curious, he walked along the alley, passing the feed and tack room and then out the small opening in the sliding doors on the other end of the stable, and came out into the open area between the stables and indoor riding area.
Jensen shouldn’t have been surprised, after all, every horse on the ranch has had their shoes replaced every six weeks like clockwork, all of Jensen's life. So it was not the fact that there was a farrier standing over a portable anvil, hammering out a horseshoe that surprised him. But that it wasn’t a short, stocky, beer bellied old man like it had been for as long as Jensen could remember.

Instead, it was a tall muscular man. Long legs clad in blue jeans, the sand colored suede chaps he wore accentuating the curve of his well shaped behind. A black tank-top covered a well cut upper body, sinewy forearms and bulging biceps tensing and releasing with every beat of the hammer.

Jensen could feel a pool of saliva form in his mouth as he observed the broad shoulders and long neck bent over that anvil. Chestnut hair tied up in a messy bun, pulled back from a clean shaven face. In the deep dark corners of his mind, locked away and not mentioned, he’s always had a deep affection for a big, well built man. It's not something he’s spoken of for years, so as not to upset Richard who, although attractive in an intellectual, bow-tie and tweed kind of way, was neither big nor well built. This man however, was. Jensen felt a flush rising in his cheeks as his mind wandered.

The man lifted the shoe and let it sink down into the bucket of water by his feet before he put it aside and stretched, turning a little to the side and Jensen knew that face. The neck was thicker, the jaw wider and sharper. But the mouth was still wide and thin, the nose still pointed at the tip and the slanted eyes were still the same bright hazel. It was a grown man's face, but it was still Jared fucking Padalecki.

The Ackles Family Tree
Now, Jensen has had his share of crushes and he’s been in love a time or two. There’d been the innocent, childish crush he had on Chris that never went beyond innocent and childish. Jensen loves Chris with an intensity he reserves for a small group of people, and there have been brief moments in his life where he’s entertained a thought of what might have been. But it’s been nothing serious, no heartbreak or what if’s, only a mild curiosity.

There was the crazy circus of coming to San Francisco and joining that vibrant gay scene. The dramatic short lived college relationships, one after the other. Then there was the mature, adult love he shared with Richard.

And then there’s Jared Padalecki. Most people have that one person, that first real love that starts out so innocent, all blushing faces and fumbling hands, that turns into drama and craziness. That, can’t keep your hands off each other, I’ll die if you ever leave me, let’s run away together love, that always ends in heartbreak.

For Jensen, that person is Jared Padalecki. When Jared’s around, every nerve ending in his body goes into full alert and his IQ drops about a hundred points, leaving an over sensitized drooling moron in his place.

Jared is the kind of person who slides into your life effortlessly, looking back you can’t remember what it was like without them there. The way Jensen remembers it, Jared had a really cool bike and when Jensen, shy and a little scared, because Jared was ten years old, told him so, Jared had smiled, flicked his hair out of his eyes and asked if Jensen wanted a lift home. Jensen remembers his hands holding on to Jared's jacket as he sat behind him on the bicycle rack and that was that. They’d come home, Jensen introduced him and then Jared never really left.

At first, there were always rules about staying over on school nights, curfews and all that.

Jensen knows the exact moment that changed.
It was the hottest summer anyone could remember. Grandma May had decided that everyone, guests and staff, needed a day off in the stifling heat and planned a picnic down at the lake a little further down the valley. Jared had let it slip that it was his half brother's first birthday and his mom and stepdad had planned a big party.

Grandma May had insisted he had to go home, said they’d be waiting for him. Jared had been quiet on the ride into central Evergreen where they lived. Jensen remembers seeing Grandma May’s eyes observing him in the rearview mirror, and Jensen had reached out and grabbed his hand, Jared's bigger one closing around his.

He’d held on even as they left the car and walked up to the door. There were sounds of people laughing coming from inside and so many balloons covering the door, Grandma May had to push a few to the side so she could find the doorbell.

When the door opened, the woman standing on the other side, wearing a white summer dress with her brown hair hanging loose had looked surprised,

“Jared. Isn’t it your dad's week?”

Jared’s hand had tightened around his own as he kept his face to the ground, his answer a quiet mumble,

“No Mom, it’s yours.”

A blond man in beige dress pants and a white shirt open in the collar had come to the door,

“Sharleen, who is it? Oh, Jared. Isn’t it your dad’s week?”

“No. It is not.”

Jensen had never heard Grandma May’s voice sound so hard or cold and even at nine, Jensen had recognized the look on the people at the door as shame.

“Either way, it’s inconsequential, we’re only here to get some swimming trunks. We’re going swimming at our lake and Jared didn’t have any with him.”

That was a lie. Jared had a pair of blue swimming trunks in a backpack standing on Jensen's bedroom floor and Grandma May knew that. Jensen had never, ever heard Grandma May lie before but now she had, right before them all without batting an eye.

“Jared, show me where your room is so we can go find a pair.”

She had held her hand out and Jared had let go of his and taken hers instead, Grandma May pushing past the two adults at the door walking into the house without waiting or asking for an invitation. Jensen had followed as Jared led them down a corridor to a room that was a home office, not a ten-year-old’s bedroom, a large gym bag standing in the corner. Jared had rubbed the back of his neck and his words were mumbled as he said,

“They have an air mattress for when I come.”

“An air mattress.” There had been something dangerous in his grandma’s voice.

“Well, there’s only so many rooms in the house and he’s only here every other week, we have a playroom, his toys and things are there too.”
It was the blond man again, standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, a defensive look on his face with Jared's mother standing behind him.

“Yes, I can see you’re cramped for space. Obviously you need a whole room to keep your computer in.”

Despite his young age, Jensen had heard the acid sarcasm falling from his grandma's lips. She didn’t wait for a reply. Turning from the adults and back to Jared her voice softening as she spoke to him, pointing at the large gym bag on the floor she said,

“Are these your things, Jared?”

At his silent nod she’d reached down and picked up the bag. She held out one hand to Jared again and turned to face his mother, ignoring the man in front of her.

“You change weeks on Mondays, yes?”

“Yes.”

“We have plans for the whole week, we thought Jared could stay with us since it's the summer holiday. We can call his father, George is it, to have him pick Jared up at our place.”

The woman had nodded, taking breath as if to straighten herself, trying to command the room the way his grandma did. She failed.

“That's so kind of you, Jared seems to love being at your ranch, he’s such an outdoorsy kid. He doesn't seem to enjoy being in town.”

His grandma's smile had looked more like a snare. “Yes. Well, we love having him stay over. Boys, time to go.”

Without another word she had walked out of the room, Jared’s hand in one of hers, his bag in the other, back straight, head held high. Despite her short stature and simple blue cotton dress, her silver streaked brown hair in a simple bun, she strode through the carpeted hallway like a queen. At the car, she’d thrown his bag into the backseat urging them both into the bench seat in the front. Jared sitting in the middle, her hand holding his when she wasn’t switching gears and Jensen holding on to the other one, knowing he’d just seen something awful.

Coming down to the lake everyone else was already there. A mix of guests and staff all changed for swimming. There were large blankets on the ground already filled with food, most of it coming from the large, portable barbeque Chris stood in front of, seeming undisturbed by the heat. A battery driven radio was playing in the background. People were playing in the water, others standing around talking and laughing, beer bottles and glasses of lemonade in their hands. Jensen could see his dad, grandpa, Jeff and Omundson all standing in a group, giving Grandma May a look he didn't understand when they spotted Jared. When they got out of the car she’d told them to change behind the truck and then walked over to the group. They couldn’t hear what she was saying, but her hands and arms moved in those wavy, jerky movements they did when she was furious.

Jensen had missed watching the rest of the discussion as they changed out of their clothes and into their swim trunks. When they were done and had come out on the other side of the truck, they heard a roar behind them and a strong arm each grabbing them around the waist as Colt lifted them up one under each arm and ran to the lake.

“Time to get wet, boys!”
They’d squealed and laughed as he ran with them, then screamed as he tossed them into the air above the shimmering surface of the water. That whole day they spent their time either flying or under water as Colt, Omundson and Jeff kept tossing them around in the lake. When they at last came back up, hands and feet wrinkled and lips blue, they’d been wrapped in towels and fed huge sandwiches and cake. Jensen had leaned back into Colt’s side as he devoured his food, Colt had put one arm around his shoulder pulling him close, then done the same with Jared.

They put a spare bed in his room and Jared slept in it the whole summer. Every Monday there was always a polite call from George or Sharleen. Because Jared just loved spending time at the ranch and they had things planned that they just knew Jared wouldn’t like, and would Colt or who ever answered the phone mind if Jared stayed a day or two? They could put a check covering expenses in the mailbox, it was no problem.

At a shallow inspection there wasn’t anything wrong with Jared’s parents. They didn’t drink too much, money wasn’t a big issue, they didn’t believe in physical discipline. The problem was that when they divorced, it was like they divorced Jared too.

The answer was always polite. They didn’t mind at all, a check in the mailbox was fine. But, they had things planned too, so wasn’t it better if Jared stayed the whole week? It was always fine. Jensen is sure they must have talked about it, but neither he nor Jared ever heard them say a bad thing about either of Jared’s parents. They only asked if Jared wanted to stay a little longer, he always said yes.

Things didn’t really change when school started. Jared would spend a night here at his moms and a night there at his dad’s, but it didn’t really stick, soon everyone learnt how it really worked. When Jared wanted to join the football team they called Colt, that night Jensen and Jared sat on the stair listening as Colt said into the phone,

“I’m transferring the money for Jensen’s after school activities on Wednesday. I don’t mind doing Jared’s as well, but I need the money in my account by Wednesday morning. If it’s not there I can drive by your husband’s work and pick up a check.”

Colt never had to drive anywhere, the money came when he asked, every time. Along with the standard string of sentences about how Jared just loved spending time at the ranch and how he’d talked about wanting to be a rancher and they sure hoped it wasn’t any trouble to have Jared over so often.

The answer was always the same, “No trouble at all, we love having him here.”

A year later, Jared’s dad and his new family moved out of state. If Jared spent little time at his place when he lived a twenty minute drive away, him living two states away made the time they spent together nonexistent.

Jared was twelve the first time Jensen heard any of the adults in his family lose their temper with his parents. Jared was tackled at practice on day, the helmet, old and overused was jarred off his head as the fastening broke and Jared flew head first into the ground.

At the hospital Grandma May’s arms had been around him as Jensen, with a sour taste in his mouth, watched Colt stomp back and forth in the waiting room, taking between clenched teeth into his new cellphone,

“I don’t care how you and George divide things up between the two of you. Give me your goddamn insurance number and you and your ex-husband can figure out the cost between the two of you later. Your son is lying unconscious in the damn hospital and he needs an MRI, right now. So give me the goddamn number, Sharleen.”
That hospital visit lead to three things. Jared spent a week in bed with a severe concussion, Colt got involved with the football team, organizing a huge fundraiser at the ranch to get money for new football equipment and Jared stopped sleeping at his mom's all together.

They never really talked about it, but there was a quiet understanding between Jared and Jensen. A kind of silent knowledge that they both knew what it was like to be unwanted by your parent. When Alona’s mom died she was added to the group, and they concluded that it was impossible to decided what was worse, being abandoned by your mother or your mother dying.

Jared never mentioned his dad, but Jensen figured with Colt in the picture picking up where George left off, and being Colt, doing it so much better, it wasn’t really a loss. Even though Jensen knew it must have stung when George had three kids with his new, younger wife.

Jensen figured out he loved Jared pretty fast. Being a year older it took Jared a little longer to see Jensen the same way. When Jensen was fourteen, Jared finally got a clue and the two of them became the epicness that all High School sweethearts are made of. There was a time Jensen could see their entire life played out together, living together on the ranch. That was the year Colt caught them making out in the hayloft. It was the most underwhelming coming out scene in history. Once they got to their feet and straightened their clothes, Jensen had somehow stammered out,

“We’re gay.”

Colt had looked at them, not a twitch in his face and voice calm as he said,

“Yeah, I know. Dinner's ready go wash up.”

That was the day Jared moved out of his room and into the downstairs bedroom. Chris had already moved out into his own cabin, but since his old room was next to Jensen's, the other two on the opposite part of the upper floor, it was decided Jared should live downstairs.

When Jared turned sixteen, his stepdad got promoted and transferred into central Denver. Not wanting to commute everyday it was decided the family would move. Sharleen and her husband turned up at the ranch, talking about how they didn’t want to pull Jared out of school and away from all his friends when he only had two years left. Maybe they could all come to some kind of arrangement where Jared could stay at the ranch and he could come visit on weekends.

Jared had looked at Jensen rolling his eyes, Jensen had snorted, Lance had turned on his heel walking away, his fists clenched at his sides while Grandma May came out on the porch. Standing beside Jared, her arms around his waist, Colt’s voice finally lost all pretense of civility,

“Sharleen, we’ve been raising your son for the past six years. We’re not about to stop anytime soon, he’s family. You go to Denver, keep the checks coming until he graduates High School and then we’ll be done with each other.”

They’d sputtered about it being Jared's choice, how he always chose the ranch above them.

Colt's eyes had been stormy and his voice like granite when he said, “You keep telling yourselves that. Now, get off my ranch.”

Later, the two of them lying on their backs in the hay, eyes fixed on the ceiling, Jensen had asked if Jared was ok.

“I’m glad we’ve stopped pretending.”

Jared never went to Denver on the weekends.
But then, Jared graduated High School and Jensen didn’t. That ended well. Not. Back then it was
very dramatic and Jensen thought he would die when Jared closed the car door and drove away,
seeking the freedom and adventure every eighteen-year-old trying to break free, goes looking for. He
came back a few months later and Jensen thought that, this time it really would last forever. It didn’t.
It wasn’t Jared’s fault. Now, Jensen knows that at that age you don’t want to stay in one place and
Jared couldn’t stay in one place for thirty seconds. He’d blow into town for a season and leave again.
Come home for four weeks and then leave. And every time Jensen fell like a brick. In hindsight,
Jensen is grateful no one picked a side. Jared was family whatever their relationship status might be
and everyone let the two of them figure things out without interfering. Jared called home twice a
week as promised whether he and Jensen were on speaking terms or not.

It’s ironic that Jared was always seen as the free spirit that would never stay in Evergreen, when it
was Jensen that stayed away for ten years.

The last time Jensen saw Jared, was when he, with shaky legs and trying to fix his clothing, stumbled
out of the tack room in the stables. Jared had stood, chest bare and arms crossed over his chest, belt
and fly still undone, jeans hanging low on his hips. His eyes, always so bright, had been dark and his
lips pressed together, jaw tensing and releasing.

“You can not be serious, Jensen. A stack of hay has more personality than that elitist, gay cliché.”

Jensen, fixing his clothing with stiff angry movements, was furious with himself for allowing this to
happen the second he met Jared again. When his new boyfriend was up in the house with his family,
that he had introduced them to not two hours ago.

“Shut-up, Jared. Richard might not fit in here, but he’s smart, funny, cultured and he want’s more
from me then to bend me over the nearest surface.”

“That’s unfair, Jensen.”

Jensen had closed his eyes, sighing as a dragged a hand over them.

“Jared, we’re not in High School anymore. We’re not teenagers and this, this thing with us. It’s too
much drama.”

Jared had clenched his jaw, at twenty-five he was an adult but his face still looked boyish. Jensen
had turned to leave but two hands had grabbed his upper arms dragging him back into the tack room,
pushing him up against the nearest wall, trapping him against it. Jared’s mouth was angry, hot and
demanding as it closed over his. For a second Jensen had melted into it before he had, with every
ounce of willpower he possessed, pushed him away. Fingers against his swollen lips he’d said,

“You can’t do this. It’s not fair, Jared. You can’t blow back into town and expect me to be here
every time.”

There had been something wild in Jared’s eyes and an angry desperation in his words.

“I didn’t blow into town, Jensen. I told you, I’ve come back home. I’m done moving around.”

“Yeah, well I’m not. I live in San Francisco now with Richard.”

“Bullshit, Jensen. You are not a city boy. You’re not a desk jockey. The very core of you, the center
of your soul, is this ranch and these horses. San Francisco, are you fucking kidding me?”
“I’m not that one dimensional, Jared. I’m capable of loving both this ranch and San Francisco, which
is where Richard and I need to be right now.”

Their eyes had met, Jared's dark and furious, Jensen's stinging. He’d swallowed, trying to compose
himself, be the adult he strived to be.

“Jared, this has to stop. If you care for me you’ll stay out of sight when I come home to visit. This is
your home too, you belong here but I love Richard and it’ll be easier on all of us if we don’t cross
paths when I’m here.”

Jared’s lips had turned into a sneer and there was cruelty in his voice when he replied, “Yeah, I
noticed that. That’s why I had you bent over and moaning my name. My name, Jensen two minutes
after saying hello, while he’s up at the house boring the shit out of everyone.”

He’d felt his teeth clench and his jaw jump, the composure he tried so hard to maintain, slipping.

“Screw you, Jared.”

“No darlin’, screw you.”

Jensen had looked at him, comeback on his tongue, but he was tired, exhausted by this emotional
circus that was the two of them.

“Jared, you’re twenty-five years old and you’re acting like a fucking brat. This is why I choose
Richard.”

Body trembling as he walked out the sliding doors, Jensen had felt as though someone was choking
him from the inside. Chris had stood leaning against the stable wall, eyes piercing.

“Shut up, Chris.”

“Didn’t say a word, son.”

Jensen hasn’t seen Jared for five years, the last he heard, Jared left again after their last fight. Those
years have not only been kind to him, they’ve showered him with glorious manliness and bulk that
makes Jensen's insides tingle. This is so not good.

For a second Jensen thought he should slip away and hide in the old root cellar until Jared left. Jared
chose that moment to look up and fix his eyes on Jensen. Jared’s the type of person who whatever
mood he’s in, it not only affects him, but transfers to everyone around him. Which is amazing when
he’s in a good mood, when he’s not, it can be like a thick, damp blanket being thrown over your
face. He has this presence that can overwhelm when he’s zoned in on you, it’s like being pulled into
the eye of the storm.

Now, his eyes roamed over Jensen like he was cataloging every single thing about him, Jensen had a
marching band in his chest and a tornado in his ears. Jared pulled off his brown leather gloves and
threw them on the anvil before stalking over. His mouth set in a tight line as his fingers traced over
the fading black eye, the shadow of a bruise on his jaw. Jensen stood rooted to the spot as Jared's
thumb traced the almost closed split in his lower lip.

Jared’s other hand was hot against the small of his back as he began to walk, Jensen's legs moving
backwards until Jared had him inside the stable backed up against the first available surface. Jensen's
stomach clenched as Jared's hands traveled under the hem of the henley he was wearing, one hand
bunching it up as the other slid over his exposed skin, tracing the bruises around his ribcage, down to
his hipbones.
Jensen could feel his breath passing through his lips in quick, shallow bursts of air. He should try to be causal, ask how Jared’s been. Not stand there like an idiot while a guy he hasn’t seen for five years manhandles him. But he’s too raw. Too exhausted for any semblance of resistance against Jared’s presence. He has a hard time resisting Jared the best of days. Now, it’s impossible. It doesn’t matter that he hasn’t laid eyes on him for five years. That he’s got a bucket full of life experience filled to the brim since they last met, he’s a father now. But it’s Jared.

Hands lifting from his body, Jared smoothed his henley back in place before lifting one hand to his face, letting a thumb stroke across his discolored cheekbone. His lips twisting into a sneer.

“Good choice.”

Jensen felt annihilated.

He waited for the anger to come, for venomous words to shoot from his lips slicing into Jared like the snap of a whip. But he was rooted to the spot, eyes stinging as he fought to keep some semblance of control over himself and failing, because he’d been obliterated. From anyone else the words would have meant nothing, he would have swatted them away like some annoying insect buzzing in front of his face. But, it’s Jared. Jensen turned his gaze high up to the ceiling, fighting to keep the moisture in his eyes from forming into real tears.

He failed at that as well.

He didn’t see the change, eyes still on the ceiling and clouded by tears. But he felt it, in the hand on his face, heard it in the short release of breath and the remorse in the words as Jared said,

“Oh my god. Jensen, I’m sorry. Shit, I’m sorry. I’m such an asshole.” He felt another warm palm grabbing the other side of his face, hands angling his face down, forcing him to meet Jared’s guilt filled expression.

“I promised myself I wouldn’t do this. That, when I saw you I’d not be the dick I was last time we met. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Jared’s thumbs moved to stroke away the tears running down Jensen face. Five minutes in the same place as this man and Jensen's emotions were going rampant, and he’s not that guy. He has no need to be a manly man that swallows his emotions and beats his chest. But he’s not overly emotional either. Jared is the only person who could ever get him this unbalanced.

Jensen exhaled a shaky breath and moved his head away from Jared's hands, leaning his forehead in hollow of Jared’s collarbone. Jared wound his arms around his shoulders, chin resting against the top of his head.

“I’m sorry.”

The fabric of Jared’s tank-top felt coarse against his lips as he spoke, “You always did need to have the last word, even if it’s been five damn years.”

“Yeah, I know. Not one of my better qualities”

Jensen drew a shaky breath, feeling his ribs complain at the deep inhale.

“God, you dick.”

“Yeah.” The guilt was still there and now it was mixed with a note of disappointment, like Jared had failed some important task. “So far, my plan of being mature and proving massive personal growth
isn’t going too well.”

Jared smelled like fire, sweat, fresh air, hot steel and horses. The kind of scent that men’s colognes have often advertised as evoking with cowboy’s on the bottle, none coming even close.

“When did you start to shoe horses anyway?”

Jared moved, turning them around, so he was the one leaning against the empty stall door, Jensen still wrapped up inside his arms, cheek leaning against his shoulder.

“When you left with Richard. I had a massive, twenty-something crisis and…”

Jensen lifted his head and looked right at Jared, he knew him too well to expect a nice little “I saw the light” story. Jensen could not contain the apprehensive, accusation in his voice.

“What did you do?”

One hand lifting for a second to scratch at the back of his head, Jared’s eyes shifted and wouldn’t look down and meet Jensens.

“I took a dysfunctional road trip. Ended up driving piss drunk in the sticks of Oklahoma, crashing and parking my car half way through a barn wall.”

Jensen closed his eyes, sounding out a long exhale to try to calm himself as mental pictures of Jared in a wreck of a car flashed before his eyes.

“Jared, Jesus!”

“I know, I don’t need a lecture. Colt and Lance both tore me a new one. So did Jeff, Jim, Alona and Omundson. Even Chris and Kim called to yelled at me. Anyway, the old man who owned the barn was this super religious, do right by Jesus or else kind of guy. Lance and Colt came down and talked to him, asking if he’d consider dropping the charges if I worked off what I owed him. He agreed on the condition that Colt put up four of his horses as collateral that he could take if I left before my debt was paid. I was in bad shape but the thought of disappointing Colt even more, I couldn’t do that. You know how important he is to me.”

“I know.”

“Anyway, he worked me like crazy. I mean, sunrise to sundown, Monday to Saturday. Because if God only needed one day of rest, so did we. He worked as a farrier, he was the real deal. He had apprentices there all the time and people came to him from all over, like out of state. About three months in they had this two-year-old, Appaloosa mare come in. No one, not his best apprentices, not even he could get her to stand still. She kept pulling away her hoof and everyone was like, ‘What is wrong with this horse?’ I was looking on thinking, I’ve seen this before. You remember Squaw?”

Jensen brow furrowed and then he smiled. “Oh.”

Jared nodded and smiled before continuing his story.

“Yeah. I remembered when she’d only just come to The Phoenix and John was trying to shoe her and she would freak out as soon as he touched her hooves. Lance was so mad because he’d been tricked by the guy selling her telling him she was used to being shoed. You were what, ten?”

“Eleven.”
“Eleven. You were standing there looking at her and then you walked up to Lance and said that they shouldn’t hold her by the leg but further down on the hoof. They all blew you off telling you to go someplace else. So they all stood there talking, trying to figure out what to do. I was standing to the side, and I saw you walk up to her. You hadn’t started to grow yet, so you were tiny and she was big and cranky. Then you stroked her on the muzzle, said something I didn’t hear. Then you walked behind her, lifted her hoof, and called for the farrier.”

Jared shook his head a little, smiling at the memory.

“Everyone was standing there with their jaw on the ground wondering what the hell was happening and you just stood there holding her by the hoof and the horse didn’t care. So John hot shoed all four hoofs with you holding her, and she didn’t flinch once. There were seven grown men standing there, all horse people and none could figure out how you did it. When the shoes were on, Colt was like, ‘How the hell did you do that, Boy?’ And, I’ll never forget it, Jensen. You looked at him, dead serious and you were like, ’Daddy, she’s ticklish.’”

Jared let out a breathy laugh and Jensen felt a large hand come to rest on the back of his neck.

“No one ever questioned your judgment on a horse after that. So, anyway. I saw them struggling with this mare and remembered Squaw, so I pointed out that maybe her legs were sensitive and told them to hold her by the hoof instead. By then no one wanted to try because she was kicking out, so the old man told me that if I thought I knew anything about horses, I could come over and hold her. So I did, and I was right. After that he kept me around when he worked. I don’t even know how it happened, it was never talked about or anything, but I drifted into the role of being his apprentice. One day he told me I should get certified as a farrier with the American Farriers Association. I took the test and passed.”

Jensen looked at Jared’s calm face and felt a stillness in his body he’d never experienced before. The Jared he knew was always moving, even if it was only a leg jumping or fingers drumming on a table, Jared never used to be completely still. Now, he was.

“You really like it, don’t you?”

Jared nodded. “Yeah. I’ve been certified for four years now and I’ve gone back and gotten higher level certifications. I’m good at this, you know?”

“How long did you end up staying in Oklahoma?”

Jared’s hand was hot on the bare skin on his neck and his fingers moved in a small pattern. Jensen thought it was unconscious, his hands remembering an intimacy that the reasoning side of them had tried to erase.

“He said I could go when I got my certification but I stayed until he passed. I still had things to work through and there wasn’t a thing that man didn’t know about horses and their hooves. I learned so much. I was there almost three years. Then I traveled around, I’d worked up a decent reputation while working in Oklahoma so I got good work. But I got tired of living in my car traveling from one place to the other. I came home for a visit, Lance told me John had retired and said it was about time I came home. So I did.”

Jared said it in a casual tone but his gaze was intense as Jensen moistened his lips to give himself a seconds pause before he said,

“So, you live here full time again?”
Jared’s hand came to rest on the front of Jensen’s shoulders, gently pushing him away, not a long way but enough so they had a slight distance between them.

“Yes. Look, no one expected you to come back. Not now anyway, with the baby and everything. If there’s a problem we need to figure it out now. I mean, I can go back to full time ferrying and not be here all the time.”

There was a split second when Jensen wanted to say, “yes, you go do that” predicting a life with much less drama. But again, it was Jared. And not making any plans or imagining anything, it was still Jared and Jensen could never ask him to leave. Not even when he chose Richard did he ask him to leave. He only told him to stay out of sight when Jensen came to visit. Jared was as much a part as The Phoenix Ranch as anyone else here.

“No, you don’t have to do that. This is your home, you belong here.”

Jared’s voice was calm but serious as he said, “Yeah, I do. I don’t want to leave, but you’re going through some really heavy shit and if me being here makes it worse, I should go. For a while at least until you get your life together again. I don’t want to complicate it even more.”

Jensen inhaled and then exhaled, letting the air flow out of his lungs as he made a choice.

“I’m sure it’ll be ok. If we can remember that we’re actually adults and act like it, instead of pubescent fifteen-year-olds we should be fine.”

Jared gave a small nod and then his face broke into a mock shocked expression, one hand pressed to his chest as he said, “What, no drama? How are two self-respecting gay cowboys like us, ever going to face ourselves in the mirror with no drama?”

Jensen couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re getting your gay clichés mixed up. It’s the innocent, beautiful boy from small town America who falls in love with the financially independent but emotionally damaged older man, that does the drama. Gay cowboys are all about suffering in silence, we can’t come out. Thus angst.”

Jared let out a suffering breath, molding his face into a ridiculous interpretation of stoic suffering. He grasped Jensen's face looking deep into his eyes and in a gravelly voice rasped out, “Jensen, you beautiful man, we can’t. We’re gay cowboys and we have to angst. But first, let’s have sex, so we can angst even more.”

Jensen couldn't contain his amusement. Jared had the ability to lure out this deep laughter coming all the way from his core, making it’s way out in a light toned, staccato rhythm.

“You’re so ridiculous.”

“Hey!” Jared put up on hand and placed the other on his hip, taking on an insulted expression he said, “I’m a gay cowboy in chaps. I demand to be taken seriously in all my gay cowboy angst.”

It was so easy, Jensen fell into the snarky banter they’d always had with each other like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Please. What self-respecting gay cowboy wears jeans underneath his chaps? You're ruining decades worth of gay cowboy porn.”

It was Jared’s turn to laugh, he pulled Jensen close again, leaning his face down into the top of his head, chest jumping with laughter. It turned quiet when their laughs died out. Jensen could feel
Jared’s hand coming back to rest, hot and heavy at the back of his neck.

“So, I’ll stay then?”

Jensen's answer was quiet, breathy, almost a whisper, “Yeah.”

Not making plans or imagining anything? Yeah, right.
By week three Jensen has had enough.

“Alona, I swear if you don’t let me out of this bed, I will lose my mind.”

“Jensen, I’m not sure about this, you’re still banged up.”

Now, Alona Omundson-Beaver is tough and people follow her instructions to the letter. But if he has to, Jensen can butt heads with the best of them, and he’s had thirty years of practice for pigheaded discussions with his cousin.

“Alona! I’m done with this. I want to go outside, I want to ride. I want to hold my damn daughter, I’m moving out of this room. Today.”

Alona stood facing him her hands placed on her hips, her chin held high.

“Jensen, as your doctor, I’m not thrilled with the idea of you riding.”

Jensen’s body language was as confrontational as hers, arms crossed over his chest, mouth set in a determined line, eyes not leaving hers. “Well, look at it this way. If I fall and bust my ribs all over again, you’ll have an excuse to keep coming over several times a week and drop by Chris’s kitchen for a few hours every time.”

There was a slight hint of color on Alona's otherwise pale, white cheeks. “Shut-up, Jensen. I don’t need an excuse to come here. It has nothing to do with Chris.”

He knew it was rude to laugh in someone's face but Jensen couldn't keep the disbeliefing, amused laughter from breaking free. “Alona, really?”
The slight hint of color turned into a full fledged blush. "Shut-up!"

He knew it was stupid, but he couldn’t help himself. "Alona, is that an appropriate way for a doctor to speak to her patient?"

Her eyes narrowed in warning. "Jensen, get the hell out of here or I swear I’ll make sure you stay bedridden for another three weeks."

Jensen took it as permission to do as he pleased.

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As he walked up the wooden stairs and came onto the second floor, Jensen made his way across the hallway over to the door leading to his old room. When he opened the door it looked like it had for the past ten years. There was a new coat of paint on the walls, an unassuming neutral color, but the rest was as Jensen had left it. His bed covered in the quilt in earthy greens and browns Grandma May had made for him. The small, well used western saddle, Jensen's first, that Colt mounted on the wall above the headboard as a display, when he outgrew it.

A large, round braided rug on the wood floor, and the heavy bookcase with all the knickknacks and memories Jensen had collected through his early years. His old toy ranch set in some kind of dated plastic that was no doubt illegal to use in toy’s nowadays. His first boots. Chris’s old raffia cowboy hat that Jensen took over when Chris could afford to buy a new one. Picture frames with him and various family and friends. Pictures of him and Jared.

Jensen felt an overwhelming sense of relief. He’d not lived in this room for years, the entire top floor was refurbished and still they put his old room back the way he left it. They’d been waiting for him. Jensen sat down on the bed, the realization hitting him hard. Colt choose that moment to turn up in the doorway, Bella in his arms.

"I heard you butted heads with your cousin."

Jensen nodded. "Yeah. Thank you."

Colt looked at him a question in his face. "What for?"

"For keeping my room. For putting it back together the way it was."

Colt looked surprised and his tone reflected it as he asked, "Why wouldn’t we?"

Jensen looked down at his hands. "I left, for a long time. You had no way of knowing if I was ever coming back. I mean if this thing with Richard hadn’t happened…"

"You would still have come home." His words were so certain. Jensen looked at Colt and his own words held none of that certainty when he said, "You didn’t know that."

Colt switched his grip on the baby. "Yes I did. Richard had nothing to do with this. It was only a matter of time before you felt ready. Jensen…"

Colt walked over, sitting down on the bed beside him, the little girl in his arms squirmed, small arms reaching out to Jensen who leaned over and took her, snuggling her close as Colt continued talking,

"Did you know, that when my Grandma Josephine first came and took over, Jameson didn’t come with her?"
Jensen shook his head, surprised. Jensen was six when Jameson died and seven when Josephine left them. They lived on the ranch to the end but Jensen only has fleeting memories of big bushy eyebrows over warm brown eyes. And small, soft, wrinkled hands running through his hair while an airy voice whispered stories of cattle drives through snowy mountain passes and wild, untamed Mustangs running over green plains. But through all his life, all Jensen ever heard was that they both came and took over the ranch.

Colts gaze turned away from him, eyes resting on something far in the distance outside the window. “You know, I’ve never been able to understand how Montana and Amos survived losing both their boys. It’s unimaginable. If anything ever happened to you, I’d jump in the river.”

Jensen could feel his grip on the infant tightening and he surprised himself with the hard, decisiveness in his tone as he answered, “You can’t. I’d count on you to be here for Bella.”

Father and sons eyes met for a few seconds, before the older of them, closed his eye and nodded.

“Anyway,” Colt cleared his throat. “Both Tim and Colt-”

Jensen raised an eyebrow and said, “I never knew their names.”

Colts face was somber and filled with regret as he looked at him.

“Their deaths were a major trauma in the family, Jensen. Even after Montana and Amos passed, it was hard for Grandma Josephine to talk about them. But yeah, Tim was the oldest, Amos named him after the man who raised him and your Grandpa named me after the younger brother. Tim died already in forty-two, but everyone thought Colt was coming home, and then he didn’t. Josephine was living in Denver with Jameson and as soon as they received the death notice, she started to pack. It wasn’t easy on Jameson. He grew-up in Denver, had a high-ranking job at a local bank, made a lot of money. They had a good life in Denver.”

Colt ran his hand through his hair. “Your Grandpa heard them have a big argument and Jameson screamed that he wasn’t leaving everything they had in Denver to move to some ranch. The way your grandpa tells it, Grandma Josephine looked at him and said it was his choice, but she and the children were going to the ranch and there was left over roast in the fridge if he got hungry.”

“She didn’t.” Jensen could keep the laughter out of his voice.

Colts face mirrored Jensen's amusement as he continued, “She was old when you came along Jensen. But when she was in her prime, no one messed with your great grandma.”

“How long did it take before Jameson came up here?”

“The way your grandpa tells it, two days.”

This time Jensen laughed out loud. “Two days?”

“Yeah.” Colt ran a finger over the chubby cheeks of the tiny girl in Jensen's arms. “That’s why I knew you were coming home. This ranch isn’t just a house or the place we grew-up. Bess came up here, and she carved out this place for us in the world, to make something better for herself, her son and all of us who came after her. This ranch is our lifeblood, our oxygen, our soul. It’s who we are Jensen and any person who claims to love us, understands that. That’s why I knew sooner or later your relationship with Richard would come to a point, where he either came with you or you’d come home alone. I’m not gonna pretend I’m disappointed he’s not here, but I wish it could have ended in a better way. Jensen, it was never a matter of if, only when you choose this ranch over him.”
Jensen looked at the photos in his bookcase again, eyes landing on his favorite depicting an old woman sitting on a chair. Lance, in his prime standing behind her to the left, Colt still young, to her right and Jensen, just a few months old on her lap. Four generations under one roof, bound by love and held together by mountains and land that had shaped them all. Colt was right. Jensen had been on his way home for a long time now.

“We should do a new one.”

Colt looked over and asked, “A new what?”

Jensen nodded towards the picture he’d been looking at. “We should do one with Bella, you, me and Grandpa.”

Colt nodded and then a thought seemed to strike him as his expression changed. “Yeah, only problem is, who’ll tell your grandpa to sit in the chair?”

Jensen looked at Colt, a laugh exploding from his lips, picturing one of them trying to tell the spirited Lance to behave as the old man he was.

“Maybe we can change the layout.”

Colt nodded and said, “I think it would be a wise decision on our part.”

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The knock on his window came as he was about to drift off to sleep for the night. At first, Jensen ignored the sound thinking a branch was hitting the window. Then the knock came again and Jensen remembered that there were no trees close to it. There was however, a sturdy fence around the roof covered porch and if you climbed up on it, you could, if you were tall enough, get a grip on the slanted roof making it possible to hoist your way up and walk right up to his bedroom window. Jensen knew this, because Jared had done it so many times during their teen and adolescent years, the small knock on his bedroom window would wake him no matter how sound asleep he was. At first, Jared had tried sneaking up the stairs but every time his feet stepped onto the upper floor, a soft but firm voice sounded from Colt’s room.

“No, Jared.”

So instead, Jared had learned to climb out of his window, and up on the porch roof instead. But that was thirteen years ago. There’s no way that at thirty-one, Jared has climbed up on the roof and was knocking on his bedroom window. When a knock sounded a third time, Jensen took a deep breath, got out from under the warm covers and walked over to the window, keeping his eyes on the dark night outside of it. Getting close, Jensen could see the outline of a silhouette take shape. Jensen could see Jared’s face looking at him, the cocky smile that either made him furious or horny, standing out in the darkness.

Jensen should flip him off and go back to bed. He should not be standing there heart pounding, smiling like a lovestruck teenager. But he knew he’d lost the battle before it even started, because it was Jared. So instead, he walked over and opened the window.

“Have you lost your damn mind, are you trying to fall and break your neck?”

Jared smiled even wider. “Honey, are you worried about me?”

“Shut-up or I’ll close the window.”
Jared laughed. “Babe, you suck at spontaneous romance. Get out of the way so I can climb inside.”

Jensen stepped back and watched Jared fold his big body to fit through his window, he noticed it took a lot more folding and squeezing to get through then it used to.

When he came into the room, unfolding into his full height, Jensen realized he was standing in the middle of his bedroom, wearing only a pair of threadbare pajama bottoms, hanging low on his hips. He wrapped his arms around himself to feel less exposed.

Graphic images of being sixteen flashed through his mind. That ordinary Wednesday in February, all the adults away for the night at something Jensen can’t remember. The house empty except the two of them. Jared’s eyes intense as his fingers rested on the button on Jensen jeans, his ears ringing. His heart, and other things, pounding with the rush of blood. He closed his eyes for a moment, lower lip caught between his teeth, he could feel Jared’s breath on the side of his neck, the hands on his fly an unspoken question, waiting. His hands sweating, mouth sticky, lips dry as they parted.

“Yeah ok. Yeah.”

Jensen remembers feeling like he would faint as that metal button popped out of it’s hole. Jared’s hands, already huge as they inched their way down the back of the denim fabric and below the stretchy lining of his boxers. Hands going further and further down, inching both items of clothing Jensen had left down his legs. Jared’s knees bending, sinking down to the floor with them, his mouth had been so hot.

Later, Jared's skin had felt so warm under his fingers, his body so heavy now when he was allowing himself to sink down on top of Jensen. The nerves, Jared's hands getting slippery from too much lube and the mortified silence as the bottle slipped out of his hands, down on the floor. Jensen biting his lips but couldn't contain the laughter, Jared's look of relief as it slipped past his lips, joining in the laughter, because it was them, and what they were doing was so awesome and amazing and, it was them.

Then, when Jared was at last inside of him, upper body held up on straight arms, young, sinewy muscles straining, his eyes looking down on Jensen, wide and blinking in astonishment. Jensen's thighs, strong and muscled from a lifetime astride a horse, spread wide, breath coming in harsh, labored bursts of air as he tried to get used to this new, uncomfortable, intense, painful, amazing feeling.

Jared’s voice so full of wonder, “Jensen…”

Jensen's own, breaking, “Yeah…”

In the dark room, legs tangled together, Jared’s voice had been so soft, his arms so tight around him.

“Where are you?”

Jensen startled back to the present at the sound of Jared’s voice. He could feel heat spreading under his skin, hinting that color was rising on his cheeks. Jared's eye grew brighter and brighter and the moment Jared’s smile spread so wide his teeth were showing, Jensen knew Jared had figured out the precise location his mind had been. Jared reached out, his hand coming to rest hot and heavy at the back of Jensen's neck, pulling them close. His eyes morphed back to that, intense, smoldering hotness that always made Jensen feel like he was melting from the inside.

“Wanna make-out?”

Jensen had laughter bubbling in his chest, a snarky reply on his tongue and a million sound, logical,
mature reasons he should throw Jared out on his ass whirling through his mind. He ignored them all.

“Yeah.”

Jared’s smile was blinding, a low, breathy laugh passing his lips. Jensen wore a matching smile as Jared’s hot hand pulled him those last few inches until he could bend down, smiles still on their lips as they met. It felt like coming home. Like Jensen had spent the past ten years searching for the perfect fit even though he already knew he had gotten it right the first time.

No one’s ever kissed him the way Jared does. It’s heat, desire, darkness, possession, adoration, joy, bubbling laughter and sparkling rainbows, all mixed up into one amazing feeling. Jensen’s arms came up, hands resting on wide shoulders, Jared’s still holding onto the back of his neck as the other got comfortable at the small of his back, pulling him even closer.

In his own delusional mind, where Jensen believed himself having matured and evolved since the last time he and Jared were in this situation, he’d imagined a short, casual make-out session. A kind of “hello, nice to see you again” sort of affair and then they’d say good night and have a good, long, adult conversation about things in the morning. That plan relied on Jensen to have certain abilities like self-control and a brain capable of thinking. That plan lasted until the moment both of Jared’s hands traveled down, got a good grip on each rounded globe of Jensen’s ass and pulled him flush against his straining hardness and Jensen’s brain retired for the night. In a second Jensen's hands were dragging Jared’s shirt out of his jeans, pulling at it in frustration to get it off. He could feel Jared's lips trembling against his own as he laughed into the kiss,

“Something I can help you with?”

Jensen let out a frustrated sigh as he meet Jared’s amused stare and his voice was impatient and snappy as he panted out,

“Jared, shut the fuck up and do me.”

It’s amazing how fast a man can undress when he’s motivated. Soon, Jared was pushing Jensen towards his bed, turning at the last moment so he ended up on his back, underneath him. With eyes glittering in the darkness, he licked his lips.

“Saddle up, darlin’.”

Jensen rolled his eyes. “That was awful.”

Jared’s answering grin was cheeky and his voice amused when he answered, “Babe, shut the fuck up and ride me.”

Jensen’s eyes slipped shut as he sank down on Jared. Teeth biting down hard on his plump lower lip, one hand coming up to grip his own hair as he started an easy, languid rhythm. At the exquisite push and pull, Jensen could feel his eyes cross behind his closed lids. As the quiet moan slipped past his lips, he’d never been so grateful even the inner walls of this house were thick stone and dense, sound swallowing logs.

His hands coming down, Jensen let them glide over Jared’s taught upper body exploring every unfamiliar bump and groove formed from new, pronounced muscles that hadn't been there in the past. Hands molding to, but not quite reaching around bulging biceps, sliding up sinewy forearms, stretching them out above Jared’s head until they came to rest holding on tight to one wrist each for leverage, as Jensen sped up his movements.

Jared’s arms flexed under his grip making a move to pull free, but Jensen tightened his grip. When he
spoke, Jared’s voice held a warning edge to it,

“Jensen.”

Jensen let out a breathy moan, challenging smile on his lips as he looked down.

“Sorry, did you want something?”

Jared’s answering grin was feral. “Boy, you’re lucky your ribs are still sore.”

Jensen leaned down, stealing a kiss, Jared’s teeth snapping after him as he pulled free.

“You wait. When you’re all better, I’m gonna nail you so hard your throat will be raw for a week from your screams.”

Jensen’s stomach clenched, breath hitching at Jared’s words.

“Promise?”

Jared’s head dropped hard on the mattress, eyes closing as a long groan left his mouth before he said,

“Fuck, I missed you.”

The words made him increase his pace once more. Body feeling like it was vibrating, he let his hands slide from Jared's wrists until their palms were facing each other, their fingers lacing as Jensen felt his toes curl.

“Jared.”

Jared’s answering words sounded wrecked, “Yeah, yeah, go on.”

Jensen did, Jared following only a few moments later.

As the lay together, one arm folded behind his head the other wound tight around Jensen, Jared’s heart finally began to slow down under Jensen's hand. His eyes were drooping but opened again as Jared’s quiet voice sounded in the room.

“Jensen, please don’t leave again. Promise you won’t go.”

Jensen felt his breath hitch, stomach twisting into a knot. The word “me” unsaid, still he heard it the way Jared had meant it, “don’t leave me again”. Jensen Ackles was three weeks out of a six year relationship that ended in the most traumatic way possible. He and Jared had only been talking again for a few days, after five years of complete silence between them. It had been ten years since they’d been in any kind of relationship and they’d both grown-up and experienced a lot that had changed them both and still, when he spoke, Jensen knew he meant it.

“I promise.”

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Jensen startled awake to the sound of a hard rasp on the door.

“Morning, Jensen. I’ve got Bella.”

Jensen groaned and looked at Jared’s disheveled appearance, giving him a groggy smile.
“All right, Dad. Be right down.”

There were a few beats of silence behind the door and then Colts voice came through it again.

“Good morning, Jared.”

Jensen dropped his head back on the pillow, looking at Jared and saying in a low voice,

“How does he always know?”

Jared shook his head and called out,

“Morning, Colt.”

There was a sound of an amused laughter on the other side of the door.

“Breakfast in ten, Boys.”

When they walked down the stairs and into the dining room, seven sets of eyes following them, Jensen could hear several restrained curses. Jim even slammed his open palm on the table, making porcelain and glass rattle.

“God dammit, Boys. You couldn’t have keep your hands off each other for one more night?”

Looking around the room, brain still on standby, Jensen blinked and replied with an eloquent, 

“Huh?”

Colt’s smile was wide as he held out his hand, lying it palm up in the middle of the table. “Told you all, first night.”

The were grumpy sounds all around as the people around the table reached into their pockets, everyone coming up with a five dollar bill and placing it in Colt’s hand.

Jensen looked at the stack of bills. “Did you all take a bet on whether Jared and I would get together?”

Lance, Bella in his arms, looked at them as he changed grip on the bottle he was feeding her from. “No, any idiot could figure that out. We took a bet on how long it would take for Jared to climb up to your bedroom when you moved back into your old room.”

Colt folded the bills and put them in his front pocket. As Jensen stood there, mouth gaping he said, “I told them it would happen the first night.”

Jensen made a grumpy sound throwing himself down into a chair, Jared sitting down next to him. Jensen pulled an empty cup towards himself and said, 

“You’re all terrible people.”

No one took any notice, everyone already moving on to help themselves to Chris's plentiful breakfast.

Colt, fork hanging in the air, a piece of pancake speared on it, looked over at Jared who seemed untroubled and relaxed as he filled a part of his plate with a mountain of scrambled eggs.

“Jared, use the stairs from now on would you, you’ve grown into a goddamn giant, that roof won’t
hold if you keep walking over it.”

Jared, looking up from his plate, gave a mock salute, fork still in his hand. “Yes, Sir.”

Colt rolled his eyes.

“You boys.” He said it with a sigh but even looking down into his plate Jensen could see he was smiling.
As he placed his foot in the stirrup and hoisted himself up in the saddle, Jensen felt pure, un tarnished happiness. Orion, named for his velvet black coat covered in tiny white speckles, was a twelve-year-old Appaloosa stallion.

Jensen was the one who planned the breeding, and he was there the night Bellflower gave birth to him. He’s the one who first put a saddle on his back and only a few days before he left for college, Jensen put his foot in the stirrups and sat up in that saddle for the first time. They know each other well. Jensen has had a relationship with every horse he’s ever tended, but he and Orion share the same temperament, their personalities match. There’s always been a special understanding between them.

He could feel the large body beneath him, muscles twitching in restless expectation. He’s been able to ride in San Francisco, but riding a horse belonging to someone else’s stable is not the same as riding one of your own, one you’ve reared since birth. It might appear boasting if he said the horses he rode in San Francisco can’t compare to the ones here at The Phoenix, but it’s not bragging, it’s true. Their horses are exceptional, most of them descendants and members of the top pedigree of the Appaloosa breed. But most of all, they’re well cared for, every human on the ranch has a deep love for them, and it shows.

When you live in Colorado with its impressive mountains, natural wonders are all around you as soon as you walk out your front door. Meadows in the summer, remote lakes hidden in grooves in the mountain side, standing on a hillside and looking down on a green valley with cattle feasting on the plentiful grass. But at this point in his life, Jared has yet to see anything more beautiful than Jensen Ackles on a horse.

There are riders, who through training can become skilled and comfortable in a saddle. Then there’s horse people, individuals born in the saddle that communicate, train and understand horses like few people can. Whose bond and love for the animal is stronger than most human ones. Then, there’s
people like Jensen. In a lifetime of working with horses you might, if you’re lucky, stumble on one or two of people like him.

When he climbs into a saddle, he doesn't get on a horse, he molds into it and the two of them become part of one another. In a saddle, Jensen isn’t a rider atop a horse, he becomes something else. Jared’s yet to see Jensen meet a horse that didn't love him. He’s met plenty of people able to read a horse body language, understanding what a tiny twitch of it’s ears or a flick of their tail means. Jensen doesn’t read horses, he feels them. Sees right into them and understands their personalities. Jared can’t count the number of times he’s walked into the stable and found Jensen standing in front of a horse, his hands cupped on each side of it’s face, their eyes locked on each other like they were deep in some fascinating conversation only they can understand.

Observing Jensen riding out through the large double doors, Orion in a slow carefree walk, Jared put one foot up and rested it against the lowest log in the paddock fence, leaning his arms against the top one. Speeding up into a light trot, Jared shook his head at the effortless movements of horse and rider. The way Orion’s hooves seemed to dance across the soft layer of sand and dirt underneath them. His body appearing to glide through the air like Jensen weighed nothing. Jared wasn’t surprised as he felt another body come up and stand beside him, body molding into a mimic of his stance.

There was a time when Jared hated Chris with every single molecule in his body. Hated his powerful blue eyes, his soft twang and the effortless way he and Jensen would banter. He hated him. Because he was always there when Jared fucked up, always the one Jensen turned to. Every time Jared shattered his heart Chris was there, waiting in the shadows to pick up the pieces. Most of all though, Jared hated Chris because Jensen loved him so much. No matter how irrational or unrealistic, Jared has always harbored a fear that one day, Chris would wake-up and realize Jensen was the man of his dreams.

It was somewhere around the eight year mark of Jensen move to San Francisco when his tense relationship with Chris resulted in the violent confrontation they had headed towards for years. He had come home from Oklahoma only the day before and wanting to catch-up, walked into the local bar. Chris was there, for an hour or two they had ignored each other while they both had too much to drink.

On the way back from a bathroom break they had walked right into each other. Looking back, Jared can’t be sure it was intentional on either part, but it was like pulling the safety pin out of a hand grenade. Jared doesn't remember the details, they were both drunk. But Chris yelled about how Jared was an asshole and if he hadn’t been such a dick Jensen wouldn’t have left. Jared had yelled back that Jensen leaving was all on them for putting too much responsibility on him. When they ran out of words, fists took their place. Jared is a lot bigger than Chris, but that night he got a lesson in humility as he gave just as good as he got. Chris is not a big guy but by god, the man can fight.

At some point when they stood facing one another, bloodied and exhausted and trying to catch their breaths for yet another round, the doors had opened and Colt walked in. He had stood in the now empty bar, people opting to get out of the way, and surveyed the damage done to the room. He walked in, picking up a chair toppled over on the floor and sat down on it in front of a table, pointing to two more chairs, motioning for the two of them to pick them up and sit down.

Grunting and wincing they’d obeyed without objection. Despite all their perceived differences and for different reasons, they both had a deep and unquestionable respect for the man sitting in front of them. Colt leaned back in his chair, the two of them squirming as he observed them.

“You two have to stop this.” His voice had been steady, soft, not a hint of resentment or reproach,
only a calm matter-of-fact tone that left no room for talking back.

“I love you both, you're family. Chris, you’re my little brother. You mean the world to me and I love the way you always put this family first, how you always look out for Jensen. Jared, you might not be mine by blood but I raised you, Boy.”

In Jared’s opinion blood is meaningless. Whatever good qualities he had, they resulted from Colt’s firm, but loving guidance, he flinched when Colts voice turned berating as he said,

“But for too long, I’ve had to watch Jensen try to balance his love for the two of you. Chris, I know you love him, I know you feel protective but you have to let Jensen and Jared figure out their relationship on their own. Whatever that relationship is or becomes, Jared will always be family, you know that. He’s made some stupid choices but he was a kid, Chris. They both were.”

Jared had felt heat rising up his neck as Colt had turned his eyes on him.

“You, Boy have to accept that Jensen has enough love in him for all of us. You don’t have to be jealous of Chris. No one, not Jensen, not me, not Lance or anyone else at the ranch are anything like your parents. Whatever your relationship status with Jensen, you are loved by this family, that will never change.”

Jared remembers grumbling, wiping away the blood that ran from his busted nose. “Jensen has no love left for me, Colt. He’s in San Francisco, with Richard. Whatever he sees in him.”

It was at that moment, when Jared said Richard's name and Chris made a disgruntled gagging noise, that their eyes had met and Jared's icy relationship with Chris Ackles thawed or at least began to.

Colt had looked at them like they were not quite right in the head before he said, “How is it possible, that after being close to Jensen for all these years, you still don’t understand him? He isn’t like us. You always go on and on about how good he is with horses, how he sees inside of them and can coax out the best in the most hopeless case. Do you two idiots not understand that's what he does with people too? When he meets someone, he sees right into that person and picks out the best part and loves that. We all think Richards isn’t good enough. I doubt my opinion about him will ever change and neither will yours. But we don’t understand what Jensen see in him because we don’t see people the way he does. Anyway, it doesn't matter, he’s is on his way home.”

The had both opened their mouths to protest but Colt held up one hand, stopping any comments before they could express them and said,

“Jensen had to figure out what he wanted from life, without all of us around him. He’s done that, he wants to live on this ranch. The only reason he’s still in San Francisco, is because Richard does not want to live here. One day soon, Richard will force him to choose and when he does, Jensen will come home.”

Chris had run a hand, knuckles split and bloodied through his hair as Colt took a breath and then continued.

“While we wait, you need to get over your issues with each other. The two of you weren't always at each other's throat. Chris, you used to be as protective of Jared as you were of Jensen. Jared, you used to follow Chris around like a lost puppy, you worshipped him as much a Jensen did. Whatever happens, you two are family, it’s about time you act like it again.”

Colt had left it that, there was no need to elaborate. He stood up. Looking over at the bartender he said,
“I apologize for these two dimwits. I’ll leave them here to clean up the mess they caused, keep them here for as long as it takes to repair the damage.”

He looked over the two of them again. “This place is a mess, clean it up and pay Tom for any permanent damage you’ve done.”

It was during those hours, body aching, hangover kicking in and a shared feeling of general shittiness that made them talk as they cleaned the bar.

“You’re an idiot, Jared.”

“Honey, I knew there was a reason I felt such a connection to you.”

Their conversation started out a little rough.

“No one likes a queer wannabe, Chris. Go creep on your vaginas and lay off Jensen.”

“Thank your lucky star I’m not gay, son. You’d be long gone if I was.”

That one had stung and added another thirty dollars to Jared’s tab as a barstool shattered against the wall a little to the left of Chris. It took the bartender holding up his phone, a silent threat of him calling Colt again, to keep them from starting the fight all over again. For a while they stayed out of each other's way both thinking it best not to talk, but then Chris couldn’t keep it all in and said,

“I don’t know what he sees in you. He’s too gorgeous for you.”

“You’ve never seen me naked, I’ve got huge things going for me.”

“Jesus, you dickhead. That’s one metal picture I didn’t need.”

“There’s no need to feel like that, Chris. I promise, my dickhead is lovely.”

“Really? Well then step over here, son and let me get a good look at it.”

Considering that Chris was holding the neck of a broken bottle, the jagged, broken off end looking very sharp, Jared opted not to take him up on his offer. But their insults kept bouncing off the walls as Jared started them again by saying,

“Don’t you think you should try to make friends your own age, this desperate attempt to hold onto your twenties, sorry, thirties, is pathetic.”

“Well, with you having the mental capacity of a five-year-old, I thought Jensen could a use real grown-up friend.”

“You have an eleven year head start on me in the adult department. Don’t you worry, I’m catching up.”

“He deserves better than you.”

“I know, but can you think of one person who’d deserve him?”

Chris hadn’t answered and for twenty minutes they had keep to opposite sides of the room in sullen silence.

“Do you even have a plan?” Chris slammed the seat of a chair down on the tabletop he was placing it on to get it off the section of floor he was sweeping. “Say Colt is right and Jensen comes home
without Richard, are you planning on a repeat performance of your last meeting in the stables, that was a great one, Jared.”

Jared threw a dishrag at him. “Only the first part, that was great. The rest of it, not so much.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Oh lay the fuck off, Chris!” Jared slammed the mop he was holding down on the floor. “I know I wasn’t Mr. Perfect, and I did stupid things and I took him for granted, but I was a teenager. Then, when I get my shit together. The guy I’ve loved all my life, shows up with another guy, introduces him to his family, our family. An hour later he’s having sex with me and then I don’t even have time to pull up my pants before he says he’s in love with the other guy, and he doesn’t want to see me again.”

Chris shook his head. “He didn’t mean that, dumbass.”

Jared huffed and his voice held all the frustration he’d gathered inside of himself for the past three years. “He sounded pretty fucking sincere, Chris.”

Chris hands flew up in the air, the mop he’d been holding falling to the floor with a clank, as he almost shouted, “That’s because you drive him crazy. He shuts off eighty percent of his brain when you’re around.”

Jared’s voice rose to match Chris and he could feel his eyes widen and the veins in his neck pulse. “That’s not my fault!”

Chris’s eyes flashed and narrowed, his gaze turning so intense it gave them a “psychotic murderer” vibe that made most people back off when it happened. “Yes, it is!”

Jared knew him too well to be scared off and kept pushing. “Goddamnit, Chris how is Jensen's brain malfunctioning, my fault?”

“I don’t know!” Chris voice rose even higher in frustration. “It just is!”

“Fuck you, Chris.”

“Right back at you.”

They continued their work in silence again, Jared keeping his eyes glued on the worn floorboards until he couldn’t be quiet any longer.

“Think Colt’s right about Jensen coming home?”

Chris stopped mopping the floor, keeping both his hands on top of the wooden shaft, leaning over it he said,

“I don’t know. I never imagined he would want to be somewhere else other than the ranch or work in an office.”

Jared threw his hands in the air as his voice rose an octave. “That’s my point. And Richard, what is that all about?”

Chris kept his voice in check but he shook his head sighing in defeat, like Jensen's choices were too complicated to understand. “I don’t know.”

As it turned out, the only thing Jared and Chris needed to stop hating each other, was to find
someone they both hated more. Richard was a perfect match.

In the months that followed, with Jared moving back to the ranch, they settled in an unsteady truce. Helped along by Colts firm insistence that either they work together or not at all, it grew into a grudging acceptance. At some point, it turned into what some might describe as a blossoming friendship. Every Friday night like clockwork, when they were all finished with their chores, Chris would walk by the main house.

“I’m going down to the bar, are you coming, stupid or do you need to paint your fucking nails before we go?”

Where Jared always was sitting ready to go on the porch. “Darlin’ I’m already big, hot and gay. My very existence steals women from you. I wouldn't want to make it even harder for you by being edgy.”

“You’re paying for the first round, dickhead.”

“Not a problem, as long as you get your PTA tramps to pay for the twenty after that.”

Chris turned around, his long silken hair flowing like he was a walking shampoo commercial, and putting on his thickest twang he said, “Haven’t paid for a drink since nineteen-ninety-six, son.”

“You slut.”

Then came the night when Chris found and hauled Jared’s alcohol poisoned body out of the bar to his truck. Jared remembers Chris smelling like hay and chocolate chip cookies. He had buried his nose deep in the grove of Chris’s neck, swaying on unsteady feet as he did so.

Chris had grunted as he did his best to manhandle Jared’s large, unstable body forward. With a groan he said, “God, you’re heavy and stop blowing your nose on my neck you retard.”

Jared's tongue had for some mysterious reason grown four sizes and was too big for his mouth, the words tripping over it on their way out of his mouth. “You smell like cookies and you can’t say retard anymore, it’s a bad word.”

“Boy, you can't stand up or talk without slurring but you can get into a discussion about politically correct vocabulary. You’re a weird drunk.”

“What?”

“That’s my point. Jared, come on work with me, one foot in front of the other. You're too big for me to carry.”

Chris had leaned him against the truck, keeping him from falling face first into the pavement with one hand and opening the car door with the other hand.

With a laugh that was more desperate than amused and his eyes unable to focus on Chris's face, Jared slurred out, “Chris, did you hear the great news? Jensen is having a baby, with Richard. Isn’t that fucking hilarious?”

Chris had put a comforting hand on the back of his neck.

“Not really.”
Jared blinked his eyes as he tried to make the world around him focus and he thought maybe he needed to get his eyes checked because everything looked kind of hazy. Then he laughed a little to himself as he tried to imagine what the baby would look like. “Poor kid, let’s hope it inherits the donors nose, not Richards.”

Chris voice was soft as he manhandled him into the passenger seat, reaching over and bucking Jared in. “I think they’ve decided that Jensen will be the biological parent.”

Jared nodded and pointed a finger at nothing, his head unable to keep itself upright, it bobbed up and down. “They should, Jensen is beautiful. So now that prick will have Jensen and his baby that’s just wrong.”

When they came back to the ranch, Colt had stood waiting, helping Chris to get Jared out of the car.

When Jared saw him, he spread his arms out, or tried to, they were too long and slammed against the interior of Chris truck as Jared shouted, “Hey, Grandpa congratulations!”

Colt had not looked as happy as a grandfather to be should. He held Jared in a steady grip under one arm and brought his free hand up to cup the back of his head with the other.

“I’m sorry, Jared. I wanted it to be you. Chris, let’s get him upstairs we can put him in Jensen's old room.”

“Not a good idea, Colt. Help me walk him up to my place, I’ll feel better if I can keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't drown in his own vomit or some stupid shit like that.”

Jared remembered landing on something soft, Chris settling down in a deep leather chair next to him, feet propped up on the coffee table.

“Looks like you got your way, Chris. You don’t have to worry about me screwing up his life anymore.”

Chris's voice had been soft but sad. “He could have done a lot worse, Jared.”

Jared’s head lolled on the armrest of the couch and he looked over at Chris. He placed a hand over one eye as he pointed at him. “You know, I take it back. I wish you were gay, you’re kind of pretty.”

Chris sighed but there was patient and a little amusement in his words. “Go to sleep, Jared and I’m not pretty.”

Jared’s eyes slipped shut as he nodded. “Yes you are. I’m the gay one so I get to decide if a man is pretty. Now shut-up, I’m conniving a plan.”

“Conniving?” Chris laughed in disbelief. “You can’t sit up straight but you can pronounce conniving?”

Jared waved his hand in a dismissive way at what he thought was Chris general direction. “Shut-up, Chris. My great plan is this. You go gay, we hook up and when Jensen turns up with his baby and dickhead, we come out like the best fucking couple ever and show him we’re so over him.”

When he opened his eyes, Jared could see Chris head leaning against the backrest of his chair, the leather creaking as he shook his head. “You’re such a stupid drunk.”

“I’m brilliant. Stop complaining. I’ll be a great boyfriend. You can’t top but I swear I’ll be gentle the first few times.”
Jared could see Chris's eyebrows shoot up and he looked like he was about to say something rude but then his face softened and instead he said, “Tell you what. If I, by some unknown force of magic, wake-up gay one day, we’ll go with your plan.”

With his head turned upwards watching the roof spinning round and round above him, Jared tried but failed not to think about the unthinkable.

“Chris, I lost him.”

Chris voice was almost undetectable as he replied, “I think we all did.”

The months that followed were so depressing they’re not worth thinking about. Colt was right, even if it didn’t quite happen the way he said it would. Jared’s furious about what happened to Jensen, but he’s home and that is all that matters. Coming back to the present, Jared smiled a little to himself.

“We got him back.”

He heard Chris answer beside him, his voice amused but relieved as he said,

“Thank god. You're not a complete fucking asshole, but I really didn't want to have sex with you.”

Jared barked out a laugh. “Don’t worry, you’re adorable and all but you’re Plan B.”

“Son, there ain't enough letters in the alphabet to describe how many plans have to fail, for you to be an option.”

Jared’s smile grew wider and cockier. “You, me, shipwrecked forever on a deserted island.”

Chris looked him up and down and then said, “We better learn to make our own alcohol fast.” Chris went quiet for a second and then continued asking. “So, bar tonight?”

It was a casual question but the underlying meaning wasn’t. The relationship they’d rebuilt the past two years had been without Jensen there to pit them against each other. Now he was back, so the real question behind Chris words was if that mattered.

Jared kept his voice light as he answered, “Of course. You know what they say. The family who drinks together...”

“Spends Saturday hungover as shit together?”

Jared grinned. “Exactly. Jensen is paying.”

Chris laughed a breathy laugh. “Expensive whiskey night it is.”

“What are you two laughing at?”

Looking up they saw that Jensen had stopped in front of them and was looking down from atop Orion.

Chris answered, “We’re laughing about the dent we’ll make in your bank account when we go out
drinking tonight.”

“We’re going out tonight? The three of us?” Jensen’s voice was disbelieving and just a little frightened.

Jared nodded. “Yep, and you’re paying, pretty boy.”

Jensen blinked, repeating his previous words, “The three of us?”

Chris sighed. “Did all that Big City smog give you brain damage? Yes, the three of us.”

Jensen opened his mouth then closed it again, then opened it one more time as he said, “The two of you, in the same room, with alcohol?”

Looking at Chris with raised eyebrows, Jared shook his head and then with a patient tone of voice answered, “Yes, with alcohol. That’s the point of a bar, Jensen.”

“Ok…” Putting a calming hand of Orion’s neck, the large animal turning restless, Jensen looked at them both, “I’m only paying for drinks. If you wreck the bar trying to kill each other, it’s coming out of your own pockets.”

They glanced at one another as Jared put a hand to his chest taking on an insulted look.

“Like we would do that. We’re family.”

Jensen’s eyes narrowed as he observed them. “I don’t know what the hell’s happened here and I’ll not object if the you two have remembered that we are a family. But there’s a story here and I know both of you too well, to not know whatever happened, it was bloody. So don’t give me that look.”

The only answer Jensen got was two matching grins.

Jensen closed his eyes for a brief second, drew a deep breath and said, “This is not good. You two becoming best friends is so not good. It’s the damn apocalypse in cowboy boots.”

They grinned even wider. Jensen swallowed and spurred Orion into movement again, fleeing the conversation. Horse and rider took up their previous easy trot that shifted effortlessly into a graceful canter taking them in circles round the inclosure. Jared shook his head.

“Damn that boy can ride.”

Chris raised an eyebrow, “Jealous?”

Jared shook his head. “That’s pointless, Jensen is a better rider than almost anyone. You can’t compare yourself to him.”

Chris looked mischievous as he scratched a spot behind his left ear. “I meant of the horse.”

Jared’s laugh was loud, spontaneous and genuine. “Always.”
Jensen was aware it would come sooner or later. Dramatic exits are a staple in every chick-lit worthy of the title and the breakup of choice for every college romance he’d ever had. But his life is not a novel, and he’s not in college. Jensen is thirty years old and no matter how much he wished that everything that tied him to San Francisco ended when he walked out of the apartment, he knew it was wishful thinking. He lived with Richard for six years; they had joint bank accounts, insurance and all those other dull necessities that come with coexisting as two adults and owning property together. Their lives had become entwined, knotted together in a complicated array of papers and signatures. A signature is a powerful thing. There was a paper in a lawyer’s office in San Francisco that stated both he and Richard were legal parents to Bella. He’s known all along that sooner or later he would have to face reality and contact Richard to figure things out.

Even if he hasn’t said it out loud or even allowed himself to think about it too much, Jensen knows the only reason he didn’t go to the police and report Richard for assault was because he wanted leverage. Something to hold over his head when they discussed custody of Bella. It’s not something he’s proud of, but Jensen would give up every economic and material thing he’s entitled to, if he only gets full custody of Bella. He’s been gathering strength, debating how and when to deal with the issue and while doing so, life kind of took up again, he’s slipped back into ranch life with such ease.

But in mid May, about six weeks after coming back to Colorado, the “issue” was waiting on his front porch. Jensen saw something was off as soon as he came out into the open area in front of the main building and all the human inhabitants of the ranch were standing off to one side. Eyes going back and forth between a sleek black car with tinted windows and a suit clad man standing on the front porch, one shoulder leaning against one of the beams holding up the roof.

The man was middled aged, round face, hair thinning, two day stubble. He was on the on the short side, in pretty good shape although there’s a slightly more rounded shape in the middle, then the rest of his body. He could be any average, somewhat attractive, middle aged white American man, if it wasn’t for the details. The well-fitting, burgundy suit that hinted that it’s been made to order and
costs more than the average man spends on clothes in a decade. The way the sun highlighted the silver peaking out from under a cuff, it might be a generic cheap brand watch, it wasn’t and everyone could tell. Then, there was the accent. It wasn’t “upper class” but still unmistakably British.

“Hello, Jensen.”

Jensen sighed, ran a hand through his hair and braced himself, he knew he would have to deal with this, it was only a matter of time and that time apparently, was right now.

“Mark, I never thought I see you leave the security of concrete and Starbuck’s coffee.”

Mark placed a well-manicured hand on his chest and looked around as he said, “Well Toto my love, we sure as he’ll ain’t in Castro anymore.”

Jensen smiled, rolling his eyes at the reference to the famous San Francisco LGBT neighborhood.

“Why are you here, Mark?”

“You mean except enjoying the view of cowboy hotness lined up for inspection over there and can I just say, anytime one of them gets an urge to reenact Bareback Mountin, call me.”

Jensen voice was dry when he replied, “I will assume you meant Brokeback Mountain.”

Mark grinned, “No, I really didn’t.”

Jensen decided not to delve any deeper into that conversation and said, “Right, so back to what you’re doing here.”

Mark straightened the knot of his tie and answered, “I’m your lawyer and since you’ve left Richard, the two of you have paperwork to do.”

His heart speed up, “Left, yeah that’s-”

Mark held his hand up interrupting him.”Richard told me everything.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Well, I’m sure he left out some details but the cliff note version goes a little like this. You argued, he went crazy and beat the shit out of you, left you lying on the kitchen floor and when he came back, you had taken Bella and left. Sound about right?”

Jensen nodded, a little surprised that Richard had told the truth. Noticing his look, Mark smiled a wry smile.

“Believe me, it took a while to get the complete story.” His features morphed into a look of sympathy, “I’m sorry, you deserved better.”

Jensen felt himself relax a little and smiled before saying, “Thank you. So what now?”

“Now, I fetch Richard from the car, you make sure “The magnificent seven” over there don’t go berserk and then the three of us get a mountain of paperwork done.”

He could see muscles tensing when the men observing them understood that Richard was only a few feet away. His own abdominal muscles clenched but he took a deep breath and kept his cool.
“I can do that, but shouldn’t we have a lawyer each?”

Mark grinned as he said, “One of the best things about being a lawyer is that those pesky ethical codes can be so hard to interpret. If you want to get a separate lawyer, you can but honey trust me, no one is as good as me. I’m your friend, Jensen. I’m also a fantastic lawyer, and all the agreements and documents we’ve drawn up through the years are so fucking good only I can make you come out of this in the best way possible.”

Jensen smiled but there was still hesitation in his body language and Mark noticed. He put his hand on Jensen’s shoulder, squeezing it.

“I can be a slippery bastard, but you’re my friend and I promise, I will make sure you and Bella make it out of this in one piece.”

As their eyes met Jensen could see the sincerity in Mark’s eyes, and he nodded. As Mark walked towards the car, Jensen turned and walked over to their audience. He raised a warning hand as he came to stand before them.

“You all need to stay out of this.”

Lance opened his mouth to object, but he stopped him before he got a word out.

“That man, Mark is a lawyer, and he has a paper with both mine and Richard's signature on it, stating that we both are legal parents to Bella. Do you understand what that means? It means Richard has the legal right to fight me for her, try to take her away. I don’t think Richard wants to be a parent and I have leverage, but this is not the time to get even. The only thing that’s important is getting Richard to sign away all parental rights. Bella is what matters, nothing else. Got it?”

They said nothing but nodded that they understood, seven sets of hands getting pushed deep into tight denim pockets. As he heard a car door close, Jensen took a deep breath, steeled himself and turned around, facing the man he had been in a relationship with for six years but felt he didn’t know at all.

He looked haggard. Not at first glance and not to people who didn't know him. To everyone else Richard looked like he always did. A little on the short side, wearing his everyday uniform of skinny black jeans, shirt, bow tie and a blazer this one in a dark blue tweed making the shoulders appear broader than they were.

The jet black, curly hair appeared untamed and unruly but Jensen knew it took fifteen minutes to achieve the carefree look, thirty if he’d just washed it. He looked every inch the nerdy but attractive intellectual, an image he meticulously cultivated. But Jensen saw it, the jagged ends of his nails that hinted he had reverted to biting them, a habit he hated about himself.

His skin looked dull and there was a hint of a shadow under his light blue eyes that looked pensive. For most people, bad nails, dull skin and a shadow under the eyes were nothing, in Richard it meant he was a wreck. Jensen felt some of his confidence return, knowing he was not unaffected, that he’d not come out of this situation unscratched.

Jensen straightened his back, lifted his head and walked over.

“Richard.”

“Jen.”
He felt his breath stop for a second, he was only “Jen” in private, when it had only been them. He swallowed the biting comment on his tongue, instead motioning towards the door.

“Let’s go inside. We can sit in the dining room.”

As they walked into the warm, large but cozy room, sitting down at the long oak table made to hold numerous people Jensen felt calm, they were on his turf. Richard was the one out of his element here. His voice was calm as he said,

“So, you came in from San Francisco now?”

“No,” Richard's voice, usually so cultured sounded off, tired as he answered, “Los Angeles.”

His eyebrows shot up at the mention of the famous city, remembering the one weekend they took there and how Richard had spent the entire time complaining about it’s tackiness.

“You hate LA, what the hell were you doing there?”

Richard changed position in the chair, looking embarrassed,

“I eh, I was at a retreat.”

Jensen felt the ice form on the tip of his tongue, coating in it a thick stinging layer, “A retreat?”

“You were at a rehab clinic working on your anger issues, Richard.” Marks sharp accent sounded so out of place in the room. “I’m sure Jensen will feel better knowing you understand the severity of your actions and have sought treatment, instead of thinking you were sipping drinks at some spa.”

“Yes, it does. I-”

He stopped talking mid-sentence as Chris came walking into the room a tray in his hands. Without a word, he set the table with cups and plates, pots of tea and coffee, a serving platter of sandwiches and dish with a peach cobbler, steam still rising from it and a bowl of fresh clotted cream beside it.

Mark looked thrilled and served himself as soon as it was set down before him, with a leer in his eyes, he looked at Chris and said,

“A cowboy and a chef, what’s a guy gotta do to take you home?”

Chris’s voice was dry. “You can start with a sex-change.”

Mark sighed, pouting he said, “You’re one of those. A heterosexual cowboy, what a waste.”

Chris rolled his eyes and turned to Jensen again, putting a baby monitor down on the table in front of him he said, “Jared’s putting Bella down for a nap.” He turned to the two other men in the room, nodding a little at the table he kept his voice steady, “Enjoy.”

“Subtle.” The sarcasm in Richard's voice was unmistakable as he eyed the baby monitor. “Do they think I’m gonna jump you right here?”

He moistened his dry lips and with Bella in mind, Jensen rained in his own piercing tone as he answered, “They’re angry. I was in a really bad shape when I got here, Richard.”

“Well, at last they have something viable to be angry about, they’ve been waiting for a good reason for six years.”
“That’s unfair, Richard.”

Richard snorted and said, “No, it really isn’t. They’ve disliked me since day one.”

Jensen felt his pulse rise in annoyance, “Yes well, that’s been a mutual feeling, hasn’t it?”

Richard’s gaze softened and his voice lowered as he said, “It was never that I didn’t like them, it was…” He went quiet seeming to search for the right words before he continued, “They’ve always made it clear they thought I was keeping you from where you belonged. I always thought you belonged in San Francisco. There’s a side of you that you don’t show here.”

Richard took a sip of the pitch black coffee Mark had served him, Jensen kept quiet, waiting.

“They think, all you’ve done the past few years is wait to come back here while being miserable, but that’s untrue and you know it. You fit in San Francisco, Jensen. I get that you’re a great rancher and fantastic with horses but you are more than that. Do they have any idea how far up in the company you were? Have you told them you were one promotion from running the sales department for the entire chain, what your monthly income was? No, you haven’t. Because you try so hard to portray yourself as just Jensen, the rancher.”

Jensen avoided meeting Richard’s eyes knowing there was truth in what he was saying.

“Poor Jensen,” Richards tone was mocking, “having to live in the Big City, however will he survive without horses? We have stables in San Francisco, you went riding four times a week. You volunteered at an outreach program, you’ve been teaching inner city kids to ride for four years. Did you tell them that? I bet you didn’t.”

Jensen’s heart raced, one uncomfortable truth after another being slammed down on the table in front of him.

Richard ran a hand through his hair, calming his voice that had taken on a harsh tone.

“The truth is you left this ranch because you were looking for something else, something new instead of doing the same chores over and over, everyday the same. That’s why you left, that’s why you were in San Francisco so long, it had nothing to do with me. I played the bad guy for your family, took on the role as the asshole who kept you from coming back, because I know how much you love them and I didn't want you to feel more guilty than you already did.”

There was a sound of metal against porcelain as Mark scooped up another spoon of peach cobbler and cream, eyes darting back and forth between them sparkling like he was watching the best show ever.

Jensen’s voice was low but defiant as he said, “I didn’t feel guilty.”

Richard laughed a tired, breathy laugh, the words coming out of his mouth with it.

“Come on, Jensen. You’ve felt guilty your whole life. Do you remember when I made the monumental, unforgivable mistake of asking about your mother? Lance looked like he wanted to stab me with a pitchfork and then grunted out she wasn’t worth mentioning and it didn’t matter because you were nothing like her. You’ve spent your whole life proving that to everyone here. But how could you possibly know if you’re alike when they all refuse to talk to you about her? And whenever you’ve tried to ask they’ve made you feel guilty about it, like they haven’t loved you enough. So you pretend that you’re a good old rancher, knee deep in this land and if you’ve been away, it’s only been because of circumstances out of your control and not, god forbid, because you wanted to.”
Jensen’s chest was burning, this was not how he had imagined this confrontation going.

Richard’s gaze softened and his tone became smoother, kinder as he said,

“I’m not saying you don’t want to be here. I know you’ve been homesick, I know you’ve wanted to move back here for some time now.” Richard stopped again, a hand dragging over his tired eyes, “Jen, I know my place in this story. I’m the villain and I’m not saying I don’t deserve the part. But, it’s a role I’ve earned the last couple of months, not our entire six year relationship. We were a good couple, and you loved San Francisco. You were happy with me, with the life we lived. The museums, traveling, concerts and theaters and for most of our relationship, I treated you right.”

Jensen drew in his bottom lip between his teeth, nibbling it, a nervous habit and then he took over the conversation as he said,

“You did, and yes you’re right, we had a good life together. I loved you. I’ve been going over it in my head, questioning myself, doubting my judgment. Thinking maybe this relationship has been off all along and I haven’t seen it, but it wasn’t. You are not violent, you're not abusive. Your worst qualities are that you’re a little showy, kind of vain and way too fond of mixing paisley with plaid but, other than that, you’re a timid book nerd. Until six weeks ago, your version of aggression was flipping out in front of the TV when your favorite got cut on Master Chef. So what the fuck, Richard?!”

Jensen saw him looking down on a spot on the tablecloth, one finger scratching at it, trying to remove some imaginary stain. Richard always was a neat freak.

“I don’t... At the retreat- sorry. At the clinic, I had this extensive therapy and...“

“And what?”

Richard closed his eyes and shook his head, “No, I’m not going there.”

“Not going where?” Jensen heard the frustration in his own voice mimicked in Richards as he spoke again,

“I will not be that guy, Jensen. That person who blames everything on childhood trauma or some anxiety disorder they say I have. I hurt you and there’s no excuse, nothing makes it ok.”

Jensen felt his voice tremble in impatience. “I’m not asking for an excuse, I want answers. I want to understand how this sweet, caring guy I was with for six years turned into an asshole who beat me up in a matter of a few months. I don’t understand. You owe me an explanation.”

Richard’s eyes left the tablecloth and settled on the window behind Jensen, overlooking the pond at the back of the house.

“You know, whatever I think about your family, their biggest fault is that they love you so much they want you near all the time. I mean you didn’t even come out, Colt caught you with Jared on they hayloft and told you two to get washed up for dinner and that was it. My coming out story as you’re aware, isn’t as cute. I’ve known all along that you’ve always been torn, between San Francisco and this ranch, between me and Jared-”

Jensen let out a quiet, involuntary gasp when Richard mentioned Jared's name. They’d never really discussed him. Richard looked at him with a look that said “Really?” and then spoke,
“Did you think I didn’t understand? I’ve known since the first time you mentioned him. I know what happened in the barn the first time we came here.”

Jensen ran a hand across his face, feeling the guilt lodge itself in his throat and it was audible in his voice when he said,

“You never said anything.”

Richard laughed a little, shaking his head he said. “Why would I? As soon as I walked on to this ranch it was obvious I was not welcome. When I met Jared and saw the two of you together, it was like the air vibrated around you and I understood that I might leave here alone. My first reaction was to turn around and walk out the door but then I looked at you and I realized we weren’t here to introduce me. You had already predicted what kind of reception I would get. We were here for you to choose and I decided to stay until you did. I’m not thrilled about what happened between you two, but you chose me so I never said anything because you didn’t need one more thing to feel guilty about.”

Jensen dragged his fingers over his closed eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry.”

“I know you are and for the first four years after that I felt like you believed you made the right choice. Not only about Jared but leaving the ranch, that you were still with me. But then, you remember two summers ago when that shelter asked for help with an abused horse, and you came up here for two weeks?”

Jensen nodded, remembering the horrible state the mare had been in and how hard he’d worked to get her to trust him.

“When you came home, it was so obvious the scale had tipped and not in my favor. I realized it was only a matter of time until you needed to go home.”

Jensen sighed sitting up straight and then sinking back against the backrest again, shaking his head he sighed and said,

“There was a middle way, Richard. Remember the job at that publishing house in Denver I showed you. It was a perfect fit and you would have had good chance to get it, we could have moved to Denver. You would have had the city life you needed and I would have been able to commuted here, it’s only a forty minute ride.”

Richard’s eyes glanced over at Jensen face.

“Yeah, I got that job.”

“What?” His voice was shocked and his eyebrows drew together in confusion, “You got it? Richard, what the hell?!?” He almost didn’t believe what Richard was telling him.

“Yeah, the thing is though, when you were away-”

“What, when I was away what?” He heard the frustrated impatience in his own voice, but could not control it.

Richard moistened his lips with another sip of coffee and his eyes were clouded, like his thoughts were a thousand miles away. “My dad died. I got a text saying he’d been sick, and I wasn’t welcome at the funeral.”

“How could you not tell me?” Jensen’s voice was a shocked, choked off whisper, “Richard, damn it.
How could you not tell me that?"

“I was angry. They cut me off the second I came out and it was like I’d never existed. So, when I got that text I felt like, if it was so easy for them, if I meant so little, why should I care if he died?”

“Richard…” Jensen felt the fingers on his hands twitch itching to reach over and grab Richards hand lying on the table, the thumbs picking at the gnarled nails. But the memory of the last time he felt those hands on him stopped him.

“I just… I didn’t stop being angry. The rage never went away. When I applied for that job I wanted to surprise you, show you I cared more about you than where we lived. But by the time I got it, I was already so angry all the time and it was exhausting to hide it, to keep it from interfering with our life. The thought of being so close to this place... I mean, even if we lived in Denver we would still be here all the time, Friday dinners, Sunday brunches and Wednesday night football and god, I…”

Richard ran a hand through his hair again, making a loose curl break free and fall down the side of his face, Jensen fingers longed to stroke it out of the way.

“The thought of being here so often, being so close to one more family that didn't think I was good enough, it was too much. I couldn’t do it. I should have sought help then. Instead I made it even worse with the baby. I thought if I had a family of my own, one that was mine, I’d feel better. I have no idea how I reasoned, what I thought would happen. We both know I don’t like children.”

“Richard, I’m sorry.”

He looked up at Jensen, a frown on his face.

“For what, you did nothing.”

Jensen's voice was filled with self-loathing as he answered, “No, I didn’t. You were hurting so much and I didn’t see it. I was so wrapped up in myself I didn’t even notice you were falling apart.”

“Jensen…” Richard's fingers twitched like they were racing for him and this time Jensen reached out and took his hand.

“It’s not your responsibility to make sure that everyone around you is ok, our happiness and well being is not on you. I’m an adult and I understood I was unwell, it was my responsibility to seek help, and I waited too long. My anger got out-of-control months before I attacked you. Road rage, lashing out at strangers over nothing, my poor assistant took so much crap I can't believe she lasted for as long as she did before quitting.”

Looking down at the table again, the stray strand of hair fell down in front of his eyes and Jensen couldn’t stop himself reaching out and tucking it behind Richard’s ear. For a short second Richard reached up with his own free hand putting it on top of his, pressing it to his cheek and leaning into the touch before letting go again.

“When Falabella came it got worse. I thought she would give me a stronger grip on you but instead it felt like she pushed me aside, I know how it sounds. Looking on from outside I can see how twisted everything was in my head but when I was in the middle of it I couldn’t. I was trying so hard to hold on to you and at the same time hide how bad things were, how unhealthy I was. It all became too much, and I ended up hurting the one thing I was trying so hard keep.

Richards hand tightened around his own.

“It was never, ever about you, Jensen. It could have been anyone, but you had the bad luck of being
near me when I cracked. You’re strong and I know you’d never blamed yourself, but I need you too believe me when I say it had nothing to do with you. It was like my mind shut off, like my whole being was encased in this burning white hot rage and I just had to get it out. I didn’t even know who I was hitting, I didn’t understand it was you, Jensen.”

Jensen felt his eyes burning a thousand “what if’s” racing through his mind.

“God, Richard, I wish you’d told me. We might have…”

Jensen stopped and Richard gave a small, sad smile. “Maybe. There’s always been a struggle in you, two sides, two lives, two men. You loved me. I’m sure of that but I’m not so sure you would have chosen me a second time. It doesn’t matter now. I’m not ok. Five weeks of therapy will not fix me and even if it had, even if you chose me instead of Jared again the good parts of what we had are gone and all we’ve done the past year is bring out the worst in each other. And even if we were willing to try and get back to how it used to be, I crossed a line we can never recover from. We can’t go back. You and Bella need to be here, I need to be some place I can get better.”

Jensen held his breath for a short second when he mentioned Bella. Richard let out a sad sigh, tilting his head to the side he meet Jensen’s eyes head on.

“Well, that’s something I guess.”

They both went quiet, the silence was like thin black mourning veil of sadness hanging over the room. A discreet clearing of a throat brought them back.

“Darlings, this will not get any easier, maybe we shouldn’t drag this is out anymore.”

Richard nodded a look of dejected surrender to the situation they were in on his face. Jensen wiped away a tear threatening to break loose, he felt like half of him was breaking.

The paperwork was easy, Jensen felt both amazed and repulsed by how easy it was to erase one person from another's life. A few scribbled signatures and Bella had one parent instead of two.

Richard shrugged his shoulders. “I need something new. Remember when we took that road trip through, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island, we met that guy who ran a publishing house in Portland?”
“Yeah.”

“Well, we kept in touch, and he’s been asking me to come work for him for years and I need a fresh start. I called him and I’m moving to Portland in a week.”

Jensen could not stop the laugh bubbling out. “You’re gonna go crazy, all that rain will frizz your hair so bad. You hate that.”

Richard smiled. “Yeah well, my therapist says change means sacrifices so I’m sacrificing good hair for improved mental health.”

Jensen squeezed Richards hand. “It’s a good move, Portland will suit you. You were always a little too much a nerdy intellectual for San Francisco.”

The final goodbye was heartbreaking. Coming back out on the porch Jensen saw that Jared had somehow snuck out without being heard and now all seven men stood there, trying to look casual and pretend they hadn’t eavesdropped on the conversation through the baby monitor that was peeking out from Jared’s back pocket. No one looked him in the eyes.

As the walked to stand by the car, Richard opened the door to the passenger seat and Jensen felt such a sharp pang of pain, he felt like he would double over. Not that long ago he’d loved this man. Looking at him now when it was all over, he admitted to himself that he had and that there was a lot of truth behind what he’d told him. One half of Jensen had always belonged here on this ranch, always belonged with Jared. But there was another part of him that the man in front of him had seen and for a time given unconditional love.

“God...” Jensen ran a hand through his hair. “Richard.”

The man in front of him nodded and when Jensen saw him lose the fight against his tears, he lost his own battle.

“I don’t have the right to ask, but please do two things for me, Jensen.”

Jensen nodded not trusting himself to speak.

“If you ever think about me, try to forget the last part. Pretend we ended this in time and parted without either of us getting hurt.”

Jensen nodded again, not even caring that tears were running in a steady stream down his face. He drew the back of his hand under his chin to wipe away the drops that had gathered there. Richard reached out and put a hand on the back of his head.

“Allow yourself to figure out who you are, all of you. Maybe you’re nothing like your mother, maybe you are. But you have the right to decide that for yourself. If you don’t you’ll never be content wherever you are, you’ll always wonder if a part of you would be happier someplace else.”

Richard tightened his hold and pulled Jensen close, drawing him into a hug and then getting into the car without meeting his eyes.

Jensen felt rooted to the spot a thousand memories, images and emotions whirling inside of him forming into one bone crushing lump of pain. A hand on his shoulder turned him around and he came to face with Mark.

“Jensen, my love don’t be a stranger. San Francisco isn’t the same without you.” He reached up with both hands he cupped Jensen face and planted a wet kiss on his mouth.
Turning a little as he made to get into the driver's seat he waved at Chris and called out,

“My darling culinary cowboy, we could have been beautiful together. I’ll always remember you.”

Watching the car drive off and disappear among the trees, Jensen felt bile rising in throat. His whole body felt like it was floating and like it weighed a hundred pounds. There was seven sets of eyes on him, but he couldn’t turn to look at them. The anger he was so sure he’d feel the moment he saw Richard replaced by regret and sadness now coming back in full force, but directed at them instead. Mind racing and emotions going rampant Jensen walked right by them, not giving any of them a single look.

As Jensen walk right past him, Jared felt his body twitch in preparation to follow, a callused hand on his forearm stopped him. He looked up right into Jeff’s tanned face, speckled brown eyes holding a warning.

“Jeff, what the fuck? I have to go see if he’s ok.”

Jeff’s rough, deep voice was hard as steel as he said, “What about this situation makes you think he’s ok? Tell me all you want to do is see if he’s ok and that you’re not reeling with jealousy and anger from seeing how heartbroken Jensen is over Richard right now? Show me one scenario where you going after him will not make it even worse for him.”

Jared opened his mouth but couldn't convince himself that Jeff wasn’t right and instead Jeff continued speaking,

“You go someplace else and don’t go near him until you’ve worked through all of this. The last thing he needs is for you to make him feel guilty that you’re not the only one he’s ever loved. We’ve all fucked up enough.”

Looking over they all watched Jensen disappear through the stable doors, a lingering feeling in the air that they owned a big part of the blame in the emotional massacre they’d just witnessed.

It wasn’t a pleasant feeling.
Jensen smiled as the small head pushed into his chest. The little Appaloosa filly, the base of her coat white and covered in black spots was two weeks old. As he sat on the stable floor, leaning against the wall inside the stall where the foal and her mother lived, he looked at the young horse, legs long and thin still unsteady. He didn’t look up when he heard the stall door opening, didn’t look to the side when he felt a body sitting down next to him.

The voice that spoke was gravelly but tentative, the words careful, assessing.

“Do you remember anything from when I first came here?”

Still not looking at the person speaking Jensen sighed, fingers reaching down and picking up a few shavings of floor. The agitation in his body making his hands restless and in need of a distraction and he said,

“I was six, Jeff I don’t know. All I remember is being an annoying know-it-all who dragged you around the stable all the time thinking I could teach you about horses.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.” In the corner of his eyes he could see Jeff looking at him before leaning his head back against the wall, long legs bent at the knees. The timidness had been replaced by an emotion Jensen couldn’t interpret when he said, “You’re wrong. You saved my life. Did you know I’m an army brat?”

Jensen shrugged his shoulder, he knew Jeff had a connection to the military, that he’d been in the service when he was younger. But Jeff’s life before coming to The Phoenix Ranch wasn’t something anyone discussed. It was one of those subjects you by instinct knew was better off left alone. Jensen had seen him work and interact with other veterans, knew there was a story but this was the first time he had spoken of his personal experiences with him. So when Jeff’s voice started up again he listened.
“I grew up on army bases all over the country, even a few abroad. My father was a Major General in the United States Marines Corps. He was a tough, unforgiving bastard. My life was decided for me from birth. I had four older brothers and we all enlisted, the only choice was which kind of soldier we’d be. My eldest brother went to the Navy, the three other to the Marines. I joined the army the same day I turned eighteen and as soon as I turned twenty, I trained and passed the test to become a Green Beret.”

“What?” Jensen voice rose in shock. “You were special forces?”

Jeff nodded, giving off his trademark crooked grin. “I know, hard to believe right? My father was so proud when I passed the training. This was the early nineties. I was only a little over twenty and two weeks after I got my beret, I got shipped to the Gulf War.”

Jensen saw flashes of TV images pass before his eyes. He was too young to remember that war, but those images was enough for him to have a few references points. Enough for him to feel humbled and horrified that the man sitting next to him had been there.

“I won’t go into details about what they sent us to do, but it wasn’t to talk to people. About a month before the whole thing ended, I was out on assignment with my team and we ended up in an ambush we…”

He stopped, held his breath and Jensen reached out to grab his shoulder, a heavy lump in his stomach and an uncomfortable itch under his skin telling him the next part would not be pretty.

“Jeff, you don’t have to.”

Jeff reached up with his own, laying it on top of his. “It’s fine, Jensen. It’s been twenty-six years, I’ve learnt to talk about it. We were twelve men, four of us came home. When I came back it was like my head was still there, seeing one friend after another dying right before me, not being able to save them. That was just the end, what we did before that was... ugly. Soon after they diagnosed me with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. When I told my father, he looked me right in the eyes and said, ‘That’s just the politically correct way of calling you a pussy. Man the fuck up and get back out there, or get out of my house.’”

Jensen could feel his mouth hanging open, eyes wide as he processed what Jeff had told him.

“What an asshole.”

Jeff huffed out a quiet laugh and said, “No shit. Anyway, so I left his house and got on the first greyhound bus I saw and ended up in Denver. The first thing I did was get into a huge bar fight and right in the middle of it, I had an attack. All I could see was these big dunes of sand and I knew hidden in them were people trying to kill me. It took your dad, Lance, Omundson and Jim to hold me down so I couldn’t hurt anyone.”

Jensen knew how strong Colt was, how strong they all were. To think it took all four of them to take Jeff down, the amount of fear and adrenaline that must have been racing through his system was unimaginable.

“How did they end up there?”

Jeff shrugged his shoulders. “I never asked, some errand I guess. But Colt and Lance took me in. Said if I had so much excess energy I could put it to good use here. I’d never set foot on a ranch, much less ridden a horse. Colt introduced me to you as soon as I got here and I looked at you and, Jensen you were so small. All I could think was god, keep that kid away from me, I’m gonna end up
killing him.”

Jensen frowned. “What? You’re the guy who waited outside my school in fourth grade, picked up Jason Newman, carried him over to the police station and told his dad, the Sheriff, that if you ever heard of him bullying me again, you’d make sure he’d learn what real fear felt like. You would never have hurt me.”

Jensen had always thought Jeff looked like a rebel. Everyone else on the ranch were always neat and tidy looking, Jeff seemed to revel in the opposite. Not that he didn’t look good or was unkempt but there was something wild, maybe challenging about the way his thick, short black hair would always fall in whichever way it chose. He was a tall man, wide shoulders and slender body. But there was something delicate in his features that somehow softened his masculine face, half of it always covered in a short beard, now speckled with white. Jeff looked at him, his eyes had always looked a little sad to Jensen, hunted. Now he understood why. It was like his whole appearance was a rebellion against the strict military standards he grew up in.

“I was in a bad way, Jensen. When the attacks was at their worst I wasn’t here, I was still in that desert. Think of the worst thing that ever happened to you and try to imagine reliving it over and over and over. Not remembering it, reliving it, hearing the sounds, smelling all the scents like you’re physically there again. I was afraid I wouldn’t know it was you that my mind would distort you into something dangerous. Too much pain and anger can do that. You lose yourself, no matter how much you care about the person, you can’t separate your friends or loved ones from your enemies.”

Jensen pulled the hand he was still holding down and placed it over his heart, a silent gratitude for what Jeff had just said. For the unspoken acknowledgment of the other conversation Jensen was trying to recover from.

Jeff smiled and his large palm was so warm it’s heat traveled through the cotton of Jensen’s henley. He removed his hand and threw that arm around Jensen's shoulder as he continued his story,

“I’d been here maybe two weeks, and I was having one of my more difficult days. I could feel another bad attack coming and then Colt came walking over with you by his side and he was like ‘Jensen, did you know Jeff can’t ride, isn’t that crazy. Why don’t you go introduce him to the horses?’ And I thought, this guy is so stupid but he let you walk right over and you took my hand and walked to the stable babbling away about this horse and that and five minutes in, I was the calmest I’d been in months. You think you spent all that time bothering me and the truth is, the reason we spent so much time together is that the minute anyone noticed I was about to get an attack, they got you. You and those horses were the only thing that could keep my attacks from becoming unmanageable. If it wasn’t for you, I think I would have blown my brains out that first year.”

Looking at him, Jensen had a hard time finding a place for this new side of Jeff and molding it with the old one. Had always seen him as the most stable, strong guy he knew and couldn’t imagine him contemplating suicide. But then again, the older he got, the more complicated people seemed to get.

It was one of the first warm spring days, the air hinting at summer and Jeff had taken off his shirt and sat beside him in a simple black tank top leaving his shoulders and arms bare. Both of his arms had tattoos in a gray scale. At the top of each shoulder a hand, palm up and fingers spread wide rested, between the fingers four rivulets of sand ran down over his arms in curvy pattern. At different heights, the rivulets stopped and transformed into flowing script each spelling out a name.

James, Daniel, Kip, Philip, Troy, Ernesto, LaShawn, Bobby,

Jensen had never asked about the names, now looking at them he didn’t have to, Jeff saw his gaze.
“Yeah, those are my boys. I couldn’t get them home alive but I keep them with me.”

Jeff fingered one of the large silver rings he wore, the array of leather and metal bracelets on one arm jingling as he did.

“Jensen, you have this impact on people. Being around you it’s like everything you like the most about yourself comes to the surface, it’s an intoxicating feeling. So we all get a little greedy. But, this family is nothing like my old one and your dad and Grandpa and everyone here we love you like crazy. Today made it obvious we go too far sometimes. You don’t have to take that. It’s ok to tell us to back off and you don’t have to cut yourself in half because you’re afraid of hurting our feelings. Richard was right, that really isn’t your responsibility.”

Jensen leaned his head back against the wall watching the foal trying to entice its mother to play.

Jeff’s voice was soft, almost pleading when he said, “Jensen, you’ve had a shit day, come inside. You have every right to be angry with us, we deserve it and if you don’t want to talk that’s understandable but please, come inside.”

Jeff stood up holding out one hand, it took a few seconds but at least Jensen took it and was dragged to his feet.

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It was nearing midnight when he heard the door to his room opening, he could see the outline of a large shadow against the wall he was facing.

“Is this ok?”

Jared’s voice was quiet, hesitant.

Jensen exhaled, closed his eyes and as he nodded into the darkness he said, “Yeah.”

Moments later he could feel Jared’s warm body sliding in behind him, one hand coming up to run through his hair as the other found it’s place on his hip as a strong arm settled around his waist.

Jensen remained quiet but his hand slid across the arm draped over his waist until it found Jared’s, their fingers lacing.
The other side of the bed was empty when Jensen woke up, feeling no warmth from the spot beside him he understood it had been vacant for some time. He looked at the clock on the nightstand and realized that Jared must have turned off the alarm because it was already nine-thirty.

Getting ready for the day and looking through the nursery door he wasn’t surprised that the crib was empty. When he walked down the stairs his insides were still raw and he did not feel ready to face the world. But it was there right in front of him whether he was ready or not.

Coming down the stairs into the great room Jensen could hear voices coming from the dining room. He identified Jim, Lance and his dad, their words making him stop.

Lance’s voice was harsh, annoyed, “This is a bad idea, Boy. There’s no point to this.”

Colts voice was agitated and hard, a tone Jensen almost never heard him use to his dad. “Are you senile old man or just deaf? Did you not witness the same train wreck as the rest of us did yesterday?”

Lances voice was gruff and even though he couldn’t see him Jensen could imagine the crease between his eyebrows and stubborn set of his mouth under the mustache as he said, “There’s no need for that tone, Boy. I was there. It was ugly, break-ups always are and Jensen will be raw for a while, but he’ll bounce back. There’s no need to make it worse with all of this.”

“How the hell would you know?” It was Jim’s voice, “When was the last time you broke up with someone? Let me tell you. Never. You met May, you married May, you lost May, and you never loved again. You know nothing about what he’s feeling.”

Jensen could hear that his grandfather was balancing on the the edge between annoyance and anger. “The hell I do and you too Jim. We both lost our girls, are you going to tell me you’ve ever felt anything more painful than when Callie died? You think how Jensen is hurting right now comes
Jim’s voice turned soft, but it had a berating note to it as he said, “Lance, you can't compare that. We lost them too soon, and it hurts like hell they’re not here, but we loved them and only them. We never had to wonder if we made the right choice.”

Lance huffed and Jensen could almost see him raise his hands in the air in frustration. His voice held no uncertainty when he said, “Jensen made the right choice this time. Jared has been the right choice since he was nine.”

Jensen could hear Jim inhaling a deep breath preparing to fire off another counter argument, but the sound of a hand slamming down hard on the table sounded across the house interrupting him.

“Fuck Richard and Jared!” Colt's voice was hard, and Jensen felt his eyes widen in shock at Colt's choice of words. Grandma May had always disliked swearwords and Colt never used them. His words were hard and left no more room for discussion as he continued, “This is about Jensen. Did you not hear the part where he feels like he has to split himself in half to not upset us? Did you know half of the things Richard said about him? Because I didn’t and I won't have my son feeling like he has to hide who he is from me. I've made that mistake once, I’m not doing it again.”

Lance made a last attempt to get his point across, voice smooth and pleading. “This is exactly why I don’t want you to drag this up again. You spent years blaming yourself, let this stay buried. This isn't good for you.”

“Dad.” Colt lowered his voice again, but Jensen could hear the effort it took to keep it calm and civil. “I’m fifty-five years old. I’ve had thirty years to get over it, you don’t have to protect me anymore. Jensen doesn't even know what she looks like. It’s time I stopped thinking about my own fears and feelings and think about his.”

Jensen decided he’d had enough of listening to people talk about him and he exaggerated the sound of his footsteps as he walked to the dining room, the voices dying out. As he entered the room Jensen could see the backs of Jim and Lance as they made their way out through the door leading to the patio at the back of the house.

Colt was sitting at the table, the seat next to him set for breakfast, knowing how late it was he knew the only one left to have breakfast was him, so he sat down. Right in front of Colt stood a white shoebox. The black lettering on the lid was faded and Jensen could see finger marks in the dust that covered it, hinting that no one had opened the box for a long time, allowing dust to settle on it undisturbed.

“How much of that did you hear?”

Jensen looked at Colt, shrugging his shoulders he said, “Enough.”

Colt nodded. “The thing about being a parent, is that it doesn't matter if your child is five or fifty-five, you will always be overprotective. Your grandpa wants to protect me. And I want to protect you, but sometimes despite your best intentions, you end up making it worse. Eat something, Jensen.”

Colt nodded at the covered dishes and feeling his stomach cramp in hunger he did, gulping down toast and scrambled eggs, impatient to have the contents of the box revealed to him. When he finished, Colt reached over and lifted the lid of the shoebox, placing it on a chair beside him. He reached in with one hand and taking it out again placed a large photograph on the table in front of Jensen.
He could hear his own harsh inhale as he looked down into his own eyes staring up at him from the photograph.

“\"I know,\" Colts voice was gentle, \"If your hair had been auburn instead of blond you could be twins.\""

He looked down at the face in the photograph so like his own. Large, deep green eyes, straight nose with a rounded tip that tilted ever so slightly downward. Soft, plump lips but with a sharp cupid's bow. Soft features over a bone structure that made the light fall on all the right angles and a complexion dusted with light freckles although Jensen was more tanned. The only difference beside the obvious female features instead of his own masculine ones, was the long, thick, wavy auburn hair, instead of his own strawberry blond hair that he always kept short. It had a tendency to get fluffy if he didn't keep it in check. She was breathtaking.

“\"We're exactly the same.\""

"No.\" Colts voice was mild but firm.\" You look alike but you really are nothing like her. The two of you are opposites."

He could feel his frustration building expecting the same tired lines he'd always heard on those very rare occasions when the subject of his mother came up. But Colts voice interrupted his thoughts, his words calming him again.

"It's a beautiful day. \"Colt nodded to the patio door, the May sun shining through it. \"Let's go sit on the patio and I'll tell you what really happened. What I should have told you a long time ago.\"

Jensen nodded and Colt grabbed the shoebox, walking towards the door he leaned his head into the kitchen, "Chris, bring us some coffee would you? We're out back."

They sank down in the two patio chairs standing on the wooden deck, a small round table between them. Colt kept quiet until Chris had come out with the coffee and placed a large tray of cake in front of Jensen. His gaze lingered out over the meadow now coming to life and the blue pond beneath it, the sun making the surface sparkle.

Colts voice was distant as he began his story, "I met Lily Daniels when I was twenty-three.\" Jensen held his breath. "I found her hitchhiking on the road driving back from some errand in Denver. I took one look at her and I was lost. From the moment she got in my truck, it was obvious she was nothing like what I was used to. The surrounding girls had always been well mannered, timid, none of them strong or smart enough to be my partner in the running of this ranch. I was so bored with it. They were beige and there was Lily, sparkling with color. She was fierce, loud, cursed like you wouldn't believe and not regular cursing, I mean the woman had a dirty mouth."

Jensen laughed. "Oh, I bet Grandma loved that."

Colt grinned. "Oh yeah, Mom was ecstatic the woman of my dreams was a hitchhiker with a mouth like a cesspool."

He reached up and scratched his head, a few silver locks falling out of place. Jensen guessed it was more to give himself a pause than any real need.

"From the beginning our relationship was this intense, crazy romance. Despite everyone's warnings we were married four months after meeting, another two and you were on the way. I think I always knew it would not end well, but she mesmerized me. You have that in common, this charisma that draws people in. But, while yours is comforting, nurturing - it radiates love - her's was fire. It's
beautiful to look at, it keeps you warm but you get too close it’ll burn you and if you let it go unintended, it’ll turn everything around you to ash.”

Jensen kept quiet, keeping the hundreds of questions on his tongue from spilling out. He gave his dad time to collect himself before he continued.

“In her defense…” Colt turned quiet again, a somber, contemplative look on his face before beginning the sentence one more time.

“In her defense, I believe she wanted to be here, that she planned to stay. She was rootless and never really talked about her past, but on the few occasions she did I understood her parents died early and she’d raised by a Grandmother. When she passed Lily packed-up and moved from one place to another. I think she wanted to find a place to put down roots, to belong. She was happy here, we were happy together and when we found out you were on the way, she was thrilled. She was.”

Colt paused and Jensen could feel his insides cramping. He didn’t know if he could handle this, he’d had more emotional turbulence in his life the past two months than he’d had his entire life. He wasn’t sure he could take too much more. But curiosity and a burning desire to get the answers he’d been waiting for so long kept him listening as Colt took up his story again.

“Lily wanted roots, but she didn’t understand that to belong somewhere, meant that people would want things from her in return. I told her she had to pull her weight, take part in the day to day running of the ranch. That we needed to build a real life where our emotions weren’t always running rampant. When I did, she pulled away. I don’t think she could handle calm, she needed the emotional rollercoaster, I think it was all she knew. She’d leave the ranch, disappear for days at end. I handled it all wrong, I saw her as something wild needing to be tamed. So I did everything I could to reel her in and the harder I tried the more she reared away. Everyone tried to calm me. Our doctor told me it was nothing to worry about that some women had a hard time adjusting to not being in control of their bodies during their pregnancies. That she’d calm down once you came.”

Jensen raised an eyebrow a judgmental look on his face, “Really?”

Colt look a little embarrassed as he said, “A lot has changed since the eighties, what was normal then is sexist and stupid today.”

Jensen nodded. “Yeah. So then what?”

Colt leaned his head against the backrest face raised to the sky, soaking in the spring sun.

“You came and we all, me, your grandparents, Josephine and Avery, everyone was under your spell from day one, even Alona and she was what, three? Everyone, except Lily. She wasn’t interested. She didn’t want to hold you at the hospital but they told me not to worry and that some women took a little longer to connect with their baby. After a week she still didn’t want to hold you and everyone said she had the baby blues and everything would be fine. But as soon as she recovered from the delivery she was back to her old self, I had to feed you formula because she didn’t want to breastfeed you. I’d come in from work and find you in your crib screaming and crying and she wasn’t there, she’d go into town or to see a friend and leave you all alone.”

Jensen felt something pinching deep inside but kept quiet, the tone of Colt’s voice having gone darker, more somber.

“I tried everything, anything I could think of to make her connect to you. Once I carried her, literally kicking and screaming, into a doctor’s appointment. I was so sure she was suffering from some kind of postpartum depression but…”
“But what?” Jensen could feel the climax coming, the real answers he’d been waiting for around the corner but after waiting for so long he felt a sudden sense of dread.

“She wasn’t, there wasn’t anything wrong. I had a two hour argument with our doctor, demanded a second opinion and at last she looked at me and said, ‘Mr. Ackles, the only thing wrong with your wife is that she didn’t figure out she doesn’t want to be a mother, before she had a baby. ’ But I couldn't accept it because we all loved you so much and I couldn't believe she didn’t. I wanted her to see a therapist and she flat out refused.”

Jensen swallowed a mouth full of coffee to rid his mouth from the taste of acid and then said,

“I’m guessing she didn't disappear in the middle of the night.”

Colt shook his head, eyes far away. “No. She left in broad daylight. We’d been planning on expanding, back then we hadn't built the last four cabins. We’d saved a big chunk of the previous two years profit to invest in furnishings and building costs. One morning I came in from my rounds in the stables and found her sitting at the dining room table. She’d taken out the car seat, and you were sitting in it, dressed and beside you were your things, packed-up. She looked at me and said she was leaving and I had two choices. Either she left with the fifty grand we’d saved up for the new cabins or she would leave with you. Again, this was the eighties, it’s hard enough for dads to get custody these days. Back then, I couldn’t risk it, Jensen. So, I wrote a check right there and she left. Walked right out of our lives without looking back once.”

“Well.” Jensen cleared his throat not from tears but to contain the nauseous feeling climbing up through his esophagus. “At least I know how much I’m worth.”

Colt looked at him, “I would have given up everything, Jensen. The ranch, the clothes on my back, everything. You know the feeling, you had it yesterday when you thought Richard might try to take Bella. You would have done whatever it took.”

Jensen nodded, at the mention of the ranch his brow creased and he asked, “How much did you have to pay to get her to give up her share of the ranch at the divorce?”

“I did one thing right, ever since Bess married Tim every person who marries into the family has had to sign a legal document waiving any right to the ranch in case of divorce. But…”

“But what.” Jensen could tell there was more and that he would not like it.”

Colt looked uncomfortable, and he shifted in his chair, eyes not quite meeting Jensens as he said, “She left that day, and I never tracked her down, I thought if I started something she’d take you. At first I planned to wait until you turned eighteen but by then I… I figured why dig up that old skeleton, you know?”

Jensen looked at his dad with a shocked expression as comprehension set in. “You’re still married to her?!”

Colt looked slightly embarrassed as he nodded. Jensen dragged a hand over his eyes. “Jesus.” A thought hit him and he took the hand from his eyes and looked at Colt.

“Does Kim know?”

Colt laughed. “Have you met Kim?”

Kim Rhodes, a five foot eight tornado disguised as a well shaped woman in her mid forties, had blown into their lives and onto the ranch fifteen years earlier. A successful professional in the
corporate world known for metaphorically ripping her competitions balls off as she left them and their companies bleeding. She’d also been on the verge of physical collapse so the Vice President of the company had ordered two weeks fresh air and recuperation at The Phoenix Ranch.

She had not liked the idea.

The first two days she drove everyone crazy even Grandma May who had a high tolerance for difficult guests was threatening murder. On day three Colt had enough. He packed supplies, got on a horse and as he rode by her, reached down, grabbed her and dragged her up on the horse taking her up into the mountains. Kim’s angry yells and curses echoing off the mountain sides for a long time after they disappeared out of sight.

Coming back to the ranch a week and half later, her curses could still make a grown man blush but she had a distinct rosy color on her own cheeks and she was leaning back against Colt in a way that can only come from an intimate relationship with the other person's body. Colts hands holding the reins resting far up her thighs.

She’d come back only a few months later to work on her stress level, and another few months after that and a few months after that. Those regular visits every other month has been going for fifteen years now. Kim and Colts relationship is untraditional but no one who has seen them together questions the love they have for one another and it works for them. These days Kim's family and The Phoenix Ranch her home, even though she doesn’t live there.

“What did she say when you told her?”

Colt scratched at his chin and said, “I fell for Kim for the same reasons as I fell for your mother, but I was fifteen years older and wiser. Kim has the same fiery personality, but she’s very different. When we understood that what we had was more than attraction and that we wanted more from each other than, well...”

Jensen raised an eyebrow, “Really? Dad, I’m thirty years old. I’m well aware you’ve had sex more than once.”

Colt gave him a look, ran a hand through his hair and continued. “Fine, when we understood that our relationship wasn’t only physical. We had a long discussion about what to do. She didn’t want to leave her life, I didn’t want to leave mine. So, I told her my story and said I wouldn’t ask her to do something I wasn’t willing to do myself and we came to an understanding.”

“Which is?”

“That I’ll be here. She’s doing her thing, I’m not giving her a hard time about it and when she doesn’t want to do it anymore, there’s room for her here. Until then we’re content with what we have. It might not make sense to other people but we love each other enough to find a way that works for both of us. The best relationships do.”

Colt stretched his long legs out in front of himself. “Jensen, I don’t know if the truth helps you or hurts you even more. Do whatever you want with it. There’s a few papers in the box, all her details are there if you want to look for her, ask for her side of it all. I got no answers, and she was here for a year and a half that’s no time at all. Maybe she can fill in the blanks for you if you need more answers. It’s your choice and you don’t have to think about my feelings in this. I should have told you this a long time ago. All I ever wanted to do is protect you, not guilt you into being silent or make you feel you have to be a certain way. You don’t own her mistakes and you don’t have to claim responsibility for her choices. Those are Lily’s to live with. You’re not accountable for her actions or mine or anyone else's, only your own, and you have done nothing wrong.”
Jensen took a sip of coffee and said, “I know.”

Colt reached over and took a piece of Jensen's cake with his fingers and put it in his mouth. Looking out over the meadow, green with specks of blue, yellow and red, he sighed and then said, “I’m sorry about Richard. I thought he was so wrong for you and it turns out he was the person who understood you best. As your dad it’s my prerogative to never forgive him for what he did to you, but I’ll own up to my part and I treated him unfairly, I see that now.”

“Yeah.” Jensen nibbled his bottom lip, “I’m don’t think we’d have stayed together even if he hadn’t become so unwell. We wanted different lives and that would always have been an issue. He spoke a lot of truths about me, why I left and stayed away for so long. But I never planned to stay away for good. It was alway temporary and I’ve been homesick for a long time now. I’m not here because our relationship imploded, I’m here because I wanted to come home. And…”

Jensen grew silent but Colt filled in the blank.

“And, you always loved Jared more.”

Jensen let his eyes rest on the sky above the treetops. “Yeah.”
The sound of hammer against metal was steady and professional, but it was impossible not to note the aggression behind every single beat. Jared could feel a shiver ghost over his exposed arms and shoulders as a cool spring wind passed over the light sheen of sweat covering them. The defined muscles in his arms twitched, bulging in protest at every furious impact with the piece of metal lying on the anvil.

“I don’t think he can feel it, no matter how hard you slam that hammer down.”

Jared looked up, brows furrowed in irritation, not in the mood for interruptions and came face to face with the mischievous blue eyes of Timothy Omundson.

“What?” Jared flinched a little at the harsh, testy tone of his voice, he knew Omundson didn’t deserve it.

Omundson's expression didn’t change, undeterred by Jared's rude demeanor.

“Richard, I don’t think he can feel it.”

Jared stopped, closed his eyes while drawing in a deep breath. Not today. He could not deal with Omundson and his exuberant personality today. With jaw muscles jumping from the strain of being clenched tight he answered, voice held in a tight leash.


Omundson only raised a sharp, bushy eyebrow and put on an infuriating but patient smirk.

“Yes, Jared today. Today you really need it.”

“Omundson, no. Not today. I’m not having a meltdown and I’m not trying to get back at Richard for beating Jensen up by hammering the shit out of my anvil, ok.”
“I know that.” Omundson put a lock of gray hair that had escaped its confinement behind his ear. “You’re hammering the shit out of your Richard substitute because you’ve only now realized that Jensen really loved him and you’re having a penis crisis.”

Jared dropped the hammer, his arms raising in the air as he answered in a frustrated voice. “I’m not having a penis crisis. My penis is fine!”

Omundson grinned. “I know it is. But that won’t stop you from having an internal crisis over the fact that, contrary to what everyone, you most of all, have been telling themselves, Jensen wasn’t unhappy in San Francisco. His relationship with Richard wasn’t a sham and if Richard hadn’t become unwell, he might not have come home.”

Omundson stuck his hands behind the brown leather suspenders he was wearing, stretching them back and forth. Omundson always looked more like a lumberjack hipster than a cowboy, only Omundson had looked like that for as long as Jared could remember. Today he wore all denim, jeans and tight fitting shirt matching and the suspenders over it. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows showing off strong, hairy forearms, a brown leather cuff fastened around his left wrist. On his feet he wore brown, leather lace up work boots and topping the look off, a white knitted beany perched “just so” on his head, so an attractive wave of his gray hair could peek out at the front.

Omundson had one of those faces you wouldn’t describe as attractive in the traditional sense. His blue eyes were the same ordinary blue that most peoples were and his forehead had deep lines. His nose was crooked, a souvenir from that time he walked into a small town bar in Tennessee wearing a pink, sparkly cowboy hat and ordered a “sex on the beach” from the deliciously attractive but not so tolerant, male bartender. That was a stupid thing to do even today in many small towns across the country, but in the early nineties, he’d been lucky to get out of it with only a crooked nose. Omundson had one of those faces that no matter what he did or said was always expressive, exuding a charisma that made him irresistibly good looking. His crowning glory was the beard, it was full and thick and topped off by a sharp mustache, the ends of which he was always twirling between his fingers like one of those an old time villains from silent movies.

“Jared, you are freaking out. Jeff and everyone else has Jensen covered and because I’m a fantastic uncle, I’m here to stop you from doing something stupid. The last thing Jensen needs right now is another boyfriend cracking.”

Jeff and Omundson's relationship was as much a foundation of the ranch as Lance and May’s or Jim and Callie’s had been. As far as Jared knew Jeff hadn’t been out and proud when he came to the ranch or if Jeff had ever allowed himself to acknowledge that there was anything to be out about before he met Omundson. But there had never been a big coming out scene, no declarations or fanfares. One day Jeff moved into Omundson’s cabin lying secluded a little further in on the ranch on the other side of the stream. That was that and the way it had been for twenty-three years.

“I’m not freaking out.”

Omundson tilted his head to the side, “Jared, puppy. You’re big, hot and adorable, usually that’s enough for me but could you try to switch on your brain today? We’ll need it.”

Jared huffed and fired off a cranky, “Screw you, Tim.”

Omundson scowled, “Don’t call me Tim, I hate that name, it makes me sound so uninspiring. And no, Jeff wouldn’t like that and although a big, cuddly softie. He’s a big, cuddly softie with extensive military training and kind of territorial. So, let’s deal with your little issue instead, shall we?”
Looking at Omundson, Jared realized he wouldn’t go away until he got what he came for.

“Fine, yes it bothers me, it really bothers me that Jensen loved Richard. I can’t stop wondering if I’m Plan B. If he’s with me because I’m familiar and convenient. What if he came home, saw me and was like, ‘ok, that’ll work for now.’ I keep wondering what their life was like you know? Me and Jensen never had a real adult relationship, they owned property together, had joint bank accounts, they traveled and did all these adult, mature life decisions and shit. All I want to do is go up to him and ask him if he would have chosen me if things had been different.”

“Don’t do that, Jared.” For once, Omundson looked serious.

“I need to know.”

Omundson walked over to Jared, he took hold of his arm and pulled him with him over to the stable, sinking down on the ground he made them both sit down, knees bent, their backs leaning against the stable wall, the sun warming their faces.

Omundson kept his eyes straight forward as he spoke, his voice void of it’s usual teasing quality.

“I was like you when I met Jeff, he was such a mystery.”

Jared closed his eyes as the sun warmed his face, his body thirsty for the strong light after so many months without it.

“What was he like?” Jared kept his eyes closed and his head leaning against the wall as he spoke.

“Jeff came here three years before me and you two were already a thing when Jensen brought me home.” He could hear Omundson scratch and then stroke his hand over his beard.

“Broken like you wouldn’t believe and not only from the war but his childhood and family too. When he wasn’t fighting his PTSD, he was battling his own conditioning. Jeff was a recruit from the moment of his birth, not a child and his father wasn’t a parent, he was a drill instructor. At five years old he expected Jeff to wake up, get dressed and have his bedroom ready for inspection by six o’clock every single morning. Have you ever tried to make your bed to Marine Corps reglementary standards as a five-year-old? It’s impossible. I’ll never be able to understand or even imagine what he had to live through in Iraq. But I’m convinced his diagnosis stems as much from how his father treated him as from what happened there. After we moved in together, I used to unmake the bed every morning after he had finished straightening the covers and making sure the corners were perfect. I’d pull the covers and comforter loose and leave them in a heap in the middle of the bed. It drove him crazy but in time he stopped making the bed.”

It wasn’t difficult for Jared to imagine what Omundson told him, he could see the standoff happening in the bedroom. Jeff’s large, steady hands smoothing the quilted cover over their bed making sure it was flat with the same perfectionist attention to detail he approached every task he ever took on. And then Omundson, running into the room, freeing it from the perfect corners and dragging it into a rumpled mess. It wouldn’t surprise him if Omundson had stood up and jumped around on the bed as well to make sure it became as creased and unkempt as possible. He could feel a silent laugh flutter in his chest as he imagined Jeff observing the spectacle with a look that turned more and more yielding for every morning that passed. There was no way to stop Omundson’s unwavering spirit and lust for life, he never gave up.

“Did he know he was gay when he first came here? I mean, his home environment doesn’t sound like a it had a Pride flag waving on the porch.”

Omundson looked at him, eyebrow raised. “He knew, it’s something that’s hard to not notice about
yourself, as you well know. That part has never been an issue. When Jeff decided he didn’t want to die. That the life he could have was so good it made it worth working through all his shit to get there, it was like he embraced the sides of himself that had always been pushed down. If you look at him now he’s like a walking, talking middle finger to everything that was drilled into him.”

Jared opened his eyes, squinting at the sun. “It’s hard to imagine Jeff like that. He’s so stable you know, a rock.”

Omundson smiled a little. “It’s been a long road to get there. He’d already worked through the worst part when you came along. There’s no magical cure for PTSD, you can learn to manage it and have an everyday, normal life. But you can’t unlive the trauma you’ve experienced and you can’t avoid all triggers. Coming here to The Phoenix, staying here is what helped Jeff. This place and the people here are as far away from most of his triggers he can come. I don’t think he would have made it anywhere else.”

Jared nodded, one side of his mouth rising as he gave a half smile. “That seems to be a recurring theme for most of us.”

Omundson nodded. “True. But back to the reason we were talking about Jeff. The first few years I asked nothing, he was having a hard enough time as it was containing his bad memories, fighting to manage his PTSD. But in time, it became manageable, and it stopped affecting our life to where I thought little about it. The better he got, the more curious I became, so I asked, in a gentle way. At first he ignored it. Then he played dumb pretending he didn’t understand my hints. So I asked more direct questions and he would deflect them. One night, I asked about his time in the war again and he said, if I had to know, he’d tell me. But I wouldn’t like what he had to say and did I really want to know how many people he had killed. Not if he’d killed, but how many. He told me to think it over, because once he told me, I would never look at him the same way again. If I wanted to know, I should ask again and this time he would answer. That was twenty years ago, Jared. I still haven’t asked. I know who he is, why I love him and I don’t want to know what he did with the Green Berets. Over the years I’ve pieced things together, he’s told me some but not all, far from it. When we started seeing each other he never stayed the night, I thought it was because he was afraid to connect emotionally but it was because most nights he had nightmares that would wake him up screaming and drenched in sweat and the look in his eyes when I tried to calm him, the terror.”

Omundson stopped for a second like he needed to collect himself and then looked at Jared.

“My point is, don’t ask questions you don’t want answered.”

Jared ran a hand through his hair exhaling in frustration over the situation he was in.

“My situation doesn’t compare to you and Jeff. I want to know.”

Omundson pressed his lips together as if annoyed, like Jared was a child that wouldn't listen when you tried to explain something, but then they relaxed and he put on a patient expression.

“Why?”

Jared opened his mouth to answer but closed it again when no words formed.

“What difference does it make? He’s here with you now. Life isn’t an easy, straight forward line. Everyday the tiniest most insignificant choice we make can change the outcome of our entire life.
Turn left, meet the love of your life, turn right, die in a car crash. Jensen is here because of a series of choices he’s made, you might not see them, but they’re there. By the sound of things Jensen had an awesome life is San Fransisco, he could just as well have called one of his friends there for help. It would have made a hell of a lot more sense than driving all the way to Colorado in the state he was in. But he didn’t, he came home.”

Jared sighed in defeat, picking up a strand of fresh spring grass he wound and unwound it around his middle and index finger, his eyes hypnotized by the movement. “I want him to love me more.”

Omundson put one arm around Jared’s shoulder. “I know you do.”

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“That is messed up.”

Jensen moved a little, sinking further down into the hay, his head coming into a more comfortable position on Jared’s arm. He had his other arm held up in front of him, his hand holding the photo of Lily.

“It’s a scary likeness though, I mean the eyes, mouth, cheekbones.”

Jensen’s fingers played with the buttons on Jared’s shirt. “I know, right?”

Jared put the photo back down in the shoebox lying beside him and said, “Fifty grand or you, that’s so wrong. Bitch!”

Jensen inhaled and Jared added, “Sorry. I don’t know how to act. I mean, I don’t want to make this harder than it must already be but... Bitch!”

Jensen huffed out a sigh, ”Yeah.”

Jared’s hand reached over and settled around his waist. “How are you feeling about all this? Your head must be all over the place after the two days you’ve had.”

Jensen turned to the side and pressed himself closer to Jared’s warm body.

The hayloft at The Phoenix Ranch was more for show than out of necessity. Like most ranches and farms they’d long ago opted for other types of feed for their animals and they used shavings on the floors of the stalls not straw. But they’d kept the large hayloft stocked with mountains of loose hay perfect for their guests to play in or spend a few hours lying down in contemplating life. It was part of the experience they provided it was also empty when they had no guests.

That was something Jared and Jensen had always used to their advantage. When they were children it was a great place to play, as teenagers it was a great place to make out. A little older it was a great place to make out and more, even though hay isn’t soft and nice when you’re naked, it’s ends are sharp and will make you itch. Also, it offers no support what so ever. But apart from enjoying themselves PG-rated or not, this was the place they’d wasted away hours and hours talking about life, dreams, anything and everything. This was where they first kissed, where Jensen said he loved Jared and he said it back. When they fought this is where they made up. So it wasn’t a surprise that this was where Jensen ended up after his long conversation with Colt and it was even less of a surprise when Jensen heard footsteps climbing up the ladder.

He knew Jared would come.

“I really don’t know. I think I have to let it all sink in for a few weeks before I know how I feel about
it all.”

He could feel Jared's hair tickle his face as he nodded and said, “Yeah. I’m here though, I hope you understand that. When it’s sunk in, I’m here.”

Jensen could hear Jared's heart pounding against his ear and he felt the same hesitation in his body as he had the night before, like he wasn’t sure he belonged anymore. When he looked at things from Jared’s perspective Jensen could understand the uncertainty. Richard coming here, watching Jensen break down as he left.

“Jared.”

Jensen could feel Jared's long fingers playing with the hem of the henley he was wearing, his knuckles stroking against the bare, thin skin covering his hipbones.

“Yeah?”

Jensen wet his lips, fingers leaving the buttons and coming up to wrap a few strands of Jared’s messy hair between them.

“It would always have ended like this. I wouldn’t have chosen Richard a second time. I always loved you more. Always.”

Jared went still beside him, breath held until he finally let it out in one long exhale as his entire body relaxed under Jensen's hands.
Chapter 13

Bella follows her developmental markers like clockwork and one day just shy of her turning seven months Jensen looks up and realizes that his baby isn’t where he put her. On the last day of May, Bella learns to crawl and Jensen’s peace has ended. For the next twenty years or so. There are eight men on The Phoenix Ranch, eight sets of eyes, eight sets of arms and still, she’s somehow eludes them all and turns up right beside the fireplace, under the stove, or halfway out the door. It’s incredible how stealthy and sneaky a seven-month-old baby can be. Jensen doesn’t understand how people do this by themselves, he’s never been so grateful for his large extended family.

The season begins in June and the ranch becomes crowded with people, both guests and seasonal employees. There’s the usual families looking forward to bonding time, the rowdy gang of guys getting away for some proper man-time, everyone at the ranch biting the insides of their cheeks while looking at their smooth, well-manicured hands and the expensive brand jeans. Then there’s the women, lot’s and lot’s of women in groups, looking for the natural splendor of muscular Colorado cowboys and a few days of nice riding, horses optional. The problem is that, of the eight cowboys at The Phoenix Ranch, four are gay, two are widowers and not in their prime. Colt as always, puts on his old wedding band and mentions Kim as often as he can. That leaves Chris, and Chris doesn’t play where he sleeps.

It’s harmless and Chris and Jared, because they have no shame, have fun with it. There’s a lot of low slung jeans, white, dirty tank tops that show off muscled arms and ride up at just the right moment to reveal sharp hipbones and glimpses of defined six packs. One afternoon Jensen almost fell off his horse when he was in the middle of showing the basics in western riding and looked up to see Jared walking over the yard, shirtless, a saddle slung over one shoulder, his skin already tanned, jeans so low on his hips it was almost obscene. The muscles in his upper body rippling under his skin. Jensen had to grip the horn of his saddle to not slide off. He steadied himself and shook himself out of it then looked up to save face in front of his class, only to notice that Jared’s had the same effect on everyone else and no one was looking at him. Jared was though and his smile was cheeky as he winked at him.
Jensen planned his revenge and after class he found Jared in one of the storage barns and got him on his knees. When it was Jensen's turn he was agile and fast enough to get out of Jared's reach and apologize for whatever he did. Jared mentioned how he'd love to help him out, but there were time constraints and all, maybe later.

Jared's eyes were dark as Jensen backed out the door.

Chris is no better than Jared, there’s a lot of twang, man-hair, sultry smiles and yes mam’s. One morning Chris walked by, his tank top hanging out of his back pocket, upper body bare and Bella in his arms. Jensen now knows what it sounds like when eight women's ovaries explode.

Chris messing around backfired in a spectacular way since Alona happened to be home that day. She looked at Chris, then at the women then back at Chris and her brown eyes were so intense Jensen could see Chris take a step back. She walked right up to him, her voice calm but filled with a steely determination as she said,

“I get off at five on Friday, I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Chris tried in vain to play stupid but before he could say too much, he was interrupted.

“Seven, Chris.”

Chris looked slightly nauseous as she walked off.

In the midst of feeling overwhelmed by his wild child, and tons and tons of emotional drama, Jensen got a small sense of satisfaction that was not the only one looking overwhelmed and slightly tussled by life.

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Alona’s been in love with Chris since she was thirteen years old. She was seven when he came to the ranch, but back then he became more of an older brother type then anything else. She was busy being a little cowgirl always in her daddy’s shadow following him around.

Then came the illness. Twelve-year-olds are not stupid, even before they told her, Alona knew. Could tell in the thick, heavy feeling in the air, her mom’s pale face and the surrounding silence, her dad's blue eyes’ red and scared. Alona knew that something was wrong.

Cancer is an ugly disease. All illness is unpleasant but cancer eats you up from the inside, your body betraying you and the only way to fight it is to hurt yourself. To inject poison into your veins and let them dose you in radiation that wrecks you from the inside out. Alona remembers standing in the doorway, the sound of her dad's trimmer reverberating in the room as lock after lock of her mom's beautiful, long blond hair fell from her head down onto the kitchen floor. To this day, Alona keeps her eyes glued to the hairdressers mirror, her insides cramping up if they stray by accident and glimpse blond hair on the floor.

It took nine months, nine months for her proud, strong, spirited mother to wilt before her eyes and die. Nine months of seeing her in pain, her dad emptying buckets of vomit and carrying the woman who once was so strong around the house because she was too weak to get around by herself. Alona knows she fought. Fought with every single ounce of will she had but her body, the mutating cells inside of it, were too strong and she lost the war.

On her thirteenth birthday they had a big party. Her mom was so pretty, they’d found a good wig with long blond hair, Grandma May had helped her draw perfect eyebrows, put on fake lashes and brushed bronzing powder and rouge on her face to help with her pale complexion. Her dress had
been so beautiful as her dad had spun her around. It would have been the perfect mirage if her dad’s hands hadn’t been so tight around her waist, hinting that he was holding her up.

It had hit her then, right there blowing out candles and cutting cake, she had understood that this was for her. One last good memory before her mother died and left her. She’d snuck away, pretending to head for the bathroom but when no one was looking she’d slipped into the stable heart racing as she’d leaned against the wall trying to get control of her shaking body.

“You lost?”

Alona remembers the way the evening sun had shone in through the slight opening in the stable doors, hitting the side of Chris’s face, bathing it in a golden light. His intense blue eyes focused on her.

“No.”

He had leaned against the stall door beside her. “You need to get back out there, girl. She’s waiting for you.”

She’d lost her temper, the maelstrom of emotions inside of her surfacing. “Why, so we can all pretend? I’m young not stupid, Chris. I know she’ll die, this party will not make me feel better about it.”

His voice had been so soft, “This party isn’t for you, Alona. It’s for your mom. Because she will and she wants to celebrate her daughter’s birthday before she does. She will not get to celebrate another one.”

It was the first time someone dared say it to her face, to tell her the uncensored truth. She remembers taking a deep breath, swallowing hard and then nodding to him and walking back to the party. She’d celebrated as hard as she could, smiled, laughed, kissed her mother’s cold cheek, thanked her for her presents over and over telling her how perfect they were, how this was the best birthday ever. Her performance had been Oscar worthy.

That night when all the lights went out one after another, Alona had gotten out of bed and snuck outside. The open space by the fire pit was still set up for the party, long table and chairs, string of fairy lights hung over it twinkling, the dying fire still giving of warmth, embers glowing orange. An old battery driven radio had still been standing on the table and she’d switched it on, keeping the volume low. She’d broken down there, crying until she felt like she’d throw-up right over Grandma May’s favorite blue and white checked vinyl tablecloth.

A warm hand on her shoulder had startled her, lifting her tear streaked face she’d seen Chris there, face serious and eyes compassionate. She’d all but attacked him the way she’d dived right into him, her arms encircling his waist, holding on as she’d burrowed her face hard into his shoulder. He’d sat there, holding her for god knows how long. At some point he’d stood up, lifting her with him, her thin gangly legs fitting around his waist. Still crying she’d lifted her head from his shoulder not ready to go home yet. A light hand had urged her head back on his shoulder as a quiet voice whispered.

“A girl’s got to dance on her thirteenth birthday.”

She lost all concept of time that night, wrapped up in his arms crying as he moved to the soft music flowing out into the night air. At some point she must have fallen asleep because she woke up in her bed the next morning with no recollection of how she got there. She was still in her birthday dress a blanket lying over her. When she opened her eyes there was a single blue mountain flower on her bedside table and Alona knew right there, that she would marry Chris.
Alona’s love for Chris has never been childish, never blushing cheeks and stuttering words. It’s been a constant in her life when everything else has been chaos. She’d understood right there at thirteen that she had to bide her time. That nine years was a big age gap when you were that young and that Chris would never ever look at her like anything but a little girl for a long, long time yet. So she’s been patient.

She kept it as a comforting blanket to wrap herself up in during that first awful year after her mother's death. It was there deep inside of her through every teenage romance, every college relationship. It was always there in the darkest, softer corners of her soul waiting, reminding her that John and Patrick and what’s-his-name were only the practice round, rehearsal for the real thing she was waiting for.

Her love for Chris is what's kept her strong during med-school, got her through mountains and mountains of books and late nights as an intern at the hospital. But, Alona is thirty-three years old and Chris is forty-two, the age gap is now in her favor. She’s accepted the loss of her mother, finished her education and moved back home to Colorado. She’s all grown up, and she’s getting really tired of waiting for Chris to get over whatever his issues are and just grow a pair already.

So, when she saw him standing there, Bella in his arms and droves and droves of horny women drooling all over him, she lost it. Alona adores Bella and Jensen is the closest thing to a brother she has. But if Chris is going to insist on being hot and irresistible, walking around with a baby in his bare well shaped arms, it should be their baby, not Bella. And if that means Alona’s the one who will have to have the balls in this relationship, so be it.

Alona’s been waiting for Chris since nineteen ninety-six, she’s done being patient.

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Friday at six-thirty Chris paced back and forth on his porch, one second walking inside and shutting the door only to yank it open the next and walk back outside. At seven, Alona’s blue pickup truck drove to the edge of the hill where Chris's cabin stood. Jensen held his breath as he looked on from the dining room patio doors, so engrossed in the scene in front of him that he jumped when a voice sounded in the room.

“What are you looking at?”

Jensen looked back and met Jim’s blue eyes, he couldn’t think of a good answer other than spying, so without answering he turned his face back to the scene unfolding up the hillside. He could feel Jim come to stand beside him, his head turning the same way as his own, coming to rest on the scene unfolding.

Alona had climbed out of the car, her lithe body dressed in a short blue dress with a big, pink rose pattern. Over it a short dark blue, denim jacket. She had a wide, braided leather belt with a large silver buckle around her slim waist A pair of high brown leather boots on her feet and her long blond hair was, for once, hanging loose and curled at the ends creating a beautiful mess of strands down her back.

Chris was still standing on his porch as she walked around to the passenger door of the car and opened it, then stood still, waiting. They were too far away for Jensen to tell if they were talking, but he doubted it. This was one of those defining, life changing moments that had no need for words, only a choice.

Jensen felt his heart speed up as Chris moved, walking down the porch stairs one after another. His movements slow but there was a challenge in the way his body moved. He came down to stand right
in front of Alona and the open car door, it felt like an eternity standing in the shadows watching them silently observing each other.

At last, even from the distance he stood at, Jensen could see Chris’s entire upper body expand as he took a deep breath, exhaled and then got into the car.

“Well that was about damn time!”

Jensen let out a spontaneous laugh at Jim's exclamation, who looked at him shaking his head a little.

“I’ve been so damn grateful to Chris that he’s kept his distance, that he's let her become an adult. But I wasn’t expecting him to take this damn long. I was getting worried she’d tire of waiting and go find herself some fellow doctor far away from here.”

“So you’re ok with it, with them?”

Jim scratched his beard a far away look in his eyes, “I would always have been ok with it. Alona is a lot smarter than me and a better judge of character. From a selfish perspective, this is the best that could have happened. I know Chris, I know he’s good enough and loves this ranch. He’ll never leave it which means Alona will never have to choose between love and home. But…”

Jim looked out at the darkening sky. “We all want to think that when our children needs us, we’ll be there. Be the ones to protect and get them through whatever is hurting them. When Callie got sick and then passed, I wasn’t enough. I couldn’t be there for both Callie and Alona and keep myself standing all at the same time.”

“Jim, you can’t-” Jim held up his hand and shook his head a little.

“I did the best I could. As much as we might want to believe it’s true, being a parent doesn't give you superpowers. I did all I could but I know it wasn’t enough. Chris did the rest. He doesn't talk about it, Alona doesn't talk about it, but I know that when Callie was sick and after she died when Alona needed to cry and I was too tired or drained to have the strength to comfort her, she went to Chris and he gave her what I couldn’t.”

Jim went silent for a moment as they watched the blue pickup truck disappear.

“I love that boy, so no, I don’t mind.”

He turned his face to look at Jensen, a sudden humorous glint in his eyes as he said, “Now all we have to do is make sure neither of them does anything stupid. I’m sixty-six years old, I want grandbabies before I'm too old to enjoy them.”
Half a day’s ride down into the valleys below the ranch through winding mountain trails towards Black Mountain and the Staunton State Park, lies The Phoenix Ranch permanent camp site.

The land isn’t connected to the rest of the ranch, lying a good way off, right at the border of the state owned park. The Great Depression hit Colorado hard. Even though the Ackles family and it’s ranch far up in the mountains and forested areas never came close to the despair and horrors of the people having to live through the Dust Bowls hitting the plains in the southeast of the state. Years of never-ending drought and poor, overly harsh farming leaving no vegetation to keep the soil bound to the ground and the Black Blizzards - dust storms covering everything in a thin layer of black soil - it resulted in.

But still, “The Dirty Thirties” were hard on everyone but Bess knew all about poverty and hardship. Together with Amos and Montana and their children, she and Tim kept the ranch going, if not thriving than at least surviving. This piece of land had been abandoned by one family who didn’t survive and Amos bought it cheap as summer grazing land for the cattle. These days The Phoenix Ranch herds of cattle are small, no where near the size needed to make a living on it. They’re there for the guests and tradition and they keep Chris’s freezer full with beef from their own land.

What was once only open space and a small shack for storage of supplies is today a comfortable camp far away from civilization. There’s eight spacious canvas tent cabins standing in a large circle. They all have roofed wooden frames, floors and doors and old fashioned cast iron wood burners to heat them during the colder months. Inside are real beds, with thick fluffy bedding.

In the middle of the circle is a large fire pit with seating all around it. To the side is a paddock with a roofed structure for the horses to take shelter in, in case of bad weather, and a storage building. Beside it stands a rectangular building housing a storage shed and four basic bathrooms with compost toilets and wood-heated showers.

It’s kind of high maintenance for camping in the middle of nowhere, but their clientele are not the
hardy type. They want it to appear that they’re one with nature but with all the comforts of modern life.

In the middle of June the first group has booked a night in the camp, Jared and Jensen leave a day before the planned group, going up to get the camp ready and in order after a long winter of not being in use.

They’re not in a hurry, riding in a comfortable pace up the mountain side, letting the two pack horses with them take it slow under the burden of supplies they’re carrying. They reach the clearing an hour after lunch and they steer their horses towards the shallow river right before it, clear water flowing over the pebbled bed underneath it.

Jensen always gets a little excited coming up here, the world feels so far away, like modern civilization doesn’t exist. It’s like nature becomes more pronounced, the mountains seem a little higher, the snowy peaks whiter. The trees long limbs seems to spread wider and the long grass untrampled by human feet so long, the green so much more vibrant. Every sound, scent, color and feeling grow amplified by the lack of electric lights or the constant buzz of cars on a nearby road. There are no distractions, leaving a place for every sense to experience the world without filters.

Orion must agree, the way his whole body twitched and then suddenly broke out in joyful leaps bouncing around in the shallow water towards the other side and the vibrant green grass. Jensen was unprepared and at Orion's first joyful high bounce, the back of his body lifting high in the air as he kicked out with his hind legs Jensen lifted out of his saddle and did an ungraceful nosedive over Orion's head down in the river below.

It’s not even close to a bad fall, only an embarrassing one. Coming out of his slightly stunned shock Jensen could see Orion galloping on light feet in the long grass, while Jared’s hysterical laughter sounded behind him.

As he lay on his back on in the shallow water, Jensen could feel it’s icy cold as it flowed downstream. Jared’s body was hanging down over one side of his horse, the violent laughs forcing him to bend over, Jensen flipped him off which only made him laugh harder. Orion, having realized Jensen wasn’t with him came trotting back, at least having the decency to look a little apologetic as he leaned down and gently butted his head against Jensen. He tried to scowl but failed, instead cupping Orion’s face and placing a kiss on the soft muzzle.

“You silly boy. Go on then, go play.”

Orion trotted away again on light, happy hooves, tail swinging. Jared, still laughing, passed Jensen and rode his own horse and the two packhorses to the other side, releasing them into the paddock where he rid them of their packing and saddles, calling out for Orion so he could free him from the saddle.

Jensen braced himself on the pebbled river bed for leverage as he tried to get to his feet, he could see Jared making his way over to one tent, dropping off their things and opening both the front and back to air it out. The stones were too slippery and the soles of his boots gave him no grip and he fell back down again. He let out a frustrated sigh and threw his hands in the air. He felt an urge to rid himself of the uncomfortable feeling of wet clothing clinging to his body, and yanked off his shirt and the tank top underneath it, throwing them onto the riverbank. He let his body sink back down in the stream, his arms stretched out above himself, feeling the cold water, having traveled all the way from the mountain peaks, pass all around him.

As he closed his eyes, his body adapted to the water temperature. He could hear soft splashes as someone moved in the water towards him, Jared’s voice amused but there was an undertone to his
voice Jensen hadn’t heard before,

“You look like a sacrifice.”

Jensen opened his eyes, meeting a pair of dark ones, his throat moved as he swallowed hard, the muscles in his stomach clenching. At a quick glance, Jared was like he’d always been. Loud, boisterous, quick to laughter. But sometimes, they’d have a conversation or Jared would do something to remind him that the Jared he used to know, the mischievous boy, the lively teenager, the restless unrooted young adult he was, had been replaced by a man. There was a kind of dug in, unwavering confidence to him.

Jared was an adult, not the young adult he’d known but a grown man. He hadn’t had time to get to know that side of Jared and he wasn’t sure if that made him feel uncomfortable or intrigued. There was a whole galaxy of unknown behind Jared’s dark stare and Jensen wasn’t sure if he wanted to remain safe on earth or let himself get sucked into the black hole.

“Yeah well, lucky for me there's no God to worship around.”

“Honey, you can worship me all you want.” Jared's grin was wide, two rows of white teeth visible. Jensen squinted as the sun shining behind Jared made his outline blurry and huffed.

“In your dreams.”

Jared kept grinning, “Yes it is. I dream about it a lot.”

Jensen rolled his eyes holding out one hand. “Just help me up.”

Jared tilted his head and with laughter in his voice he licked his lips and said, “Say, please my Lord.”

Jensen scowled. “How about you help me up and I won’t kick you in the balls.”

“I always knew you were a godless heathen.”


“And the magic word is?”

“Now, asshole.”

Jared pursed his lips, making a tsking sound, as he stretch out one hand to Jensen and said,

“We must work on your manners, darlin’.”

Jensen took the outstretched hand but at Jared's words he made split second decision and when he had a good grip, instead of heaving himself up, tugged hard making an unprepared Jared tumble face down into the water beside him.

With Jared flailing and trying to get control of his body in the water, Jensen could get enough leverage to heave himself up on his feet in perfect timing to Jared turning over on his back. He a pushed a few wet strands of hair out of his face as he looked at Jensen, a dangerous glint in his eyes, voice steady and restrained.

“Oh, you’re gonna get it now, Boy.”

As he faced Jared's dark intense stare, Jensen felt his stomach lurch and without thinking about it
gave him a mock salute while backing away, large grin on his face saying,

“I doubt it. You’re all talk, Padalecki.”

Jared's eyes narrowed into slits as the sun’s glittering light bounced of the water surface, a stray ray of light hitting Jared's face making his white teeth stand out, his canines appearing sharper than usual.

Jared unfolded his large body in a slow, smooth motion and shrugged out of his dripping shirt, tank top following. As his wet, bronze upper body came into view, pearls of glittering water covering it, Jensen’s pulse sped up and he swallowed hard as it once again became obvious grown-up Jared had an excess of muscular definition. Jensen exhaled as Jared once again lifted a hand and ran it through his wet hair, the muscles in his arms tensing and relaxing with the movement, the deep groove at his hipbone becoming more pronounced as his upper body stretched along with his lifted arm, the wet jeans clinging on his narrow hips. Jensen felt his mouth go dry and his tongue came out to moisten his lips.

Jared took one step forward, one foot landing on the muddy riverbed. Jensen ran.

Jensen felt his side's threaten to cramp as he ran across the endless open field, he could hear Jared’s harsh breathing close behind him, a little closer and he would feel it at the back of his neck. He ran as fast as he could, laughing as he tried to make fast jerks and movements that would keep him out of Jared’s reach. He hoped his lighter build would give him the edge, making him faster than Jared’s heavy body because Jensen knew without a doubt that if Jared caught him, he’d have the upper hand. Jensen was tall and strong, but Jared surpassed him in height, bulk and strength.

With his other relationship and temporary partners he’d always been the stronger, more confident one. With Jared there had never been a competition. Even if Jared's growth spurt hit early and he had always been taller, there had never been that much of a difference in size before. Jared had been gangly, arms and legs everywhere with no control at all and even when he grew into his body he was still lean and thin. Now, he was not.

It was a strange feeling admitting to himself that he would be the weaker one if caught. There had always been a maddening attraction between them, chemistry. But in their earlier relationship there had never been these hints of power play that Jensen could sense now. It wasn’t a fight for dominance or a battle of who should have the last say. The relationship that was evolving between them now was more stable than it had ever been and the two of them more attuned to each other's feelings and needs than they’d been capable of as teenagers or adolescents. It was a game. The two of them prodding each other to see how much had happened during their time apart, a way to find out how far they could push each other and where their new boundaries were drawn.

His lungs burning he tried to keep his pace, hoping the next step would be the one that finally knocked the wind out of Jared. But one small miscalculation, one veer to the left when he thought Jared would go right and then didn’t, made him lose his head start. The air whooshed out of his lungs as Jared got a good grip around one arm as one foot slid between his own making him lose his balance and Jared got Jensen flat on his stomach on the ground, arms stretch out behind his back as Jared straddled him, hands around his wrists.

Jensen's nose filled with the damp scent of earth as newly risen, thin strands of grass tickled his face as it laid turned to the one side on the ground. Jared was heavy on top of him, his grip around Jensen's wrists tensing and releasing, fingers flexing as if struggling with himself. With his chest rising and falling in rapid, staccato movements Jensen felt his body pressed even closer to Jared's every time his lungs forced it to expand.

Jared shifted on top of him, leaning down over him, his face came down close. Hot, small bursts of
air came dancing over his naked skin as Jared’s mouth made it’s way to right beside his ear and Jensen waited for some victorious, teasing words to come. But he stayed silent and Jensen shivered as the air around him changed, the previous playful lighthearted atmosphere becoming charged and heavy. Jared’s fingers tensed around his wrists again as Jared finally spoke,

“No more running, Jensen.”

A sound of metal rattling followed by a sharp, drawn out sound, confused him and it took Jensen a second or two to realize that it was the sound of a belt being opened and drawn out of the loops of a pair of jeans. Still, he wasn’t prepared when the band of wet leather settled around his crossed wrists. He could hear himself let out an audible pant, the quick burst of air out of his lungs making it seem that the leather being pulled tight and then buckled had gone around his lungs and not his wrists.

Jensen swallowed, trying to ease the dryness in his throat, his mouth opened and closed around words that never came. Jensen felt a large hand smooth it’s way up his spine all the way to the base of his neck where it came to rest, the fingers curving to fit around the base. Right at that second vivid images entered his mind of Jared gripping him tight and fucking him right there, his face pressed into the ground and his knees getting stained by grass. Jensen wasn’t prepared for the overwhelming sense of arousal that hit him as the scene unfolded behind his closed eyes.

Jensen did his best to shake himself out of it as he heard Jared’s voice once again,

“If you have anything to say, say it now.”

Jensen felt his lips move, but they formed no words and not a sound passed them. The weight on top of him lifted as Jared stood up. Jensen felt two hands grabbing him under his arms pulling him to his feet. The hands switched their grip coming to rest on Jensen's shoulders turning him around so he came face to face with Jared. His eyes were smoldering.

“You could have said no.”

It was true. He could have said no, but he hadn’t, his lips parted but once again no sound made it past and Jared leaned down and claimed them instead. When he pulled away Jensen legs were shaking.

Jared changed his grip, one hand on the leather strap and the other on Jensen shoulder as he walked them to the camp. Jensen felt detached from his own body, like the part of him that would never have put up with this stepped out and was standing a little to the side observing what was happening. Left behind was a small voice that reminded him that what he let other people do and what he let Jared do, were two different things.

Coming up to the circle of tents, Jared walked into the nearest one and positioned Jensen so he stood with his back to him facing the large bed. Jared’s face came down to nuzzle at the groove in Jensen neck as his hands traveled down, unbuckled Jensen's belt, unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans before pulling them down, which took some work considering how wet they were. Jared made him step out of them and then, without warning, Jensen found himself face planted on the bed, ass high in the air as Jared forced him on his knees, upper body almost bent in half with no hands able to support it.

He felt a hand running down his side. “Beautiful.” And tried to turn his head to look at Jared but it was impossible in the position he was in and yelped as he felt teeth sinking into the flesh of one rounded globe.

“Delicious.”
“Jared, what the…” Jensen got no further before a palm came down right over the place Jared’s teeth had just been.

“No. You had you’re chance, no talking.”

His chest rose at his rapid inhale. “Jared-” The next slap was so hard it made him rock forward, a sharp, surprised sound passing his lips as one large hand settled in his hair, Jared leaning over him,

“One more time and I’ll gag you.”

Jensen's mouth snapped shut. He could feel Jared's lips dragging against the back of his neck curving into a smile. He shivered as Jared’s fingertips slid down his sides, bumping over every rib just under the surface in the position he was in. His mouth traced a pattern all the way to the base of his spine, Jensen let out another hard sigh as Jared bit down again on his other cheek.

“There, now they match. Looks good on you.”

Jensen opened his mouth a cuss threatening to come out, but he caught himself at the last moment, mouth snapping shut. Jareds hands now resting on his hips tensed and released.

“You always were a fast learner.”

An arm found its way in between the tight space under his elbow snaking it’s way around his waist until it came to rest right at the base of his throat. The wet leather around his wrists strained as Jared wrapped the end of it around his free hand and pulled, the hand at the base of his throat helping to to keep the pressure of his shoulders. Jensen upper body lifted off the bed and came up so he was kneeling on the bed, back bent backwards in a tight curve so Jared could lean down over him, tilting his head to the side to claim his lips. Jared’s mouth was hot and unapologetic as it sucked, bit and took everything it wanted.

The hand around his throat left its place and slid down, lower and lower, Jensen strained against both the hand and the leather controlling him, his hips trying to tilt forward urging Jared's hand to keeping going. Jensen moaned when one large hand closed around him collecting the tiny beads of wetness at his tip to help ease the way as it began a lazy rhythm. Jared's breath was hot against his neck, his palm rough as airy moans spilled from Jensen's mouth. Jared’s slow rhythm wasn’t enough and Jensen used the little slack he had to push his body forward, wanting to push into Jared's hand increasing the speed. But he was reined in, the leather chafing as Jared pulled him back flush against his own body.

“You don’t set the pace, I do”

He should rebel, tell Jared to stop and fuck off. That he didn’t get off at being controlled and all that new muscle had gone to his head. But it was so quiet. All those conflicting voices, those two warring parts of him that he was trying to mold into one person, instead of two separate ones, were silent. All he could hear was the canvas of the tent rustling when a gust of wind hit it, his own moans and far away, Jared’s voice. His head was so quiet.

It was so easy to let his muscles relax and become moldable, to lean his head back against Jared’s shoulder as he worked him, his tight hold on the leather like an anchor, not a restraint. Here in this crazy, tumultuous time of his life when he felt like he would tear at the seams Jared was holding on tight making sure he stayed in one piece. When the pull on his arms lessened, Jared's hands releasing the strap Jensen felt a wave of panic come over him that spilled over into his voice,

“Don’t let go.”
He felt Jared still behind him, his body pressed so close, rigid, his own heart beating at a furious pace,

“If you let go, I’ll fall apart. You can’t let go.”

It was like his words flipped some inner switch, the way Jared let out a cry half of relief, half growl and then everything else stopped. The hold on the leather tightened again, the space between them once again becoming non-existent as Jared used his now free other hand to wrap around his neck and bent Jensen backwards again for another filthy kiss before letting go and in a swift fluid movement forcing Jensen forward and back down into the bed his body once again prostrated before Jared.

As a jean clad knee pushed between his thighs nudging his knees apart Jensen closed his eyes, his body once again relaxing, sinking into the mattress. Jareds hands were impatient, a desperation in them Jensen thought he might understand. But not now, now everything was quiet. His thoughts and feelings still like the surface of undisturbed water and he didn’t want to create any ripples or waves, interrupting this restful place.

His head turned to the side, Jensen's line of view centered right between the open ends of the back of the tent, outside the afternoon sun was low on the sky poised right above a high cliff, it looked like it had laid down there to rest for a while. As the blossoming meadow in front of him swayed, Jensen wondered if it was the grass or him that moved. His body that rolled back and forth as Jared worked him open, one hand tensing and releasing the leather giving him enough slack to follow Jared’s pace.

His hands were so demanding. He could hear his own harsh pants and sharp cries as he went rough and deep and still Jensen felt so light. Jared's steady hold freeing him from having to have all the answers, everything figured out. He could just exist inside this void where nothing besides him and Jared mattered.

When the pressure began Jared didn’t give him long to adjust or take time to build up some pace, it was brutal from the beginning. His lungs emptied of all air with one harsh, drawn out yell as Jared's free hand came up to grab his hair. Soon his scalp tingled and his arms ached from the harsh treatment, Jared’s powerful thrusts forcing his body forward and rough hands pulling him back again.

Jensen's lungs burned, it seemed like he could never get enough air in them, like he didn’t have time to catch his breath at all. Jared's pace was punishing and ruthless the way it didn’t give him any reprieve. His climax came without warning, white dots forming in front of his eyes as every muscle in his body tensed, through the blood roaring in his ears he could make out the echo of his own scream.

He felt like he was floating, somewhere in the tiny space of his mind aware of what was happening around him, Jensen felt himself dragged up. Jared kneeling on the bed behind him, sinking so deep. The hand in his hair moving to rest in a demanding grip right under his chin, tilting his head up and to the side so Jared's moans could travel from his lips into Jensen mouth.

Jared’s climax was quiet, Jensen could feel the tremors racking Jared's body but there was no scream, no yell not even a moan only a silent choked out.

“Jensen.”

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It was the sound of indignant nighing that brought him back to the surface. His arms, now free, were...
lying at his sides, as he laid on his back under the covers. Pressed close he could feel Jared's heat.

The horses protested again and Jensen could feel an elbow in his side.

“The horse are hungry, go feed them.” Jared's voice was rough and sleepy.

Jensen yawned and stretched his aching body, “Can’t. Dead from orgasm.”

Jared hummed. “Yeah, and I did all the work, so go feed them.”

Jensen kept his eyes closed and huffed in amusement but his words were slow and slurred like as he spoke. “Jared, I just let you tie me up and fuck me rough. I ain’t moving.”

Jensen's eyes opened as he felt the bed move and then Jared’s face was above his own, his eyes were tired but sparkled and he had a sultry smile on his lips as one hand stroked a few stray hairs from his forehead.

“You did, are you gonna let me do it again?”

“Are you going to feed the horses?”

“I might.”

“Me too”

Jared grinned, “I will.”


Jared's only answer was a grin.

Jensen stretched again as Jared half stumbled out of bed, Jensen felt a little smug that he wasn’t the only one who felt a little unsteady. With a sigh of regret Jensen watched him pull out a pair of spare jeans from his pack and drag them on. His sigh must have been louder than he intended because as the jeans traveled over the firm roundness he turned around his hands working the buttons a small laugh in his voice,

“What was that?”

Jensen turned so the sheet covering him came to rest between his legs, one lying flat on the bed the other slightly bent at the knee. He sank further down on the bed and stretch his arms behind his head, making his upper body arch as he felt tired muscles and joints pop. Coming down flat on the bed again he let his arms bend and come to rest bend his head, watching Jared push the last button through it’s hole.

“I was thinking it’s a shame to cover all that up.”

“What do you want me to do, walk around the paddock in only my boots?”

There were bubbles of contentment floating around in his chest, one escaped and traveled up his throat coming out as a small, happy laugh, Jensen put on his best innocent face and said,

“Would you? For me.”

Jared looked at him, one eyebrow raised, then he shrugged his shoulders and shimmied out of his
jeans and then pulled on his boots. His answering laugh was delighted as Jared’s naked behind disappeared out of the tent. Jensen moved around on the bed and laid down on his stomach, the sheet falling to the floor. Chin resting on folded arms he had a perfect view of Jared, walking into the paddock wearing nothing but his beaten up old boots. Colorado truly was full of natural splendor.

It didn’t take long, but Jensen enjoyed every minute of Jared walking around doing chores in nothing but his birthday suit and a pair of cowboy boots. When he came sauntering back into the tent Jared toed off his boots,

“Have fun?”

Jensen, still on his stomach turned his head to look at him.

“I sure did.”

Jared smirked, and then before Jensen could react he was on his back, his legs spread and bent around Jared’s waist as he leaned down over him, hands around Jensen's wrists stretching his arms above his head.

“My turn.”

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The fire was dying down, embers glowing red and orange in front of them as Jared sat leaning against one log used as a bench in front of it, his legs bent and spread, Jensen between them, back leaning against Jared's chest.

“What did you mean?”

Jensen felt Jared's arms tighten around his waist, the slight puffs of air from his breath at the side of his neck.

“What?”

Jared's voice was quiet, everything around them pitch black except the fire and the starry sky above them.

“When you said that you’d fall apart if I let go, what did you mean?”

Jensen bit his lip, his hands covering Jared's playing with one of his thumbs.

“I don’t know, it’s…” He stopped, trying to find the right way to explain something he didn’t understand yet. “It’s like all my life I’ve been compartmentalizing myself to make sure everyone got the part of me they needed and that my own needs didn’t upset anyone. Not because any of you ever really asked me to do it, I just have. But it’s not working anymore. I have these two versions of myself and I’m trying to combine them into one person. But it frightens me, what if one of me won’t be enough for everyone? These two parts of me are pulling in different directions, and if I can’t bring them together I feel like I’ll tear at the seams.”

Jensen stopped again moistening his dry lips before continuing, voice gone soft and quiet.

“I love everyone back home, I can’t imagine a life without them, without the ranch. I’m home and this is where I want to be even if I still haven’t got everything figured out. But, you’re the only one
who doesn't make me feel I’m the one that has to make the right choice. Like if I came to you tomorrow and said I can't do this let’s leave, you’d come with me.”

Jared’s arms tightened even more around him, “I would, Jensen. You know I would.”

“Yes, I know. That’s why I need you to hold on. Because you're the only one willing to make a choice instead of waiting for me to make one.”

“It’s not a choice.” Jensen could feel Jared leaning his face against the side of his head, his mouth at the rim of his ear. “It’s never been a choice. It’s always been you. I’m not gonna say there haven’t been others, we’ve both loved other people. But you’ve always been the endgame, Jensen. You’ve always been the one. The rest is practical shit that we can figure out, but you, it’s not a choice, it’s…it just is.”

Jensen felt his insides cramp so tight he had to pull himself out of Jared’s hold, turn around and straddle him so they could kiss and they tumbled into each other again.
“So?”

“So, what?” Chris voice was gruff, and he kept his back to them both as Jensen and Jared sat at the small kitchen table looking at him.

Jensen sighed. “So, how was your date with Alona?”

Chris scowled as he placed a large plate of cake in front each of them, Jensen suspected it was so they’d have something other to do with their mouths than to ask questions. “Don’t you two have something more important to do? Where’s Bella, isn’t it snack time?”

Jensen smiled and shook his head. “Snack time was an hour ago. Bella’s having nap. She just fell asleep so we have a good hour or two. Plenty of time to go through all the interesting details.”

“Jensen, eat your fucking cake and shut-up.”

Jared laughed at Chris's frustrated, slightly flustered face and said, “Honey, don’t be that way. Have you set a date yet?”

Chris threw a dish towel at him. “We’ve been on one date, Jared.”

Jared laughed again, catching the towel and throwing it back at Chris. “Yeah, but it’s not like normal dating is it. I mean you guy’s have known each other since she was seven, she’s been in love with you for what a good twenty years and you-”

Chris interrupted. “Twenty years ago she was thirteen, Jared!”

Jensen dove into the conversation again, “We know, it’s obvious you took longer to get there. But you can’t deny that you’ve been thinking about Alona as something other than a little girl for a good couple of years now. She’s thirty-three, Chris.”
“I know that. I’m just saying it hasn’t been a thing for twenty years.”

Jared took over again, “That wasn’t what I was saying. My point was that when other people date, they have this whole period of getting to know each other, meeting family and all of that. You and Alona don’t have that so it’s not like you need two years of casual dating to figure things out.”

“Figure what out?” The three men in the room turned to the doorway and the distinct female voice coming from it.

“Kim!” It was Jensen's voice, he quickly got out of his chair and walked over to the slender, short haired brunette standing on the threshold who as soon as he was in her reach, dragged him into her arms squeezing him tight.

“Babe!” Soft but strong hands came up to grasp his face.

“Give me a kiss.” Jensen did, smacked his closed lips against hers. “One more!”

Jensen leaned back looking at her. To an outsider Kim must appear hard, with her short hair styled in a long, wild pixie cut and the dark brown eyes, standing out in her white face. Big silver hoops in her ears, tight fitting black leather jacket over a black top and black skinny jeans, the outfit topped off with a pair of heavy black biker boots. Kim might look like a biker chick with a switchblade hidden in her pocket, and back in the cutthroat business world she inhabited, she was. But at The Phoenix, Kim was soft.

“What are you doing here? You never come up this time of year.”

Her hands were warm on his face as she answered, “I know, but I had to come to make sure dickwad didn’t scar your pretty face.”

She turned his face side to side as she inspected him. “Looks ok, he’s lucky. One tiny scratch and I’d have hunted him down and cut his balls off.”

Jensen winched, Kim noticed and looked a little apologetic.

“Sorry honey, I know it’s a little more complicated than that. But as your part time stepmom, it’s my prerogative to not give a shit and hate his no good, son of a bitch face.”

“Damn right!” It was Jared's voice, Kim let go of Jensen and moved over to him, dragging his long body down she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with a loud smack on the cheek. “Hey gorgeous. Jensen have any new scars anywhere else I need to know about?”

Jared shook his head. “No.”

Kim grinned. “I’m trusting you did a very thorough search.”

Jared grinned back. “As often as I can.”

Her laugh was unapologetic and untamed. She turned to Chris, hugging him and then, with his arms around her faking a collapse so he had to hold her up, while she leant her face on his shoulder looking up at him through lowered lashes, “Chris, I’m starving. Feed me.”

Chris laughed his low, husky laugh and put her down on a chair before he grabbed an empty plate and lifted lids on the large number of pots and pans all around him.

“So, I ask again. Figure what out?”
Jensen sat down again opposite Kim, Jared leaned against a counter behind him, out of the way of Chris' movements. Jensen dove into the conversation again, bringing Kim up to speed as he said, “Chris and Alona have been on a date.”

“You’re shitting me.” Kim’s eyes were wide as she looked over at Chris. “I thought you’d never grow a pair and ask her out.”

Jared grinned. “He didn’t. Alona had enough of his shit and almost threatened to castrate him if he didn’t go. She even picked him up, held the door open for him and everything.”

Chris looked like he wanted to murder them all. Slowly.

“That’s my girl!” Kim’s smile was wide, and she ignored the icy stare Chris gave her as he placed a plate of food in front of her. “So, how did it go?”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to get out of him.” Jensen looked at Chris and continued, “But he won’t answer. He’s being vague and evasive.”

“Chris, are you being difficult?” Kim had a teasing tone to her voice, “If you think you and Alona dating is going to be a private affair you’re so out of touch with how this family works, it’s ridiculous. You people couldn’t keep your noses out of each other’s business if your goddamn lives depended on it, you more than anyone. So, don’t be a fucking hypocrite and give us the good stuff.”

Chris scowled and turned away facing a counter, pretending to be busy.

Kim ignored his obvious body language and continued, “Babe, we’re not going away. Let’s start with something easy. Where did you go?”

They saw Chris’ shoulders rise and fall as he sighed. He poured himself a cup of coffee and then turned around, leaning against the counter.

“There’s nothing to tell. We went to Tom’s bar, had some beers, listened to a band and shot some pool. That’s it. It was no big fuss about it so give it a rest, all of you.”

Kim smirked as she answered, “Right, so considering the kind of people you and Alona are, it was a perfect night.”

Chris rolled his eyes in frustration, hand running through his loose hair. “Jesus enough, I’m going out to the garden.”

Kim laughed, Jared and Jensen looking on in amusement as she said, “So, when are the two of you doing it again?”

Chris removed the white apron tied around his waist with jerky movements and looked over, as he stomped over to the door he answered, “Tuesday.”

Kim’s cackle followed him as walked out the door.

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“Jensen, she’s beautiful.”

Sunk down into the old rocking chair standing in one corner of the nursery, Kim leaned her face
down into Bella's head, closing her eyes and inhaling through her nose.

As he let his eyes roam around the room Jensen felt touched at the work his dad and grandpa had done to put this nursery together. There had never been enough children in the Ackles family to keep a permanent nursery. There were always people in need of a bed and having a whole room standing set up for babies that weren't there, wasn’t practical.

Jensen figured it was an emotional decision as well. It wasn’t a secret that Mays pregnancy with Colt had been difficult and that she and Lance had been discouraged by doctors to try for any more children for the sake of May’s health and safety. Jensen knows that was always a sore spot in what was otherwise a happy marriage. But things tend to work out the way they’re supposed to. If there had been more children, Lance hand May might not have taken in Chris and Jensen can’t imagine the ranch without him.

Jensen is sure Colt would have wanted more kids as well but for obvious reasons that didn’t happen. During Jensen's entire childhood Colt had been the most eligible bachelor in the whole of Jefferson county. Jensen remembered fractions of conversations he’d overheard during visits to town or other social gatherings. Women of all ages sighing as they discussed the subject of Colt Ackles, stoically raising his son by himself after being abandoned in such a cruel, heartless way. As the conversations would progress the subject would ever so subtle, flow from how wonderful, responsible and loving he was, to an appreciation that tilted to the more natural side of his attributes. That’s usually when Jensen, mortified and with cheeks burning, would stop eavesdropping. So meeting someone new shouldn’t have been difficult for Colt, he had every single woman in Jefferson county, and some willing to become single, standing in line. But having a marriage end the way he had with Lily, being left like that, would put most people off from trying again.

Then there’s him and Bella, it’s not unthinkable that Bella would get a sibling. Jensen loves being a father and if it had been easy, he would gladly have one or two more children. But, even though it’s possible, it’s a difficult and expensive process. It was worth the money, no doubt. But again? Jensen's not so sure. So, for various reasons, there haven’t been a lot of children at the ranch.

Still, the nursery might not be a permanent feature but it was laden with history. The plain and beautiful chair Kim was rocking Bella in was made by Tim for Montana when she was carrying what would be his namesake.

The simple crib had held every baby in the family since Amos. The quilt in it sewn by Josephine and the blanket around Bella crocheted by May. The old, beautiful rocking horse in the other corner of the room had been loved since Jameson bought it, Lance, Althea, Colt, Alona and Jensen had all contributed to the wear and tear but, there was nothing wrong with it, it’s wasn’t shiny and perfect, but it had character.

There were new additions too, it’s obvious Lance and Colt got a little carried away, judging by the amount of plushie horses, the bookcase filled with toy horse models and stables from a brand Jensen knew was expensive.

There was a mobile over the crib, glittering, white winged horses hanging from it. A large water globe, doubling as a nightlight and a music box with a sparkling unicorn inside, standing on the small table beside it. Jensen realized that he would have to work hard, very hard, to make sure Bella didn’t get spoiled.

He watched Kim again, her cheek leaning against Bella's head and Jensen felt a pang of guilt.

“Kim, do you think you and Dad's relationship would have been different if he wasn’t still married to Lily?”
As she met his gaze Kim didn’t look surprised, confirming what Jensen already knew, that Colt had talked to her about the conversation he’d had with Jensen.

Her voice was calm as she asked, “Different how?”

Jensen, who had been leaning against a wall walked over and sat down sideways on the rocking horse.

“Dad was only twenty-five when he had me, forty when you met, you were only thirty-two Kim. I mean, it wouldn’t have been strange for Dad to start over and have kids with you. So, did Lily make it difficult for you to start a family of your own?”

Kim smiled a little, shaking her head. “Jensen. First off all, say that it had, it still wouldn’t be anything you have to feel guilty about or take responsibility for.”

Kim took a breath and continued,

“But, it didn’t. The only impact Lily’s ever had on our relationship is the life lessons your dad learned from her. It made him smart and strong enough to handle me and that’s not an easy thing to do.”

Kim rattled the colorful jumble of plastic rings in her hands, the girl in her lap giggling and reaching for them.

“Before I met your dad, I was sure I would spend my life alone, my love life being easy hookups and casual relationships. That’s how my life worked and that’s how I liked it. Your dad was not part of the plan at all. I freaked out when I met him, I thought I would become a cliché. Either I would be one of those women who give up their entire lives for love or the opposite and be that woman who gives up love for her career. But, your dad he didn’t force me to make that choice. With him I’ve been able to have my career and our relationship. Not in the conventional way, but our way. I never was the maternal type Jensen, your baby is lovely, but I never wanted one of my own. Your dad, this family, it’s so much more than I ever imagined myself having and it’s enough for me. Colt not divorcing Lily hasn’t affected us.”

Jensen nodded to himself, Kim wasn’t the person to sugarcoat things, you accepted her or you didn’t, either way she stayed as she was. She didn’t lie or compromise herself to fit in. She was also a little too perceptive for comfort.

“Why are you asking?”

Jensen looked at her, no matter how understanding people said they where, Lily would always be a sensitive subject but Jensen figured if anyone would listen without judgment or discomfort, it would be Kim.

“I don’t know, I’m thinking about trying to find her. Not because I need her I... I’d like to meet her, see who she is. I’ve been so conflicted about a lot of things, I thought maybe if I meet her I could understand... me. If that makes any sense.”

“It makes sense. Don’t worry about anyone else, if you want to find her, do it.”

Jensen looked at the baby squirming in Kim’s arms tired of their babbling.

“Don’t tell Dad, ok?”

Kim frowned as she looked at him. “Jensen...”
“If I decide to find her, I’ll tell him. But there's no point putting him through that agony if I change my mind or I can’t find her.”

She didn’t look happy about it, but Kim nodded her consent.
At first look a busy kitchen is chaos. Pots and pans everywhere, heat coming from both oven and stove. A chopping board of ingredients here, a pot of spices there. Dishes in the sink, dishes on the countertop, always a hand short.

It’s an illusion, there is nothing more organized than a kitchen. Everything has its place, there’s an order, rules that can not be broken or the soufflé will not rise. The imagined chaos is temporary. When the food is cooked, the dishes will be washed, the surfaces cleaned. When you turn off the lights everything is shining, every pot, pan and ladle in their place.

Chris knows chaos, it’s not temporary. Chaos is living in a constant sense of unpredictability. How many people will be passed out in the house today, how many will stand in line to his mom’s bedroom? Who will leer at him instead of her and will he have to fight them off?

Who will overdose, who will get paranoid and who will soil themselves all over the couch?

A few dishes in a sink isn’t a mess, it’s a sign of love and warmth. Dirt has a way of sticking to everything. Give it enough time and it’ll seep into the grain of a table, lay itself like a thick, sticky mass over everything, the white walls becoming yellow when the cigarette smoke seeps into it. A mess is your mattress damp when you lay down at night, you put a towel over it, close your eyes and breathe through your mouth, to tired to think about where the wetness comes from. Your hand holding the baseball bat under the pillow in case someone mistakes you for your mom.

It doesn't matter how hard you try to wash your clothes, rubbing them between your hands under running water, the fabric drenched with liquid soap stolen from the McDonald's bathroom. The second you hang it to dry the filth seeps into it again.

Then there’s the constant stress. The people all around you always hustling, always trying to score anyway they can. Cheat, lie, steal, kill, anything and everything is allowed for one more dollar, one step closer to the next hit.
It’s been twenty-six years and Chris can still scent the stench of filth, urine and his own desperate longing for a way out. His plan had been the army, survive until eighteen and enlist, there was no other way. Dad a stranger, probably any random guy on the street. Mom a junkie, too far gone to turn her life around. Everything always filth and chaos.

Then they came. Lured down by false promises of a horse that didn’t exist. A nice middle aged couple, the man's voice kind and joyful, an easy mark. He sat a little on the side, back leaning against the house wall as the pack of rabid beasts advanced on them. Chris had sympathized with them as he looked on, his lips drawing tight at the stale taste of the week old takeout, nothing else in the fridge and no money.

They’d all been so wrong. He was strong as a bear and she had a shotgun in the backseat. Chris remembers looking on as people scattered at the sound of the first bang. Junkies aren’t brave, they're weak, pathetic creatures, barely human. An amused, desperate laughter had passed his lips at the absurdity of it all. He remembers them looking over and he’d laughed even harder, laughed because they would get back in their truck, old but clean and cared for, and go home to some place that probably was nice. He would still be here and he knew he wouldn’t survive until eighteen. He’d crumble like everyone else around him, become like them, sub-human. Falling to the side in a heap on the ground he’d laughed and laughed until he didn’t know if the tremors in his body where laughter or a drawn out scream that was too intense to come out in one piece. Instead forcing it’s way out in small bursts.

A hand of the back of his neck made him look up, eyes locking with warm brown ones. She never told him what she saw staring into his own blue ones, but after a few moments of gazing a thumb had come out, running over a week old bruise on his cheekbone, her eyes becoming unclear as big tears filled them and then fell over the rim. His laughter had transformed into a hurt nonsensical sound, like a dog beaten too many times, whimpering at the sight of a shadow. She had cried even harder, her sobs mixing with his intangible whine that grew louder as he came to stand over them. His big hand reaching down under her arms pulling her to her feet, her back so straight. Her face looking up as he towered over her.

“We’re taking him with us.”

Chris’s insides had twisted into knots, impossible, he knew that and the man, so strong would never, he wouldn’t.

“Alright.”

The hands on his body were strange. He was so used to fighting them off, reminding people with his fists that he wasn’t for sale. His muscles tightened as he readied himself for a fight but the chance that, maybe... That whatever happened, it was impossible for it to be worse than this, made him force his muscles to keep still, to not lash out. His legs had trembled as he was pulled to his feet, steady arms keeping him upright as they led him to the truck. As he collapsed in the backseat, his head landed on something, a lap, soft hands coming down to stroke his hair and Chris wanted to tell her to stop. That there hadn't been shampoo in the house for years and that his filth would rub off on her, but it felt too good.

The man's voice sounded from the driver seat.

“What’s the plan, May wanna go to the motel?”

“No.” Her voice had been short. “I wanna go home. Please drive us home, Lance.”

It’s a nine hour drive from Cherokee, Oklahoma to Evergreen, Colorado. Hitting Route 281 you pass
the state line into Kansas. Right before the town of Russell, you drive onto Highway 70 and then straightforward for another five and a half hours. After Lincoln, you pass another state line into Colorado, driving through Denver, the mountains casting their shadow over the city. And then finally into the roundabout at North Turkey Creek Road and onto the compact dirt road that leads to the two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres of The Phoenix Ranch.

It’s a nine hour drive, to Chris it was journey from chaos to order.

As they drove out from the trees and into the open space of the ranch, the sun had hinted at sunrise, the sky at the base of the hills a dusky azure instead of the deep blue of night. She had led him through the door, past dark hallways and rooms that smelled like lavender and freshly picked lilacs and into the kitchen, her hand on his shoulders pushing him down on a chair. Then the range had come to life, and she molded into the room, becoming part of it. When Lance came in, car and horse trailer put away plates of food, egg, bacon, pancakes and fried tomatoes appeared in front of them.

“Honey, do you want blueberries or maple syrup on your pancakes?”

Staring into the plate of food he’d waited for Lance to answer, when none came he’d looked over to the side where May stood looking at him, waiting.

His lips tried to find the right shape to an answer a question that was unfamiliar.

“I don’t know.”

That answer got him half a bottle of syrup and a bowl of blueberries dumped all over the mountain of pancakes in front of him. That first bite, the eruption of flavors in his mouth set the tone for the rest of that strange morning. The sensation of walking into a clean bathroom, warm water in the shower, shampoo and sandalwood scented soap washing off layer after layer of grime. The pajamas on the counter when he got out, the burgundy color faded, the sleeves and legs too long but the cotton soft and clean. Real sheets on a bed that wasn’t a urine stained mattress on the floor, pillowcase just come down from the clothesline, still smelling like mountain air and sunshine. As his eyes drooped, he wished he’d never wake up again, that he could fall asleep, hunger sated, body clean and warm and not have to open his eyes and figure out the catch. What the price was for all this or even worse, have it all snatched away again as they sent him away in the morning.

He did wake up. With regret lingering at the back of his mouth he’d tried to steel himself and opened his eyes only to stare right into the pair of the greenest eyes he’d ever seen.

“Hi!”

There was a tiny person kneeling on his bed, face bent down over his. The eyes grew larger, sparkling in excitement as Chris looked back, taking in the face. Healthy tanned, freckled skin, a mop of untamed strawberry blond hair falling down over his forehead, straight nose, big smile. It was a face that had no idea there were predators outside his door.

“Hi.”

The smile grew wider. “I’m Jensen, I’m four.”

“I’m Chris. I’m sixteen.” His voice sounded too rough and tired for his age even to his own ears.

“You slept for a really long time. A whole day and a whole night.”

Disoriented he’d tried to take in the information.
“That long? Guess I was tired.”

The boy on the bed had nodded his head. “Grandma May said I should tell you breakfast is almost ready.”

“May is your grandma?”

He’d nodded again, a small frown settling between his eyes as if thinking very hard. Voice serious as he explained,

“She’s my grandma because she's my daddys, mommy.”

“Right.”

He’d sat up in the bed, rubbing the grit out of his eyes. The boy had jumped off the bed and run over to the dresser opposite the bed, pulling something down and dragging it over. He climbed up on the bed again, trying to pull it up, Chris had reached over, grasping what he saw was the handles of a large plastic bag and help him pull it up on the bed.

“Grandma May went shopping for you, I got to come. We bought you a toothbrush, and a hairbrush. We got socks and underwear and jeans and I helped pick out the shirts.”

As he tried to process the worlds falling from the small mouth in a rapid speed, he’d looked into the bag. It was all there, everything he said, the clothes all had store tags on them, not thrift store stickers.

“You should get dressed, Grandma doesn’t like when you're late for breakfast. I'll show you where the bathroom is.”

A small hand had slotted into his and pulled as he jumped down from the bed. Sliding out from under the covers he’d followed, bag in hand, as he was dragged out into a hallway and to the bathroom door.

“I'll wait here!”

He’d only just got his pants on, a white tank top going over his head and a plaid shirt in his hand when he heard a knock on the door.

“Can I come in?”

When he opened the door he’d looked down on the small person standing there almost bouncing, limbs unable to keep still.

“Did you like the shirts?!”

As he looked down at the shirt in his hand, the boy had taken a deep breath, his whole body shaking in excitement.

“You picked the red one! It’s my favorite!”

As he looked into Jensen’s excited face Chris smiled back, it was like the air around him vibrated from his excitement, standing close Chris felt himself sucked into his aura. It was like a thirty foot drop right into a cloud of cotton candy.

“Mine too.”
Then he was being pulled by the hand again, through the hallway and down the stairs. Half way down he heard voices.

“Mom, I’m not doubting your judgment, if you want him to stay he’ll stay. I’m saying you can’t just take a teenager from his home and drive him two states away. The police call that kidnapping of a minor.”

“That wasn’t a home, Colt. It was a cesspool!”

“I believe you. I’m not arguing the fact that he’s here, only that there are legal issues that we need to deal with if he’s staying. I would prefer if you and Dad didn’t go to jail.”

“He’s staying!”

“Allright. Then we need to call Aunt Althea so she can help us make that happen within the boundaries of the law.”

That short conversation helped him draw a map of how things worked, everyone's role. Through those first few months, when he existed in a state of constant euphoria and mind numbing fear, it grew to include the others. May was passion and love, Lance steady and mischievous Colt was the voice of reason, Jim the gruff realist and Omundson the eternal optimist, life one big adventure. Alona, everyone's darling angel, and Callie fearless, claws like a lioness if anyone threatened her pack.

Then there was Jensen. It didn’t take Chris long to figure out that his own reaction to him, the calm that flowed through him, wasn't strange, it was the way it was. Jensen was the heart. The center of the ranch and as soon as he was close everyone sort of gravitated towards him.

If it wasn't for Jensen, Chris would have chickened out and left. Run away when things got hard. The morning May told him he needed to learn how to ride, the day Lance dragged him out to the garage to help him work on a truck, when Colt said they would drive the cattle to the summer pasture, just the two of them alone in the mountains. The day he realized Omundson had had his hand on his shoulder for ten minutes and Chris hadn't noticed, not flinched once. The first time he yelled at May and was sure they would kick him out.

The night they told him he had to go back to Oklahoma and testify in front of a judge, so Lance and May could become legal guardians and he had walked out, too scared. Lance walking beside him for hours talking, how it was all going to be fine, that it would all work out but they had to do it right. But he was too afraid, thinking it was better if he left of his own free will, than being told he wasn't allowed to stay.

And then, Jensen’s voice calling out once, twice, the third time with a tremble and Chris stopped.

It all worked out. With the help of Aunt Althea and her law degree, May and Lance became legal guardians with no objection from the State of Oklahoma and Chris walked out of that courtroom with a new family and a new last name. As Lance’s pickup truck crossed the state line, Christian Kane stayed behind in Oklahoma and Chris Ackles went home to Evergreen, Colorado.

A nine hour car ride changed his life. Now, on a random Tuesday night twenty-six years later a ten minute ride might do it again. Alona is waiting for him at Tom’s bar and Chris's hand is on the ignition key debating if he should turn it or not.

Chris has known about Alona’s feelings for him for a long time, but he had kind of hope she’d grow out of it. He should have known better. Considering what kind of woman her mother was, he should
have predicted that she’d get fed-up and call him out on his bullshit.

It’s not a question of love, Chris loves her, has for a long time. Their first date was good, so good. Chris knows it would be easy to drive to the bar and then drown in her. But if he does this, he’ll throw himself into the unpredictable again and if this all goes to hell, Chris is family but he’s not blood. Chris knows he’s loved, wanted. Knows they would never want to choose but if they had to, they’d have to choose Alona. He’s not sure he’s brave enough to risk everything, this ranch, these people. It's all he wants, all he cares about, he can't lose it.

But, if it doesn't go to hell, if it works out, it has the potential to be so good. Chris could fall asleep every night with a head on his chest and wake up every morning with his nose buried in golden strands. Spend his life with his best friend. Someone who loves this ranch and these people as much as he does, someone who knows him, accepts him for who he is.

The sound of giggling made him turn his head to the side, in the evening light he saw Jensen on the porch, Bella laughing as she rose high in the air on his stretched arms. That could be him, if he only was brave enough, it could be him on that porch.

Fingers twitching, Chris took a deep breath and turned the key.

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Wednesday morning was the same as always, everyone trotting into the dining room one after the other, eyes still tired, arms stretching, mouths yawning. One by one they all sat down in the same spot they always sat, one more chair filled with Kim at Colt's side.

Chris came out of the kitchen, serving trays in his hands, no one offering to help, knowing Chris didn’t like people messing with his kitchen. And then Alona came out behind him, trays in her hands, shirt way too big to be hers. Colt opened his paper, Kim snatching the business section, Jensen spooned food into Bella's mouth with one hand, feeding himself with the other. Jared and Jeff planning the day, Jim, Lance and Omundson talking about a fence in need of repair. Chris came back out with the last trays, everyone helping themselves as he sat down, Colt handing over the sports section without looking.

Alona had a coffee cup in one hand, the other on Chris' shoulder as she leaned on it reading along with him. His hand behind her back, fingers playing with loose strands of hair. It was just another ordinary Wednesday morning.
Chapter 17

The rest of the season whirls by. Jensen spends most of July in a daze. As soon as he gets used to crawling, Bella starts teething and then gets her first ever ear infection and won’t stop crying. Jensen walks round and round in the great room at night, he walks out in the yard to the stables; the horses looking at him in reproach at being awoken by the crying baby.

Jared tries to take over, Colt tries to take over, Lance, Chris and Alona all try to take over, so Jensen can sleep for more than two hours at a time. But he waves them away with irritated gestures and Colt gently herds everyone away saying Jensen knows where they are if he needs them. Jensen rocks her, kisses her, holds her and loves her with everything he’s got, but she won’t stop crying and he would chop off one hand right now if it would make her ears stop hurting. Jensen discusses, argues and one morning even screams at Alona.

“Don’t you think she needs antibiotics?”

“No Jensen.” Alona’s voice was calm and steady. Everyone but Jensen could tell it was her “I’m going to try to reason with a crazy person” voice and her body language was soft as she said, “Doctors have been overusing antibiotics for too long and together with all the antibiotics used in meat production these days, antibiotic resistance is becoming one of the world’s most serious health threats. A simple infection like this will heal itself out with the same efficiency as with antibiotics. All we can do is wait it out and manage the pain and her fever with child tylenol.”

Jensen’s voice was pleading as he walked in circles, rocking Bella who was still crying. “Alona, please.”

“No, Jensen.”

“Alona, you’re being unreasonable.”

“No I’m not.” Even as Jensen voice rose Alona stayed calm and neutral. “You haven’t slept a
whole night since she began to teethe and not more than an hour here and there for four days now, you’re not thinking straight.”

“Alona! Just give her some antibiotics. What kind of doctor are you?! ”

“The good kind, who doesn't medicate her patients when there’s no need for it.”

Jensen opened his mouth again, but Jared cut him off as he said,

“Jensen, enough.”

The crying baby was lifted out of his arms and placed in Alona’s. Jensen blinked and saw Jared in front of him, he opened his mouth while reaching for Bella, but Jared grasped his arms and said,

“Jensen, I love you, but you are mental right now. You're going to bed. You will sleep for at least eight hours and then you can have this discussion with Alona again when your brain is working.”

Jensen’s voice was stubborn as he answered, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Jared ignored him, turning to the others in the room.

“You all go do your thing, Alona, you got Bella for a while? I’m gonna put psycho-dad here to bed.”

Jensen threw out cusses as Jared, hand holding onto his upper arm, manhandled him up the stairs. Once in their room Jared sat him down on their bed, wrestled him out of his clothing and under the covers before Jensen’s exhausted brain had registered what was happening.

“Jensen, sleep. I mean it.”

Jensen protested, throwing the covers aside. “Jared, I’m her dad. She's in pain and she needs me.”

Jared looked at him, running a hand through his hair as if he was debating something with himself. At last he said.

“Jensen, are serious about us or are you planning on ditching me when you’ve got all your emotional baggage sorted out?”

Jensen frowned, blinking as if he couldn’t quite follow Jared's train of thought. “What? No! Jared no. This, us, it’s not something I’m uncertain about.”

Jared nodded. “Ok, so you can see us living our life together, we’re it, for life?”

A slight panic rose inside of him, he and Jared they picked right back up without talking about stuff. He kind of figured they were fine, no need to discuss things that were obvious. They were both home that it was them now was indisputable. He hadn’t even considered they needed to talk about it. He could hear the uncertainty in his voice as he answered.

“Well yeah. I kind of figured that was obvious. That we got all our bullshit out of our system apart and now… If there’s stuff you’re unsure about…”

“I’m not.” Jared's voice was clear and decisive. “I’m not unsure at all, just checking. So you agree that you and me, we’re it?”

“Yes.”

“Ok.” Jared took a deep breath and then continued by saying, “So here's the thing. You’re Bella's
Jensen felt his lips part but no sound came out between them as Jared’s words hit him. It was one of those “oh” moments when something inside of you slots into place and you can suddenly see something clearly. Ever since Richard had signed away his parental rights Jensen had mourned that Falabella, like him, would only have one parent when she in fact had two all along. How many nights the past months had he woken-up only to find Jared feeding or comforting her? When she cried she reached for Jared as often as for him. How could he have missed something so indisputable?

He could hear Jared’s feet shuffling as he stood, his voice unsure.

“I’m not saying we have to draw up papers and stuff right away or anything, I’m just saying I-”

Jared stopped the sentence and Jensen could see his large palm rub at the back of his neck, clearly unsure of the direction he had taken the conversation.

Jensen felt his eyes flutter as his body relaxed and molded to the soft mattress. Something inside of him letting go, because Bella had two dads, she would be fine. His voice was groggy and slurred as he said, “I’m gonna sleep now, you got Bella?”

He could see Jared's shoulders release the tightness that had held them, his face softening and he leant down, fingers gliding through Jensen's hair, damp from sweat at the temples.

“I got her. Sleep.”

Jensen’s lips barely moved as he mumbled, “Ok.”

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Jensen slept until a soft hand on his shoulder shook him awake, opening his eyes he saw Colts face looking down on him.

“Dinner’s ready, come eat.”

As he walked down the stairs and into the dining room, it was like someone had removed a thick hood from his head. He sat down next to Alona, winding his arms around her shoulders, leaning his forehead against her upper arm.

“I’m sorry. You’re a great doctor.”

She kissed his head. “Jensen, you have a nine-month-old baby who didn’t give you any time to recuperate between teething and her first ear infection, you’re allowed to have a meltdown.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“I know. Eat something.”

As he entered through the kitchen door and sat down, Chris turned to him. “Your lawyer friend called while you were sleeping.”

Jensen frowned. “Mark? Wait, he called you?”

At Jensens sleepy confusion Chris smiled and said, “Jared took your phone into protective custody
so it wouldn’t wake you and gave it to me so I could answer if it rang.” He shifted his gaze a second like he wasn’t sure if this was the right time. “Your apartment’s been sold. Mark said Richard didn’t take everything. He left a lot for you that you need to go and either get rid of or take with you. There was bunch of legal stuff too, so you could get your half of the profit.”

Jensen nodded, swallowing the bite of duck breast and roast potatoes. Chris was in the middle of a French faze.

“Did he mention what it sold for?”

Chris scratched his head. “Well yeah, nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

Lance coughed, food swallowed down the wrong pipe. Through bursts of coughing he panted out. “Nine hundred and, Jesus. How big was your apartment and how much of that is profit?”

Jensen scratched his forehead, thinking. “It’s a thousand square feet one bedroom apartment, more like a loft really. But, it’s the Castro district, the prices there are crazy, so it’s still cheap. We bought it five years ago for five hundred grand and then we put around a hundred and fifty thousand into renovations. So, I guess we’ll get around a hundred and fifty each in profit.”

Colt put his fork down on the plate and asked, “How did you even get a mortgage for that kind of money?” Jensen rubbed the back of his neck, uncomfortable at where the discussion was going. This was one thing about his life in San Francisco he hadn’t talked about.

The people at The Phoenix Ranch didn’t have to turn their pockets inside out. The ranch itself was worth a lot more than the three hundred dollars Bess once paid, a sale today would end in seven figures. Not that it would ever happen.

It was on the higher end of the dude ranch market, they did well but they were a frugal gang of people. The profit went back into the ranch, the animals and their savings for bad seasons, better equipment or for when that perfect horse or piece of cattle came along. There was one TV in the main building, everything in the house good, solid quality. Pricy at first but made to last, and it stayed for as long as it did, meaning things didn’t get replaced.

It was a different approach to life and a complete contrast to the flashy, expensive lifestyle Jensen had lived in San Francisco. At The Phoenix Ranch, every single penny was worth something. This ranch and everything belonging to it was hard earned through one hundred and thirty-six years of workdays lasting from sunrise to sunset.

Jensen remembered him and Jared coming home from school angry. Grandma May’s sitting at her table in the kitchen writing numbers in a big book in her meticulous handwriting, her soft voice reprimanding them at their language as they walked through the door.

“We don’t use that language in this house, boys you know that. What could be so upsetting you forgot that?”

They had sat down opposite her, she’s stood up and soon hot chocolate and cookies were in front of them. Jensen talked about how, Brendan at school was moving away because the bank took his ranch. She’d sat down again, her voice had been serious, and Jensen felt grown up as she talked to them, like she knew thirteen was old enough to understand complicated adult stuff.

“You remember this. This ranch has belonged to us since Bess bought it. No bank has ever owned a single piece of it. All of these ranches around us that have to sell or are taken by the bank, they can only do that because the people on those ranches owe them money. There have been plenty of lean
times for us as well, but we don’t go to the bank. We tighten our belts, work harder and wait it out. Never owe people money, boys. If you can't pay in cash, you can't afford it.”

Jensen had no idea how to explain the different life he’d lived away from this place, his and Richard’s lifestyle.

“Dad, when we met Richard had already established a good reputation as a literary agent. He had a good client list who had a fair share of bestsellers, over the years that list grew and then an author he represented got a deal to turn one of his books into a tv-show. When I made the deal with Richards company, my career took off. I was good at my job, and I climbed the company ladder fast. So, between us we took home around a hundred and sixty, a hundred and seventy thousand a year.”

Colt looked at him. “Are you saying you made eighty thousand dollars a year?”

Jensen nodded. “Closer to ninety, more if you count in the bonuses I got whenever I brought in a new big client. In San Francisco property is business, you buy as cheap as you can and fix it up. Try to add as much value as you can, for as little money as possible. You live there a few years until the market's good, sell and make a decent profit and then you take a step up on the property ladder and do it all over again. It’s an investment.”

“It’s a gamble.”

Lance’s words weren't a chastisement, only a statement. Jensen nodded. “Yeah and one most people have to take. There’s few people born into the inheritance we all got.”

Lance nodded and said, “True. It would do us all good to remember that a little more often.”

“Speaking of counting our blessings.” It was Jeff's scratchy voice and Jensen turned his head to face him where he sat at the other end of the table as he asked, “When are you thinking of going to San Francisco?”

Jensen swallowed another bite. “I haven’t really gotten that far. Why?”

Jeff, plate empty, leaned back in his chair, long arm stretched out along the backrest of Omundson's.

“I’ve talked to my guy at the veterans service office over in Denver. We’re done selecting the people for the new course. I figured since you’re back full time you’d be on board for the full course.”

“Yeah.” The course was a thing Jeff had started. Inspired by his own experiences he’d figured that if he could treat his PTSD by being around horses and on this ranch, why couldn't others? He and Jensen had got talking about it and Jensen had been so excited by the idea, throwing himself into research. The reading they did made it obvious they weren't the only ones who’d got that idea. The clinical term was Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy. Jensen’s first summer home from college, the two of them had taken a certification course, becoming certified Equine Specialists

Through that course they came in contact with a therapist that was getting certified as well, but as a Mental Health Specialist. Jeff had gotten in touch with the Veterans Affairs office in Denver and that September Jeff had invited five veterans and their families to the ranch for a week. Together with the therapist he worked with them and their families. Over the course of the next eight months they would come and stay for a weekend a month ending with one more weeks stay in May. Jensen had always made it a priority to come home for at least a few of those weekends.

The change in the veterans and their loved ones was so incredible to watch. The living room wall in Jeff and Omundson’s house was plastered with cards, photos, and letters from the people he’d helped. The therapist was great, Jensen did his part well too but Jeff had the first hand experience
they lacked. The true understanding of what they felt, smelled, heard and saw when an attack came. Watching a six foot five, two hundred and fifty pound mountain of muscled Marine curled up in Jeff’s lap, crying like child, was a surreal experience but something Jensen had become accustomed to.

“When are we starting?”

Jeff took a mouthful of the coffee that had appeared on the table as Chris had cleared it.

“First week of September.”

“We’re doing the first week in the mountain camp?”

Jeff nodded.

Chris came out holding a pie, putting it down and then walked out again with a wave as he said,

“I need to check on the guest kitchen, we’re serving Moules Marinières, gotta make sure the morons don’t poison our guests with bad mussels.”

Omundson, voice was teasing as he said, “That would be the culinary students you handpicked from your old school among two hundred applicants? The ones you’ve been training for months and who all think you’re a culinary god and would have promised their firstborn to the Devil for a chance to work in your kitchen, those morons?”

Chris grinned as he backed out the door and left them with a cocky, “Exactly.”

“Why don’t you go down to San Francisco next week.” Colt was looking at him from over the rim of his raised coffee cup. “Take Jared, have a few days off and enjoy yourselves, we’re not fully booked, we can cope without you.”

Jensen squirmed in his chair. “I don’t know, Bella’s only-” He got no further before he could hear Lance’s voice,

“Jensen, don’t even try. Bella has lived more than half her life with us, she will be perfectly happy without you for a few days. No one’s suggesting a five week trip, we’re talking three, four days. Take Jared, get your affairs in order, get drunk and sleep in.”

Jensen made a last vain attempt at protest, earning him a sharp. “Boy!”

Jensen admitted defeat and looked over at Jared.

“So, you wanna go to San Francisco?”
It’s easy. Jensen had imagined it to be hard, that he’d have to search for months or maybe even years, but it’s so easy. There are nine Lily Ackles on Facebook and only one of them has green eyes and auburn hair.

Staring at the profile picture she’s still incredibly beautiful. Her page isn’t private, he can roam the page at will and he does. With his heart pounding he opened her “About” page and steeled himself as he clicked on the family tab. He’s not sure how he’ll react if there’s a new family there, other children. He couldn’t look, pacing the room back and forth he kept his back to the phone he’d tossed on the bed.

“What are you doing?”

Jared’s voice was curious and amused as he looked at him from where he stood leaning against the doorframe. Jensen kept pacing, biting his thumbnail, a bad habit he thought he had kicked years ago.

“Can you look at the open Facebook page on my phone, what does it say?”

Jared looked confused and opened his mouth to no doubt ask what Jensen was on about, but Jensen snapped at him,

“Jared, can you just look at it!”

Eyebrow raised at Jensens tone, Jared walked over to the bed, picked up his phone not asking for the security code as he typed it. It was the same one Jensen had used for everything since he got his first ATM card.

Jared said nothing as the security screen faded and the Facebook page appeared in its place, but Jensen knew him well enough to see the exact moment he pieced it all together.

“Well?” Jensen pronunciation was unclear, his teeth gnawing at his cuticle.
Jared's voice was serious as he lifted his eyes to met Jensen's, but void of any opinion. “Are you sure you want to open this door?”

“I have to know.” Jensen's voice was quiet. “There's something restless in me Jared, it's dormant right now but, what if it comes back? I don't want it to, I'm happy here. If I meet her, I might figure out that part of myself, what I'm looking for. What does it say, does she have a family?”

The tip of Jensen's thumb came back into his mouth as Jared nodded and lowered his face to screen. His heart was beating so hard he thought that if he looked down, he would see his chest jumping.

“No, no family, looks like there's never been one. No photos of kids or anything, just her in pictures from all over the world, it looks like she gets around a lot.”

A breath he hadn't noticed he was holding rushed out of his lungs then right back in as Jared's disbelieving voice said.

“No way.”

“What?”

Jared looked up at him, running his free hand through his hair. “I looked at her `life events´ to see if it mentioned being in a relationship but... shit.”

His thumb left his mouth as both of his hands came up, one hand grasping the other above his head, his eyes getting dry, unblinking and blown so wide.

“Jared, what!?”

Jared's free hand was over his face, fingers spread as it dragged down over the face coming to a stop at his chin. One finger resting at the base of his bottom lip, like he was readying himself to cover his own mouth.

“There's a post that says…” Jared took a deep breath before continuing, reading out loud.

“June 30th 1986: Moved to Castro, San Francisco.”

The color drain from his face. “She doesn't still live there, right?”

Jared's look told him all he needed to know. Hands still above his head his fingers laced together.

“Does it say were?”

Jared nodded. “Oakwood Street. Do you know it?”

“What? No, no that's just, no. That's right by the Tartain bakery. Me and Richard had brunch there every Sunday for five years. This can not be happening. I can not have lived in the same city as my mother for ten years, five of them a fifteen minute walk away. God. Fuck her!”

Turning round and around on the spot he stood, his lungs expanded as he drew in a deep breath, holding it in until his they ached.

“How many times have I seen her, has she seen me, did she understand who I was?”

There are fifty-two Sundays in a year, times five the number is two hundred and eighty-five. Every single one of those Sundays flashed before Jensen's eyes, his head whirled from all the faces
spinning round and round in his head.

“What if she saw me Jared? We look exactly alike if she saw me she must have known. Did she see me and walk away? I mean, god, did she walk away from me again?”

On the few occasions Jensen had talked about her or confronted the fact that his mom left him, it’d been like bungee jumping. He’d jumped and dived head first towards ground below but right before hitting it, a rubber band had stopped him from tumbling down into the emotion. Now the band snapped and Jensen felt like he was seconds from crashing against the pavement.

His skin was raw when Jared’s large hand grasped him, pulling him in, long arms winding around him holding on tight. Jared. Jared would catch him, Jared would hold onto him. Jensen hands shook as they reached for his belt, fumbling as he tried to get it open and out from its loops.

“Jensen, no. Stop.”

Jared’s large hands grasped his wrists pulling his hands from the belt.

“Jared.” Jensen didn’t recognize his own voice. “Jared, please. You have to hold on to me.”

“I will.” Jared’s hands pulled on his, urging them to wind around Jared’s waist, before grasping Jensen’s face between them. “I’ve got you. But that, the belt. That’s for fun, for pleasure. This is not fun, and it’s not pleasurable. This is you, at last, confronting that she left you. The woman who gave birth to you and was supposed to love you more than anything else on this planet, blackmailed your dad for fifty grand and left you. You don’t have to be ok with that, Jensen. It’s supposed to hurt”

“Really? Jared, both your parents abandoned you and you seem to handle it damn well.”

“Jensen, Jesus.” Jared let go with one hand letting it caress it’s way up his face, fingers gliding through his hair before settling at the back of his head. “Is that what you think? That I handled it well. What do you think all that restlessness, that anger I had after High School was about? Do you really think it was about you and me? I had to crash a car piss drunk though a barn wall and spend three years beating the shit out of steel with a hammer, to process my own parents.”

Jensen’s fingers ached from the tight grip they had on Jared’s shirt.

“You wanna find Lily when we’re in San Francisco, we’ll do that. But first, accept that it’s ok for you to be mad at her. If you don’t, meeting her will break you.”

He drew a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah, ok. Yeah.” Jared lets his arms come down to wind around him, pulling him close as Jensen tried to even out his breathing.

“Did you look them up?” Jensen’s voice was muffled, his forehead leaning against one of Jared’s shoulders. Jared's hair tickling his cheek as he shook his head.

“It was different for me. She left when you were a baby, you know nothing about her. My parents is a different story, if you asked them they would say I was the one who left them, it’s pointless.”

“Aren’t you curious though, I mean you have five younger half-siblings, don’t you?”

“Not really. I mean, I think if I hadn’t had all of you, if May hadn’t reacted the way she did. If Colt hadn’t all but adopted me, it would be different. Maybe I would have needed a family to connect to, but I do have one. Me having that accident it really made me understand that.”

“How?”
Jared pulled away from Jensen and sat down on the floor pulling Jensen with him, together they sat with their knees bent, backs against the bed, Jared’s left hand holding on to Jensen’s right one. His voice was serious when he said,

“I shouldn't have walked away from that accident, the car was trashed. All I got was a few scrapes and bruises, a light concussion. Colt and Lance came to the hospital eleven hours after I was admitted and usually it’s almost a twelve hour drive from here to that part of Oklahoma. I didn't call them, I was too ashamed. But the hospital did. It was surreal. I was expecting Lance to be furious and Colt to be stern but reasonable, but Lance was quiet, didn’t say a word. When he came in, he looked at me and sat down on my bed holding my hand and Colt he lost it, he screamed and screamed, he was so angry. I’ve never seen him like that.”

Jensen tried to imagine the reaction Jared was describing, but couldn't, Colt didn’t scream.

“When he stopped, his face was white, drained of all color and then he came over to the bed and hugged me for like ten minutes. I thought he’d crack my ribs.”

Jensen's fingers laced with Jared’s as he leaned his head on his shoulder. “They love you, Jared.”

“Yeah, but up until then I’d always thought it was a conditional love, that I was here because I was important to you. It hit me then that their love didn’t come with any conditions. I mean when it came to our relationship and who you would end up with, they’ve always been in my corner. That made things difficult for Richard, he never got a chance because they’d already made up their minds who they thought was right for you. But that night in the hospital and everything they did after to keep me out of jail, it really hit me that even if we didn’t make it as a couple, I’d still be family.”

“Of course you would.”

Jensen’s head slid off Jared’s shoulder as he moved to look at him. “No, Jensen. To you. To Lance, May and Colt, yeah but most people don’t do this. Most families are not like this one. They don’t take in a veteran with PTSD or become legal guardians of some sixteen-year-old kid they picked up at a crack house or semi adopt a ten-year-old because they think his parents are assholes. That’s not normal, Jensen.”

“That might be true, but I couldn’t imagine this ranch without you all here.”

Jared slid one arm around Jensen, pulling him close, his head coming to rest on Jared's shoulder again. There was no sadness or longing in Jared's voice as he said,

“I don’t need those people. They were just over twenty when they had me and they’d both passed thirty when they had all of those other kids. What if they were a lot happier in their new relationships and better parents for it, why confront them? I’d mess up those kids impression of their parents for something I don’t need. I have a family.”

Jensen lifted his head again, he pulled on Jared's shirt to force his face down and kissed him.

“Yeah, you do.”

Jared smiled and said, “So do you, Jensen. We’ll go to San Francisco and if you want to see her, we will. But your family is here. She might have given birth to you but she’s not your mom, she hasn’t earned that title.”

Jensen didn’t disagree, but he knew there was only one way to quiet all the questions and insecurities he was carrying. “I have to see her Jared, I can’t stand the thought that Dad’s still married to her, that he’s had that connection to her for all these years because he feared losing me.”
Jared kissed him and then said, “Alright. Let’s go to San Francisco and get Colt a divorce.”
“So, this is it.”

Jensen looked at Jared, it was strange seeing him here in this apartment.

“I’m guessing you don’t approve.”

He saw Jared looking around the large, open and now almost empty space. He walked around the room taking in the kitchen, jet black cabinets and counters with frosted glass doors and granite countertop. His eyes roamed over the exposed brick walls, the expensive materials visible in every corner and the custom made, glass staircase leading to the loft. In his defense, Jensen had protested at the expense, but when Richard commissioned it, he was still bringing in a lot more money than Jensen, so he had yielded.

“It’s very flashy, but to be fair you lived here with Richard so I have to dislike it on pure principle.”

He smiled, but Jared’s face turned questioning. “How are you holding up, can you handle this?”

It was strange being back. The relator had met them, opening up the apartment and told them to call when they were ready to leave. Standing on the threshold Jensen’s stomach had clenched, more from dread about the memories that might come and how Jared might react, than any real discomfort. But walking in, nothing came. Jared kept his cool, there was a twitch in his right eye when Jensen stopped by the kitchen counter letting his fingers glide over the smooth surface, absentmindedly rubbing the spot on his head that had connected with it. It was like seeing the loft emptied of the life he’d lived with Richard, only a few boxes of his things standing on the floor and a few pieces of odd furniture Jensen had collected, disarmed it. This had been his home for five years and he felt comfortable in the space.

As he observed the spot on the floor where he had laid bleeding only five months earlier, he experienced only regret that what had once been a loving partnership ended in such a disaster. He
wished Richard had gotten the help he needed sooner. That the end to their relationship and this part of his life had been kinder, to the both of them.

“I’m ok, really. I’m just a little sad it had to end that way. I feel sad for him.”

“You what? Jensen, come on, he beat you up.”

Jareds voice bounced of the bare walls. As he watched the empty space, it was as if he saw his relationship with Richard without a filter there to smooth things out, erasing imperfections and unflattering angles. Like he was observing it from the outside. He leaned against the kitchen counter and looked over at Jared, who’d sat down on one of the deep window benches Jensen had always loved so much.

“Jared, look it’s your right to hate Richard. He’s my ex, I walked out on you for him and then he hurt me. But don’t make me out to be a battered partner so broken I’m defending my abuser, because I’m not and I never was. Richard was not abusive. Not in any way, physically, verbally or emotionally. He wasn’t controlling, manipulative or jealous, I know he beat me, but he was not abusive, Jared. He was a kind, sensitive guy who got knocked around by life one time too many and broke, unfortunately I was standing in front of him when that happened. It wasn’t about me or our relationship, it could have been anyone.”

Jared opened his mouth to protest, and he held up one hand to silence him.

“I’m not defending his actions. What he did to me was inexcusable, no matter what his problems were or are. He knew long before that happened that he wasn’t ok and he should have sought help. But he understands that, I think he knew the second he walked out of here that he’d done something horrible and he sought help and took all the blame.”

Jared took a deep breath and said in a voice that made it clear he was not as understanding or forgiving as Jensen. “It was his blame to carry. I understand what you saying, I accept it. But I don’t understand why you sympathize so much with him.”

“Because I had all the power, Jared. Me and Richard's relationship was nothing like ours. We can joke around, do our silly power play games but when we stop, we’re two people whose emotions and needs have an equal importance. With Richard I was the dominant one and not in a subtle way. Everything was on my terms, because I had somewhere to go if it didn’t workout. I had all of you waiting for me and Richard wasn’t welcome. For christ sake, the first time I took him home, I left him alone in a room full of people who I knew wouldn't get him. Who wanted me to be with you while I was in the stable having sex with you. That’s a shitty thing to do. When everyone was distant and rude to him, I didn't put my foot down. I ignored it and explained it away as conflicting personalities, I didn’t fight for him, I left him behind. It wasn’t intentional, but I made it damn clear it was my way or nothing. Richard didn’t have any place else to go, he had nothing. I mean his family, god.”

Jensen ran a hand through his hair shaking his head.

“His family, what?” Jared’s eye were almost, not quite, but almost curious.

“I don’t know a lot, I never met them. What I know is that they were some kind of big deal, old blood, old money family down in New Hampshire.”

“Old blood how?”

Jensen scratched the back of his neck. “Old blood like ‘Mayflower´ old blood.”
Jared gave a low whistle. “That old.”

“Yeah. Richard he does everything right. He studies hard, get’s accepted to Notre Dame he’s the perfect Ivy league son, right. One day he can’t do it anymore so he comes out and they kick him out on the spot, I mean on the spot like he get’s fifteen minutes to pack a bag and then he’s out, erased from the family. His parents and six siblings pretending he doesn’t exist.”

“Jesus.”

Jensen huffed out a sad laugh. “Yeah. So you know, Jared, he had all that baggage, that trauma. Then he meets me and he’s not accepted by my family either, he doesn’t even get a chance. He was the one with everything to lose and however unintentional from my side, he knew he needed to play by my rules. I know considering what he did and how that conversation you eavesdropped on happened, it looks like I was the weak, passive one, but I wasn’t. He was. I feel bad for him because he’s alone again, hurting and broken and I can’t help but think that if I had been a little more attuned to what was going on with him. If I had put my foot down with all of you, if I hadn’t made him feel so left out that he had to fight to keep me. Maybe he would have trusted me enough to tell me something was wrong, I could have helped him before it got this bad, for everyone.”

Jared squirmed, and he pushed off the counter, sat down on his lap facing him, knees bent on either side of his legs, his arms encircling his neck.

“I don’t mean Richard and I would have made it, we never would have. Richard is everything you’re not and from the beginning my relationship with him, was me giving you the middle finger because I was furious with you. I loved him, but he treated me a lot better than I ever treated him. But despite how I acted and what he did, neither of us deserved for it to end this fucking bad.”

Jared sighed, pouting a little. “Fine, I understand why you empathize with him. I think it’s in your blood, you Ackles and your ranch full of lost, broken strays. I still get to hate him though, right?”

Jensen breathed out a laugh. “Yeah.”

Jared looked around the room. “So, how do you wanna do this?”

“It looks like Richard packed and labeled the boxes really well, he was always kind of anal about organization, so let’s load them up and I’ll go through them when we get home. If I don’t want it, I’m sure we can use it in our guest cabins, the same with the furniture.”

Jared nodded. “When are we meeting up with Mark?”

Jensen looked at his watch. “In three hours, we’re meeting him at the restaurant an hour before everyone else shows up to get the paperwork out of the way. So, it should be plenty of time for us to get this loaded and then head back to the hotel to get a shower.”

“Who’s ‘everyone else’ again?”

“Just a few friends that heard I was coming and wanted to meet up.”

Jared stood and picked up a stack of boxes. “I bet if you move that great ass of yours we can get this done quick enough to squeeze in a quicky as well.”

Jensen grinned.
The Zanzibar was one of those all-inclusive venues. A great restaurant on the main floor, a piano bar with a view on the top floor and a shirts-off club in the cellar.

If Jensen had any plans of trying to fly under the radar during his temporary return to his home of the past ten years, walking beside a six foot four, hot ass cowboy was probably not his best idea. Jared didn’t fit in at all, didn’t try. With his well-worn ripped jeans, legs rolled up so they rest at the edge of his high, pointy brown boots, tank top and tight fitting denim shirt tucked in. His heavy belt and big chunky silver buckle standing out right above his crotch. Hair pushed out of his eyes by a pair of pilot sunglasses on top of his head, he looked like he walked right of a catwalk and down on the streets of Castro, so comfortable and at ease.

At home, Jared melted into the ranch, was part of it and kind of blended into the landscape, but here... He wasn’t unaware that Jared was attractive. Far from it, he was very aware, he just forgot that he wasn’t the only one who had that reaction to him. At the ranch or in Evergreen at large it had always been them and people knew. So apart from the occasional over exited women and men staying at the ranch, Jensen wasn’t used to people admiring him in such a blatant and vocal manner. In retrospect and for his own sanity’s sake, Jensen thought that bringing Jared to the gayest neighborhood in America, might not have been such a good idea. The third time someone approached him Jensen scowled, Jared just laughed, throwing his arm around his shoulder pulling him close and kissing him on the head. It was a little patronizing but Jensen took every public display of affection as an unspoken, fuck off to everyone watching.

As they walked around the neighborhood and into the restaurant Jensen got nods, greetings and stopped a few times, exchanging a few words here and there. It became obvious people didn’t know what happened. Their break up had come as a shook to all their acquaintances, all everyone seemed to know was that his and Richard's relationship had suddenly imploded and they’d both left, in opposite directions. He didn’t need to correct anyone, it was as good an explanation as any and almost correct, just a few details short.

Mark was already sitting at a table set up for a large party of people.

“Jensen, gorgeous.” Mark stood up, giving him a kiss on the cheek before a little too roughly pushing him a side and stepping out in front of Jared.

“We have not been formally introduced, Mark.”

Jared's hand looked huge grasping his. “I’m Jared.”

“And I am at your service.”

“Mark.” Jensen's voice was a little more testy and a little less cool than he would have liked.

Mark did a little waving motion with his hand, like he was trying to make Jensen go away and said, “Jensen, don’t be so selfish. Sharing is caring my love.”

Jensen's answer was calm but tart, “I’m an only child, Mark. I was never good at sharing.”

Mark sighed, pursing his lips and wrinkling his nose. “Darling, don’t you know monogamy is against our religion.”

Jensen shook his head, dragging a hand over his eyes. “My family's never been much for religion.”

“Honey, It’s never too late.”
Jensen’s eyes were steely as he looked at Mark and said, “Funny, that’s what I said when I took up shooting again.”

Jared laughed as Mark’s right eyebrow shot up. “My, my, my aren’t we territorial.”

“Don’t we have paperwork to do?”

With a longing and thorough last look at Jared, Mark sighed and motioned for them to sit down, while saying with a pout,

“You’re so selfish, Jensen.”

Jensen’s affairs didn’t take long to settle. Mark was flamboyant, and his determination to represent the stereotype he’d embraced to the fullest, made him a little too much to handle. But he was a talented and efficient lawyer. Jensen’s body was numb as he scribbled his signature on paper after paper, signing away the last ties his old life.

“That’s that. On to your dad’s divorce.”

He nodded. “Did I get you everything you need?” After talking to Mark over the phone and understanding all the paperwork needed, Jensen had raided the office in the guest bunkhouse that not only held all the paperwork for the business and ranch, but their personal ones as well. The most important ones kept in a big, sturdy, fireproof safe. Under the pretense of getting more involved with the business side of the ranch and pointing out that it was his field of expertise, Jensen had bought himself undisturbed access to the office.

He’d felt a little bad seeing how excited Lance and Colt got at his interest. But while going through every available document he did in fact, clear out decades of unnecessary papers, update the filing cabinet, and made a new and improved website. So, even though his motives might not be pure or unselfish, he got a lot of work done. All the while, being able to snoop around enough to get all necessary paperwork together.

The easy thing would have been to talk to Colt about it, but he still wasn’t sure he’d be able to go through with meeting Lily and didn’t want to drag all those emotions up for nothing.

Mark nodded. “Everything is perfect. The prenuptial agreement she signed was really a work of art, who ever created in the first place has my eternal adoration.”

“The way I understand it there’s been a few versions but my grandpa’s sister, Althea wrote that.”

“Well, she's quite the lady, you must introduce us.”

“I’d love to, but she passed away when I was eight.” Jensen took a sip of the glass of wine that Mark had ordered for him. “My grandpa says she kicked ass. She attended law school in the fifties, only woman in her class. She worked as a prosecutor in Denver all her life. There’s this story going round that when defense lawyers found out they were going up against her, they’d tell their clients to make a deal, because no one wanted to go head to head with her.”

Mark laughed. “Really?”

Jensen smiled. “Yeah. She was even appointed a judge and ready to take the bench, but a few days after turning fifty-six she got run over by a drunk driver, she didn’t make it.”

“No.” Mark’s voice was sympathetic.
“Yeah. It was a rough couple of years for Grandpa, my great grandparents, Josephine and Jameson lived with us and they passed away only nine months apart and then Althea a year later. Anyway, I’m not sure, because it’s only in the past few months Dad’s told me what really happened, and I’m sure I haven’t heard the whole story. But it sounds like my grandma and grandpa didn’t like Lily very much, so when I saw it was Althea who drafted the prenup I got the impression they asked her to make a new one.”

Mark nodded. “That was one smart move on their part. This is iron clad, she’s entitled to nothing, only a small monetary compensation and considering she walked away with fifty grand, I’d say she got that. Technically she owes your dad money.”

Jensen shook his head. “No. Don’t make things complicated, I want her to sign the papers without a fuss.”

“And she will.” The self-assured confidence in Mark’s voice was unapologetic. “I’m saying if she tries to be difficult you can point out that I can make her life very unpleasant.”

“I like you.” Jared’s voice was amused.

“It’s very mutual.”

Jensen rolled his eyes. “So, the divorce, it shouldn’t be a problem?”

Mark made a dismissive hand gesture. “No. Even if she’d refuse to sign or if you can’t go through with meeting her, get your dad to sign the papers and I’ll get him a divorce. They’ve been separated for thirty years and have an indisputable prenup, I don’t really need her signature. It’s only about the right paperwork and with an easy case like this, I can swing that together in an afternoon.”

Jensen exhaled, relaxing the muscles in his back that without him noticing had gone stiff.

“Please say we’re done with all the paperwork.” Jared stretched his arms. “I haven’t done anything and my head hurts.”

Mark gave Jensen a look and said. “Are we finished?” It made Jared look over with a questioning look.

Jensen rubbed the back of his neck. “There was that last paper.”

Mark smiled taking out one last stack of papers from his briefcase, sitting by the floor beside him and said, “Excellent, I’ve added the condition we talked about and marked where I need both of your signatures.”

Mark pushed the papers over to Jensen who quickly signed them while Jared looked on in confusion.

“Jensen, what is going on?”

Jensen put down the pen, sliding it and the papers over to Jared. He kept his eyes on a spot on the table his voice hushed and it betrayed how nervous he suddenly felt as he said.

“These are adoption papers. If you sign, you’re granted full parental rights for Bella. The one condition being that if you for whatever reason want to leave the ranch and I don’t want to go with you, Bella stays at The Phoenix.”

He heard the emotion held in check mirrored in Jared's voice as he replied, “Are you sure?”
Jensen took a breath and meet his stare head on. “Why, are you going somewhere?”

Jared's eyes pierced right through him. “Nope.”

“Then sign the damn papers.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

“You two are just the cutest thing ever.” Marks grin was two miles wide as he looked at them.

Jensen smiled back and his heart leaped as he heard the sound of pen on paper.
In all honesty Jared’s not all that impressed with San Francisco. It’s pretty enough with it’s colorful buildings and view of the North Pacific Ocean, but it’s got nothing on The Rockie’s.

Jared spent most of his early twenties travelling all around the country. He’s been to a lot of the big cities, New York, Philadelphia, Miami, New Orleans, Houston, Dallas, Nashville, Las Vegas and a bunch of shit-holes in between, working his way though odd crap jobs from place to place. The thing that connects most big cities are that the people there always seem to think they’re better, more important, people like Jared are seen as clueless rednecks.

Jared has no real problem with it, he spent a lot of years trying to figure himself out. Who he was, where he fit and for a while he tried to be a Big City person, it didn’t suit him. Jared’s at his best at The Phoenix. He cares as little about what these people think of him as what he scrapes off his work boots every evening. It’s all a pile of crap.

The large gathering of people who have joined them at the table are no exception. They could all have been taken directly from any GQ cover or tv-show gay stereotype. They’re attractive, impeccably dressed, there’s no dirt under their nails and they’re all successful in whatever it is they do. They’re also so fucking dull Jared's afraid his brain’s going to start leaking out of his ears. It’s funny how a group of people who see themselves as so inclusive and open minded are still just as much a bunch of elitist assholes as anywhere else. Jared’s not much for making a scene and he doesn’t care one way or the other, he’s got no need for validation by them. He’s just surprised that these are the people Jensen called friends, they don’t fit him at all. They’re too self-centered, too quick to point out how great they are or how successful. How expensive their apartment is, that their assistant is a moron or how many facials they get a month.

They’re dicks.

Or, they don’t fit his Jensen. He talked a lot about his life in San Francisco on the long drive down. Paired with what he revealed about his relationship with Richard and tonight's impressions make it
pretty obvious that Jared wouldn't have liked San Francisco Jensen very much.

But who ever he was, he’s not here tonight. The Jensen beside him is his. It’s his hand playing with one of his own under the table, the same way it has done since Jared finished signing the adoption papers. It’s so big Jared can’t allow himself to think about it, because this is not the time or place to let all of that out. That emotion is for him and Jensen, and for them alone.

Jared looked up as someone decided to bring him into the conversation and said,

“So what do you do at the ranch, Jared? I’m guessing by those bulging biceps of yours it’s manual labor.”

Jared smiled, scratching his forehead little while mentally rolling his eyes as he answered, “I’m a wrangler. I take care of the animals and all the chores around the ranch. I’m also a certified farrier, so I shoe all the horses and make their horseshoes.”

“What do you mean you make the shoes, aren’t they like metal or something?”

Jared bit his cheek as he looked over at RWGG1 short for, Random Well-groomed Gay Guy number one. He just couldn’t keep them apart or remember their names. He reached out patting Jensen back as he disguised a laugh as a cough.

With his friendliest most patient tone of voice as he answered, “Yes, most of the time. I prefer to use steel because the mountain terrain we ride our horses in is rough. But there are other materials. In horse racing they usually use aluminum because of the lighter weight. There are custom materials as well, copper, titanium, rubber even plastic. But I almost never work with those. You can buy ready made shoes that you only have shaped a little to fit the particular hoof, but I prefer to make mine from scratch. That way I can make one that’s a perfect fit for the horse.”

“What’s the fuss? A hoof is a hoof right?” Jared looked over at RWGG2 and said, “A hoof is a hoof the way a human foot is a human foot, they’re all unique.”

”Isn’t it kind of cruel, don’t you like nail it to their feet?”

Jared stayed smiling while eyeing the no doubt expensive vintage motorcycle jacket the young man in front of him was wearing. For a moment he contemplated pointing out that, usually that type of jacket was made of horse leather. But he bit his tongue and instead kept his voice calm as he answered RSTT1 (Random Super Twinky Twink number one).

“A hoof, is like a human fingernail, it grows and needs to be trimmed. The part of the hoof where I nail the shoe in place, is like a grown out human nail, they have no feeling in it. As long as you know what you are doing it doesn’t hurt them.”

They lost interest after that and Jared kind of zoned out of the conversation, his mind settled back on Jensen’s fingers playing with his own. Jensen’s fingers wrapping around one of his, reminded him of Bella’s small hands gripping on his thumb. Her tiny, tiny fingers and how she laughed when Jared brought them to his mouth making munching sounds. The grip on his shirt as she looked up at him with those large eyes that had taken on her dad’s lovely shade of green. How they tangled in his hair when she, tired and cranky, but refusing to sleep, would rest against his shoulder as he walked back and forth, whispering nonsense into her tiny ear. The way they’d land on his face or more sensitive parts when she’d decided that four o'clock was a good time to get up. Jensen, trying to convince her it wasn’t, would carry her to their bed and together they’d try to make her go back to sleep. But instead she would laugh as she decided that their bodies made a fantastic obstacle course.
Jared missed her. Keeping half an ear on the conversation in case someone brought the grunt in cowboy boots into it again, Jared listened as RWGG3, rambled about pillows or pillowcases Jared wasn’t really listening, but it was something stupid. He reached into one front pocket and pulled out his phone, keeping it in his lap under the table he quickly typed a message and sent it.

Jared had to pretend to scratch his nose as he covered his mouth to muffle his laugh as he opened Colt’s answer. It was a simple,

“We’re fine, it’s spaghetti day. Stop being annoying. Goodbye!”

Followed by a picture of Bella, face and naked chest more orange than white, huge smile, eyes glittering and random pieces of spaghetti stuck all over her, while a few strands hung from both her hands.

“What are you laughing at?” Jensen’s voice was a low murmur in his ear, the weight of his arm on his shoulder comforting as he leaned over to see what Jared was looking at. Jared angled his phone so Jensen saw the message. Jensen’s chest jump against his arm as he leaned his forehead on Jared’s shoulder, laughing into his bicep.

“I can't believe you caved.”

Jared pulled away and looked at him as he said, “I caved? You called them four times while we were driving down here.”

Jensen waved away Jared’s comment. “That was over twenty-four hours ago.”

Jared opened his mouth to deliver a doubtful comeback when RWGG3 interrupted by saying,

“What’s so juicy you two have to sit there whispering to each other? Are there naughty pictures in your phone, don’t keep us in the dark.”

Jensen inhaled, ready to answer but Jared got there first, holding up his phone so everyone could see. “If by naughty you mean a ten-month-old baby covered in spaghetti, then yes.”

“Oh.” The disinterested dismissal of the cuteness that was exploding from the screen did nothing to improve Jared’s opinion of RWGG3 or was it number two? It was impossible to tell them apart and either way, Jared didn’t care. He was here for Jensen and he put up with them only for his sake. But he was forced to pay attention as one of them turned to him and brought him into the conversation again by saying,

“We were speculating about this year's most exciting, nail biting, thrilling event coming to a TV near us all soon. What's your guess, Jared who’ll die on the season premier of The Walking Dead?”

When Jared didn’t answer right away, someone in the group sensed the need to point out, “It’s a tv-show.”

This time Jared wasn’t able to contain his laugh. “Yeah, we have TV’s in Colorado, even far up in the mountains where we live. Netflix too if you can believe it. I don’t really watch TV though, so I can’t say.”

RWGG1 spoke up again. Jared noticed he didn’t like his voice, it was nasal and in a pitch that irritated his ears.

“Really? I’d think you’d be aching for something fun and exciting after spending all day carrying
hay and mucking horseshit.”

Jared had seen the change in Jensen happening all night. From the initial excitement of meeting his friends again, to the slight frowns when they talked. After an hour it turned into a look of boredom so well concealed only Jared picked up on it. Then the tell tale sign of irritation when his lips pursed and Jared saw him chewing on the inside of his bottom lip. Now, there was an angry twitch in the corner of his left eye as they narrowed and Jensen got ready to bite their heads off.

Jared intervened before Jensen got a word out.

“It’s true, carrying hay and mucking horseshit is part of it. Like any job ranch work has it’s monotonous, boring parts. But on an average day, I also take long rides though the most beautiful nature this country can offer. With a nudge and a soft hand I can control a thousand pound animal and together, we can control a herd of cattle with horns as wide as I am tall. I could sit around watching actors waving fake guns for excitement but for me, guns are not props, they’re a tool. I always have a rifle with me. Our mountains are home to black bear, grizzly bear, coyotes, lynx, wolves and mountain lions, you never know when excitement is just around the corner. Another day, I get to bend steel with only my will, fire and a hammer. And when I’m done, my body aching and sweaty I don’t go inside. I ride bareback down to our lake, strip down and jump naked into the clearest water you’ve ever imagined. I don’t need zombies or fake blood to make my life exciting. You boys ever tire of fluffing pillows and watching TV, you come on up to us, and I’ll show you real fun and excitement.”

The table was quiet for a few seconds before Mark cleared his throat and stood up. “Well, not that this isn’t fun and all but I hope you’ll excuse me. I need to go masturbate in the bathroom while that lovely imagery is still vivid in my mind.”

Jared didn’t have time to react to Mark’s words before a hand under one arm was pulling him up out of his chair.

“Guy’s, great to catch up with you all again but all this sitting around is boring. I’m gonna take Jared downstairs for some grinding.”

And with that Jared was dragged to the downstairs club, tripping down the stairs, Jensen dragging him along as he walked through the empty dance floor, the hour too early for clubbing. Jared tried to get a grip on the situation and said,

“Jensen hold up, you know I don’t like dancing in clubs.”

As they came to a door, Jensen turned pushing it open with his back, revealing a large, deserted bathroom with ten bathrooms stalls standing side by side. Backing into the room towards the stall at the back of the room Jensen grinned, shoved Jared into it, closing the thin door behind him.

“Who said anything about dancing?”

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He woke before the sun came up. Being back on the ranch had reverted his internal clock back to ranch hours and two days in the city didn’t change that. Jensen rubbed the back of his head, still a little tender from being banged against the bathroom stall door as Jared had him pressed up against it, his legs tight around Jared’s waist and his hands gripping the sides of the stall.

He’s not sure what came over him, but sitting at that table listening to people he’d once considered friends and realizing just how shallow they were, threw him. When Jared took them down so
effortlessly with his easy, natural confidence Jensen had felt like he’d combust if he couldn’t have him right there.

During all his years in this city, he’d harbored an image of himself as the down to earth, hardworking, responsible person he always thought himself to be. All that might be true, in Evergreen, Colorado. This city and the people he’d chosen to surround himself with seemed to have drawn out and amplified every unflattering trait he had. He felt unbalanced. Uneven. Like he had Colt on one shoulder, smiling at him and telling him not to worry, he forgave him for forgetting the lessons he’d taught him. That it was a rite of passage for every twenty-something to be stupid and self-absorbed as they discovered who they were and what it meant to be an adult.

But he had two shoulders, and closing his eyes someone was climbing up his arm, pulling themselves up, pinching him on the way to get his attention. Behind closed lids green eyes focused on him as Lily dragged her way up on his shoulder, whispering uncomfortable truths in his ear. That he should stop flattering himself, stop filtering his personality to appear better than he was. That her DNA was as much a part of him as Colt’s. With a smirk her eyes bore into him as she told him to stop pretending that he was a good person.

He stood leaning against the hotel window watching the sun come up and people making their walks of shame along empty streets. He had a choice to make. He gazed at Jared’s sleeping form and he wanted to shake him awake and have him tell him the world was made up of puppies and rainbows. Instead he picked up the folder on the table and placed the scrap of paper on Jared’s bedside table.

“Gone to see Lily. Don’t follow, I have to do this alone. Be back later. Love you.”

Jensen knew the streets of this neighborhood as almost intimately as the trails and mountain passes of the ranch, he made his way to the address without paying much attention to where he walked, he knew the way. He sat on a street bench looking at the windows of the bright yellow building for hours, drinking stale take away coffee from a twenty-four-hour open cafe around the corner.

The folder, only filled with a few sheets of papers, felt heavy in his hand.

As the morning neared nine, and the streets came to life around him, he had the sudden realization that she might not actually be home. She could be traveling or working or any place but here. It wasn't unusual for people to sublet their apartments. He closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he saw a flash of auburn hair in a window.

After another three quick breaths Jensen got up from the bench, walked into the building, his mind going numb and blank until he was standing in front of door 3B. With a pounding heart and a hurricane roaring in his ears he raised a shaking arm and knocked.
Chapter 21

She photographed well. It wasn’t the first thought Jensen thought he’d have, when seeing his mother in real life for the first time. But as the door opened revealing the woman, he’d so far only seen in a thirty-year-old photo and countless profile photo on Facebook, it was. Here, standing in front of him, the unforgiving morning sun shining in through a large bay window, her skin wasn’t as smooth. It was a face that had been shaped by the elements, her soft light freckles didn’t hide the sunspots and deep creases at the corners of her eyes, hinting that she’d spent a lot of time squinting. The vibrant auburn hair tied up in a messy bun wasn’t natural and her figure not as impressive under the long, flowing black silk robe. She was still gorgeous, but it wasn’t a timeless beauty standing in front of him, just a woman made up from ever changing flesh and bone like everyone else.

He had tried to calculate every possible reaction so he could prepare, know how to tackle it. He had a plan for everything, crying, having a door slammed in his face, shock, anger, shame, all of it. For a moment as they stood on opposite sides of the threshold observing one another Jensen though he might have to use one of them. Her eyes were as searching as his own as they took him in, roaming over his face. Jensen realized that whatever fear he’d had about her seeing him when he used to live here, it was unfounded. The way her eyes, so like his own, seemed to catalog every single detail, it was apparent that she was as surprised and overwhelmed by the likeness as he had first been.

It felt like hours but couldn’t have been more than seconds before she seemed to recover and collect herself. Jensen watched it happen, saw her features smooth out, a veil coming down over her eyes hiding any real emotion as a well practiced mask slid into place.

It was perfect, flawless but there was a slight hitch in her voice that shattered the illusion of calm as she said,

“So, you found me. Come in, Jensen.”

She turned and walked back into the apartment with him following as she said, “I just got up, the kitchen’s to your right, there’s coffee in the pot, milk in the fridge and sugar on the table. Help
yourself and I’ll be with you as soon as I get some clothes on.”

Her voice didn’t fit her. It was hoarse and scratchy, like she’d averaged a pack of cigarettes a day for the last thirty years and now he knew where the lines around the mouth came from.

Her reaction threw him off balance, it felt too cracked for him to get a grasp on. It was like watching two people, the woman who had opened the door and the woman she became a few seconds later and he couldn’t get a grip on which of them he was supposed to react to. Not being able to think of anything else to do, he did what she’d told him.

In the kitchen, painted a vibrant purple, he found an open shelf with big ceramic mugs on it. He took two down and placed them on the small cluttered table by the window. He served himself some coffee, put in a dash of milk and two spoons of sugar before sitting down to wait, observing the room in the meantime. It was warm, lived in, small knickknacks and photos cluttered the space. A small wood sculpture in the shape of a gorilla, a figurine of the Hindu god Shiva, his body painted in a sky blue. A small table fountain on the windowsill shaped as a pink lotus, a Muslim prayer band made up from black onyx beads. Every available space on the walls had framed photos on it, scenes depicting everything from intimate black and white portraits of people from every continent to magnificent, panoramic views of breathtaking landscapes. Jensen looked around the space and he felt safe, like the room was a haven, a safe space filled with things that meant something. Looking closely Jensen could see how it all fit together, like a puzzle of a life being laid out before him. Knickknacks and cheap souvenirs becoming pieces that fit with each other and had a meaning that only the person laying the puzzle fully understood. Under an open newspaper on the table he noticed a stack of photos sticking out, pulling one out a big, gray cat came into view.

“It’s a spotted clouded leopard. I trekked the Nepalese parts of the Himalayans for seven weeks to get that picture.”

Lily, now dressed in harem pants in an emerald green silk with gold embroidery and a tunic to match, stood in the doorway watching him. She walked into the room and sat down opposite him, nodding as Jensen said,

“So you’re a photographer?”

“For twenty-eight years now. I freelance, but I work with a lot of the big papers. I average three hundred travel days a year and have seen some incredible things along the way. I was in Berlin when the wall fell, in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda during the wars. Traveled Afghanistan under the Taliban’s, I only just came back from Syria two days ago.”

“Wow, that’s…” He wasn’t sure what say. “That’s a lot of experiences for one life.”

Lily nodded, eyes twinkling. “Yes. But that’s not why you’re here.” She stopped, picking up a package of cigarettes she looked at Jensen and asked, “Do you mind?”

Jensen shook his head as she took one out lighting it. “I won’t ask if you want one. Smoking was always a big no at The Phoenix Ranch. I think unhealthy and filthy was the nicest thing your grandma had to say about it. How is May?”

“Dead, ten years now.”

She took a long drag on her cigarette the smoke flowing out with her words as she spoke, “I’m sorry. May was never my biggest fan, and the feeling was mutual, but she was a formidable woman. It must have been hard for you.”
She paused but before Jensen could answer she spoke again.

“So…” Flipping off some ash on an empty plate in front of her she looked at him. “How do you want to do this? Scream, call me an awful human being? Ask in an accusing tone, how could you! Tell me I’m a sorry excuse for a woman? Throw in my face everything I’ve missed, how wonderful my life would have been, if I’d been a proper mother and stayed?”

She took another deep drag on the cigarette, then continued before Jensen had figured out how to answer.

“Look, I can take all of it. I made a choice and I can face the consequences, and you certainly are entitled to be angry with me. But before you do, let me say that leaving you and Colt was the best thing I could do, for everyone. I would have been miserable if I stayed, I would have resented you for trapping me there and that would have made your life miserable. I need air, Jensen. Life, adventure, I need to move. When I met Colt, I thought I could stop, thought I wanted to stop. That the two of you would ground me, but there’s so much out there, so many colors, so much life.”

She paused for a second and looked at him, like she was gauging his reaction, listening to her speak. Jensen felt like he was listening to a rehearsed monologue. When her voice started up again there were no apologies, shame or regret in it. It was a voice of a woman content with herself and the choices she made. It was also complete bullshit. It was well executed but hollow. A speech performed by a carefully constructed character and Jensen saw right through it. Jensen bit his tongue and stayed silent, waiting to see if the facade would crack if she was allowed to continue.

“I’m a very selfish person, Jensen. I’m capable of enough reflection and insight to know that about myself. I don’t need people, just taking care of my needs is a full time job. Colt, he loved you so much. They all loved you so much and I loved Colt, more than I’ve ever loved anyone. That I even tried staying say’s a lot about my feelings for him. It’s one of the better things I’ve done, being able to give him you. But I’m not mother material. So, if you’re here to yell at me for leaving you, go ahead. But I would have hurt you more if I’d stayed.”

Jensen leaned back in his chair and observed her. The whole situation was anti-climactic. Watching the woman in front of him talk, he felt nothing but annoyance that after all this, she wasn’t honest with him. He thought about just standing up and walking out that this whole idea was a waste of time but he’d come too far for that. So instead he met her eyes and said,

“Well, that was a nice speech. Been rehearsing it long?”

It had the effect he wanted, whatever words were left on her tongue was muted and her mask cracked. Before she was able to compose herself enough to talk Jensen continued.

“That’s not why I’m here. I came because I was curious. I’m not here to yell or make a scene. I just want to know what happened. You’ve been a mystery for so long, it’s only now the last few months that dad has talked about you and I have his version, but I would like yours as well. But if you’re just gonna sit here and pretend to be this caricature of the cold hearted bitch you’re portraying yourself as, then this is pointless. I’m not looking for a mother, Lily. I’ve had a good life filled with people who love me. I don’t need or expect anything from you other than your side of the story, you owe me that.”

“You’re very perceptive and blunt, your grandma was the same.” There was a small smile on her lips that soften her face. “Yes, I’ve been rehearsing it for a long time, Jensen. I figured one way or the other you would come looking. I’ve been expecting you to turn up for a decade or so, waiting to come home and find you standing here on the street.”
“I might have. I lived here for almost ten years just a few blocks down. I used to have brunch over at Tartain every Sunday for years. But that was before I knew you lived here too. I thought maybe you’d seen me.”

Lily butted out her cigarette and immediately pulled loose a strand of hair, pulling it through her fingers over and over, like they were impatient. Her face seemed surprised at what he’d told her and she shook her head slowly as he spoke before answering,

“No, I never saw you. But I’m always on the move so it’s probably not that surprising.” She let the hair go and took out another cigarette, observing him through the smoke as she lit it and then said,

“So you left, moved away from the ranch? That must have been difficult. I can imagine your responsibility for that place must have been drilled into you all your life.”

Jensen nodded a little, “Yes and no. No one gave me a hard time about leaving, but I ended up staying away longer than I planned and going back was messy. I’d made a life here that was hard to get out of.”

“Why did you go back?” He noticed her gaze searching his face and her body was still, almost like she was holding her breath as she waited for his reply.

“Because I wanted to.” It was a simple answer, but it was the truth. By the wry half smile in her face and the small, huffed out laugh he figured it was somehow disappointing. Head slightly tilted to the side Lily said,

“You’re a proper Ackles alright. Roots so deep in that damn land you’re a permanent fixture. Steady as the mountains surrounding it but just as unmovable.” She flicked off some more ash on the plate and sighed again, the mask finally falling away completely and there was something tired in her as she spoke again,

“I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed, Jensen. The truth is far less satisfying than the rehearsed version. You would have been better off accepting the caricature than to look for answers I can’t really give you. I left because I didn’t want to be there and I knew even if I asked, Colt would refuse to leave.”

She took the sip from her coffee before she spoke up again. “To you and your family The Phoenix Ranch is a magical place, to me it was a prison.”

Jensen felt his brow crease, his lips pressing against each other and Lily smiled as she looked at him and said,

“I told you, you wouldn’t like it.” He felt his brow relax and his eyebrows raising as he nodded but he stayed silent as she began speaking again.

“You want my side of the story, here it is: Coming to The Phoenix was a mistake. I was hitchhiking from Denver trying to get to California and then I opened the door and got into the car of Colt Ackles and his ridiculous blue eyes. I don’t know what he looks like now, but back then your dad was stupidly beautiful.”

Jensen took up his phone and opened a photo he’d snapped of Colt only a few weeks back. He turned the phone so Lily could see it and her eyes closed briefly as she shook her head, when she opened them again there was an amused acceptance in them,

“Stupidly beautiful. I guess it was too much to hope for that he would be overweight and bald like a normal middle aged man. Damn him.” She shook her head and then took up the story again, “The
best way I can describe it, is that I lost myself in this crazy, intense love I felt for him, right from the second I met him. I got in the car and he drove me to the ranch and that was it. In your dad’s mind it was settled, our life was decided, and I was so wrapped up in this love I just went with it. It all happened so fast. By the time that first crazy, intense new love fase settled we were married, and you were on the way. There’s a reason you’re supposed to take your time before making those kinds of decisions. New love is like a madness, there’s no reality, no sense to it. When my head cleared I realized I had bound myself to a life I hadn’t planned. I always wanted to be a photographer, I always wanted to live in the city. Marriage and a baby was not in the plan. I was twenty-three years old, Jensen and stuck in a life I never wanted.”

Jensen didn’t flinch, he was sitting in a stranger’s kitchen, in front of the woman who gave birth to him, listening to her telling him straight to his face that she didn’t want him, and nothing in him hurt when she said it.

Jensen nodded and said, “Fair enough. I know how easy it is to get stuck in a life you didn’t plan, but…” Jensen stopped for a second trying to find words. He picked up his phone again and swiped among the pictures until he found one he’d taken of Bella the week before, holding it up for Lily as he continued, “This is Falabella, the man I first decided to have her together with, our relationship ended soon after we had her. It was abrupt and messy. But even though it didn’t turn out as I planned the thought of leaving her, I can't imagine it.”

Lily turned her gaze out the window observing the street below them and the room turned silent for a minute. Jensen didn’t speak, waiting for her to say something. Her hands reached for the crumpled package on the table and she lit her third cigarette before speaking again.

“What are you asking, Jensen if I loved you, if it was easy walking away?” She closed her eyes shaking her head as to herself before speaking up again, her voice subdued and there was something frail in it, like shame or self-hatred.

“I hated you, Jensen.”

Later, looking back on the conversation Jensen could never explain how he stayed so neutral, how his expression never changed or his body stayed so still. He heard the words, faced the sincerity behind them when he caught her eyes, but he stayed calm as she continued speaking,

“I hated you, because you were a physical manifestation of how thoroughly I had trapped myself in a life I hated. But, I left you behind because I loved you and I loved your dad. Once I made up my mind, I knew the right thing to do was to leave you at the ranch. There was no way I could ever have convinced Colt to come with me. I knew if I took you with me I would still feel hampered by the responsibility and honestly, there was no question which of us, me or your dad, could give you the best life. You could grow up with a mom constantly on the road and too selfish to put your needs first or a dad and his whole damn ranch full of people who adored you. It wasn’t a hard choice. It was painful, but it wasn’t difficult. Walking away from you is one of the few truly unselfish things I’ve done, the only time I’ve put someone else's needs above my own.”

He didn’t like her. Jensen believed her, didn’t doubt that she truly believed she made the best decision she could in an impossible situation. The feeling wasn’t vengeful or brought on by her honesty, it was on a deeper, more instinctive level. It was a sad thing to understand but there was too little history between them for Jensen to cushion or dampen the emotion for the sake of their relationship.

As he looked at her, he remembered an experiment they’d done in school. The teacher had explained how magnets worked, Jensen didn’t remember all the science stuff, but the teacher had shown them that put one way, the magnets were drawn to each other. But turned the other way they repelled each
other, pushing against each other's magnetic fields and it was impossible to get them close. As he sat across from Lily, it was like he could reach out and touch their auras, they were a blanketing presence in the room and the small kitchen wasn’t big enough for both of them. Coming in contact they weren’t drawn to each other. They clashed, violently.

Jensen understood with suddenly clarity what Colt had meant when he said that he and Lily were each other's opposite.

Jensen remembered watching those shows where adopted children reunite with their birth parents, the joy, the tears, the loved radiating from them when they finally get to hold their lost child or parent again. But now he understood his situation was very different. He never had to wonder where he came from, had deeper roots than most people he knew and this woman in front of him could contribute with nothing to deepen them. It hit him right there that all she could do was weaken them.

He recalled a book Richard had read during a time when Jensen still took interest in what he was reading. It had been some kind of encyclopedia or textbook on Norse mythology. One evening sitting on the couch, Richard lying with his head on his lap, he’d read a part of it out loud to Jensen. It had been about Yggdrasil, an enormous tree that held the entire world on it’s branches. The tree had three thick roots and at the base of one of them, a dragon called Nidhogg was chewing on them, putting the life and vitality of the tree in danger, threatening to send the world into chaos.

The Phoenix Ranch was Jensen's Yggdrasil, the people it’s roots and Lily was Nidhogg, chewing away at them, threatening to send him into the same unrooted life she lived.

Jensen needed roots.

“Alright.” Jensen was surprised by how soft his voice sounded, “Why did you blackmail him?”

Lily ran a hand over her face, as her other reached for a fourth cigarette, Jensen felt his eyes and nose sting from the smoke that had started to fill up the room but said nothing.

“Didn’t leave anything out, did he? That was an empty threat, Jensen. I needed money to start my life and the prenup your grandparents made me sign would have given me nothing. Your grandma always saw right through me.”

Jensen thought of Richard and asked, “Did they give you a hard time?”

Lily shook her head, “At the time I thought so. Just like I thought your dad was selfish for not even considering leaving The Phoenix. Now, with age and experience I can understand what they were trying to protect, what that ranch meant to them, to your family even though it wasn’t right for me. Your grandma and grandpa were-” She stopped and looked at him with a question on her face, “Is Lance gone too?”

Jensen shook his head, “Alive and as willful and energetic as always.”

She huffed out a laugh, smoke flowing out of her mouth in rivulets along with it, “I can imagine. Your grandparents thought we were moving too fast and were very vocal about that opinion. But once you were on the way they did everything to make sure it would work out. I think that May understood how it would all turn out a lot sooner than everyone else, even me. She did the best she could to invite me into the family, but I wasn’t open to it. I didn’t want to be a Phoenix matriarch, I wanted to be free. Look, I needed money and Colt had it. If I had wanted to blackmail him, I would have demanded more than his savings. Even thirty years ago that ranch was worth a shitload of money and he would have given me every penny to keep you.”
Jensen felt a flare of protectiveness surge through him as he tried to imagine a life without The Phoenix, it was impossible. He pushed the emotion down. He felt no anger or hate, but all curiosity had vanished. There were no answers in this room, the stranger in front of him only had answers about herself, not about him and he realized he didn’t care why she left. The only thing that really mattered was that she had, and he suddenly wanted to get it all over with.

“Yes, he would have.” Jensen reached down into his lap and took up the folder he’d placed there and put the papers down in front of Lily as he said,

“I need you to sign these.”

She looked a little taken aback at how quickly Jensen shifted the conversation, like she had imagined him wanting to say more. Her surprise melted into a look of sardonic acceptance as she said, “I guess story-time is over.” She leafed through the papers and for a second Jensen though he could see the mask beginning to slide into place again but it shattered again as she took in the words.

Jensen wasn’t sure what he expected but the hurt look was surprising. “I always imagined maybe he would come looking for me. Silly, I know.”

Jensen looked at her and it hit him, “You love him.”

Leafing through the papers again Lily kept her eyes glued on them as she answered, “I gave up on finding someone I would love more than Colt Ackles a long time ago. If it makes it easier for you, Jensen I can’t count the number of times I’ve wished my spirit wasn’t so thirsty for freedom and adventure. That my soul wasn’t so restless and that you and your dad had been enough. There has been many, many periods in my life I thought I made the wrong choice and even a few occasions when I was on my way back asking for forgiveness. But every time I got a phone call about some exciting new job, in a place I’d never been before and I turned the car around.” Lily lifted her face and met his eye’s, “Leaving Colt and you was never a question about not loving you enough, I loved you too much to make you deal with me and all the hurt and constant disappointment I would have brought into your lives.”

She took up a pen lying on the table, her hand was hesitant as she brought it to the papers, it hovered over the them for a few seconds before she lowered the pen to the sheet and signed.

She pushed the papers back at him and Jensen eyed through them making sure every signature needed was there.

“I guess it’s naïve to hope he never met someone new.” It was said as a statement but Jensen heard the question and he answered,

“Yes, he met someone about fifteen years ago.”

She nodded, “I figured, a nice, traditional country woman with dirt under her nails and hips to give him the five kids he always wanted.”

Jensen though about Kim and for a second he contemplated telling Lily about her, but something stopped him. It felt cruel, like rubbing it in somehow. Jensen didn’t feel a need to hurt her or make it worse. Sitting here listening to her Jensen couldn’t claim any affection or desire to get to know her better but it made it obvious she had hurt too. The thing was a mess of bad decisions and broken hearts and telling her about Kim would serve no other purpose then sucker punching her for no reason other than to hurt her. He didn’t want to stay, didn’t really want to get to know her better, but for some reason he wants to leave her with something so he said,
“There’s no brood, just me. You're the only one who gave him a child.”

The smile and shine in her eyes told him it had been the right thing to say. She looked down at his phone, the screen now turned black.

“The girl, Falabella, she looks like me, she’s your biological child?”

Jensen placed the papers in the folder and answered, “Yes and she does.”

“So, I’m a grandmother.” She said it like it was her right. As if knowing that she and Bella shared some genetic markers gave her a right to a piece of his daughter and his whole being rebelled against it. But he kept his emotions in check as he stood up and asked,

“Do you want to be? Honestly, Lily do you? You’re entitled to live a life that is right for you. But the title of Mother or Grandma has to be earned. I’m grateful for the role you played in giving me life, and I understand now why you made the choice you did. I believe you were sincere when you said you’ve sometimes wished things would have turned out differently and that you’ve regretted your choice at times. But wishing for things to be different and wanting them to be, is not the same. We all make choices we sometimes regret without really wanting our lives to be different. I’m not going to stand here and pretend that meeting you have made me feel some overwhelming sense of love towards you. Looking at you I see a stranger, not a mother. But tell me right now that you want to be a part of her life, my life and I’ll make an effort to get to know you. To let Bella get to know you. But, if freedom and adventure is still more important to you then people, please don’t ask. I don’t resent you, but I can’t let you into Bella’s life just to make you feel better about yourself, there has to be something substantial in it for her as well.”

Lily looked at him, a small disillusioned smile playing on her lips, “You’re Colt’s boy right down to the marrow.” She said nothing more and Jensen knew she wouldn’t ask.

He smiled a little back and said, “Yeah. Thank you for speaking to me, Lily. I really do hope your life stays exciting and adventurous, but I have all I need at The Phoenix so, for all our sake, let’s make this separation permanent.”

She lit yet another cigarette and Jensen searched her face for any signs of regret or a longing for a life that could have been, but the mask had slid securely into place and he saw nothing.

“It was interesting meeting you, Jensen. At least you get your looks from me.”

Jensen stood on the threshold to the kitchen, ready to walk out. “Yeah. I think I got the best from both of you. Your looks and Dads heart.”

***

Jared was sitting in the hotel bar eating breakfast when Jensen came back to the hotel, thirty minutes after walking out of Lily’s apartment. As he saw him Jensen relaxed, leaving the state of emergency he’d been in since he walked out of the hotel room five hours earlier. Small tremors traveled through his body, he was exhausted.

It was like Jared could sense him the way his brow creased as he looked up, eyes scanning his surroundings. Jensen forced his tired legs to move, and he walked over, Jared meeting him halfway, his hand grasping one elbow, eyes concerned.

“Are you ok?”

Jared looked worried, his eyes scanning Jensen's face looking for signs of distress.
“I am.” Jared frowned but before he could object Jensen spoke again, “Jared, I am ok, I’m tired but I’m ok and I’ll tell you everything, I will, I just…”

“What?”

Jensen sighed, rubbing his tired eyes as he said, “Can we go home? Can we drive, now? I’m so done with this city. Jared, I want to go home.”
It’s a nineteen hour drive from San Francisco, California to Evergreen, Colorado. They took turns driving, making only a few short stops. When they crossed the state line from Utah to Colorado, Jensen had told Jared every single detail he could remember, analyzed and re-analyzed every feeling, every word spoken. When the truck loaded with his old life, drove out of the roundabout at North Turkey Creek Road and onto the compact dirt road leading to the two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres of The Phoenix Ranch, Jensen was done with San Francisco and with Lily Ackles.

As they entered the dining room, everyone gathered for the day's first coffee break, Jensen walked right over to Colt and picked up the little girl in his arms burying his face in her cheek.

“Hi, Bella. I missed you.”

Jensen wish he could say that his dad looked surprised to see them home early, but he didn’t, only amused as he said, “You’re not supposed to be home yet.”

He looked at his dad and placed the folder he was holding on the table in front of him and said,

“I was homesick and Jared hated San Francisco. Dad, I need you to sign the papers in this folder.”

As Colt eyed him in surprise, Lance, Omundson, Jim, Jeff and Chris looked on with curiosity as Jared said,

“How is a strong word.”

Jensen could hear Colt take out the papers as he answered, “Jared, you hated it.”

Jared scratched a spot beside his left nostril, keeping his eyes averted Jensen could still tell Colt was leafing through the papers as Jared admitted,

“Yeah. I really did.”
“Where did you find her?” Colt’s voice was even but controlled.

Jensen felt oddly detached as he spoke, “San Francisco, the same place she’s lived for the past thirty years. Not counting the three hundred days a year, give or take a few, she spends traveling.”

Lance, eyes going back and forth between son and grandson spoke up, “What is that?”

Colt ran a hand through his bouncy, gray hair. “It’s divorce papers, signed by Lily.”

Everyone but Colt was silent. “How was she?”

Bella, bored at being held squirmed and Jensen put her down leaving her free to settle with a few colorful toys under the diningroom table. He sat down on a chair, Jared joining him. With an even, calm voice he answered,

“Content with the choice she made.”

“And you?” Colt’s voice was worried and Jensen could see his eyes searching his face for any signs of heartache.

Chris came out of the kitchen with cups for him and Jared, plates for everyone and a big chocolate cake.

Lance looked at it and said, “It’s ten o’clock in the morning, Chris. Don’t you think it’s a bit early for cake?”

Chris shrugged and answered, “Jensen met Lily, he needs cake. Colt is about to divorce the woman who abandoned him and their child thirty years ago, he needs cake too. You, Lance are about to sit here and listen to your son and grandson talk about the woman who abandoned them both. You most of all need cake.”

Jensen smiled, poured himself a cup of coffee and then answered Colt's question.

“I’m glad I met her but I’ll be equally glad, never to have to do it again.”

Lance, hand holding a spoon full of cake, looked at him voice furious, “Was she mean to you? If she was mean to you I’m gonna-”

Jensen interrupted him before he could finish his sentence. “She wasn’t mean to me, Grandpa. She was just... herself I guess.”

“That’ll do it.” Jim’s voice was gruff, his eyes on the large slice of cake he was cutting for himself.

Colt let his fingers run over the papers. “Jensen, why didn’t you tell me? This wasn’t your responsibility, you did not have to do this for me.”

Jensen leaned back in his chair, coffee cup in hand he smiled when he heard giggles coming from under the table. He needed to find the right words, explain what he’d understood.

“Dad, I didn’t tell you because until I knocked on her door I wasn’t sure I’d be able to go through with it. I didn’t want to drag up all these emotions for nothing. But I had to do it, it had to be me because you wouldn’t have. You would have stayed married to her to make sure I wouldn’t have to confront the choice she made. Look…”

He paused to find the right words.
“It wasn’t dramatic, it wasn’t emotionally damaging, it was good for me. All my life she’s been this mysterious figure, this idea and now she became a person. A person whose energy and personality clashed violently with my own.”

In the corner of his eye he saw Lance and Jim nodding.

“Dad, it took five minutes before I realized there was nothing there for me. I could almost see our energies crashing against each other, pushing us further and further apart. Like the room wasn’t big enough to fit us both. I’m glad I met her because now I know I don’t miss her, I don’t need her, I don’t love her. I don’t even like her. The truth is, I met her, and I felt nothing. She was a stranger and not one I wanted to get to know. Dad, sign the papers so we can send them to Mark and end this. I know you’ve waited for me, but I’ve let her go. Now you do the same.”

Colt looked at the papers and then up as Jeff nudged him holding out a pen, putting the bulb of the pen to the line Colt met Jensen’s eyes.

“You deserved better.”

Jensen shrugged his shoulders. “Dad, look around you, look at all of these people and think of those who are not here. Alona and Kim. Callie, Aunt Althea, Josephine, Jameson, Grandma May. How many people, how many children do you think get to grow up being surrounded and loved by so many people? I’ve been a lot luckier than most.”

The sound of pen on paper echoed though the room and everyone held their breath as Colt signed the papers. As soon as Colt finished writing out the last letter a hand too large to be that quick, reached out and snatched the papers from the table. Everyone looked over at Lance who was already getting up from the chair, papers in hand.

“Jensen, give me the address to that lawyer.”

Jensen raised an eyebrow but reached into his pocket pulling out his wallet and took out Mark’s business card, handing it to his grandpa.

“Dad, what are you doing?” Colt’s voice as always, was calm but questioning.

Lance looked at his son and his voice was triumphant as he said, “I’ve waited thirty years to get that woman out of our lives, I’m driving to the post office so these papers are at Mark’s office tomorrow morning.”

A thought suddenly struck him and Jensen called out, “Grandpa, hold on a minute, put the papers back down.”

Lance stopped but you could tell by his twitching body that he was itching to go.

“Jensen, I’m sending these now.”

Jensen held up one hand in a pacifying gesture, “I’m not objecting, Grandpa, I just want to take a picture of them.”

“What the hell for?”

“To send to Kim.”

Lance already halfway out the porch door stopped, turned around and put the papers down, smile on his face as Jensen took out his phone.
“Make sure you get both their signatures in the picture, Jensen and the word divorce.”

Colt sat watching with a look of poised acceptance, his voice more curious than reproachful as he asked,

“Does anyone care what I think?”

The “No!” that sounded from all parts of the room was strong and unanimous.

***

Kim’s always thought Lake Michigan shows its most beautiful side at night. The floor to ceiling windows in her downtown Chicago apartment has always had the most amazing view down over the water. At night, it’s surface is pitch black with thousands of yellow lights from the city off of it’s surface. The penthouse she calls home comes with the job. Kim remembers that day, ten years ago when she moved in. The glass, marble, custom made wood floors and every other luxury material you can think of right there surrounding her. The ultimate proof that she made it, she was at the top. She’d worked so hard, forsaken so much and it was finally worth it. She had everything she ever imagined and some she never had.

There’s been moments, nights, she’s woken up between expensive silk sheets, when she’s had to pinch herself to believe it could work out like this. That the poor Southside girl could end up here.

They all think she’s so tough, like it’s frightening walking into a room of middle-aged men in suits. Please. Going to school one gang standing on the sidewalk, watching the opposing gang standing on the other, never knowing if this is the day they’ll break their truce, that’s scary. A balding man in a suite really isn’t.

Kim grew up with drug deals happening on the corner, girls for sale in the apartment above, drunks sleeping it off on their doorstep and the occasional drive by shooting to shake things up now and then.

She had the brains, ambition, courage and will to get herself out. Kims story isn’t a Lifetime movie about the inspirational teacher or the devoted mother fighting against harrowing odds. The teachers in her school did more drugs than the students and her mom gave up before she even tried. Kim got herself out. She's the one who studied, the one who got herself on birth control to not go down her mom’s path and have a kid at fifteen. Got herself the scholarship, her college education, the internship at the company. She’s the one who’s been working sixty hour weeks for twenty years.

She’s earned every single thing she has. Except Colt. She has no idea how she got him.

Colt’s too good for her. He should be with some apple cheeked woman with a baby on her hip and a homemade pie in her hand. She’s told him this, told him at least twenty times the first five years or so. He would shake his head, say no in that infuriatingly calm, reasonable tone of his and the discussion would be over.

When Kim finally stopped waiting for Colt to grow tired of her shit and tell her not to come back, she told herself that Colt and his ranch was icing on the cake. That karma or the universe or some nonsense like that had throw in a little extra for all her hard work. A reward to show her that a girl really can have it all.

But the last few years there’s been something, an insignificant little thought scurrying around at the back of her head, slowly it’s grown and grown and now it’s so big she can’t ignore it anymore. Kim has begun to wonder if Colt and The Phoenix Ranch isn’t icing on the cake. Maybe it’s not a reward
for a job well done.

It’s getting harder. There was a time when the constant climb, the never ending battle to end up on top was exhilarating. She’s been at the top for ten years now and there’s sharks below her, nibbling at her toes ready to swallow her whole if she slips up. Little baby sharks so hungry for everything she has. The corner office, the penthouse, the title and she’s getting tired.

These fucking kids, they’re nothing. She could take them down so easy, but it’s getting harder and harder to care. The sacrifices, the hours, the constant battle against power hungry suits, it’s getting boring.

And this view, this great lake and the Chicago skyline. The skyscrapers and rows and rows of gleaming glass walls, they’re not as fantastic as they once were.

For a long time Kim has jumped between the mountains of Colorado and this bustling metropolis seamlessly, the tall buildings as impressive as the mountain peaks. This big lake as gorgeous as the small, clear one hidden away on the ranch, navigating these busy streets as exciting as galloping down the valleys and up mountain trails. She drew her first breath in this city, was raised on it’s street and has clawed her way to the very pinnacle of it.

If things had turned out another way, she might have seen things a differently. If she’d never set foot on The Phoenix land or laid eye’s on Colt Ackles, never slid her fingers through his hair, felt the ends curl around her fingers. Never known what his voice sounded like when everything around them was velvet black and silent. If he hadn’t been so damn gorgeous and his ranch hadn’t felt so much like home she might not have know there was another way.

Now every time she comes back to this city the traffic is a little louder, the smog a little thicker. She has dinner at the best Michelin restaurants the city can offer and the food is amazing but, there’s no heart. It’s food cooked with passion and the desire to impress, Chris’s food is cooked out of love and you can taste it. Her penthouse is still impressive, still gleaming from luxury and expensive materials. But these wood floors don’t creak in that homey, lived in way when you walk on them. The silk sheets still slide over her body like water but they don’t have the same comforting weight as the thick crochet blanket on Colt’s bed.

The surrounding people are smart and interesting, she thinks, she doesn’t know them. Can’t afford to get friendly with the people who’d mix her a nice strychnine cocktail to get her out of the way. Kim has close friends, even family, but they’re in Colorado and she is here in Chicago, alone.

Eyes drawn back to her phone again Kim sees the picture. The two rows of signatures, one messy and then Colts, simple and steady like everything else about him. Jensen did this, Kim knows he did. He sees so much more than he admits. Colts marriage to Lily hasn’t affected them, Kim would still have made the same choices.

But that doesn’t mean she’s liked it. It doesn’t mean she hasn't hated Lily Ackles with a fire so hot that had they ever met, it would have been bloody. If she had ever dared to walk back on that ranch, ever had the audacity to try and sneak her way back into the life of Colt and Jensen. She might be Colt’s wife by law and Jensen's mother by birth but Kim’s the one who’s been there. She’s the one who Colt asks for advice, the one he trusts. She was the one waving and taking pictures when Jensen graduated High School and college, the one who stayed up all night comforting him the first time Jared left. Lily was Colt's wife for a year and a half and Jensen's mother for three months. Kim has been a part of their life for fifteen years.

Lily might look like Joleen but Kim is not Dolly Parton. She wouldn’t have written a nice little song and asked Lily to leave Colt alone. She would have clawed those emerald eyes out of that bitches
face and ripped out her auburn hair. Now, she’s almost gone and Colt, all of him, will be hers. She’s done nothing to deserve him, hasn’t worked or fought for him and he’s still been there. Kim might not deserve him, might not deserve any of them or that ranch, but he chose her, and she’s not giving him up, not ever.

Closing her eyes and inhaling she can still recall Bella’s scent. Kim never wanted to be a mother, she’s been content with the part she’s played in Jensen, Alona and Jared’s childhood. But she wouldn’t mind being a grandma. Her own reflection in the dark glass makes it’s obvious she’s not a soft, little lady in a frilly apron and she never will be. But they don’t seem to care.

One hand on the glass, Kim observes it, sees the long sharp, black nails. Her nail girl always yells at her, curses in English and Vietnamese jumbled together every time she comes back from the ranch, her nails short and ruined. You don’t need claws at The Phoenix.

The lake really is beautiful. Standing looking out over it Kim drinks her scotch and listens to the silence of her fancy penthouse kitchen.

There’s this thought she can’t seem to shake.

Maybe this penthouse wasn’t the the endgame. What if her reward was not reaching the highest peak of this city? But instead, to get the fuck out of it.

***

It’s a fifteen hour drive from Chicago, Illinois to Evergreen, Colorado. It’s a straight forward trip on Highway 8 crossing the border to Iowa and then Nebraska. Right before the state line to Colorado you drive onto the smaller Highway 76 and then outside of Denver, onto Highway 70 leading you straight to North Turkey Creek Road and the roundabout that takes you onto the compact dirt road that leads to the two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres of The Phoenix Ranch.

On the last day of August, seven days after Jared and Jensen came home from San Francisco, a white U-Haul truck drives up the road and parks in front of the main building.

Kim’s dressed in her usual biker chick look as she jumps out of the driver seat. Having gravitated to the building at the sight of the car driving up, everyone looked on as she walked towards the house. Colt, standing by the porch eyed the truck behind her as he hugged her.

His face was open but there was no surprises in it as he asked, “Are you done?”

Kim exhaled. “Yeah, I’m done.”
It happens on the last week of August. Jensen and Jared were standing by the paddock at the indoor riding area, working on replacing one of the wooden fence rails when Lance's sharp voice called for them from up at the house.

“Boys, hurry it’s Bella.”

At their pace, it’s a forty second run from that paddock up to the main building. It’s amazing how many images and imagined scenarios of disaster that can run through your mind in forty seconds.

By the time they reached the building; Jensen had imagined Bella bumping her head, burning herself on the open fireplace, cutting herself, falling down the stairs and cracking her skull open. She’d broken every bone in her body, was suffocating and Jensen's mind whirled as he tried to remember the infant CPR he’d read up on. He had mentally taken stock on every piece of firearm on the ranch, remembering the statistics he’d read about children shooting themselves by accident. Jensen knew every single weapon was always locked up tight in another building, but it didn’t matter. As they burst into the great room, chests heaving and eyes wild, Jensen was sure Bella had somehow died in a gruesome household accident and Jensen now had to plan a funeral for his baby.

Bella wasn’t dead. She wasn’t injured, hurt or sad. She was laughing as she stood on unsteady feet, body bent over, hands flat on the floor fighting for balance as she pushed herself up to a standing position.

As they came to a halt in the doorway, both of them panting, Jensen tried to get his rampant emotions under control and failed in a spectacular way as Bella took a few staggering steps all by herself, before losing balance and falling back down.

Jared, Colt, Chris and Lance all applauded, Kim held her phone up still filming in case she did it
again. Jensen cried, then laughed and then cried some more.

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There’s a white, heart shaped trinket box on the left nightstand in Jim’s bedroom. The faces of two horses nuzzling each other has been etched out on its lid, their outline raised and smooth as you run your fingers over it. It’s been twenty years since Callie died and Jim still can’t make himself sleep on that side of the bed.

He’s not a eunuch. Jim was only forty-six when she died and twenty years is a long time to go without being touched by a woman. But there’s been no serious attachment and never in this bed. A few have tried, but Jim’s too much of a gentleman to force any woman to compete with a memory.

She made him promise. Swear that he wouldn’t get lost in mourning her and spend his life alone. He swore, what else was he supposed to do, tell a dying woman no? Jim thinks he’s kept his promise. It all depends how you look at things, Jim’s not alone. He’s not been alone since that afternoon in April nineteen-sixty-six when he jumped out of the truck he hitched a ride with from Elk Mountain, Wyoming to Evergreen, Colorado and walked onto The Phoenix Ranch in search of a job.

This ranch has been his home and the people family for fifty years. Over time buildings have disappeared and new ones have been added. The cattle are fewer and the guests five times as many as they used to be. The family has lost loved ones and gained new ones. So, Jim's not alone, not at all. But to bring someone else into this bedroom, have another woman put her clothes next to his? No, impossible.

There’s people who seem to fall in love again and again, who can reinvent themselves and start over. Jim’s doesn’t have that ability. Some people only get one shot, one person they’re supposed to be with. Or perhaps people like him get lucky and find the right one while others have to look and look without every getting it just right. They get close but there’s always something missing.

Jim got it right from the start. Not that it was all sugar and honey that’s not how it works. But if it’s right, you always find a way. There are people that fit and get it right on the first try, Lance and May, Jeff and Omundson. Then there’s people like Colt, he knew what he was looking for but missed the mark on his first try. Lily had all the right ingredients but in the wrong measurements. He got it right with Kim though, they’re each other’s polar opposites, quiet and loud. His calm reason to her fierce temper, but they fit, combine their personalities into a solid structure that can survive the most violent earthquake. Jared and Jensen got it right too. But they were too young and had some growing up to do. Some issues to work out before they were ready.

Then there’s people that know who they should be with but needs a little nudge in the right direction. All though in Chris's case that slight nudge might be more like a big ass shove off a cliff.

Jim’s not been impatient. Alona's been busy, medical school is one long commitment and not one that works well with other distractions. Jim can’t figure out how he had a kid smart enough to become a doctor. There’s nothing wrong with him and Callie was a clever woman, but neither of them were book smart the way Alona's always been. But she’s been a licensed doctor for three years now and back in Evergreen for two. Jim would have liked to have her home on the ranch, in the house he built to fit not only him and Callie but a big family, two, three or four generations under one roof, not living in that tiny apartment in town. But he understands, knows what she’s been waiting for.

Chris goddamn Ackles.
Jim understands his hesitation, knows the fear that’s kept him hesitating, Jim's felt it too.

All those years he loved Callie, without making a move. Waiting to prove to Josephine and Jameson that he was good enough for her, could do right by her. Jim still remembers the day he asked Jameson for her hand. The bushy brows raised high in his lined face and his gray eyes twinkling as he broke into a loud laugh and asked if Jim honestly thought either of them had a say if Callie had made up her mind. Jim remembers standing there feeling slightly stunned before realizing how utterly stupid the situation was and feeling embarrassed started to laugh as well. Josephine had kissed his cheek, said it was about time and would he like to go look at the piece of land Callie had chosen for them to build their house on?

That was the day Jim finally learnt what being a part of this family means.

Life at The Phoenix Ranch is not something you gamble with. But his brave girl, so much like her mother, has finally shoved Chris off the cliff and forced him to choose.

He’s a clever boy, so obviously he made the right choice.

But now Jim's is getting a little impatient. This has gone on long enough, no need for it to go on forever. They’ve only been dating since June that’s barely three months, but this whole thing was decided twenty years ago so there’s really no point in dragging it on any longer.

All that’s really left to do is for Jim to lift the lid of the little heart shaped box.

It really isn’t anything special. Callie was always a down to earth, practical woman and not impressed by gaudy trinkets. Jim would have bought her anything she asked for, but what she wanted was a simple silver band with a small stone in the middle. She would have been happy with a fake one but it was one thing to accommodate her wishes regarding style but there were lines. Jim might have been born a poor ranchers kid, to long down the line in a row of twelve siblings, to stand a chance to take over, but so far up he got kicked out as soon as he stood a chance to feed himself.

But at thirty-one, Jim was not a poor ranchers kid fifth in a line of twelve. He’d worked himself up to Lance’s right-hand man, had built his own house on the ranch and he made a good living. He could damn well make sure Callie got a real stone in her engagement ring.

It’s there, lifting the lid the simple silver band with it’s diamond lies at the bottom. Beside it, the silver wedding band, a horseshoe with thirteen small diamonds, that when worn it slots around the engagement rings diamond, placing it in the middle of the horseshoe.

They’ve been in this little trinket box since Callie put them there. Jim would never, ever have taken them off, but that’s what she wanted. Once they’d been told that this was the way it would end, that the treatment wasn’t working, and the tumors kept growing instead of shrinking, she knew what she wanted to do.

Callie cleaned out all her clothes from her closet and donated them, Jim argued but she argued back, saying she would not leave him to do all that alone. She let him keep the dress she wore on their first date. Her wedding dress, the one Bess once hand stitched for Montana, was placed in a box and wrapped it in delicate silk paper. On top there’s a letter addressed to Alona, Jim has no idea what’s in it, she never told him and it’s not addressed to him. There are more boxes, more letters. Like the one with Alona’s baby clothes wrapped in lavender silk paper. There’s been boxes and letters for every big, important moment in Alona’s life. Her sixteenth birthday, her High School graduation, her twenty-first and thirtieth birthday, everyone giving Alona a new small piece of Callie, her favorite dress, her diaries, the earrings she got for her own sixteenth birthday. The letters telling Alona everything Callie wanted her daughter to know, to learn, even though she couldn’t be there to teach
Jim has given her the boxes as instructed, every single one, even though a part of him has felt like he’s relieved Callie's death over and over again. But it’s not been about her death, it’s been about keeping her alive for Alona. To allow Callie to be part of her life even though she couldn’t be here.

Jim wanted her to pass right here in this bed. Didn’t want her to leave him in a white room stinking of disinfectant and that disgusting mix of linoleum floors and sickness that's ingrained into the walls of a hospital, floating around like a thick smog that suffocates you. She refused. Said she would never die in their bedroom, would not taint the fifteen years they spent sleeping side by side in this bed with her death. They compromised and Callie drew her last breath in the cabin with the best view out of the bedroom window. Jim hasn’t set his foot in cabin number four since that day.

The day they moved her to the cabin Callie took off the rings and put them in the little heart shaped white trinket box on her nightstand. She’d told him the boxes and letters were for Alona and she should get them no matter what. But these rings, he had bought them for her and it was up to Jim to decide if he passed them on to whoever Alona would choose.

It shouldn’t be hard, Callie loved Chris so Jim knows she would have approved, more than approved, she would have been happy. Jim approves too, he loves Chris. Couldn’t think of anyone better. But the last time these rings were out of this little trinket box they were on Callie’s finger. If he takes them out, it’ll be like Jim's finally accepted that she’ll never put them on again. It should be obvious, she’s been gone for twenty years but grief does not come with an expiration date and it doesn't go away. The ache inside you doesn't lessen, instead you get so used to it you don’t think about it.

It’s like breathing. you draw in a breath and let it out without noticing. It’s the same with the grief. You’re aware it’s happening but you don’t pay attention until something forces you to think about it. A gust of wind blowing smoke from the fire in your face, forcing a cough out of your lungs and suddenly you’re aware of your breathing. Or, picking up your dead wife's rings so you can give them to the man you want your daughter to marry.

Jim's been here before, knows the ache will sink back and get comfortable again way back where he knows it will always be. But there are some things that are more painful than others no matter how right they are. Sometimes you have to make it easy on yourself.

Jim put the lid back on. He can’t make himself pick up the rings but he can pick up the box. His hand closing around it, he picked it up from the nightstand, stood up and walked to Chris's kitchen.

September is the last busy month. Jensen and Jeff travel up in the mountains with their veterans the first week, it’s as draining and rewarding as Jensen remembers it to be.

They announce the adoption at dinner one night a week later. The calm “Well duh!” reaction wasn’t quite what he and Jared were going for.

Things kind of shift even if they stay the same. Kim finds her place, she’s not a cowgirl, but she knows business and after managing a company with thousands of employees, keeping track of the seasonal employees at the ranch is like a vacation. Occasionally she takes on a few consulting jobs to spice things up but overall she seems content managing the business side of the ranch. Kim can play however tough she likes, Jensen's pretty sure she’s been waiting for this divorce for a long time.

By the third week of September, fall is in the air. Jensen's eyes are hypnotized by the yellow flames
and orange sparks of the fire as he lies on his back beside Jared making the most of one of the last mild evenings, cuddling on a blanket under the stars by the firepit.

They’re not talking, there’s nothing important to say, no need to fill the air with words.

The crackling of the fire and distant moo’s breaching the silence is enough, the pitch black sky a velvety backdrop to the dense carpet of stars above them. Jensen's head is on Jared's arm. Once, Jared breaks the silence.

“Did San Fransisco help or are you still afraid you’ll become restless again?”

Jensen turned a little so he could snuggle his face into the side of Jared’s chest, his shirt smelled like fabric softener and smoke.

“It helped. Sometimes I think I complicate things too much. Leaving this ranch, leaving you, was such a big deal for me. I’ve been trying to find these big, complicated reasons I did it. But it's not complicated, and it's not big. I left the ranch because I was a twenty-year-old kid who wanted to be independent and try a different life. By the time I grew tired of it, this new life was so solid, so grown-up, leaving it was complicated. Lily said she needed adventure instead of people, I’m the opposite. I don’t care about adventure, people make me happy. You and everyone else here on this ranch, you’re my people, you’re all I need.”

Jared's lips felt warm as they kissed his temple. They must have spent another thirty minutes in silence, nothing but nature’s sounds around them until Alona’s soft voice sounded in the darkness, distant but not so far away they couldn't make out the words.

“So, you gonna tell me why the box with my mom’s engagement and wedding band is in your sock drawer?”

“Alona, jesus.”

There was a deceitful innocence and slightly amused tone in Alona's voice when she answered.

“I'm only asking.”

Chris voice revealed how little Alonas act was working on him as he said, “Girl, don’t even try, you might fool your daddy with those fluttering lashes, but not me. What were you doing in my sock drawer, anyway?”

“My feet were cold and don’t flatter yourself, Chris. You have no resistance to these fluttering lashes at all.”

Jensen could feel Jared's chest tremble beside him as he tried to silence his laugh. It was strange listening in on a conversation when you couldn't see the facial expressions of the people talking, but neither of them wanted to move and risk interrupting them.

“Darlin’, I’m a rock. You can’t sway me.”

“That would be so much more believable if you actually looked me in the eyes when you said it. Back to the box in your sock drawer.”

“Woman, can you let me do this my damn way? I’m gonna ask soon.” They didn’t need to see Chris's facial expressions to imagine the flustered frustration or the pleased smugness in Alonas
answer as she said,

“Good, I only wanted to know so I have time to get the ring.”

“What ring? I have the rings. Don’t you want your moms rings?”

“Not my rings, your ring.”

“Alona, I’m not really a ring kind of guy, I mean I’m in the kitchen all day, it’s not sanitary.”

“Oh honey please, why don’t you lecture the medical doctor about hygiene. You’re wearing a damn ring, Chris. Don’t worry, the one I’ve picked out is your style.”

“A ring, Alona, really?”

“Chris, it’s a ring or `Property of Alona´ tattooed on your forehead.”

“Fine, I’ll wear damn ring if it makes you happy.”

“It will.”

Alona’s voice was smug but happy and even though he only had voices to go on, Jensen could tell Chris wasn’t as frustrated or grumpy as he sounded. There was an undercurrent in his voice that hinted at the game they were playing with each other.

“So, when are you gonna ask?”

“Alona!”

Alona’s answer was a loud squeal that made both Jared and Jensen so curious they had to lift their head to see what was happening. The only thing they saw before the couple disappeared in the darkness was Chris’s back walking towards his cabin, Alona over his shoulder laughing, a few moments later they heard a door slam.

“So.”Jared's voice was amused as they settled back down on the blanket, Jensen head back on his arm. “On a scale from one to ten, how much pain do you think I’d be in this time tomorrow if I proposed to you right now and we announced it tomorrow morning?”

Jensen blinked. “Zero pain. You’d feel nothing because you’d be dead. Alona would kill you.”

“True, should I ignore the fact that you didn’t dismiss the idea of me proposing?”

Jensen couldn’t stop the short laugh from jumping out. “Maybe let the thought mature for a year or two and allow them be the couple in the the spotlight for a while. Let them have their first kid and the we can revisit the subject.”

“Works for me. For future reference, I’d like to point out that I’m in favor of the tattoo idea instead of rings. Can’t you just imagine `Property of Jared´ written out a nice italic font, right here.”

The “right here” was timed with one of Jared's large hands somehow inching it's way under Jensen body, down his jeans and underwear and taking a firm hold of his left cheek, squeezing it tight.

Jensen’s answer was short and dry. “No.”
“Don’t be so hasty, Jensen. I mean Alona’s gonna get knocked-up like two seconds after she’s out of her wedding dress. I figure we got at least a year and a half before we make that choice. So, let the answer mature for a while and we can discuss it again on a later occasion.”

“Jared, one or a hundred years, it won’t matter. There will be no tattoo with your name on my ass. Not ever.”

Even in the dim light Jensen could make out Jared’s pout, but he ignored it and instead he slapped Jared on the thigh and sat up.

“Come on, time to tuck in the horses.”

They finished the nights chores in that kind of quiet synchronicity that can only come from years and years of working next to one another. Walking into the tack room to put away some stray equipment Jensen wasn’t paying attention and didn’t register the door closing. It was only when the sound of the bolt sliding into its locked position that Jensen looked up frowning, worried that Jared had locked him in by mistake.

He hadn’t. He stood leaning against the door, shirt off, belt hanging from one hand, a pen tucked behind one ear. His voice was calm and reasonable as he spoke, but Jensen could hear the predator just below the surface and he took an involuntary step back.

“You know, Jensen I don’t think you’re giving this tattoo idea the deep consideration it deserves, maybe it would be easier if you had some visual reference to go by.”

Jensen looked at the belt, then at the pen, then back at the belt. “Oh no, no you don’t. Jared, don’t you dare.”

Jared dared.
By October Bella is a professional walker and if Jensen thought keeping tabs on her while crawling was a challenge, walking adds a whole new level off stress. Childproofing your home is easy when you live in a nice modern building, when you live on a hundred and thirty-year-old ranch, not so much. How do you childproof cattle with horns as wide as a grown man is tall?

Jensen worries and stalks her every move until Colt gets fed-up and says, “Jensen, enough. We live on a ranch, you can’t protect her from everything.”

“I can try!” Jensen knew he was being unreasonable and overprotective and he flinched at the tone of his voice, thirty years old or not, Colt was still his dad and there were lines he wasn’t comfortable crossing.

The raised eyebrow in the otherwise calm face revealed that he shared Jensen's sentiment and made it clear he was still the child in this relationship.

“Jensen, Bella will get hurt, she’ll fall and scrape her knees, burn herself on the stove and get thrown off her horse. She might break something, get a concussion or worse. She’ll get sick and get her heart broken. No matter how much you try to protect her, your child will one day injure herself, there’s nothing you can do to prevent that. All you can do is raise a girl with enough common sense and knowledge to keep herself out of trouble. Protecting Bella from everything that might hurt her will not keep her safe, teaching her will. One day she’ll get to the stove before you can stop her and she will burn her hand. It will hurt, she will cry and you’ll comfort her. When she’s stopped crying, you’ll explain to her why it hurt and she won’t do it again.”

He knew his dad was right, but when it came to Bella logic didn’t always soothe his irrational fears. Jensen took a deep breath and watched his baby waddle away on short, unsteady legs trying to accept that no matter how much he wanted to, he couldn’t encase her in bubble wrap and put her in a world where everything was padded and safe.
Either way, Bella hurting herself was not Jensen's biggest parenting problem at that moment. It was trying to explain to the three eldest members of his family that the honest to god mountain of presents on the dining table was insane. That they should take at least half of it away and save for Christmas and that, at twelve months old, Bella would think the wrapping paper more fun that what was underneath it.

“I don’t see the problem here, Jensen.”

“Grandpa, you don’t think maybe thirty-five presents is a little too much for one child?”

Lance’s arms crossed over his chest, Jim looked grumpy and Colt looked uncharacteristically stubborn. Jim's voice was gruff and pig-headed in a way only Jim could be as he said,

“There’s nine of us, it’s only three presents each and a lot of them are small. You’re making an issue out nothing.”

Jensen took a deep breath to keep his voice calm and reasonable, sometimes trying to reason with these three was like having a conversation with Bella. They listened but all he got back was babbled out gibberish.

“Fist of all, you three are responsible for that pile. The other six of us haven’t brought our presents here yet. But, I’m not saying it’s a problem, all I’m suggesting is that we save some of the presents for Christmas instead. Bella is too young, she will not stay interested long enough to open all of these and-”

“Save for Christmas, boy are crazy? A lot of these are clothes, she’ll have outgrown them by Christmas. Look at this.” Lance held up a present wrapped in purple, shiny paper, “It’s a onesie that says Gobble till you Wobble and a matching tutu. Save for Christmas, Jensen!?"

Jensen inhaled again, he was an adult he could do reasonable. “Ok, so that’ll be one present she gets’ today but maybe some of the others aren’t as dependent on season or size, maybe-”

“Jensen! It’s my granddaughter's first birthday and you want to deprive her of some of the gifts I bought for her.”

“Dad, that’s not what I’m saying. She’ll get the presents we’ll only spread them out and this way you won’t have to buy her any presents for Christmas because it’s already done.”

“So now I can't buy my great granddaughter gifts for Christmas?!”

“What? Grandpa, you know that's not what I was saying I-”

Jared, walking into the room, interrupted the discussion, his eyebrow shot up as he noticed the standoff between Jensen and the three grumpy men in the dining room.

“What’s going on?”

Jensen exhaled, at last someone reasonable had come to help him, but before Jensen could explain his grandpa, dad and uncle had launched themselves into a outraged tirade about how Jensen was trying to prevent them from giving Bella presents and deprive them of the joy of being a loving grandparent and life’s icing on the cake. What was the point of being a grandparent and great grandparent and great uncle if you weren't allowed to lavish said child with attention and presents on her birthday and how it was impossible to save some of them for Christmas because-

“Alright!” Holding up both hands in front of himself Jared made soothing, calming gestures as he
said, “Alright, I hear you. It’s only a little snag in the communication. Everything is fine. Bella will
get her presents.”

Jensen opened his mouth to protest but Jared threw his arm around his shoulder, drawing him into a
tight hug that brought his face snug against his shoulder, muffling any words he tried to get out.

“Everything is alright. Lance, weren’t you and Jim supposed to string up the lights? Colt, didn’t Chris
give you a shopping list? Everyone go by your business now, go on, everything is fine. Big day full
of presents in front of us.”

As soon as the three older men had walked out of the room, calmed by Jared’s words Jensen pulled
himself free.

“What was that? Do you not see that mountain on the table? She’ll be bored in ten minutes.”

Jared waved his protests away and said in a patient tone. “Jensen, come on. There hasn’t been a baby
on this ranch since you were one, they’re excited. A year or two and then Alona and Chris will start
a brood and things will calm down, but right now Bella is the only baby on this ranch. Let them have
their fun.”

Jensen sighed and looked at the mountain of colorful paper on the table again.

“She’ll get obnoxiously spoiled, Jared.”

Jared shook his head, a few loose chestnut strands escaped from knot he kept his hair in when
working and fell over his forehead.

“No she won’t, she’ll grow up the same way we all did. She’ll get spoiled rotten with love and
attention but as soon as she’s able, she’ll learn responsibility and gratitude the same way every child
on this ranch has, through working on it.”

“I know, Jared but come on, you have to admit this is excessive.”

Jared shook his head smiling, “It looks like every birthday table I can remember. Your birthday table
looked like this, Alona’s looked like this even mine used to look like this and I wasn’t even family.”

Jensen made face. “You were family from the moment you first walked into this house but anyway, I
don’t remember that, we didn’t have this many toys, did we?”

Jared shrugged his shoulders. “I guess it depends how you define toys. I mean we never got GI Joe’s
or big Lego sets, we got horse grooming kits, saddles and ropes. I mean, they gave us a lot of
presents but pretty much everything were items we needed for everyday life here, we just didn’t see it
like that.”

Jensen sighed but gave a conceding nod. “Yeah, I guess.”

Jared’s eyes were warm and laughing as he looked at him. “Don’t worry, Falabella will get spoiled
there’s nothing we can do about that, but she won’t be obnoxious or ungrateful, we’ll make sure of it.
Let them have their fun.”

Jensen threw his arms around Jared’s shoulders, looking at him with a slight twinkle in his eyes.

“Fine, but if she turns into a little monster, it’s on them.”

Jared smiled, letting one hand stroke across Jensen cheek.
“The girl's an Ackles, she’ll be wonderful.”

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It’s not clear who enjoyed Bella’s first birthday party the most, Bella or her eighty-year-old great grandfather, her sixty-seven-year-old great uncle or her fifty-five-year-old grandfather. Either way they spent as much time on the floor as she did, all the while opening her presents and exclaiming, “Look, Bella it’s a horsy! Can you say horsy?”

At the dining room table Jared's hand was hot against the back of Jensen's neck and Chris's cake, some kind of fluffy dream made of clotted cream and strawberries, was still lingering on his tongue. He looked on at the three oldest and the youngest member of his family as they crawled around on the floor amidst an ocean of colorful, wrinkled wrapping paper.

Kim and Chris were in the middle of a conversation with Omundson and Jeff as Alona sunk down on a chair next to Jared who was discreetly holding on to his phone. Her voice was muted but amused as she said, “Please tell me you are filming this.”

Jensen scratched his nose to conceal his grin, Jared’s eyes twinkled, but he kept his face neutral as he answered in a low, inconspicuous voice, “Of course.”

She leaned her face on Jared's shoulder, face turned away from the men on the floor. Alona's chest jumped as she laughed into his bicep and said, “I'll be expecting a copy.”

Jared’s face was still and expressionless as he answered, “Obviously.”

“What are you three up too?”

Lance's rugged voice made Alona stop laughing and their little crowd all turned to look at him and the other two men on the floor.

“Up to?” Alona's voice was smooth and her her brown eyes wide.

Jim let out a gruff laugh. “Nice try, angel but if you were going for innocent, you should have made Jensen say it. He does the whole sweet and innocent liar thing a lot better than you.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell her.” Chris's voice sounded teasing but fond as they all looked over at him.

“I’m a fantastic liar.” Alona's voice was indignant as she looked at all of them. “Fantastic!”

Chris rolled his eyes while shaking his head.

There was a grunt from the floor as Colt stood up, eyes on Jensen. “You ready to take your girl for her first ride?”

It was family tradition as old as the ranch, every child born on it took their first ride on their first birthday. Jensen had done his in Colts arms, Alona in Callie’s, Colt in Lances, Lance and Althea in Josephine’s, Josephine, Tim and Colt in Amos and now it was Bella’s turn.
As they walked out to the stable in a tight group, they were all struck by the moment and Jensen was nervous. The only one who didn’t appear to care about monumental rite of passage she was about to partake in, was Bella, who seemed calm and content held in Jensen arm’s.

As he came to stand in front of Acorn, Jensen changed his grip on Bella holding her on one arm as his free hand caressed her muzzle and then up her graying forehead.

“Hey girl, I know you’re retired, but I thought you, me and Bella could go for a short ride. This is Bella’s first time, and I thought you’d might want to join us.”

Jensen’s green eyes met large dark ones, thick long lashes hanging down over them, standing still gazing at each other, Acorn’s breath was warm against his face and neck, her muzzle so soft a smile formed on his lips from the sensation.

Bella was calm and quiet in his arms, she’d been out in the stables with Jensen lots of times so the sight of the large animal was not new to her, still she seemed as mesmerized as Jensen and Acorn. When she reached out a tiny hand putting it on Acorn’s muzzle she pushed her face towards her, making her giggle.

“She’s just like her daddy.” Jensen turned his head and saw Colt coming to stand beside them.

“You were like this at her age, as soon as a horse was in sight you were always reaching for it like you wanted to get on it right away. People thought I was crazy when I let you learn how to ride at three, but it was a struggle to keep you off them for that long.”

Jensen smiled. “Well, it worked out ok.”

Colts answered with a warm laugh. “I’d say so. If you give me my granddaughter, you can get Acorn ready to go.” Nodding Jensen handed Bella to Colt.

It was a cliché but Jensen could do this in his sleep. Attach the lead rope to the halter, walk Acorn back into the stable to stand in the open space by the tack room. Jared came over and took the leash as Jensen ran his hands over Acorns body making sure no hay or straw or anything else that could cause discomfort stuck in her coat, making a few strokes with a body brush, more out of routine than need. He put on the saddle pad, putting it higher up then needed so he could pull in in place going with the grain of her coat.

Getting a full western saddle on top of her was heavy, even for a grown man. It was all in the movement, using one knee to push it so you didn’t have to use all your strength. Then getting a good momentum going, swinging it up and on in a kind of whipping motion that made the straps and stirrups flip out by themselves, so they didn’t get caught underneath the saddle. If done right, you would get the saddle up in the air and then setting it down smooth, getting nothing caught or making the saddle drop or slam down on the horse.

Jensen leaned down and buckled first the front, then the back cinch strap in place, making sure all the leather was straight and smooth, not twisted or bent in a way to irritate Acorns skin. He checked everything one more time, wiggling the pad and saddle to get it to lay just right he reached down and tightened the front cinch one more notch. Then, reaching down, taking hold of Acorns front leg and urging her to bend it to make sure no skin had caught while tightening the chinches. He attached the breast collar to the uptugs on top and the chinch below before tightening the chinches one last time.

Jensen continued by picking up the prepared bridle and stepping up to Acorns face. Jared unbuckled the halter, pulling it over her ears and then stepped out of the way. With one hand on her cheek Jensen let the bridle slide up her face and in place. When the bit reached her mouth Jensen let his free
hand come down and hold it in place while urging the horse to open his mouth with soft fingers and let it slip in. With the help of both hands he slipped her ears under the leather straps one at a time pulling her black fringe out from under the straps as well. He checked once again, that everything was in place and lying flat and closed the throat latch making sure there was enough space for four fingers underneath it so it wasn’t too tight.

His hand stroked down Acorns flank as Colt once again came to stand beside him. He adjusted the length of the stirrups one last time and took the reins in one hand placing it on the saddle horn, put one foot in the stirrup and heaved himself up in a fluid, well practiced move.

Once in the saddle, he made Acorn walk outside and into the paddock, Jim opening the gate for him. They did a few laps around the paddock together allowing Acorn to stretch her legs and Jensen to judge her mood. It was like sinking down into your favorite chair, it might be old and the fabric faded but, it’s padding and springs having shaped himself to a perfect fit after years of use. He and Acorn was so used to each other it was effortless to sit upon her again. Jensen rode up to the part of the fence were Colt was waiting and lifted Bella into his arms, setting her down on the saddle in front of him. On hand holding the reins the other tight around her.

It was like Acorn knew she had precious cargo on board the way her body moved so steadily with a gracefulness Jensen had forgotten she had. Like having a rider on her again made her feel ten years younger. Bella, tiny plump body molded into the too big saddle like it was made for her. Jensen's stomach made joyful little leaps every time a laugh escaped out through her mouth and soon her hands came to grasp the reins below his own. Her coordination wasn’t spot on, but the will was there and he realized he might have to train a good first horse for her, soon.

On the ground, nine people were leaning on the fence watching father and daughter take their first ride together.

Jared, phone in hand stood with Colt on one side and Alona on his other. Colt's voice was a little unsteady as he spoke.

“Boy, you better be filming this.”

“I am, it'll be perfect.”

“I should hope so, with all that practice you got in earlier.”

His eyes left off the display for a second as Jared looked at Colt, big, unapologetic grin on his face.

A sharp sniveling sound and a quick drag of an arm across his face made Kim, who was standing between Colt and Lance smile and lean over to the elder Ackles.

“Got something in your eye?”

Lance looked over, eyes gleaming and big smile under his mustache. “Only tears darlin’. I cried when I did this with Colt, I cried when Colt did this with Jensen and I am crying now. Crying of happiness is a privilege and you should cherish it every time it happens.”

Kim snuck one arm under his, leaning her head on his shoulder as they turned their heads back to horse and it’s riders.

“You’re a lovely man, Lance Ackles.”
Alona loves Chris's hair. It’s thick and falls in beautiful waves down to his shoulders. Most of the time it’s tamed by rubber bands or bandanas but sometimes he wears it loose. Once, Alona asked why he kept it that long. He said it was so he’d never forget that there was always shampoo in this house. She didn’t understand his answer then, it took a few more years before it became clear. Alona remembers they’d been sitting outside, in the middle of the night, sky black and twinkling. They’ve done that a lot.

It started that first year after her mother died. When you lose someone like that, at first the grief, it’s so acute it envelopes you in such an intense pain it’s like you move through the world in slow motion, even though everything else goes on at it’s normal pace. It’s like trying to listen in on a conversation while being submerged in water, all you hear are distorted voices and words you can’t quite make out.

After awhile the grief transforms into a state where you can function somewhat. You remember that you have to turn on the tap for water to come out of it. That staring at the coffeepot won’t make coffee appear out of nowhere, you have to prepare the coffee maker and turn it on. It’s amazing how many steps are involved in making a pot of coffee. Alona lost count on the number of mornings she’d come downstairs only to find her dad staring at the coffee maker like it was something NASA built.

Then there’s the emotional explosion of the funeral, were the mind numbing grief transforms from shock to unimaginable sadness and loss. After, you spend months walking around like some kind of volatile natural element, the most insignificant spark, a smell, a sound, a color. Anything that invokes a memory triggering an explosive response. It’s exhausting not being in control of your own emotions.

After a while though your grief makes people uncomfortable, like they’re not doing enough to make you feel better. There’s no way of explaining that it doesn’t work like that, that grief doesn’t end or go away. Time doesn't heal all wounds you just learn how to work around them. Reinvent yourself
into someone who can continue existing without the person you’ve lost. So you keep up appearances, smile and say ‘sure it’s hard but you know, life goes on’ it’s not a lie, it’s true. But the only thing that’s happened is that you’ve gained back control and learnt how to keep the emotions and tears in until you’re some place where they won’t make other people squirm.

When Alona gained back control of her grief she’d sneak out at night and like magic, Chris would always find her. It was like he could sense that this would be one of those nights.

Life does goes on though, if you let it. Alona’s mom died, Alona didn’t, so she had to live. At some point the conversations stopped being about her dead mom and became about other things. Alona was twenty-two when Chris at last talked about life before The Phoenix. She knows more about him than anyone else on this ranch. Things he didn’t even tell May. Things that are so hard to know, that hurt so much to hear, she almost couldn't stand it when he told her. She listened anyway because he was strong for her, so she could be for him too.

It amuses her to think that everyone believes they know her and Chris's story and relationship so well. When in fact most of it has formed and evolved during conversations in the middle of the night when no one else was around.

One hand playing with strands of his hair, Alona let the fingertips of the other ghost down Chris's chest, his complexion getting lighter now that his summer tan had almost faded. She still wasn’t used to this, lying beside him in his bed like she belonged there.

Alona is not as brave as she tries to make herself out to be, not about Chris. Deep inside she’d been terrified. Feared that if she got it, this thing she’d been waiting on for so long, it wouldn’t be like she’d pictured. That she would put their friendship at risk for nothing, destroy the bond they had.

She understands why Chris hesitated, knows better than anyone why he’s so afraid of losing this ranch and its people. Alona would never do that to him. It would be kinder to put gun to his head and pull the trigger, then to tell Chris to leave The Phoenix.

However much Alona's tried to keep her dreams and expectation level headed she still, if she’s honest with herself, had these ready made scenes in her mind of how this would play out. She can sense the heat of embarrassment on her cheeks as she thinks of long rides during sunset, the sky a shimmering backdrop in pinks and purples. A first kiss under the moonlight down by the lake, Chris's hands hot against her bare skin on a perfect summer night. Alona was afraid that if they did this, it wouldn’t live up to her expectations. It didn’t, not at all.

She was unprepared for the veritable whirl-pool of emotions that took her over when Chris made up his mind. She’d been waiting at the parking lot out back at Tom’s bar, Chris had walked out of his car and up to her, his hand heavy at the back of her neck and his lips against hers before she even understood what was happening. It wasn’t cute. Their first kiss wasn’t standing in knee-high, soft grass by a clear lake under a silvery full moon. It was on a concrete parking lot, the backdrop a dirty brickwall, the light shining down on them a flickering streetlight, the stench of stale vomit and urine in the air. There were no soft, hesitant lips or sparkling eyes gazing at each other, it was a challenge. Chris saying with hands and lips what he couldn’t with words, but the message was so clear, “You want it? Alright, here I am. Can you handle it?”

Their first time wasn’t languid and loving under the stars. It was fast and rough in the backseat of Chris’ truck. Her underwear on the floor and dress hitched up as she straddled him, the buttons at the front of her dress open to her waist. Hands on Chris's shoulders, his on her hips, face buried in her chest, her head thrown back as she moved on top of him. It was cramped, uncomfortable, rushed and insane.
When it was over, Alona’s breath rapid and heavy still straddling him, her forehead leaning against his shoulder, a slight panic had risen in the pit of her stomach. It wasn’t playing out like she’d thought it would and what she felt was nothing like that warm, comforting love she’d carried with her all these years. This was something new, something unpredictable and overwhelming. She’d been scared to lift her head and look at Chris, not sure what she’d see now.

His breath had been hot against the side of her neck, one hand at the base of her spine the other tangled in her loose, tousled hair. The hand in her hair had tightened, urging her to lift her head, the car still silent except for their audible breathing.

Head straightening up, eye’s lifting to meet Chris's, Alona held her breath. Chris's face was illuminated by the flickering streetlight, then cast in shadow when it went out. Face going in and out of focus making it appear his eyes were flashing every time the lights switched on. It made it impossible for Alona to see them or try to interpret his expression, her heart raced and her lungs ached at the lack of oxygen.

The light flashed on again, this time staying lit long enough for the both of them read each other's expressions. Chris's eyes were as searching as her own and then there was a small twitch in the left corner of his mouth, then one more reaching a little wider. Alona’s mouth mimicked his, twitch by twitch until they were sitting there, in the backseat of Chris beat up old truck, at the back of the crappiest dive bar in Colorado. His jeans halfway down his thighs, her underwear on the floor, brown and blond hair tousled, grinning like two morons.

If she closed her eyes Alona could still feel the warmth of the early June night flowing in through the open car window beside her as Chris drove them back to the ranch, sleeves on his shirt rolled up, bare arm grazing against her thigh every time he switched gears.

Not one word had been spoken, but it was decided, it was them now.

Alona watched her hand on Chris's chest, the diamond on her finger coming to life as the sun rose outside the bedroom window. There had been no French restaurant, no rose petals on the floor or champagne cooling.

Chris hadn’t kneeled, he’d made grilled cheese sandwiches that they’d eaten in his bed. Alona’s hair was a mess on top of her head, wearing one of Chris's raggedy old tee-shirts, her feet pushed under his thighs to warm them as she leaned against him, some random game on the beaten up old TV in front of them.

At a commercial break Chris's hand had tangled in her hair, the other holding a beer, Alona busy sucking the cheesy grease from her fingers. His voice had sounded so comfortable,

“So, you wanna get married?”

Alona’s head had stayed on his shoulder, her voice didn’t rise a single note, her eyelids still heavy as she looked at the woman on the TV trying to convince her that this or that cream would change her life.

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t fireworks. No surprise outburst of joy, no tears or laughter. The question was a matter of formality nothing else. For Chris this was decided when he stepped out of his truck at Tom’s bar. For Alona, it was decided the morning after her thirteenth birthday.
Chapter 26

Fall makes way to winter, the golden mountainsides becoming barren as the leaves let go and twirl around the sky dancing on the strong winds before being rocked down on the ground. Bella laughs and claps her hands in excitement as she wades through the colorful piles of leaves covering the ground all around the ranch.

Jensen laughs and has to run after and catch her as she chases the leaves that fall down around her trying to catch them with her small hand, just so he can pick her up and kiss her over and over because she’s the most wonderful thing that ever existed.

Jensen buys a special harness he can use to strap her against himself as he takes her riding across the land. She’s such a quiet soul, so easy to keep content as she sits at a safe distance from the flames and anvil as Jared hammers out a new shoe. Bella burns herself, it’s unavoidable but Jared looks like he wants to sentence himself to thirty years of hard labor in some Siberian work camp when he’s not able to stop her in time. But she learns to keep her distance and when steam rises from the bucket of water as Jared cools the steel she looks very serious as she points and says, “Ow. Bad.”

In the evenings the fireplace in the great room gets lit and Jensen leans against the doorframe and watches as Jared snuggles up with her on the couch and they read about Sir Prance-a-lot and Clippity-Clop. When he comes back ten minutes later he can’t help but smile as they’re both asleep, Jared stretched out and Bella curled into a ball on his chest. Those times, Jensen has to sneak over and slide his way in so he can lay beside Jared, head on his chest, face inches away from Bella, it’s like instant prozac.

The first snow transforms the vibrant landscape to a calm restful white, bringing with it a sense of peace. Opening the door and walking out in the early morning, the sky’s still black, the winter day’s so much shorter. Jensen's warm breath collides with the cold air and steam flows out of his mouth with every breath, the snow covered ground shimmers as light reflects down on it from the dark starry sky above and the ground squeaks under his feet.
Winter at The Phoenix is a time for rest and family. The guests are few. Only a small, select group of people that have been visiting for so many years, they’re considered close friends are welcome. It’s a time for restoration, buildings, vehicles, tools and inhabitants on two legs and four in need of maintenance and a little TLC after a long busy season.

For the first time since he was twenty, Jensen is not striving to be somewhere else, not on his way to something better. With a few months perspective he can see that San Francisco helped only not in the way he thought it would. His meeting with Lily gave him answers about himself but it wasn’t from recognition or emotional connection, it was from the lack of it. It was understanding how little he lost that made it easy to let it go. Jensen no longer has to wonder or try to picture what kind of mother she would have been.

He has no resentment, anger or even sadness towards her. He can’t agree with the choices she’s made, would never make the same ones. But people are imperfect and a product of the people who came before them. You make the best choices you can with what they gave you, he thinks maybe Lily wasn’t given a lot to start with. There’s nothing wrong with the life she’s chosen, plenty of people, gender insignificant, don’t want the house, partner and children. They want freedom from expectations or the vagabond life of excitement and adventure she lives and some are just not the family type. The only questionable thing about it, is that she had Jensen before she figured that out, but he can’t resent her for his own existence. He can fault her for leaving him, it’s a shitty thing to do as a parent but would it have been better if some kind of moral or ethical code made her stay even if it would have made her unhappy? Would she have been a good mother? Jensen doubts it. With all the facts laid out before him he’s confident that she made the best choice she could, for everyone involved.

Meeting Lily was important, but going back to San Francisco even more so. It gave him perspective on a lot of things. Why he left The Phoenix in the first place, how doomed his relationship with Richard had always been and his own big part in that. Even though Jensen’s been able to accept that what happened did so, not because Richard was a bad person but because he was ill, he still viewed him as the catalyst and his attack, the action that made their relationship unsalvageable.

As he stood in the empty apartment, hearing silent echoes of their life together bouncing off the walls he understood it wasn’t true. Having the courage to look at it without coddling himself Jensen could see that he left the relationship a long time before that. He loved Richard, but not enough, not as much as he deserved.

There is a tiny little voice inside of him that he’s been ignoring since before coming back to The Phoenix.

He watched Jared and Bella playing in the fluffy snow through the window, Bella's ivory white cheeks rosy, tiny wool mittens damp and heavy with lumps of snow hanging on to the fibers. Jared’s tall body bent down so he could roll the ball of snow bigger and bigger so their snowman could get a good sized head.

The voice that Jensen does not want to listen to is a little too honest for comfort and it’s not holding back anymore. It puts the truth out there, forces it to the front of his mind without mercy and leaves it there for Jensen to have to face. The truth is that Jensen had decided to leave way before the attack happened. But then Richard came home and put the folder from the surrogacy agency on the kitchen counter and Jensen stayed. Not because he wanted Richard, not because he believed Richard wanted a family but, because he wanted Bella.

Jensen was fully aware their relationship wouldn’t survive, that bringing a baby into it would make it crumble. But he wanted to be a father and Richard was willing to help him become one. He
understood that when the baby came their relationship would end soon after and Richard would not be interested in joint custody, it wasn’t a surprise. The attack was a traumatic shock, and it pushed all those other things far back but it doesn’t change the fact that he was planning on leaving with Bella all along. He was just waiting for Richard to make the first move, he wanted him to be the one who made the choice, didn’t want to be the bad guy.

It doesn’t erase Richard's own faults, and he has quite a few that have nothing to do with anxiety or anger. It doesn’t relieve him from guilt or blame, what it does do is acknowledge that the attack was a tragic conclusion to a relationship that had ended long before. But for different selfish and self-serving reasons they both hung on way beyond the expiration date and it made the relationship toxic.

Without excusing the truly awful thing Richard did to him, that blame is Richards to carry and the action inexcusable, Jensen can now view their relationship without tinted glasses that make himself out to be a better person than he is. He can accept that if they had both left when the relationship was over, it wouldn't have happened. Jensen wouldn't have to live with those memories and neither would Richard. He would still have had his issues to deal with, but maybe the end of their relationship would have been the push he needed to seek help or maybe he would have attacked someone else, it’s impossible to know and Jensen isn’t interested in delving deeper into that thought. Forgiving Richard and accepting that there are complicated reasons behind the action, that he was unwell, is one thing, but Jensen isn’t going to make himself out to be a catalyst or turn his own actions into a justification or excuse for what happened.

Outside he sees Jared making his way down to the stable, Bella behind him on a wooden pull-sled, their snowman standing at attention behind them. Anyway, Richard wasn’t what he was standing here contemplating, what he was thinking about was the contentment that has come over him.

The tear inside of him, that divide between two warring parts of himself, has grown silent. Now Jensen understands Lily had nothing to do with it. It was not about the choice between Richard and Jared or The Phoenix versus San Francisco. Like everyone else he’s got good sides and not so good sides. Personality traits that are flattering and he is proud of, then there are other traits he’d rather forget he has. The conflict inside of him was never about people or places. Like everyone else Jensen is a complicated human being with the potential to grow a wide range of personalities.

The choice he had to make was about what kind of person he wanted to be, what parts of himself he wanted to encourage and which to soften. He can’t erase everything about himself he doesn’t like, but he can decide how prominent he’ll allow them to be, place himself in a context where they’re not encouraged.

His brief return to San Francisco helped him understand that he doesn't like the person he was there. He got a good long taste of life outside The Phoenix, of the kind of person that city, his job and the people he surrounded himself with turned him into. It stroked his ego and flattered his selfishness. It was exciting, inspiring and full of flavor, but it left a bitter aftertaste.

Jensen was raised thinking he was the most amazing thing that ever came into this world. It’s an incredible privilege and one every child should have. But at The Phoenix, that privilege comes with a big dose of humility, hard work and gratitude, and if you forget, there’s always someone there to remind you.

When Jensen lived in San Francisco, there was no one there to remind him of all that. For every year that passed, every step up on the ladder, Jensen kept an image of himself, believed that he was the same person he had been at the ranch. He didn’t see how he kept changing into a person he doesn’t want to be. Jensen prefers the person he is on ThePhoenix and that other part, that side of him that’s been pulling at him, there’s no room for him here. Jensen is home and ready for the lifelong
commitment of running this ranch.

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January is biting cold with more snow than they’ve seen for at least fifteen years. After the third heavy snowfall in as many weeks they park the truck with the snowplow in front at the main building so they at least don’t have to shovel their way down to the garage in the mornings.

The second Wednesday of the month, Jared’s on morning duty in the stables, he comes back in too soon and Jensen looks up as he instead of coming to the breakfast table pulls Colt aside talking to him in a low voice. As Colt’s expression changes so does Jensen, his brow furrowing at Jared’s serious face and Colt’s grim expression.

“What’s going on?”

Jensen could see the two men share a look and so did the rest of the table that turned silent. Colt ran a hand through his silver locks as Jared inhaled a deep breath before walking over, sitting down next to Jensen taking hold of his hand lacing their fingers.

“Jensen…”

If he was only worried before now he was scared.

Jared moistened his lips and continued. “Jensen, Acorn is dead.”

It’s not a surprise or at least shouldn’t be, Acorn was pushing thirty-one and except for the ride on Bella’s birthday, retired from riding for a good few years, she was old. It was always hard when one of their horses passed away but Acorn was special to him.

Her body was still warm when Jensen kneeled down on the stable floor beside her, the scent of the fine pine shavings covering it becoming more pronounced this close to it. He sat on his knees beside her as he ran his hand over her beautiful coat still shining even if the hair had strands of gray in it. Flecks of pine shavings had stuck to her black mane and Jensen reached for a mane comb to brush them out.

It was redundant work as she no doubt would get covered in them again as they transported her body out of the stall, but Acorn had been one of his best friends his whole life, she deserved what little dignity in death he could giver her.

They left him alone with her to say goodbye until Lance came into the stall and put a hand on his shoulder.

“They’re here, Jensen it’s time for her to go.”

He dragged a hand over his face as Lances grip squeezed in sympathy.

“They, we’d bury her on the ranch if only the ground wasn’t frozen. We’ll send her to the crematorium and take her home when it’s done.”

He nodded and put his hand on her neck. “You did good lady.”

They sent him inside to be with Bella out of the line of sight as they loaded Acorns body on the truck and sent it away. When her ashes came back a few days later, Jensen put it on a shelf in the stables to
wait for spring and the snow to melt so he could go up to his favorite mountain outlook and spread her over the land.

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At the end of January, Chris and Alona announced that they planned to have their wedding in June. Jensen observed as they in innocent ignorance explained that they were thinking a quick courthouse ceremony, a small dinner and apart from family maybe five, six guests.

Jensen understood why. He was sure people who knew their story expected Alona to want the big fairy tale wedding but if they did, they didn’t get it. For Alona marrying Chris had never been about the wedding. She never had scrapbooks with cutout pictures of wedding dresses or meticulously made out plans for dinners or any other grand expectations. Alona wanted to be Chris’s wife. For her it was about the life that came after and the wedding itself, something she wanted to get over with. Chris just wanted Alona to be happy. Unfortunately for Chris and Alona, on The Phoenix Ranch there were a lot more wills to consider than just their own.

Jared looked at him and together they shared a smile and shook their heads in sympathy and amusement as Lance and Jim looked at the couple like they’d just stabbed them in the chest and descended into a rambling tirade. As exclamations like; “My only daughter!” “Waited for this since you were a girl!” “Not blood but still my damn son!” “Why do you want to deprive us of…” “What are we going to tell the Denver branch of the family? Already made a guest list!”

“How could you do this to us!”

Alona and Chris grew paler and paler until they with a sigh and surrender in their voices apologized and explained how they hadn’t thought things through.

By February, Lance and Jim were in full control of the wedding plans and the guest list had grown by a hundred and seventy people. Chris and Alona looked on with a silent desperation in their eyes as the two old men discussed and compared two brands of party tents. Jensen came to stand between them and threw an arm around each shoulder and if his voice was a little too amused and relieved that his life was no longer the one the elder members of this family were focused on, it couldn’t be helped.

“Remember that they love you.”

They looked at him in tired resignation and nodded.

One morning at breakfast Jared laughed when Jim said something about chair-covers and Chris looked at him with a cruel expression as he said,

“What are you’re laughing at? As the best man you’ll have to do tons of this shit.”

Jared reared back in his chair horrified desperation in his eyes as he said, “What? No. Wait, isn’t Jensen your best man?”

With an unflattering, gleeful look on his face Chris shook his head and the words spilling from his lips were so soft and so evil, “No, Jensen is maid of honor.”

Jensen, sitting next to Jared had looked at Alona with accusing eyes. In the background they could hear a knock on the door and Colt stood up to see who it was. Alona’s look was one of contented malice and she grinned, shrugged her shoulders and threw his words back in his face.

“Remember that they love you.”
Jensen scowled and was about send off a snarky answer when Colt came back into the great room with an unreadable expression on his face. They all grew quiet when they saw it and waited for him to speak. Colt's voice was pensive as he spoke,

“Jared, your sister is here to see you.”
Jared had five younger siblings. Three on his dad's side with his second wife Lisa; Hannah, John and Peter Padalecki. He had two more on his mom’s side with her second husband Thorne; David and Emma Jones. He had seen none of them for a good fifteen years and they were all children back then, all of them at least ten years younger than him. By process of elimination it was obviously Hannah or Emma standing in the hallway waiting for him, unless one of his brothers had decided to change things up a bit, but that didn’t seem likely. He looked at the girl or maybe young woman was more accurate. With her hazel eyes and brown hair he figured he was looking at Emma. His dad was blond and blue eyed and Jared took after his mom, so did the woman in front of him.

“Emma?”

“Hi, Jared.”

He wasn’t sure what to say, the whole situation was bizarre. Jared couldn’t for the life of him figure out why his estranged little sister was standing on the threshold at The Phoenix Ranch. He could sense someone come up behind him and he didn’t have to look to know who it was. His mind was still blank and Jared couldn’t think of anything to say as he noticed Jensen reach out beside him, taking Emma’s hand as he introduced himself.

“Hi, I’m Jensen.”

Her eyes shifted and Jared could tell she was nervous but she smiled a little. “Yeah, I recognized you from the website, I’m Emma.”

At her comment Jared remembered that when Jensen updated the ranch website while snooping around for Colts private papers for the divorce, he added new information about the family, uploading pictures of them all and explaining who they all were.

“What are you doing here?”
It was rude. Jared was raised to treat visitors standing at this door better, May always inviting people in for a meal whither they were people looking for work, tradesmen or neighbors, a sentiment that didn't start or die with her. But he couldn't think of anything else to say.

She looked like a girl not a woman when she met his stare with uncertain eyes, that soon shifted and settled on a spot by her feet.

“I had nowhere else to go.”

It was then that Jared followed her eyes, and he saw that what he at a quick, disinterested look first thought was a luggage, was instead two separate baby seats and there was an infant in each of them. Tiny, tiny little people who couldn't be more than a few weeks old at the most. Jared's words left him again, and he looked over at Colt in desperation because Colt always did the right thing. But he shook his head and said in a voice that didn’t give Jared even the tiniest hint of what to do.

“This is your decision, Jared.”

Jared hadn’t seen Emma in fifteen years. He had no connection to her, except for some shared DNA, she was a stranger. But what kind of person says no to a girl with two newborn babies?

Jared ran a hand through his hair, grasping at straws, he asked,

“What about Sherleen and Thorne?”

She gave a wry smile and Jared recognized it, he’d had it on his own lips more times then he cared to remember. The dry, emotionless disappointment in the voice was as familiar as an old, comfortable sweater,

“It’s been a while since you last spent time with our mother, but you of all people should remember she’s not a warm, nurturing kind of person.”

Jared’s forehead creased in sympathetic recollection as he replied, “Yeah. I was hoping she had improved with practice. But why come here? I mean, you were a kid the last time I saw you, you must barely remember me.”

He didn’t want to invite her, didn’t want to open all that up again. Jared had dealt with his messed up biological family, had said goodbye. Maybe not in person but he’d said his farewells and moved on, creating a life with the family that had chosen him. It was over and done with and he didn’t want to invite any of them into this family, this life. He sympathized with her but he had no obligation to some half sibling he didn’t grow up with.

There was a mix of desperation, exhaustion and shame in her face. Jared did his best to ignore it but when Emma spoke again he had to listen, “I don’t remember much, only fragments here and there and the name of this place. I get that it’s weird me turning up like this but, their dad was never a part of this, my parents are assholes, my grandparents are assholes and you’re the only brother old enough to help. I had a plan for all this, but that depended on my roommate not ditching me with a rent I can’t afford. I only need a few days to figure things out.”

They were all in a good place. Alona and Chris, despite their complaining that was more for show than anything else, were planning their wedding, which also kept Jim and Lance in a good mood. Colt had, if possible, become even more calm and reasonable since Kim moved in. Jeff and Omundson as always were stable, but seemed even more content because everyone else was so relaxed. Then there was him and Jensen, they were in such a good place. After years of drama and bullshit they’d settled, Jensen had his shit figured out and dealt with and so did Jared. But now a part
of that baggage was standing in front of him asking to come in and Jared didn’t want to put everyone through this, didn’t want to invite someone who might rock the metaphorical boat.

But if he didn’t, if he sent this girl away, closed the door and told her and her infants to leave, what kind of person would he be? He could hear Grandma May's voice echoing between the walls, see the disapproving frown between her warm brown eyes as she looked him up and down in dissatisfaction. He could sense the chill of her biting words, asking what would have become of Jared if she, Lance and Colt had reasoned the same way. If she’d left him in that house with the air mattress and people who didn’t care, instead of taking him with her.

The heart of the matter was that genetic mass and family trees aside, Jared couldn’t turn her away. Not because she was his sister but because on this ranch, if someone stood on your doorstep asking for help, you invited them in. Jared couldn’t turn her away, he wasn’t raised like that.

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Emma’s story wasn’t original or complicated. It was the classic tale; nineteen-year-old girl buys fake ID, goes to a bar, get drunk, hooks up with a stranger she can’t remember and ends up with an unwelcome surprise a nine months later or in Emma's case, two unwelcome surprises.

Jensen changed his grip on the one of the two unnamed brothers he held in his arms, Jared holding the other. Emma shuffled food into her mouth in a speed and with a greed that could only come from real and acute hunger. Every other bite she took a small break and got a few words out before taking another bite, putting her story together.

By the sound of things Jared's hope that Sharleen would be a better mother with her younger children, was nothing more than wishful thinking. As with Jared there had been no obvious mistreatment. Emma had always been well-fed, clean and dressed in whatever was in style. She’d had her own room, a pink canopy over her princess bed, the newest toys, Barbie dream home, Barbie car, everything she wanted.

Except love and attention.

Like Jared had in her first marriage, Sharleen's younger children filled an important role in her life. They were props, accessories ornating her idea of the ideal suburban life. Perfect house, perfect husband, perfect garden, dog, car, clothes and of course, perfect children.

But the props grew up enough to develop a mind and will of their own. When Emma didn’t want to wear pink princess dresses and pose for the next Facebook update, thing lost their shimmer and the glossy surface cracked.

Jensen watched as she ran a hand through the thick brown hair that when not messy and clumped together in patches with dried baby vomit, must be beautiful the way it reached down to her waist. There was so much of Jared in her. If Jensen had passed her on the street, he would have identified her as his sister based on looks alone. But there were other similarities, mannerisms like the way her hands were never still when she talked. It wasn’t big wavy movements like his Grandma May’s had been, but they were never still. Observing them talk to each other he watched as their movements mirrored each other. When she laughed her head leaned backwards the same way Jared’s did, and when she spoke it was the same pattern in her speech, the way she emphasized certain words or letters in the same exact way.

Emma Jones was a younger, female version of her brother, on the outside. But as Jensen had discovered physical similarities didn’t mean a mirrored internal life. After only two hours on the ranch there was no way of knowing if Emma was anything like Jared, or if she just looked liked him.
It would surprise him if it turned out to be the latter considering the different lives they’d lived. They might share a mother but Jared had been raised on this ranch since he was ten years old, Emma had been raised, Jensen used the term only for lack of a better word, by Sharleen and Thorne.

But she was also vulnerable, a girl playing a woman. As he observed her it was so obvious that at twenty she was a young adult but with a big emphasis on young. She wasn’t ready. It was obvious in the way she let Jensen and Jared hold the boys, saw them shifted from arm to arm without objecting or the barest hint of a reaction as the others joined them. When Bella was this new Jensen never wanted to put her down, wanted her in his arms all the time and didn’t let strangers paw at her. He’s never worried about anyone here on the ranch holding her but they’re his family, to Emma they were strangers.

Then there was the fact that they still didn’t have names. They were only three weeks old, and it was not unusual for parents to take time deciding on a name but during that period there were nicknames or endearments in it’s place. Emma said “them” and the way her voice sounded she might as well have said “it.” She fed them formula, Jensen’s not the right person to criticize that, for obvious reasons breastfeeding wasn’t an option for Bella. But he didn’t buy Emma's evasive answers about complications and not being able to breastfeed.

She took care of their basic needs, they were fed, clean and clothed but there was no connection between mother and child. Jensen's heart ached at the way the boy's eyes fixated on him and Jared as they held, spoke to and cuddled them, it was obvious they were starved of attention and eye contact.

He didn’t want to be judgmental at her disinterest, he had no idea what she’d come from. The little he knew made him pretty sure Emma did the best she could, cared for the babies the way she’d learnt from her own parents. Jensen remembered how overwhelming having Bella was, how he thought he was prepared and understood what he was getting into, only to be floored by it all once Bella came. He tried to imagine all that times two and then having it thrown at him at twenty, while not having the backup of a partner, Dad, Grandfather, Grandmother, three Uncles and Cousin.

From that perspective he sympathized with her, she was overwhelmed and alone and Jensen had no right to judge her. She was doing the best she could and when she realized it wasn’t enough, she came here for help.

They put her up in the guest room downstairs, walking into the room Emma looked at the large bed with a desperate longing in her tired eyes.

Jensen showed her the bathroom and said, “You look exhausted. Take a long shower, wash your hair and go to bed, me and Jared can take the boys tonight, you look like you need a night of undisturbed sleep.”

“Really?” There was such a relief in her eyes Jensen felt even more sorry for her.

Jared's look was more questioning, but he kept quiet as they left the room carrying the babies with them. Once they were out of earshot Jared turned to him and his words were dry as he said, “So, no sleep for us?”

Jensen met his annoyed stare with a chastising one. “Jared, come on. She’s overwhelmed and exhausted.”

Jared sighed, “I noticed I just... I’m trying not to be an asshole here, but I haven’t seen her for fifteen
years and now she’s here with two babies. What does she think I can do for her? I waited so long for
this, for us to get to this amazing place we’re at. Now my sister that I haven’t seen since I was sixteen
turns up with two infants that she can’t handle. I don’t know her, Jensen. I was enjoying the no
drama direction our life had taken.”

Jensen nodded and said, “I know it’s weird. But the poor kid was raised by your mother and now
she’s alone and out of her depth. We can at least give her a hand while she figures things out. Maybe
you can see this as an opportunity to connect with a part of your family. I know you don’t care about
blood, but she is your sister and these are your nephews.”

Jared looked down into the face of the infant he was holding, all babies this young looked the same,
tiny, tiny little people who needed protection and care, but too small to have developed a personality.
But the small tufts of brown hair on his head, his eyes a light hazel, it wasn’t all that different from
his own and no matter how hard he fought the emotion, the spark of recognition meant something.
The realization ambushed him and a wave of panic settle in a heavy lump in his stomach.

“Jared.” Jensen read him so easy, “It’s ok if the fact that they’re your blood means something to you.
It doesn’t take away from the love you have for the people here. Family is what’s important, blood or
choice, it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to connect with people you have a
biological tie to.”

He looked at Jensens calm face, his reasonable words and was struck by how much he reminded him
of Colt. Ever since they came home from San Francisco, there was a sense of tranquility about him.
Like he had spent years trying to stand upright on a balancing board and now he had stepped down
and stood with his feet firmly on the ground, not swaying or wavering. He felt grounded, sure of
what he wanted and who he wanted to be. It was a comforting thought now when Jared felt himself
stagger.

He shook his head to clear it and said, “I know, the feeling startled me that’s all. I’ve been
disconnected from that part of myself for so long. Now it’s been what, three hours since she came? I
wasn’t prepared for it.”

Jensen, holding the baby on one arm, reached over and stroked some stray strands of hair from his
forehead and said, “I don’t think it’s so much about Emma, more the fact that there’s a tiny, helpless
baby that looks like you in your arms; you’re genetically programmed to care. Don’t read so much
into all of this yet, you’ll freakout before anything has even happened. Give it a few day’s, get to
know your sister and nephews and we’ll see what happens.”

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At The Phoenix Ranch everyone has a purpose, a task they’re responsible for. There’s the obvious
day to day running of the ranch where they all have different skills and preferences. No one trumps
Jensen when training their horses, no one interferes with Chris’s kitchen, Lance can breathe life back
into the most stubborn, rusty engine or machine and Jared’s got the whole farrier thing going for him.
Colt was always good at the business side of running a dude ranch but with Kim at his side and her
management experience, things haven’t been running so smooth since May passed. Jim has a special
touch with the cattle. Omundson is in his prime during the busy season, his charisma magnetic and
the guests love him.

Jeff has his PTSD courses, but he keeps a low profile. He doesn't mind solitude and over the years
he’s spent countless hours on horseback, inspecting fences and land. He knows every single acre of
this ranch by heart. If asked, he could mark its exact borders with his eyes closed.

There are two types of people on The Phoenix Ranch. Those who were born on it and those who
The people born on it see the world and the people inhabiting it with a soft glow of trust and kindness. They’re not naïve, they know what the world and people are like. But they believe that with enough love and encouragement you can be a good person, if you choose to be. They open their arms, heart and home to people they feel are deserving of another go at life. Somehow they can see into a person and sense the chance for either redemption or the possibility that given a proper chance, they could be something good. Jensen ability to see people, to sense them and spread an aura around him that affects people in such a profound way is powerful, but not entirely unique. Colt, Lance and even Alona have a little of it. Not anywhere near what Jensen does, but enough to view people without prejudice.

Then there’s people like Jeff, people not born here. Jim, Jared, Chris, Omundson, Kim, Callie and May when they were still with them, they all have their unique tragic backstory. The one thing they have in common, is that they understood what was on offer coming here and they’ve taken it. There’s been plenty of people who’ve come and gone on this ranch through the years. People who needed what can be found here, but they either didn’t understand what was on offer or didn’t want it. But Jeff and the others did. They understood, and they wanted it so bad they grabbed on for dear life. They all have gratitude engraved into their bones, a love for this ranch and these people that is so unquestioning and deep that it envelopes their entire core.

But this is not a place where you grovel in gratitude. No one holds you accountable for what they give you. Be kind, respectful, do the work and if you fuck up, apologize. That’s enough, no one expects more of you.

So, they’ve all found other, more subtle ways to show that gratitude. That unbreakable loyalty they have to the family that has become their own. Most of them have skills and talents that make it easy for them.

Jeff is more subtle. When he came here, he knew nothing about ranch work, had no idea how to nurture and care for land or animals. He had never repaired a fence or built something, could barely tell the difference between a cow and a horse. Until that point in life all Jeff had ever trained for, was to destroy and kill. It might be an unfair description of life as a soldier or the military. But for Jeff, his experience, his training that started as soon as he took his first breath, it was all about destruction and following orders.

Jeff’s been on this ranch since nineteen ninety-two. During those years he’s learnt that he’s more, that he has a choice and doesn't have to be a soldier, he can be Jeff. It’s been a long journey of trying to find himself among all the drilled in commands, values and his PTSD.

At first, when people broke through the cracks in his armor, Jeff tried to erase every part of the soldier. He tried to reinvent himself and become someone new, someone softer, less gruff and harsh. But you can’t erase the first twenty-two years of your life. It took a good few years but when Jeff was ready he could accept the parts of the soldier that he liked. The loyalty, the ability to commit to something he believes in, to put the wellbeing of others in front of his own needs. Jeff understood that he could choose what he liked and leave the rest behind. He’s been able to put his experiences and qualities to good use. He’s had the knowledge and opportunity to make a difference for the veterans and their families that have come here, and he’s tried to pass along the gift these people gave him, the lessons he’s learn here.

Then there’s the part of the soldier he uses without talking to anyone about it. Like the time when there had been reports of mutilated cattle in the local paper for weeks and Jeff saw footprints on the
ach that shouldn’t be there. Footprints that no one else paid any attention too, but Jeff knows the pattern and size of every shoe belonging to this ranch, these fit none of them. Jeff found him a few nights later. They had a nice long talk. Well, Jeff did most of the talking, the other guy seemed a little lost for words. But having a guy appearing out of the darkness, holding a military issue knife and looking like he knew how to use it will silence most people. Jeff wouldn’t actually have done anything, he’s killed and hurt enough people, the only thing Jeff did, was to manhandle him to the sheriff’s office in town.

He told people he’d had trouble sleeping and stumbled on him by accident, they didn't believe him, but no one called him out on his lie. All that happened was that May gave him a bigger slice of pie for dinner that evening.

When someone threatens the wellbeing and happiness of the people or animals at this ranch, that’s when Jeff steps in, when his skills are most valuable. He keeps a close vigil on his charges and he doesn’t like it when someone turns up and threatens to make things difficult.

Jeff’s not sure what to make of Emma Jones. She’s polite, friendly, shows gratitude for the help she gets but there’s this feeling. Jeff doesn’t like it, the tingle in his spine that says something isn’t right, especially when he can’t figure out what it is. But there is something and Jeff worries as he keeps a close eye on her. Worries about Jared. When Jensen walked out on him that night almost six years ago now, there was a period after it when Jeff thought they might lose Jared for good. It was hard standing on the sidelines watching him drink and fuck his way through Colorado and every neighboring state. So self-destructive, so irreparably heartbroken. Jared is a lot more vulnerable and dependent on the love of the people here then he likes to admit. It took him and Jensen a long time to find their way back to each other, where they belong. Jeff will not let someone come here and ruin it for them.

He’s less worried about Jensen, he came back from San Francisco with a whole new confidence, a grounded feeling Jeff hasn’t seen in him since before Jared left the first time and May died. But this girl has made Jared's head spin, Jeff can tell and he’s not happy about it.

She keeps following them around. It shouldn’t feel weird that she gravitating to Jared, he is her brother and why wouldn’t she want to connect with him? Make up for lost time and all that. It’s the same with Jensen, it shouldn’t be strange that she’s staying close, he has that effect on people and as her brother's partner, she would want to get to know him. It shouldn’t feel strange, but Jeff can’t shake the feeling that things are not what they seem.

Little Miss Emma Jones can flip her hair, flutter her lashes and put on the lost, scared kitten look all she want’s, Jeff still doesn't trust her and it’s his job to keep these people safe.

Keeping his eyes on Jared as he led Emma, seated on one of their more docile old mares, around the paddock he felt two bodies come to stand on either side of him on the porch. He smelled the alluring scent of fresh coffee and looked down to see a cup being held out to him. He looked at Chris with a smile of gratitude and took the cup. Glancing at his other side Kim was standing beside him, smoke rising from her own cup in the cold February air. They didn’t talk as they all turned back to watch Jared and his sister. Chris voice was gruff when he at last breached the silence and said,

“So, do we trust her?”

Kim's answering one was cynical and hard, but her reply made Jeff smile.

“Fuck no.”

There was a time when Jeff had a loaded gun ready, waiting for that day when he’d had enough. He
unloaded it twenty-four years ago and hasn’t touched it since. He’s indebted to these people. He repays it by keeping them safe from threats they don’t even know are there.

But sometimes it’s nice to know you’ve got back-up.

Padalecki-Jones Family Tree

Padalec
One week turns into two and Emma stays. And why wouldn’t she? With the nice little vacation she’s having, seeing as Jared and Jensen keep taking care of her babies. After that first night they moved the cot out of their room and down to the one Emma used. Their bedroom is right above hers and although the wood and stone swallows a lot of sound, screaming babies have a tendency to make themselves heard no matter what. At two o’clock in the morning, when they’d screamed for forty minutes straight with no sign of it stopping, Jared threw off the covers and walked downstairs.

They were wet and hungry, Emma sound asleep, earplugs pushed into her ears. Turns out Jared can tell babies are screaming through stone and wood but all Emma needs to tune them out is a little foam stuck in her ears. Jared changed them and went to heat up a bottle each. Halfway through Jensen came down, eyes red and hair a fluffy mess on his head. They didn’t speak as they feed them. When the bottles were empty Jared handed over the other boy to Jensen who seemed to disapprove when Jared walked back into Emmas bedroom and took out the cot, carrying it upstairs. But one look inside, the soft light from the window bringing out the fluorescent yellow foam in her ears made him swallow whatever comment he had prepared, and he walked upstairs.

With the boys sleeping in their cot and the two of them back under the covers, Jared sighed and with his tired eyes on the roof he spoke into the silence.

“What the hell are we going to do about this? She has no idea what she’s doing. It’s like she doesn’t care.”

Jensen’s voice was soft but Jared sensed the worry beneath it as he said, “She’s doing what your mom’s always done when something about her kids have been hard or inconvenient, look away and pretend it isn’t happening. We’ll teach her how to take care of them.”

“How is that our job, Jensen?”

“Who else is going to do it?”
Jared sighed again, there was no one else and with resignation in his voice he said, “She’s not leaving anytime soon, is she?”

Jensen turned and snuggled into his side. “If she leaves, she takes those boys with her. With her parenting skills do you really want her to raise them without our help right now?”

Jared had no good arguments to lean on. Whatever reservations he had about Emma it didn’t transfer to her boys. During the short time they’d been on the ranch, Jared had already formed a bond and attachment to them. And that’s why two weeks later Emma, Bret and Blaze were still there.

It’s what Jared calls them, Emma still hasn’t named them and they can’t keep calling them “the babies” anyway, he thinks it suits them. That Bella’s full name, Falabella, is a horse breed and that there are two breeds called Breton and Blazer and that Bella, Bret and Blaze fits well together is a coincidence. Kind of, a little, not at all.

Jareds never thought much about children. Before his break with Jensen he was too young, too immature and wrapped up in himself and the issues he had to work through. After the break, he couldn’t see himself with anyone else, not like that. When it came to family, it had always been Jensen or nothing. When he came home, Jensen came with two for the price of one and he never questioned or thought about it. Bella was there, Jensen was her dad so Jared was her dad too, it wasn’t complicated or something he needed to think about. It’s certainly not something he would change, he loves Bella, she’s one of the best things that ever happened to him. But with the new babies here, Jared’s started to think about children in a broader sense, like the fact that if it was possible, he’d like more than one. In all honesty, if it was only up to Jared and it could be done, in whichever way, a genetic connection is not important, he’d have a whole house full of them.

Jared’s never thought about it before but it’s become clear to him that he really likes kids and he loves being a dad.

Which is why Jared knows he’s getting too attached. They're not his boys, they’re Emma’s. He’s their uncle not their dad. He forces himself to remember that when Bella waddles up to them, points and with words that still doesn't fit in her mouth says,

“Bella's baby.”

Reminds himself that she’s pointing at her cousins not her brothers. But it’s hard to remember when it’s he and Jensen that are doing all the parenting. With the experiences of what happened with Lily fresh in his mind, Jensen has convinced him to take it easy. To not grab Emma by the shoulders, scream at her and ask her why she’s not paying any goddamn attention to her kids. Why he and Jensen are the ones feeding, changing, rocking, comforting, playing and caring for them while she lounges on the couch watching tv or takes thirty minute showers.

Jared can’t figure her out. Why she’s here. What she wants from him. Why she had those kids in the first place, when it’s so obvious she doesn't want them.

On his better, more patient days he can view her with compassion and a sense of remorse. Guilt that he got out of that house and she didn’t. That he grew up here and learned what things like nurture, love, care, acceptance and parenting mean in practice. He knows his sister to a certain extent is a product of her environment.

Those days he tries to invite her, to teach, when that doesn't work he takes her out on rides, or encourages her to take part in the everyday chores, so she can learn to contribute now when it’s clear she has no intention of leaving. But she doesn't pay attention, it isn’t obvious but Jared still notices the disinterest. She comes with him and they have long conversations about life and who they are.
She asks him a hundred questions every day and Jared hasn’t talked so much about himself ever, but if it helps her, if some of the things he’s understood can make it so she doesn't have to make the long, stupid journey he did then he’ll keep talking.

Jared didn’t need his biological family, had all he wanted on this ranch. But a part of it came knocking and Jared will do his best to make sure he can help them find a home here, like he did. He might have his reservations about Emma, but he’s already too attached to those boys to not at least try to look past them.

And if Emma makes that impossible Jared will do what he can to make sure those boys will be ok.

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He’s been here before, knows what’s happening. Colt can see it in the way the girls legs shake under the dining room table in impatience, the way her eyes, without her noticing, keep glancing over to the door. Her disinterest and childish self-indulgence. He’s done his best to keep his thoughts and disapproval to himself, pressed his lips together to stop biting comments and history from repeating itself, even if it appears inevitable. She’s Jared's sister and Colt would love for him to have someone from his biological family to connect to and those boys are heaven in matching onesies, even if their mother needs some work. But he’s kept his thoughts to himself, hushed his dad and Jim when he’s seen their lips tremble. This will not be a repeat of the mess with Lily. They’re all thirty years older and now they have to prove they’re thirty years wiser as well.

If this past eleven months since Jensen came home has taught him anything, it’s that however caring, hard working, respectable and family oriented they all are, they can be a judgmental bunch of assholes. Every person is accountable for their own choices and actions. Lily made her choice, Richard as well, but the people on this ranch didn’t make it easy for them to make a different one.

So he’s tried his hardest to welcome Emma into the family she’s now connected to, hoping that with enough love, acceptance and encouragement they can all help her become a better mother. It’s not working, and he can see the signs. Which is why when he awoke to a sound coming from downstairs he slid out of bed and walked to the stairs.

From the top landing he could see straight down into the great room and her shadowed silhouette moving toward the hallway, bag in hand but no babies.

“Haven't you forgotten something?”

It was a valid question that had been lingering on his tongue, but Colt hadn't asked it. Instead the question sounding in the dark room came in Jensen's voice. It was calm, and a little muted from Colt's position on the stairs. He couldn’t see him but he thought the voice came from further down the great room, or maybe the open entryway into the dining room. He saw Emma come to an abrupt stop and stand in stiff attention for a few seconds, her shoulders rising and falling as she tried to calm her breathing, before turning around to face Jensen.

She moved towards him without casting a glance up the stairs as she passes them and Colt remained unseen as he sat down on the stairs to wait and see how this would play out. If Jensen could handle this conversation better than he did in nineteen eighty-six.

Their voices became muffled by distance and separating walls but he could still make out the words when the conversation began.

“What do you want me to say?”
Jensens voice was wistful as he said, “I want you to say that you can’t sleep and are going for a walk to clear your head, but that’s not what’s happening. So instead I want you to be quiet, sit down and listen as I paint two scenarios for you and when I’m done, you choose which one you prefer.”

The scraping of chair legs against wood told him Emma had done as he asked.

“Did Jared tell you about my mother, how I tracked her down a few months ago?”

The room stayed silent, but as Jensen continued Colt figured she must have nodded her head to show that Jared had. Because Jensen continued talking offering no explanation to his previous question.

“The memory of meeting Lily is still so fresh that when I close my eyes I can picture her expression when she looked at me, there was curiosity but no love, no affection. You look at those boys almost the same way, except instead of curiosity, there’s a resentment. Like you’re a caged animal walking back and forth in restlessness behind iron bars. They say I'm good at reading people, picking up on their emotions and needs. There might be some truth to it because I picked you and your motives apart almost as soon as you came. When I met Lily, it was the most underwhelming experience of my life and most of what we talked about makes no difference in my life. She had a good explanation why she left and I believed her when she said that leaving was the best for everyone involved. She wouldn't have been a good mother. The one thing she said that struck me was, that even though she didn’t want me, my dad did and being able to give him me, was one of the better things she’s done.”

He could feel moisture burning in his eyes and couldn’t argue with that sentiment. He had a wide range of negative emotions and expressions he could use to describe his thoughts about Lily and their failed marriage. But she gave him Jensen and he would always be grateful for that. Jensen's voice starting up again brought him back to the moment.

“I think it’s the same for you, Emma. I can tell you don’t want this. You’re not interested in staying on this ranch and you don’t want those boys, but I believe you want wherever you leave them to be meaningful. It’s obvious in the way you don’t interact with them, haven’t named them. I think you decided before you had them that you weren't keeping them. You could have adopted them away to anyone, but you didn’t. Why? I think I've got a good idea, but since you’re planning on walking out of here and leaving me and Jared to raise your boys, I think you owe me that answer.”

The room was silent for a few moments and when she spoke, there was a streak of defiance in her words.

“I’m not leaving because I’m some emotionally dead monster. You think that just because I don’t want to be a mom, I don’t want what’s best for them? The pregnancy was an accident. I thought about an abortion but I wanted out of this life and I’d read about people giving up their babies for adoption getting really good money or the adoptive parents putting the biological mother though college, stuff like that. So, instead of having an abortion, I started an adoption process, made a plan with an agency but all those couples trying so hard to make a good impression, it’s all surface. My entire life has been a pretty surface but I know what hides behind it. Behind the green lawn and perfect rose bushes. The straight white teeth and matching outfit. Nothing. It's empty, like those movie sets where behind the facade there’s only beams holding it up. I met twenty couples, and they all appeared perfect, but how am I supposed to tell what's a house and what's only a movie set? I can’t leave them there, what if I make the wrong choice and ruin their life?”

It turned silent, except for the howl of a coming storm trying to push it’s way through the windows. Colt looked at his watch and saw that they were nearing dawn. He should make the most of waking this early and go out and tend to the horses before that snowstorm he could tell was coming hit them. But not even the threat of doing the mornings chores in a blizzard could drag him from this
conversation as Emma continued.

“I thought about Jared a lot. The last time I saw him was when dad got a new job in Denver and they drove up here. The windows to the car were closed so I don’t know what you talked about and I was only five. But you were all standing on the porch with Jared and I remember thinking that I wished I could get out of the car and come stay here too. I thought about finding him so many times but Jared is a non-subject in the Jones household, you’re not allowed to talk about him or anything that can tarnish the surface. And I was sitting there in a crappy motel room with two babies I didn’t want, but couldn’t make myself give up to strangers and I thought about him and this place and how maybe he was still here. I found your website and there he was, standing next to you and this family holding Bella and I thought maybe you wanted her to have siblings and I had two ready. I came here, and it’s as fucking idyllic and perfect as I thought it would be. You and Jared just took them over without me saying a thing, he’s even named them. So you want me to tell you why? My answer is why not? Why wouldn’t I want to leave them here?”

As much as he wanted to, Colt couldn’t stop the wave of sympathy that washed over him as Emma spoke. He remembered his conversations and interactions with Sharleen all too well to doubt her experiences and emotions.

“Where are you going?”

Even though he couldn’t see his facial expression, Colt could tell how calm Jensen was. He marveled at the soft tone, like they were talking about everyday life and not about her walking out on her kids.

“New York. I’ve been accepted to Parsons School of Design, I want to be a fashion designer.”

Jensen’s voice was impressed as he said, “That’s not bad. It’s a hard school to get into. But we’re in late February now, the spring semester has already started. I’m assuming you won’t start until August so you can’t be in any real hurry.”

There was anger in her words, contained, but still anger as she spoke.

“This isn’t easy for me. My heart isn’t black and I’m not emotionally stunted. I’m afraid if I wait too long, I won’t be able to leave and I’ll stay and become resentful and mean, I don’t want that for them. You and Jared, you’re so damn perfect together and this place is wonderful, they have the potential of having a great life here, I don’t want to ruin it.”

Jensen sighed and his voice took on patient, tutoring tone as he said, “Ok. Then let me give you those two scenarios.”

He could note compassion in his words and then a chair moved, followed by footsteps and the sound of paper being torn and muffled sniffles. He could picture Jensen standing up and tearing off some paper towels to hand to Emma as it became to hard to keep her emotions in check.

“In scenario number one, I go back upstairs and try to sleep for another hour while you slip out the door and we’ll never see or hear from you again. Me and Jared and everyone else here, we’ll raise those boys, we’ll love them and they will have a good life but when they-”

Jensen stopped for a second and Colt smiled as he began the sentence again.

“When Bret and Blaze start school, they’ll understand that their situation differs from most of the other kids and they’ll ask questions about why they don’t have a mommy. Now in our case that’s a question we’re prepared for because our daughter has two dads and no mom. But I’ve always
planned to be honest with Bella about how she came into this world, and I will with Bret and Blaze too.

“I’ll adapt the explanations to their age but the older they get the more detailed their questions will become. I’ll tell Bella about how these two nice ladies decided they wanted to help me and Jared have a baby, because we wanted one so bad. I have an album ready with all the information I have available about the egg donor, pictures of the surrogate that she took while pregnant and who she was. But in this scenario, I have to tell Bret and Blaze that you disappeared one morning and just left them here. I’ll try, for their sake, to paint you in the best possible way I can, but I won’t tell them a fairytale. When they’re old enough, they will come looking for you, Emma. You’re a part of them and they’ll have questions me and Jared won’t be able to answer. Trust me when I say that they will find you and they will be angry.”

Colt could taste the sour guilt in his mouth as he heard his son talk with such blatant honesty about how Colt had failed when it came to speaking to him about Lily. He didn’t say it out right, but there was no mistaking that he was drawing on his own experiences or why he was so determined to be honest with his own children.

Children... It dawn on him then, that however tonight played out, when it was over, Colt would have three grandbabies instead of one. It was a good feeling. Turning his attention back to the conversation Emma remained quiet as Jensen continued speaking.

“In scenario number two, we go down to the stable and get the morning’s work done. When we’re finished, Chris will be up and making breakfast, we’ll eat and then you, me and Jared will have a long conversation about how to best do this. That we’ll take them is obvious. We’re already too attached to let them go, but we’ll do this right. I’ll call our lawyer and we’ll do an official adoption, it shouldn’t take more than a few weeks at the most. If it’s too hard for you to stay here while we get all the paperwork done you can stay in Alona’s apartment in town, she’s never there anymore. Well put together the same album I’ve made for Bella and when you leave and the boys grow up, the story me and Jared can tell them will be different. We can explain how even though you didn’t want to have children of your own, you gave us this amazing gift. You can be a real person in their life, not their parent, not their mother, but someone we send christmas cards and write letters to. You can be that person who visits and always brings the best presents and someone they can have a relationship with. If you choose scenario two, you can stay a part of this family and be their cool Aunt Emma who was nice enough to help their dads have them.”

Colt could hear Emma cry without trying to muffle the sound any more, who could blame her? Jensen was so much more compassionate than him and a lot smarter for it.

“How’s it going?”

Colt jumped at the hushed voice and couldn’t contain his surprise when Jared sat down next to him.

“You knew?”

Jared gave him a look that stated how stupid the question was. The sarcasm in his voice obvious even as he whispered,

“No. Jensen is downstairs telling my sister we’ll adopt her twin boys without us ever talking about it.”

Colt didn’t comment but his look held all the snarky replies needed, then turned his attention back to the conversation taking place as Jensen asked the million dollar question.
“So, what do you want me to do, Emma? Should I go back to sleep or put on my boots?”

They could hear Emma draw in a long, deep breath and then answer, “Put on your boots.”
Chapter 29

With Mark’s help and the fact that it’s a kinship adoption, meaning it’s really only a question of what Emma wants, it’s a quick and easy process. She leaves for the airport as soon as they step out of the courthouse and Jared can’t blame her. It’s the right decision for everyone involved but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. They have her phone number and the address to the friend she’ll be sharing an apartment with in New York, but they’ve promised to let her make first contact when she’s ready. Jared’s worried that it might turn into if she’s ever ready, but either way it’s her choice. Right choice or not, the fact remains that he and Jensen is coming out of this with two sons, while Emma’s given two up. It’s what she wanted, but that doesn’t make it easy and Jared will respect her wishes, even if that means she might never talk to them again.

Standing on the curb watching the taxi take her away Jared thought that life moves in circles and history does repeat itself, but that doesn’t mean you can’t learn to make better choices when a situation comes back up again. Looking over at Jensen and his pale complexion it seemed the situation they found themselves in had caught up with him. There was a mix of controlled panic and wonder in his voice as he said,

“Did we just adopt your estranged sisters babies?”

They’d talked about this, over and over during long sleepless nights the past four weeks, agreed that it’s what they wanted to do. Even if Jared had realized that more kids was something he wanted and Jensen admitting he felt the same, it was still not on the immediate agenda after the year they’d had with getting back together, Lily and everything. But those boys would not have stayed with Emma what ever choice they made and Jared was their biological uncle, an opportunity like this would never come again. It was not something they could say no to. But now, standing in the bright, early March sun the absurdity of the whole situation washed over them both. Jared couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his own voice when he said,

“Yeah, I think we did. I swear, things like this only happens in this family.”
Jensen ran a hand over his face and nodded.

“True. Let’s drive home, I think I need a nap. This has been a weird month.”

Jared looked at him. “A nap? You do realize we now have three children under the age of two.”

Jensen smiled a little and snuck his arm under Jared's. “That’s what their grandparents and uncles are for.”

Jared nodded. “True story.”

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When they opened the front door twenty minutes later and walked into the hallway, they almost collided with Colts back. Jeff came after him and between them they carried Lances bed frame.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

Colt turned his head and looked at them. “Your grandpa is switching bedrooms and taking the downstairs one.”

Jensen looked at Jared, blinked and then even though he knew better, dove into the rabbit hole.

“Why? Don’t we need that room for guests?”

Colt shook his head and without putting the heavy, wooden frame down, began an explanation that sent his and Jared's tired brains into overload.

“Well, you two will need help with the night feedings. Me and Kim can do that, but if they sleep in your room, they’ll still wake you up, so it’s better if they move to their own. Your grandpa is moving downstairs so we can refurbish his room into the boys room. There’ll be too many people in this house to offer any restful retreat to guests anyway, and since Alona and Chris will move into Jim’s house, that’ll free up Chris's cabin. We can fix that up and rent it out, so we’ll lose a room for two but gaine a cabin that can fit eight people. Anyway, I’ve been waiting for a good excuse to make your grandpa move downstairs, no matter what that stubborn old man says, his knees are not handling the stairs well anymore.”

They looked at each other and without speaking decided it was best not to comment. Instead, Jared yawned and said, “Are the babies ok?”

Lance came walking into the hallway, a table lamp in one hand and a rolled up rug under an arm and said,

“They are, all three of them. Why wouldn’t they be?”

“Ok, then we’re taking a nap.”

The three older men nodded and Lance said, “Cabin number two still has the heat on after the Millers left this morning, go nap in there, it’ll be loud in here.”

They didn’t object and turned around walking out the door to cabin number two. With this family, sometimes it was best to step out of the way and let things happen without getting involved.

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Three days later, on March seventh, Jensen was still trying to process how he went from being a father of one, to a father of three in a little over four weeks. It was the right decision, no doubt about it, but a little hasty. With Bella he had a year to get used to the idea of her coming into his life. But every time he panicked something reminded him of how good this all worked out considering the circumstances. He’d see Colt strolling towards the stables, Bellas tiny hand in his as she tried to navigate the snowy ground or he’d walk into the kitchen to find Chris stirring pots while Kim sat at the table, the boys on her thighs and holding bottles as they feed. Jensen would offer to take over but the two of them would wave him away saying he had chores, and they were fine.

But today, as Jensen made his way up to the house for lunch, his phone rang. As he picked it up and watched the name on the display, it hit him, it’s was March seventh. This time a year ago Jensen was in a car driving from San Francisco, California to Evergreen, Colorado with bruised body and a five-month-old baby in the back seat.

With a racing heart, Jensen answered his phone.

“Hi, Richard.”

“This inappropriate, isn’t it? I shouldn’t have called. I’m sorry, I’ll hang up.”

“Wait.”

Jensen could feel his mind whirling, memories of a six year relationship, four of them good, two of them bad and the last day horrible, flashed in jumbled sequences in his head. But a second later it stopped, and they settled back down in the dark comfortable corner they lived.

“Don’t hang up, Richard. How are you?”

“You’re asking me? That was supposed the be my line, I wanted to call and say I’m sorry and-”

“Stop.”

It wasn’t harsh, unfriendly or even sad, it was a simple, soft request. Jensen didn't want to hear him apologize.

“I know why you’ve called, but don’t. I’m past it, until I saw your name on the display I didn’t even reflect on what today was. So let’s not talk about a year ago and tell me how you’re doing instead, how’s Portland?”

Jensen could hear Richard letting out a long breath, breathing a few times to collect himself and try to release some of the tension and the nerves that no doubt must have been overwhelming. His voice sounded a little less nervous as he said,

“Portland is good, wet. I’ve got a nice condo down by Columbia River and the work's really interesting. I’ve got some great new clients and I’m building up a decent social life.”

Jensen came up to the porch and even though it was still below freezing temperatures, he swept of the thin layer of snow that had blown in under the roof and landed on the bench standing by the door. He sat down and he was genuinely interested when he asked,

“Yeah? Anyone interesting?”

Richard was quiet on the other end, Jensen could feel his hesitation seeping through the connection. He understood the hesitation and in an attempt to defuse the tension he spoke again.
“Richard, I got back with Jared three weeks after coming home. He’s adopted Bella and together we just adopted his estranged sister’s twin infant boys. So you seeing someone will only make me feel less guilty about moving on so fast.”

“I’m sorry, you did what?!?” Richard's voice was disbelieving and Jensen couldn’t blame him, when you said it out loud it sounded ridiculous, like a bad plot in a cheesy Hallmark movie.

Richard continued, “Jared has a sister?”

There was no point in trying to make it sound reasonable or less absurd than it was, so Jensen's tone was amused as he replied, “Half sister, he has two and three half brothers. But one of them, Emma, got knocked up by a stranger, didn’t want the babies, tracked Jared down and asked us to adopt her twins.”

Richard was quiet for a while and then with amusement clear in his voice he said,

“This kind of thing only happens in your family. You people are insane.”

Jensen couldn't contain a small laughter and was about to answer but Richard continued.

“No but seriously, only in your family. Three babies, Jensen?”

It was ridiculous and wonderful. Talking to Richard and listening to his dumbstruck reaction, it hit him. It was like talking about it with someone outside of this ranch, he could truly process what had happened and how amazing it was. It was wonderful.

“I know. I know it’s crazy, but it’s right for me, for us. Me and Jared are simple people, Richard. This ranch and a family that’s our idea of a great life. Back to you, are you seeing anyone?”

Richard still hesitated.

“I worry about you.” He didn’t know where it came from but Jensen knew it was true and as he continued, it was like the words flowed out of his mouth without thought as he said, “I worry because no matter what happened I don’t want you to be alone. You did a terrible thing, but you’re not a bad person, Richard. I want you to find someplace where you’re welcome and happy, where people treat you better than my family did. I want you to have someone in your life who isn’t as selfish and dominating as I was. I know I was an asshole and I know I wouldn’t have chosen you a second time, but I loved you, Richard. I want you to have someone who’ll love you like you deserve. Someone who’ll see and support you and not be so focused on their own needs, they won’t notice when you’re in trouble.”

When Richard spoke he sounded sad but questioning.

”Why are you telling me this?”

I took Jensen a moment to find the answer in himself before he could say it out loud.

“Richard,”

Jensen heard the floorboards of the old wooden porch creak and he looked up to see Jared standing with one foot on it, the other still on the ground, like the icy winds had made him freeze in the middle of the step. Their eyes met for a second and then Jared looked away and walked towards the door. Jensen hand reached out and grabbed him around the wrist before he could open the door and dragged him down on the bench beside him before picking up on the conversation again.
“I’m telling you this because I think this is the last time we’ll ever speak to each other, and I would like our last conversation to be an honest one. When we say goodbye, my life here with Jared, our children and this family will continue and I know it’s selfish, but I would like to know that me moving on to a life that suits me better, doesn’t leave you alone in the world.”

Richard’s voice was quiet but soft as he replied,

“I’m not alone, Jensen. I’m seeing someone, Thomas, he’s a professor in English literature at The University of Portland and his family is great, really nice. I was reluctant, but even after I told him our story he still wanted me. I’ve promised to be honest, and he’s promised to hold me accountable if I’m not. I’m good, Jen. I’ll be in therapy for years and years to come, but that’s all because of the baggage I had when we met and refused to deal with, not our relationship.”

“That’s good. So his family, they’re nice to you?”

Jensen could hear the smile on Richard’s lips as he answered,

“Yeah, really nice, I fit you know? His mom and sister are on their way to pick me up, Thomas goes on this weeklong fishing trip with his dad and brothers every year and, as you know, being one with nature isn’t my thing. So me and his mom and sister are taking a road trip and I’ve promised to show them San Francisco.”

Jensen wanted to tell Richard how happy he was for him, but after brief pause to catch his breath Richard continued.

“But as always, Jensen, you take too much responsibility. It’s true that you were a selfish asshole sometimes, but so was I. You were dominating but I never objected. Most of the time I forced you into that role by being passive, so when a choice needed to be made, it was you who had to make it and I could be the one who always stood aside for your will. It’s a comfortable place to hide when you don’t want to take responsibility. I held on to you for way too long, not because I thought you wanted to stay but because I knew, I could guilt you into not leaving me.

“I could see your loyalty and love to me and to Jared and your family were tearing you apart. If I had not been so afraid of facing my issues, I would have a told you to go home years ago. I knew I would never live on the ranch, but I also knew you would never be truly happy anywhere else. I should have told you it was ok to go. Don’t feel guilty or worry about me anymore, you can let that go. I will have to live with regret and guilt for what I did, you can’t take that away, Jensen. And even if you could, I wouldn’t allow it. That guilt is proof to me that I’m not beyond fixing. That I have a moral compass and I don’t want to hurt people, that I will never allow myself to become a person capable of that again. I would be a lot more scared for myself if I didn’t feel guilty, Jensen. I’m where I’m supposed to be and so are you. We had a good couple of years but we were never each other’s happily ever after, and we both knew that. It’s time for us to say goodbye.”

Jensen though of a million more things to say, but he settled for the right one.

“Bye, Richard.”

“Goodbye, Jensen.”

He disconnected the call, looked at Jared and said,

“It was a goodbye, closure for both of us, that’s all.”

With one hand holding his Jared pulled him to his feet. If he was experiencing any other emotion then relaxed harmony, he didn’t let it show. Instead his voice was amused as he said,
“I kind of figured, unless you’re planning on shacking up with Richard again and leaving me here with three babies, that would make me feel kind of stupid.”

He said it with a trembling smile on his lips and sparkling eyes and Jensen knew they didn’t need to talk about it. Whatever insecurities Jared might once have had about Richard, the past year had erased them.
Mornings are a nice, peaceful time of the day everyone dropping in for breakfast around seven. The ones in charge of early morning feeding come in around seven-thirty smelling of pine shavings and Colorado mountain air.

It’s a time for planning the day, getting your body ready and fueled for the heavy work in front of it, everyone’s voices a little gravelly from sleep and muted to not disturbed the peace. Which is why when Jensen, with the grace and agility of a zombie, stumbled down the stairs one morning the loud shouting snapped him into attention. One hand shielding his eyes against the strong morning sun making it’s way over the mountain ridges and in through the windows, he frowned at the loud voices. He was getting used to multiple babies screaming at once but the two adult voices, one male one female shouting at each other was too foreign to his ears to handle at this time of day.

“Grandpa, I mean it. I’m booking you an appointment today!”

When he came to the doorway to the dinningroom Jensen found it crowded, Colt, Jim, Jared, Kim, Omundson, Jeff and Chris all cowering in it, watching as Alona and Lance stood facing each other, Lance with a sour, stubborn expression towering over Alonas smaller frame, hands on her hips, eyes blazing.

“Girl, you will do no such thing. It’s unnecessary!”

“Unnecessary? I asked if you wanted toast and you dove into a ten-minute history lesson about why you don’t eat goat meat.”

“Chris was slamming pot’s around in the kitchen I misheard a little, it happens!”

Jensen looked at Colt and with a yawn he asked,

“Should we do something?”
Colt shook his head. “I’ve been telling him he need to get his hearing checked for months. He refuses to listen, let her try.”

Jensen nodded and turned his face back to the heated discussion that was escalating into a full blown argument.

“Grandpa, you turned eighty-one last week. It’s normal for your hearing to decline, a hearing aid can help you with that.”

Lance had a coffee cup in one hand and for a second Jensen thought he might throw it the way his large hand tightened around it. His hand shook in restrained anger as he sat it down on the table and took a deep breath forcing his words out in a calm, expressionless tone that was not encouraging and made Alona take a step back in apprehension. She knew from experience how angry Lance was when he got that calm.

“I do not need a hearing aid, Alona.”

The crowned by the door kept their mouths shut as they all parted in a smooth motion when Lance with back straight and jaw muscle jumping stomped out of the room. When the front door slammed shut, Alona threw her hands up in the air and let out a frustrated sigh.

“He so stubborn! Why won’t he let me help him?”

Jim came over and clapped her on the shoulder. “It’s difficult getting old, Alona especially when you’ve always been as big, strong and capable as Lance has, your body gives up on you before you’re ready to let it. Let him be, he’ll get there eventually.”

At the back of the ranch house down by the small pond there was a big cottonwood tree, the trunk enormous, the branches long and heavy. It was hundreds of years old and the perfect spot to spend a few hours resting under. If the winter had been harsher than usual spring was early and wonderful. They were only in late April but the trees already had bulging buds almost ready to burst, the yellow and brown mix of dead grass and mud was getting green speckles in it as this year’s grass made it’s way up out of the ground.

Lance stayed away for most of the morning, by lunchtime he had still not come back.

Jensen looked out the window in the dining room and saw his grandpa stretched out under the tree, arms behind his head, hat over his face and legs crossed as the sun shone down on him through the leafless branches. With a fed-up sigh Jensen grabbed his boots and pulled them on, throwing out to the crowd gathering around the table.

“I’ll go get Grandpa, he’s moped enough now.”

Alona, enjoying a day off looked up as she came out of the kitchen.

“I should go, I’m the one who upset him.”

Jensen shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I already have my boots on, I’ll get him.”

He walked down towards the tree and called out when he was getting close.

“Grandpa, lunch.”

The long, stretched limbs didn’t twitch and the hat over the face hid any possible change to his expression.
The sun warm his back as he walked closer, and he thought that this was one of those deceiving spring days that always lollled you into a false sense of comfort only to hit you with a bad cold the next morning. The strong sun so warm you underdressed not noticing that the air still had winter in it and your body getting chilled.

“Grandpa, wake-up.”

Lance still didn’t reply and Jensen swore under his breath as he came up to him, mumbling under his breath with sarcasm he didn’t rein in.

“No, there nothing wrong with your hearing, your fine, I’m standing almost on top of you screaming and you're not even twitching, you stubborn mule.”

Jensen raised his voice another notch.

“Grandpa! Stop moping and get up, Chris made veal ragout and peach cobbler. I’m hungry, come on.”

When Lance still didn’t move Jensen sighed. Losing his temper, his grandpa was a willful man, even petulant when he chose to be. He nudged Lance booted foot lying crossed over the other with his own.

“Grandpa, enough with the damn moping.”

There was no resistance in the foot and it slipped down on the ground with a dull thud. Nothing in Lance body reacted to the movement. A nauseous, acid fear gripped Jensen's gut holding tight in an iron grip that seemed to encompass his entire inside. His lungs flattened and slammed into the back of his ribs as all the air wooshed out caught off by the strong pressure.

His eyes widened as he stared on the body before him, searching for any signs of movement, a reaction, breathing, anything. There was nothing.

The grip on his lungs relented only to let air out in quick, shallow breaths as Jensen sank down beside Lance, hand slow and unsteady with the tremors that had overtaken his whole body as he reached out and grasped one of his grandpa's hands. It was big, capable of strength Jensen would never have. His fingers traced the thick, faded scar that encircled the hand, Jensen knew there was a matching on his other and his mind slipped to when he was ten and he and Jared was allowed to come with Lance, Colt and Jim as they took a group out to teach them to herd cattle.

They had been a rowdy, cocky bunch of men in their mid twenties, too self-assured and even at that young age Jensen didn't like how they behaved.

During the whole day the group became louder and more obnoxious, trying to challenge each other to daring moves that put not only themselves but the animals in danger as well. When one of them almost collided his horse with a group of cattle, risking injury to both horse, cattle and rider, Lance lost his temper and gave the five men a lecture so harsh and blunt Jensen ears burned and he knew that if he ever made his grandpa talk to him like that, he’d be too ashamed to ever look him in the eyes again.

They’d turned around to go back to the ranch, the outing canceled by the guests behavior.

That should have been the end to it but whatever feelings of shame his grandpa's harsh words had invoked in Jensen, their guests didn’t care about the chastisement. It only seemed to trigger them, like disobeying Lance, so big and who with his Marlboro Man look seemed to represent the quintessential essence of American masculinity, would make them appear tougher.
At a rest stop Jensen looked on as they joked around and while Lance, Colt and Jim were busy checking over the animals, Jensen had seen the loudest of the group deliberately provoking one cow, trying to get her to react so he could appear brave in front of his friends. When the poor animal lost her temper, she stomped at the ground, dust whirling around her hooves and Jensen could hear her frustrated breathing all the way over to where he stood.

When she moved, he looked first at the man and then at what was behind him and fear gripped him. He remembers calling out and every adult whip around at the sound of his voice, Lance was closest.

He reached for his rope but there was no time to pull on his thick leather gloves. With a skill mastered during more than sixty years of experience, Lance threw the noose around the the horns of the cow just as the man ran out of her way and she, unable to stop in time in the loose soil, dived headfirst over the high muddy ridge down to the river below.

To this day, Jensen still has no idea how his grandpa held onto that rope and kept the animal from being swept away by the moving water. The river wasn’t wild but deep and strong enough for a disoriented animal to drown in. In the corner of his eye Jensen could see his dad and Jim running towards Lance while the group of tourists who were much closer, stood there looking on without lifting a finger to help. Jensen will never forget the earsplitting primal scream his grandpa had let out as he used every single ounce of strength to hold on until Colt and Jim came up and could take hold of the rope and together the three of them dragged the poor animal to shore and safety.

It’s one of the few times Jensen has seen his dad furious as he yelled in outrage at the five men looking on. For a short second he had shared a look with Jared and he was almost certain Colt would strike the man that had lured the animal, but with a deep breath and his hands balled into tight fists at his side Colt had kept a tight rein on his self-control. When they’d made sure the animal was unhurt and Jim with a steady hand helped to guide her up the hillside on a pathway a little downstream, Jensen had looked at the rope wound twice around both of his grandpa’s hands for grip and saw it change color from the natural beige to red as blood seeped into the fibers. He’d looked at Jared who’s eye were as wide and overwhelmed as Jensen’s and he’d called out for Colt,

“Dad, Grandpa’s hurt bad.”

As Colt stalked over, Lance had looked down on them, sweat covering his face and body staggering from the unbelievable strain forcing a smile onto his lips as he said,

“Don’t you worry boys, it’s only a rope burn that’s all, happens all the time. You two run over and saddle up your horses again, it’s time to move on."

They’d done as told because even back then, they both understood that Lance sent them away so they wouldn’t see how bad it really was.

The adults had joined them some time later, Lance looking drawn. Colt had eyed them both as he said,

“Jensen, Grandpa’s feeling a little rough, you think you can ride and lead his horse at the same time?”

Jensen’s face had been serious in the way only a ten-year-old’s can be as he nodded, eyes large as he listed to his dad.

“I need Jared to stay here and help. Tell Jeff and Omundson to come up here, we can’t drive these cattle and get these five horses home at the same time.”
The group of men had looked at Colt and demanded to know what he meant, they would ride the horses back. Colt had regained his composure and said in a voice that was calm but left no opening for discussion.

“You have all proven that you lack the common sense and respect for living beings to ride any of our horses ever again. You’ll all walk back to the ranch and when you get there, you’ll find your things packed up and ready. I want you off this ranch by sundown.”

Jensen had done as he’d been told, trying his best to lead his grandpa along easy trails that would mean as little movement as possible in the saddle. It was the longest two hours of his life and his throat constricted more and more for every choked off groan of discomfort coming from behind him. Jensen tried his hardest, but he wasn’t used to his grandpa needing help and when he rode them both in on the ranch and came into view of Grandma May and Chris out in the garden Jensen was crying.

While Chris helped Lance off the horse eyeing the two bandana wrapped hands as Jensen encouraged by May’s patience managed to, between tears and hiccups tell the full story and deliver the message his dad had sent. The horses they rode in on were taken care of and sent to rest by Jeff and Omundson before they saddled up two rested ones and rode out.

Grandma May sent one of the seasonal staff to pack up the groups things while she got Lance into the truck and drove him to the doctor. Jensen stayed behind with Chris who tried his best to keep his anger under control enough to comfort him.

The ordeal left Lance with an aching body and rope burns so bad they’d cut into the flesh of his hands deep enough to make it impossible for him to work for three weeks and now, twenty-two years later still carry scars as a reminder.

The hand he was holding was one of the strongest Jensen had ever known. Now the skin was thin, the thick blue veins underneath it standing out, small speckles of age spots on it’s surface. When you stood face to face with Lance or watched him around the ranch you didn’t see an old man, older yes, but not old. It was when you zoomed in on the small details that it became obvious.

His grandpa’s hand was ice cold and Jensen though he’d throw up as he tried to find a pulse and the earth beneath him rocked when he couldn’t find one. He put the cold hand down, placing it gently on his grandpa’s chest as he reached up for the large, gray hat covering his face.

In the distance the porch door banged open and several voices could be heard calling out. He could make out Alona’s voice filled with dread screaming;

“Grandpa!”

And Colts panicked one, shouting: “Daddy!” Like he was a six-year-old boy instead of a full grown man closing in on fifty-six.

Jensen had his eyes closed as he lifted the hat of the face but forced them open, looking down into the unmoving face. He could sense the others getting closer as he reached out one palm and placed it gently on Lances cheek. It was cold.

A drop of water landed on Lance pale face and Jensen wondered when it had started to rain until he realized he was crying and the drop was a tear. He drew in a shaky breath, then the air exploded out of his lungs as Lance’s blue eyes opened and Jensen screamed in shock.

“What the hell are you doing, Boy?”

Jensen might have inherited most of his looks from Lily but he got his temper from Colt, leaving him
a calm disposition that meant he almost never got angry. But as he saw Lances eyebrows draw together in a frown and he understood he had just been sleeping and hadn't heard Jensen as he called out to him, the cold in his limbs coming from lying out in the spring air too long, not because he was dead, and the lack of pulse because Jensen had no idea how to find one, he lost it.

“Grandpa! Goddamn it.” Jensen got to his feet as everyone else came up, running his hands through his hair and grasping his fingers together letting his palms rest on his head, Jensen walked around in circles, breathing close to hyperventilating.

“Jesus fucking christ!”

“Watch your language, Boy. We don’t talk like that here, you know that.”

Jensen looked over at his grandpa who had stood up looking confused at the commotion. But he reared back as he met Jensen eyes, shocked at whatever he saw in them.

Jensen opened his mouth but closed it again, holding his breath. He walked around in small circles, hands still above his head, opening his mouth and closing it again as the hands came down and cupped over his mouth. He opened his mouth one last time but words and breath stuck in his chest and instead he turned on his heel and walked away.

Behind him Alonas tear filled voice was shouting; “Just how was I supposed to live with myself if our last conversation had been an argument?”

Jensen couldn't make out the reply but soon after a hand grasped his own and together he and Alona stormed away.

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For such a close knit group of people always up in each other's business, literally living on top of each other, the people at The Phoenix Ranch all had great respect for personal space when it came to more negative emotions like anger, sadness and grief. When both Callie and May died they all avoided each other for days until they had worked through that first acute pain enough to mourn together. The same went for when someone was angry, not the petulant sulking that Lance had just shown, but real anger that you needed to work through. Everyone knew there were some things that could not be made better with talking, company or Chris's cooking, sometimes you needed to be alone to brood until you were ready.

Which was why even though they both ended up in the soft hay, Alona and Jensen did not speak as they tried to work through the fact that they’d for a few short moments thought their grandpa had died. Alonas anger was red hot and grounded in a deep rooted anxiety that she for a second or two thought that the last memory she’d have of Lance was the two of them screaming at each other. Jensen anger was more of a shocked reaction to the whole absurd situation.

Alona had always been more vocal in her anger, and now and then she breached the silence with a loud cry of frustration or a random curse thrown out into the ceiling.

It took an hour before they heard the telltale sound of feet ascending a ladder. They kept their silence, eyes glued to the roof as Lance lay down between them in the hay.

“You know, when your grandma died, and I spent those weeks alone in the mountains I was waiting for an accident. Me slipping on a ledge or an early snowstorm to hit me so I would freeze to death and could join her. It wasn’t because I wanted to leave all of you, but I knew you’d all get by without me and I missed May so much. When the mountains refused to cooperate, I came home and
given a little time I got my lust for life back, but I was ready. I wasn’t scared or worried about dying, I was fine with it happening whenever it decided to. You had already left, Alona, and then Jensen and Jared disappeared too and I thought I should at least stay on until you all came home so I wouldn’t leave Colt and the others shorthanded with all that responsibility. Then crash bang, you all came home within two years and now, Alona you and Chris are getting married and, Jensen you’re back with Jared and I have three great-grandbabies. I’m so excited and happy.”

Lance stopped talking and Jensen heard the sound of him moistening his lips before he continued.

“When you’ve lived as long as I have, you come to understand that life has periods full of experiences, life, excitement and then you have periods that are transportation from one part of your life to another. Now with everything that’s happening, this exciting, vibrant time in all of your lives, I don’t want to go. I’m not ready.”

Jensen heard the rustling of paper and clinking of glass then something was placed on his stomach. He looked down and saw it was a large sandwich wrapped up and a glass bottle filled with milk, his stomach cramped when he remembered he missed lunch. Alona must have had the same reaction because soon there was movement in the dried grass as the three of them sat up, leaning their backs against the wall as they ate without looking at each other. After a few bites and a drink of milk, Lance continued talking.

“I miss your grandma every single day and when it’s my time, I want you to spread my ashes on the same hill we spread her, the same way everyone in this family has had their ashes spread, so I can fall down over this land and sink down into the earth with her. I know I’ll be content and we’ll both be her watching over you all, just like Bess and Tim, Amos and Montana, you’re great grandparents, Aunt Althea and Callie.”

“What about Josephine's brothers?”

Lance looked over at Jensen who wasn't sure where that question had come from, he was still mad but food and his grandpa sitting here talking to them was making it fade away. Lance's voice was filled with sadness and loss as he spoke, Jensen figured it was more the situation than from any real recollection of the two men, Lance being too young when they left for the war to remember them.

“We never got them home from Europe, Tim is in the Lorraine American Cemetery in France and Colt is in the Ardennes American Cemetery in Belgium.”

Jensen could understand some of the loss he sensed in Lance, there was something disturbing with the thought that two of their own, two people who belonged here couldn’t come back home. It was... wrong.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that I’m not afraid to die, it's the natural progression of things. I’m supposed to go before all of you but right now being here with you is so much fun, I don’t want to go yet. I’m eighty-one years old, I know my time is running out. But I was hoping I could squeeze another ten to fifteen years out of this body and I don’t like that it’s falling apart on me.”

Jensen didn’t know how to respond, everything he could think of sounded like platitudes when he said them in his head. Alona didn’t have that problem, and she said,

“We want you here too. You might be ready but we’re not. So it’s in everyone’s best interest that you take better care of yourself. No one is going to push you down in a rocking chair and put a blanket over your shoulders just because you slow down your pace or get a little help when things aren’t working like they used to.”
Lance grumbled but they could tell he didn’t disagree. He put an arm each around their shoulders and pulled them close.

“I’m sorry I frightened you.”

Jensen sighed. “You’re forgiven but don’t do that again, you fucking scared me.”

“Jensen, language, if your grandma was here she’d wash that dirty mouth with a bar of soap.”

Jensen rolled his eyes and knew it was a false threat, this family didn’t raise their children with threats or physical punishments, and he said, “I loved Grandma, but I never understood why she was so strict about things like that, it’s not like we throw words like that around all the time.”

On the other side of Lance, Jensen could here Alona laugh. “Remember when Grandma found us listening to that cussing song Blink 182 did when we were in school? She took a dollar out of our allowance for every swearword in the song and there was like forty of them.”

Jensen ran a hand over his face as he laughed at the memory. Back then it hadn’t been funny, and they’d lost two weeks worth of their allowance, but now it was something they could remember with amusement.

Lance joined in their laughter but when he spoke again, his voice had a somber note to it.

“Your grandma had her reasons. She didn’t like to talk about it but it was important to her that things were neat and well-kept, that included all of us.”

Alona looked at Lance, her finger playing with the ends of the thick braid that fell down over one shoulder.

“She never told us anything, when you asked where she came from or anything about her life before coming to The Phoenix she would avoid your questions.”

Lance nodded. “May hated where she came from, Alona and after she left she never went back. That’s why we have nothing to do with that side of the family. Your grandma grew up in Texas, in a small town called Kerrick. It’s right by the Santa Fe trail and the border to Oklahoma. When your grandma was born in forty-one, the government had already bought up and planted grassland in that area. The dust bowls hit that area hard during the depression, so they created the Rita Blanca Grasslands to fix the land erosion. The Dixons, your grandma’s family, used to have a big farm, and they were well off, but they were hit hard and by the time the rest of the country and the farms still standing recovered, her family had sunk deep into depressed lethargy and alcoholism. One lost generation is all it takes for five previous generations hard work to crumble. The farm was rundown, the people crude and indifferent and your grandma hated it. She left when she was eighteen and I met her a year later when she was waiting tables at a diner in Oklahoma. A year after that we got engaged, the next we married and the year after that, Colt was born.”

Lance stopped and took a bite of his sandwich, washing it down with some milk before he spoke again.

“You’re both too young to remember much about your great grandma Josephine, but my mother was a woman of strong principals and she took May under her wings. Taught her about this ranch, it’s history and the values it’s built on, your grandma took to it right from the start. May loved this land and this family as if she’d been born into it and she was fiercely protective of its ideals and legacy. You choose who you are and how you’re perceived by people around you. You grandma wanted you to be the best people you could be and she knew how fast a place that once flourished can be
thrown into despair. That’s why even something as seemingly trivial as bad language was important to her. This ranch and it’s legacy is only as strong as it’s weakest member, one bad generation, that’s all it takes for everything we’ve built to crumble.”

Neither Jensen nor Alona commented on what Lance had told them, it was unnecessary. They understood the legacy they would be entrusted to pass on and the responsibility that was on their shoulders. Instead Alona snuck her arm under Lance’s, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“If I call a colleague and set up an appointment for a health check and a referral to an audiologist, will you please go?”

Lance sighed, but he didn’t object.

When he entered the dining room one morning two weeks later with a discreet little attachment to each ear, no one made a comment but when they spoke their voice was lower and softer than usual and Lance heard every word.
Alona,

I’ve been writing you these letters for two months now. For every letter I write I get one step closer to completing what I set out to do. To teach you every life lesson I’ve learnt so far and give you every bit of advice I can on a few sheets of paper instead of the at least thirty more years I thought I’d have with you. Losing my own mother as such an early age, I know what you’ll be deprived off. I understand the loss you’ll go through, it’s life’s cruel irony that the same disease that took my mother will now take yours. Every day I write, I get one day closer to losing you and you me.

This letter will differ from my other ones. My goal was always to make sure you know I’m still a part of you, that even though I’m gone a small part of me can still have a role during these important moments in your life.

As children and teenagers we live under the illusion that our parents work is done when we become adults. It’s only when you become one yourself, that you comprehend how important your parents still are, how many life lessons they still have left to teach, that you didn’t understand before.

I’m not worried. You have a whole ranch of people that will help you, answer your questions, guide you and support you. I’m jealous though, and I battle my anger, it infuriates me that they’ll get to do all the things that was supposed to be my privilege as your mother.

I don’t know where you’ll be in life when you get this. You could be a little over twenty or forty. The man you’ve chosen could be anyone. Who ever he is, he’s chosen to become part of this family and that comes with it’s limitations and responsibilities.

Love him with everything you have. I hope he makes your stomach flip when he walks by and your skin tingle when he touches it. I hope he makes you feel you’re the most valuable, important person in his life.
Most of all, I hope you understand that if it ever comes down to a choice between him and The Phoenix, the choice is painful but obvious.

I wish you a marriage that will stand the test of time and bring you joy and fulfillment for the rest of your life. I wish you the marriage I’ve had with your father.

But my darling girl, the most important love affair you’ll ever have, is with this land. I hope you have found yourself a man that understands what this land is, and how deep your connection is to it and the family who lives on it.

I know it’s naïve of me to think that you might not choose to live somewhere else, after all, I don’t know who you are. By now, you’ve outgrown the girl I knew. I also know Jensen is the heir, but this ranch is as much your responsibility as it is his. You might not be an Ackles but you are blood and with that blood comes the task of preserving this ranch, this refuge for everyone on it.

If you and your husband live your life away from here, you must be willing to drop everything and come back home if you are needed. And if your husband says no, go anyway.

Love can be found and lost and then found again but you only have one family. The love you have for these two thousand four hundred and fifty-six acres might lead to a conflict of interests between what’s best for your marriage and what’s best for the family. Family comes first, Alona.

I know when you read this you’re not far from committing yourself to someone and I suppose I should give you advice like, never go to bed angry or remember to make time for each other. My experience is that things like that tend to work themselves out. If you are right for each other, you’ll make it work.

I don’t want to sadden or dissuade you so close to what I hope will be one of the happiest days of your life, but because I can’t be there to make sure he’s good enough, I’m making you think it through, one last time.

If this man loves you, Alona he will understand how important this ranch is, does he?

When you open the box this letter came with, you’ll find a simple, white lace dress. It won’t look like much with today's standards of designer gowns for thousands and thousands of dollars and maybe you will choose another dress, but I want you to understand what it stands for.

Bess hand stitched that dress for Montana when she married Amos in nineteen-thirteen. Through the years it’s been taken in and let out, the hem has been lengthened and shortened to fit every woman who ever stood bride on this ranch. Montana, Josephine, May, Me, Lily and now it’s your turn. You’re free to choose another one, just as you are free to choose your husband and the life you want for yourself.

All I want, is that you really think about what it is you’re choosing.

Whatever you decide, the dress is not yours. Wear it or don’t, but when your day is over it goes back in the box to wait for the next Phoenix bride, and when that day comes you have the responsibility to explain to that woman, whether it’s your daughter, Jensen's daughter or a future daughter-in-law to either of you, what that dress stands for.

I don’t know if May will be there or if you’ve lost her too by the time you read this, either way, the role of matriarch of this family will fall on you too soon (don’t look surprised darling, we all know Jensen won’t be marrying a woman).

As matriarch, you carry the weight of the combined history of six generations of women on your
shoulders. This ranch is a living, breathing thing and we, its women are its life force. This ranch was founded by Bess, a woman who defied every gender norm of her time. When war took two of our own, it was Josephine who, during a time when women were supposed to honor and obey, defied her husband to save this ranch and you must be willing to do the same.

The women of this family love with everything we have, but we do not obey. We always have and we always will be true equals to our husbands and our will and our word carry the same weight and importance as theirs, remember that.

When I read these lines to myself, I can see my fear. Fear, because I'm running out of time. I'm not afraid of death, Alona. I'm afraid of becoming a shadow in your life, someone you can't remember. I should scrap these pages and start over, write you a letter about the magic of love and give you platitudes and clichés for advice. But the point of these letters is to give you a part of me, the real me, not ironed out memories that erase the ugly parts.

If life here on his ranch has taught me anything, it's that family doesn't end with blood, but it always comes first. It's up to your future husband if he becomes a part of the family or not. You chose him and now he has to choose you, but with you comes The Phoenix and if he loves you he'll understand that. You deserve everything, the love of a partner and this family.

My point, Alona is that if he asks you to choose, he's not the one.

This cabin always had the most lovely view down over the pond. Looking out this bedroom window I can see you running over the summer meadow, your legs that you haven’t grown into yet gangly and your feet bare. Chris chasing after you because you snuck up and put a water balloon down his collar. He has an ability to make you laugh, even a day like this when your mother has moved out of your house and is days away from dying, he still makes you laugh.

That’s what I want for you. Someone who can find your joy even when you’re stuck in a nightmare.

I have a million and one dying wishes. One of them is that when you read this, you’ve found someone who can make you laugh they way you’re laughing right now outside this window. If he can do that, then he has my eternal love and is welcome into my family.

If he can do that, he’s good enough.

Love, Mom.

She folded the letter up and placed it back in it’s envelope, Alona leaned her head back against the thick trunk of the tree down by the pond. As she looked out over the still surface of the water she lifted the lavender envelope to her face. Inhaling she could scent the traces of her mother’s perfume that still lingered on it. She never knew if her mother had done it on purpose so she would always remember what she smelled like or if they’d been stored in a way that left the scent on the papers. Either way it was effective and made her presence more vivid. As a light breeze touch her face Alona smiled.

“Don’t worry, Mom. It’s the right choice and we’re not going anywhere.”

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It seems to Jensen that weddings are a weird tradition. It’s supposed to be all about the two people getting married, but with the way Alona and Chris gets ushered around, Jensen thinks it’s more about treating friends and relatives too far away in the family tree to matter under normal circumstances, to free food and booze. Sure the ceremony was beautiful and Alona was stunning in the simple
Edwardian ivory dress, the lace so delicate and sheer it flowed around her as she moved. A simple wreath of blue mountain flowers in her loose hair.

Jensen had looked at Jim and his grandpa as Alona and Chris had walked down through the isle of chairs created at the back of the house and coming to stand in front of the judge officiating their wedding. There had been happiness in their face but Jensen couldn’t help but wonder if some of the shine in their eyes didn’t come from a bittersweet remembrance of Callie and May in that same dress.

The ceremony was short and soon after the couple was made to stand this way and smile that way, shaking that hand of two hundred people they didn’t know and being toasted with stories about some embarrassing memory they couldn’t recall.

As some distant male relative, some obscure uncle of Callie’s mother, made another toast while Alona and Chris smiled politely, Jared had leaned over and whispered,

“We’ll elope to Vegas, right?”

Jensen had kept his tone and face neutral as he answered,

“Hell yeah.”

Jared looked relieved and spoke again,

“How much longer do you think we have to endure this?”

Jensen had grinned as he said, “We have three babies under the age of two, it’s the perfect excuse for our escape. As soon as they cut the cake we’re out of here.”

He looked down on his knee and then at Jared’s and he couldn’t stop the corny smile when he saw the now five-month-old boys, in their tiny jeans and plaid shirts, the brown suede fringed baby chaps and matching vest over them, the little baby boots. It was over-the-top, Jensen knew that but Lance was the one who had come home with the outfits and it was damn adorable.

Jensen and Jared kept a smile on their face through the rest of the dinner answering questions from acquaintances and people Jensen didn’t remember being related to. At points during the dinner Jensen and Chris’s eyes would meet and he’d make a discreet face of absolute misery and Jensen would do his best to send strengthening vibes his way.

Alona and Chris cut the cake, smiled for more pictures and danced just like expected. Jensen eyed it all with sympathy for them but then had look for tissues as Jared picked up Bella and walked onto the dance floor. Her outfit was a cowgirls dream, jeans top covered in rhinestones, a white tulle skirt so big and fluffy Jensen had no idea how she moved around in it and white boots with red hearts embroidered on them. Jensen had not bought that outfit either but he had learnt to pick his parenting battles with the senior members of his family.

With his arm full of babies, Jensen watched as Bella's hair, that had at last started to grow, fell around her face in auburn waves and her green eyes sparkled as she laughed in delight as Jared twirled them around on the dance floor.

With his arms hampered by Blaze and Bret, Jensen tried to stretch for his napkin but couldn’t reach it. Jim, who had left the dance floor came to sit down by him and took Bret, leaving Jensen one arm free to grab the napkin and discreetly wipe at his eyes.
Jim looked at him with a small smile playing on his lips.

“You can roll your eyes at this spectacle all you want, Jensen Ackles but when it’s Bella's turn you’ll be as over-the-top as me and your grandpa.”

Jensen chose not to answer.

They made their escape not long after. Alona and Chris sent them jealous, longing looks and made rude gestures when no one was looking. They made their goodbyes to all the guests and proclaimed how they’d loved to stay but you know, the babies.

Once all three were sleeping, Jared collapsed on his back on the bed while Jensen shrugged out of his clothing.

As Jensen's fancy jeans fell to the floor Jared looked at him a smile playing on his lips and voice playful as he said,

“Hey, wanna save a horse?”

With one eyebrow raised Jensen looked at him and rolled his eyes but there was laughter in his voice as he answered,

“What, and ride a cowboy instead?”

Jared didn’t even try to keep a straight face as he continued. “Took the words right out my mouth, darlin.”

With a sigh Jensen dragged a hand over his tired eyes and shook his head in disappointment.

“That has to be the worst line to date. You had better lines when we were in High School.”

Jared’s unapologetic grin stayed on his face as he leaned his arms behind his head and said,

“When we were in High School, a gust of wind gave us an erection and we had all the time in the world. You’re high maintenance for a thirty-something guy with three babies that could wake-up at any moment.”

Jensen opened his mouth to fire off a snarky reply but looking at the miles of bare leg, the well cut upper body and bulging biceps, he changed his mind.

“Shut-up and take off your underwear.”

Jared grinned even wider. “Giddy-up, Boy.”

One leg just about to swing across Jared’s waist Jensen stopped and kneeled on the bed.

“Jared! Shut the fuck up and take your clothes off.”

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Later, when the party had stopped everything was quiet and Jensen was trying to get Blaze back to sleep after waking, he got a glimpse of a part of Chris and Alana's relationship they rarely showed in public.
The lights around the ranch had been turned down, the sun hinting at rising, a golden shimmer climbing up over the mountain sides and Jensen saw the early morning fog float like a blanket over the dewy grass.

Out in the open meadow by the pond just below Chris's old cabin, the now married couple was dancing. Chris in threadbare jeans and nothing else, feet bare and hair loose. Alona in one of his old plaid shirts, her bare legs around his waist, arms around his neck and one cheek resting against his shoulder as Chris moved them around in the open space to a music only he could hear. With the fog swirling around his bare feet and the golden shimmer licking at the azure sky, it was like they were dancing on clouds.

Jensen looked on for a little while longer but then turned his gaze away, feeling that he had glimpsed a deep, significant moment that was for the two of them alone.
With the adoption, trying to figure out how to get life into a sensible rhythm with three small children, Chris and Alona’s wedding, and the high season taking off right after it, it’s mid July before Jensen remembers the ashes standing waiting for him in the stables. A pang of guilt hit him as he looked at the cardboard urn and he apologized to Acorn for leaving her there for so long, promising that he’d take her up in the mountains that evening.

It’s like the seasons this year have stepped up and after a harsh winter and long beautiful spring, summer has outshone them both with glorious long, sunny days. The mountain meadows bursting with color and a temperature that is hot but not stifling.

Jensen’s favorite part about summer is that as soon as the temperature goes above seventy, Jared’s shirt comes off.

When Jensen mentioned the ashes at dinner Colt told him to take the evening off.

“Take Jared, you two haven’t had a night to yourselves since before the twins came. Go spread the ashes and then go out for a drink or a movie and spend the night at a motel or take a tent with you, you need some time alone.”

They took one of the pickup trucks. A ride would have been nicer and more scenic but you could get to the mountain overlook Jensen had in mind by road as well. Road might be an overstatement, it was more like a dirt path that during this dry time of year could be driven on by a pickup truck on. It’s a tight fit though and branches heavy with green leaves that slapped against the side of the car and dragged against the windows as they drove. So, it really would have been easier to ride but something inside Jensen said that it would be inappropriate to ride one of their horses on the way to spread the ashes of one they lost. He knew he was over-thinking it, but that core in the pit of his stomach that told him what’s wrong and what’s right said no, so they drove instead.

It was like driving through an ocean of green or some distant jungle. The visibility almost non
existent with the branches hanging down over the small path, then they parted and for a second his stomach lurched because the view that greeted them made it appear that they’d driven the car right out into mid air. The outlook was only a little piece of rock, big enough for a truck, a few trees and not much else. It wasn’t marked on any map, not in any guidebooks of the Denver mountain parks, it was a hidden place high up where the mountain ridges of the Rockies met the sky. Only people truly connected to the land knew about it, a place they could sit in silence and look out on this magic kingdom they’d been blessed to be a part of.

Stepping out of the car their boots scraped against the hard rock and Jensen held his breath as he looked out over the meadows far below them, miles and miles of green lodged between great mountain peaks, some still clad in snow at the top despite the hot summer.

The best part about the Colorado summer, besides Jared not wearing a shirt, was the length of the days. This time a year the sun comes up at five-thirty in the mornings but doesn’t set until around eight-thirty in the evenings. It’s a welcome change from the darkness of the winter months when the sun comes up two hours later and is down again by five.

The endless sky in front of him was on fire in bright orange, rose pink and shades of lavender, and Jensen couldn’t for the life of him remember why he ever thought he wanted to live some place else.

Acorn got carried away by a soft summer breeze. Her ashes flowing out into the open air and she was gone. The wind spreading her all over the mountain trails, plains and meadows she loved so much. Jensen watched the shimmering dust disappear and when he closed his eyes the wind caressed his face and the world whirled by as a hundred different memories of him and Acorn galloping over this land flashed behind his closed lids.

Jared stays quiet as Jensen says his silent goodbye. When she was gone, he threw an arm around Jensen’s shoulder and pulled him close, kissing the top of his head. They stood there, not speaking for another few minutes until Jensen turned to him.

“So, a whole evening and a night off. What do you want to do? Tom’s bar, catch a movie?

Jared opened the door to the backseat of the truck and pulled something out. When Jensen saw it, he couldn’t help but let out a small, breathy laugh. Wiggling the six pack in one hand and the double sleeping bag in the other Jared said,

“Drinks and movies are nice and all but we’re surrounded by people twenty-four seven. I’d like to have you all for myself for a few hours, so how about we stay right here, far away from other people?”

Jensen nodded his answer with a smile on his lips.

“Sounds good, but it’s gonna get cold up here. Let’s drive down to the lake.”

Jared agreed, and he took the wheel as they made their way on the narrow mountain path, the dim light of the evening making it even harder to navigate. They made it down the mountain and across bumpy back country roads until they came into the secluded meadow where the lake was.

As they stepped out of the car the sun was sliding down behind the mountain ridge casting a golden shine over everything and making the surface of the water shimmer in orange.

Jared spread the sleeping bag out on the truck’s cargo area and together they sat on it’s edge drinking budweisers and staring out on the magnificent show nature gave them.

As the sky turned a dark indigo blue and stars appeared the six pack was gone and they moved
further up on the blanket lying down on their backs beside each other, Jensen's head on Jared's outstretched arm. They stayed silent, the only sound in the air the chirping of crickets and the flute-like song of a western meadowlark.

It was perfect, romantic, peaceful, a night alone cuddling under the stars like the star crossed lovers they had always been. Jensen turned his head and looked at Jared.

“Wanna fuck?”

Jared had his hands on his belt before he got a reply out.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

Jensen mirrored his movements, opening his belt and unzipping before reaching up and dragging his henley off, his answer muffled by the fabric.

“I didn’t want to ruin the moment, it was all romantic and shit.”

Jared, skin already exposed up top shimmied out of his jeans and underwear, throwing them behind himself on the metal surface as he answered,

“That kind of romance is for people with free access to privacy and no kids. For people like us, romance is getting enough alone time alone to fuck on the back of a pickup truck. Besides, didn't I give you a corsage for my senior prom? A grand romantic gesture like that should hold me over for a few more years.”

As Jared settled between his spread legs, Jensen's amused laughter got replaced by a long moan as Jared’s tongue entered his mouth. He wrapped his arms around him, one hand tangling in his hair, the other roaming over bare, tanned skin. His fingertips sliding down one rib after another as Jared moved over him.

As Jared entered him and his legs tightened around his waist Jensen forced his eyes open and saw his face inches from his, strands of his hair hanging down over his face and the universe behind him a breathtaking backdrop and Jensen was struck by how goddamn much he loved him.

The sensation combined with Jared’s movements made his whole body cramp in pleasure and he had to reach up with one hand and grip the side of the truck to ground himself.

Later, with chests still heaving as their bodies worked to resupply the oxygen in their blood, Jensen licked his lips and looked at Jared.

“Don’t suppose you have another sixpack hidden somewhere?”

Jared stretched, the muscles in his abdomen rippling under the skin and smiled.

“Of course I do.”

A minute later they were sitting side by side drinking beer again, the surrounding air still warm despite the darkness and late hour, neither of them bothered putting clothes back on. Jared yawned around the bottle and said,

“Do you ever think about what our lives would have been like if we’d left this ranch and done something different with our lives?”

Jensen let the mouthful of beer swirl in his mouth as he looked at Jared with a question written on his
“Don’t you think it’s a little late for that?”

Jared reached out and brushed away a bug crawling down Jensen's arm and then let the hand reach out so he could put his arm around his shoulder.

“I’m not saying I want a different life, I like this one. But sometimes, when I get you all to myself like this I wonder what it would be like, you know? I mean, we could have moved away lived someplace else, just the two of us.”

Jensen leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Come on, let’s go for a swim.”

Jared eyed the darkness and then the lake shimmering under the light of the moon.

“It’s gonna be cold now.”

Jensen shrugged his shoulders. “Honey, I’ve seen your penis since long before puberty hit. Trust me, even shrunk I’ll be impressed.”

Jared's eyes narrowed. “Wow, you’ll pay for that.”

Jensen was halfway out in the lake before Jared caught up and with a push on his shoulder forced him under the water.

Jensen breached the surface with a sputtered laugh, running a hand over his face to wipe the water off it. Jared's hand grab him under the water pulling him close, he didn’t fight it.

Instead he let himself float through the water until his legs could wrap around him and his arms encircled Jared’s neck. He felt Jared's hand grab hold of his backside making him rise higher in the water and he ran his hands through his still dry hair as he leaned down to kiss him.

One hand released it’s grip and came up to cup the back of his head as Jared pressed them closer, their breaths hot and mouths impatient. Jensen grinned when something twitched against his leg and Jared's face was smug when he spoke,

“You were saying about shrinking.”

As Jared walked out of the water Jensen let go and put his feet back down on the ground but as soon as they reached the truck again, Jared manhandled him back up on the edge of the cargo area. Jensen's legs wrapped around his narrow waist again as he let his upper body fall back down on the sleeping bag arms stretched out over his head and body arched as Jared ran his hands over it.

His own hands closed in a tight grip around the sleeping bags silky material as Jared entered him in a swift, well practiced move. Jared took a tight grip on his shoulders for leverage as he pulled him down towards him with every thrust.

Jensen's lips became dry as his breath came out in a harsh, steady rhythm and let his tongue out to moisten them but Jared leaned down and stole it. His shoulder blades rose, the silky material of the sleeping bag sticking to his damp skin as his body arched and he kept his eyes open, fixed on the vault of heaven. The sky had grown so dark the whole milky way was looking down on him and the air was filled with the song of so many crickets it was like they were holding a private symphony for him and Jared.
A hand came to cradle the back of his neck and the other the small of his back as Jared pulled him up, claiming his mouth in a wet kiss hands on the back of his hips pulling him impossibly close and deep. It was like every supporting bone in his body had vanished the way he swayed and molded under Jared’s large palms as he held him up and in place. Jared's breath was heavy and hot against his neck as Jensen wound his arms tight around his neck and gripped his hair, their faces so close their lips touched whether they were kissing or not.

When they at last broke apart, lying sweaty and panting with their back on the truck and legs dangling inches from the ground a shiver ran through Jensen's sated body.

Jared stretched his arm far above his head, arching his upper body and let out a contented loud groan and said,

“I needed that.”

Turning over to the side he leaned over Jensen and kissed him. “Darlin’, you’re so damn hot it’s almost ridiculous.”

Jensen let his fingers tangle in Jared's hair as he smiled with tired eyes fighting to stay open and pulled him down for another kiss.

***

Jensen woke to the sun stinging his eyes and Jared's soft voice murmuring in the distance. Leaning his arms over his head he stretched his body from the tips of his fingers down to the end of his toes, letting out a loud yawn. His spine popped and muscles stretched until everything was back in place. He sat up and leaned one elbow on his bent knees and leaned his cheek in it’s hand as he ran his other through his hair.

With groggy eyes he could see Jared who'd been standing to the side a phone to his ear, end the call and come over.

“If I were you I’d put some pants on. The temperature is supposed to hit at least eighty-five degrees by noon, so your dad’s decided on a day by the lake for everyone. They’re on their way now.”

Jensen groaned and let his body fall back down on the bed of the truck. With a groggy, rough voice he said,

“Everyone?”

Jared came to stand in his line of view but Jensen had to shield his eyes at the strong sun behind him. He moved up on the flatbed and crawled on top of him leaning down stealing a kiss, sighing before he answered,

“Everyone, family, babies and guests. Everyone. They'll be here in minutes so pants, Jensen.”

Jensen sighed again and as Jared climbed off and threw his underwear and jeans at him he allowed himself two minutes of pouting as his and Jared’s alone time was over before pulling on his jeans. He looked over at Jared who was dragging down his tank top over his stomach.

“Tell me more about that place for just you and me.”

Jared opened his mouth but didn’t have time to answer as the first horse came into view on the slight ridge above the meadow. Jensen had just enough time to button his pants and pull his henley over his head before an ocean of people and horses came up on the ridge and made their way down towards
Jared came to stand beside him, throwing an arm around his shoulder as he said,

“Sounds pretty awesome right now, doesn’t it?”

Two trucks came driving down the same path they’d driven down the night before. Chis and Alona stepped out of one and unloaded a mountain of coolers and the large barbeque. Kim and Colt stepped out of the other and unbuckled a baby each from the backseat and Jensen's heart fluttered at the delighted look on Blaze and Bret’s faces when they saw him and Jared, their small hands reaching out to them.

Jensen took one of them and then turned when a high voice called out for him and he saw Bella waving from her spot in front of Lance as they rode down the ridge towards them. He could see a grin matching his own on Jared's face as they both waved back with their free hand.

Jensen looked down towards the lake, watching as everything was set up with an impressive speed, blankets laid out, smoke rising from the barbeque within minutes. Soon they were sitting down enjoying the breakfast Chris had packed for them. Bella was running back and forth to the edge of the water, squealing in delight as it touched her toes and running away from it and then back down repeating the process all under Colts watchful eyes.

The world moved on around them. Omundson was entertaining guest with outrageous and completely false stories about himself and this ranch. Jensen wasn’t an expert on the Omundson branch of the family, but he was sure they weren't related to Billy the Kid or Buffalo Bill and Omundson’s great grandfather Tormund had been a fisherman in Norway, not a gunslinger.

Jeff was holding Bella in his arm as he stood in the middle of the lake, pretending to drop her down in the water making her squeal with laughter. Kim leaned against Colts chest laughing at something he said as they sat together on the blanket next to Jensen and Jared. Alona had her arms around Chris's waist and her chin resting on his shoulder as she stood behind him, watching as he flipped the burgers on the grill. Lance and Jim were laughing and in the middle of some engaging conversation with a few guests. Jensen looked at them all and felt so lucky.

He shook his head to himself and looked over at Jared saying, “I don’t know about you, but a place for just the two of us sounds pretty awful right now.”

Jared laughed a little and then leaned his face down into the top of Bret’s head, his answer muffled.

“Terrible, worst idea ever.” He paused but then looked over with a small smile playing at the edge of his mouth. “So, quickly in the tack room tonight?”

Jensen leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m your guy.”

Jared smiled back. “Always.”
In almost every great civilization there has been a myth about a magical bird with the ability to end its life engulfed in flames and then be reborn from its own ashes.

It’s a powerful image and one that must speak to something fundamental in human beings, the way it’s appeared in so many incarnations, separated from each other by space and time. It’s an impressive creature, and it’s abilities wondrous, but standing on the porch of the house whose foundation Bess once laid a hundred and thirty-something years ago, Jensen though maybe the tale of the Phoenix was more an allegory than a myth.

A way to portray the human ability to change, evolve and decide for themselves who they wanted to be. Like the Phoenix, people could set aflame their old life and rise from the ashes as someone new.

As he observed the people walking over and around the well-kept ranch, Jensen smiled to himself as the plaid and jeans disappeared and they were all transformed. Chris long hair became a turquoise plume of feathers flowing from the top of his head down his back, Jared’s strong arms hammering the steel into submission became powerful, large wings and Jeff’s eyes observing everything became sharp and golden.

Lance and Jim's feathers were a little rugged and had lost it’s shine but they were still impressive creatures. Omundson sparkled in every color of the rainbow, shimmering as he spread his wide wings for everyone to adore. Alona’s light frame looked so delicate as she sat on the porch railing and Jensen could see her magnificent tail of long lavender feathers flow down behind her. Kim’s looked like she was already on fire as the bright crimson plume of feather trembled and swayed in the wind.

And Colt, his coat a shimmering silver as he stood in such calm, indisputable majesty observing them all.

They were all Phoenixes and every single one of them had chosen this ranch and this family. Some
had started their lives far away from here but like that bird of fire, they had burned their old selves to ashes and been reborn in these mountains. Some had been born here but chosen to stay or to come home again.

Jensen had left and tried to reinvent himself in San Francisco. But you can’t be reborn if you’re not willing to burn the old you. Jensens journey was never about rebirth. It was to remind himself that he’d been born a Phoenix and he didn’t want to be anything else.

So, here we are at last.

If you're reading this, you've come to the end of a long story and I hope you've enjoyed it. I know there's been a lot of new faces; I love them all and I hope you've enjoyed getting to know them. If I've left you feeling confused, take a look below and you'll find the Spoiler versions of all the Family Trees and a Timeline for The Phoenix Ranch.

I started this story in August last year, my intention was to write a short story to jump start my creativity again since I was feeling a little burned out after finishing Fucking Kodiak, Alaska. I had a vague idea about wanting to put Jensen on a horse and Jared in chaps, obviously I accomplished that. But this story quickly spiraled out of control and instead of a short smutty gay cowboy story, it became something I didn't plan, as stories tend to do.

I've been completely engrossed in a whirlwind romance with this story for the past eight months. It's been intense and my head has been crowded with people constantly talking to me. I've not really been able to do anything else than write this story or do all the work surrounding it, researching, trying to get all my facts and dates right. Building this family and discovering how it all fits together. I'm hopelessly behind on all my shows, I have a stack of unread books in need of love and attention, video games waiting to be played and work I've been discreetly putting off in favour of sneaking in writing session when the office has been empty. But, for me it's been 800+ hours well spent.

I hope the time you spent reading this feels if not good, than at least not wasted.

Thank you for reading.

Xenodike
Ackles SPOILERS

Avery Moore
Born 9 Dec 1975, Died 5 Oct 2023

Veronica Ackles
Born 4 Mar 1995, Died 2 Apr 2046

Jace Ackles
Born 12 Mar 1995, Died 5 Apr 2023

Josephine Ackles
Born 3 Mar 1995, Died 7 Apr 2023

Kim Rhodes
Born 7 Jun 1988

Colt Ackles
Born 13 Apr 1991

Allie Fraser
Born 13 Apr 1991

Jared Passelli
Born 13 Apr 1991

Jase Ackles
Born 15 Jan 1997

Blaze Ackles
Born 15 Jan 1997

Brei Ackles
Born 17 Jan 1997

Fabella Ackles
Born 1 Oct 2015

Richard Boyd
Born 13 Oct 2015

Lane Ackles
Born 17 Oct 2021

Lily Ackles
Born 7 Oct 1995

May Ackles
Born 7 Oct 1995

Tim Ackles
Born 9 Sep 1965, Died 5 May 2021

Colt Ackles
Born 7 Dec 1996, Died 2 Apr 2046

Joe Ackles
Born 17 Oct 2021

Alana Reaves
Ackles
Born 13 Apr 1991

Printed from Family Echo - http://www.familyecho.cc
Padalecki/Jones SPOLIEF

Thorne Jones
Born 1 Sep 1960

Sharleen Jones
Born 2 Apr 1960

George Padalecki
Born 13 Dec 1963

David Jones
Born 27 Mar 1995

Emma Jones
Born 1 Feb 1997

Jarad Padalecki
Born 19 Jul 1986

Jensen Ackles
Born 1 Mar 1986

Richard Boyd
Born 3 Oct 1981

Bret Ackles
Born 12 Jan 2017

Blaze Ackles
Born 12 Jan 2017

Faëbella Ackles
Born 8 Oct 2015

Blaze Ackles
Born 12 Jan 2017

Bret Ackles
Born 12 Jan 2017

Printed from Family Echo - http://www.familyecho.cc
TIMELINE
Colorado 1869-1939
By: Xenodike

1869
Bess Ackles is born in New York

1890
Bess marries Avery Moore

1891
Amos Ackles is born

1892
Avery is killed

1893
Bess moves to Colorado
The Phoenix Ranch is created

1894
Tim Adams moves to Phoenix
Montana Ellis is born in Colorado Springs
Tim Ackles is born in Evergreen
Jameson Omundson is born, in Denver

1913
Amos & Montana get married

1914

1916
Colt Ackles is born, in Evergreen
TIMELINE
Colorado 1940-79
By: Xenodike

1941
May Dixon is born in Kerrick

1942
Tim Ackles dies in WW2

1945
Colt Ackles dies in WW2

1950
Jim Beaver is born in Wyoming

1952
Callie Omundson is born in Denver

1960
Lance and May get married

1961
Colt Ackles is born in Evergreen

1963
Lily Daniels is born in Kansas City

1966
Jeffery Dean Morgan is born in Seattle
TIMELINE
Colorado 1980-1996
By: Xenodike

1981
Jim and Callie get married

1981
Richard Boyd is born, in New Hampshire

1981
Alona Beaver is born, in Evergreen

1982
Omundson moves to Phoenix

1983
Colt marries Lily

1985
Jared Padalecki is born, in Evergreen

1986
Lily leaves Colt and moves to San Francisco

1986
Jensen Ackles is born, in Evergreen

1990
Chris moves to Phoenix

1990
Chris changes surname to Ackles

1991
May & Lance become Chris legal guardians

1991
Jameson dies

1992
Jeff moves to Phoenix

1993
Chris starts CU school

1993
Josephine dies

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TIMELINE

Colorado 1998-2015

2001
Kim & Colt becomes a couple

2001
Alona graduates High School

2001
Alona enrolls at The University of Denver

2003
Jared leaves Centaur

2003
Jared graduates High School

2004
Jensen graduates High School

2005
May dies

2009
Jensen graduates University

2010
Jensen and Richard becomes a couple

2011
Jensen & Richard move in together

2011
Jensen introduces Richard to the family

2011
Jared drives drunk and has a car accident

2013
Alona's finishes med school

2013
Jared marries in Okla
TIMELINE
Colorado 2016

June 2016
Jared & Jensen go to the mountain camp

June 2016
Bella starts crawling

June 2016
Alona & Chris start dating

June 2016
Kim comes to Phoenix

April 2016
Jared & Jensen get back together

March 2016
Jensen moves back to Phoenix

March 2016
Jensen & Richards relationship ends

May 2016
Mark & Richard come to the ranch

August 2016
Bella takes her first steps

August 2016
Jared & Jersen go to San Francisco

August 2016
Kim moves in

July 2016
Alona & Chris begin a relationship

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!