

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

I SPY PECAN PIE

Anna Birmingham

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

I SPY PECAN PIE

By Anna Birmingham

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

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I SPY PECAN PIE

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Photo Description

A lean and muscular man with dark hair and tattoos on his chest and shoulders stands in a large bucket. He is naked and soaping himself all over, paying particular attention to his crotch.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See him? That's Justin. He hasn't been working here long and I've been too shy to approach him so far. Since I do all the cooking here on the ranch I only see him at mealtimes and I've been trying to find out what he likes so that I can make it especially for him. I have some great friends here who are surprisingly encouraging and open minded. They've been trying to help me out (without being too obvious of course, which of course means they are being ridiculously obvious). They mean well, but I might be better off with less "help".

Justin is very sweet and always polite, he was definitely raised well but I have a feeling he's been on his own for a long time, too long. I don't know his story, but his eyes just look so sad sometimes and it breaks my heart. I think he might be interested, but I know sometimes I can seem intimidating. I've always been taller and bigger than most of the other guys here and being that I'm also the cook, most people don't know really know what to make of me. It kind of keeps me from approaching guys I'm attracted to and I don't want to make the same mistake with Justin. It's not like a get a lot of chances to meet many available men and Justin is someone special, I just really don't want to screw this up.

We've been dancing around the attraction for a while now (at least in my own mind) and I've been working up my courage to see if Justin wants to spend some time with me away from the ranch. I finally have a whole "date speech" planned and I head out the back door, around the barn and what do I see? Justin in all his wet and soapy glory. Needless to say, I forgot my speech.

Can you help me with what happens next? I need your words to help me work up my courage through some clumsily romantic moments that may not always work out, but where I have the best of intentions? One of my biggest

weaknesses is Justin's voice, his husky southern drawl does me in every time he opens his mouth.

Culinary shenanigans, a big guy who likes to bottom and the dirty talk are encouraged. An HEA would be a huge plus because these guys deserve it.

Thank you!

Ann

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, light-hearted, pie, slow burn, misunderstandings, pie, overly helpful friends, pie

Word Count: 13,659

Acknowledgements

Firstly, a big shout out to my wonderful beta readers - Jane, for all your great 'picky ticky' advice, how to speak cowboy and endless encouragement, and to Ren, for everything Alabama, lessons on accents and being a very useful petrol-head (or whatever you call it in the South...) Thanks also to Ann for a fabulous prompt and introducing me to Justin. And finally to all the organizers of Love's Landscapes. Y'all do a great job!

I SPY PECAN PIE

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Our eyes met over a chicken pot pie. It was a damn good chicken pot pie, and I should know. I made the thing.

The eyes were gray, clear, beautiful and belonged to a man I had never seen before.

“Who’s that?” I elbowed Bessie as we returned to the kitchen.

Bessie shook her head with a chuckle. “I wondered how long it would take you to notice him.”

Putting on my best innocent look, I said, “What do you mean?”

Bessie just rolled her eyes and brushed some flour off her powdered cheek. “His name is Justin. He started yesterday.”

“Oh... okay.”

She watched me, waiting. She knew me far too well. That was the problem with someone knowing you since you were in kindergarten.

“So... where’s he from?”

Bessie smiled. “Alabama.”

“And what’s he doing out here in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere?”

Bessie frowned and pointed at me. “Watch your mouth, Duke. You may be big, but you’re not too old for me to smack your butt.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry. So how did he end up here?”

“Don’t know, honey.” Bessie shrugged and tied her hair more firmly into a bun. “You’ll have to ask the boys.” Then she busied herself cleaning up the pots and pans. I knew that was all I would get out of her for the time being.

I’d lived and worked on the M&M Ranch with Bessie and her two sons since I had left school around fifteen years ago. She was like a second mother to me, and I loved her to death.

So, Justin. I sneaked a look back into the dining room to watch him eat his dinner with the other half dozen or so ranch hands. My eyes slid over his

profile, taking in the short dark hair, elegant eyebrows, and sexy scruff on his cheeks. He looked lean and muscled. It was hard to say how tall, since he was sitting down. Either way, he was gorgeous and totally my type, which was kind of amazing. We didn't get many new faces under the age of fifty around these parts. I'd guessed he was in his late twenties but would need a much closer inspection to be sure.

Justin must've felt my eyes on him because he turned towards the kitchen and caught me staring at him. I pulled back sharply, embarrassed to have been caught gaping like a fish.

"Fuck," I mumbled under my breath. A split second later, the sting of a dish towel bit into my leg.

"Language," Bessie said.

I cursed again, silently this time. She may have been pushing sixty, but Bessie had the best goddamned hearing in Texas and a deadly aim with her dish towel.

The sound of heavy boots and several chairs scraping loudly over the wooden floor in the dining room drew my attention. I could hear the murmur of conversation as the ranch hands moved about.

"Duke!" a deep voice hollered. "Where's my supper? These dirty dogs have eaten all the pot pie. Get your pansy ass out here and feed me now!"

I smothered a grin, picking up the second pie I had made that afternoon and carrying it in to the dining room.

Bessie's sons, Mac and Mike, were sprawled in their seats, identical blue eyes twinkling in amusement. I put the new pot pie in the middle of the old oak table and let them dig in.

"You took your sweet time. I nearly passed out from starvation over here." Mike spooned out a huge helping. He began shoveling it down, moaning in pleasure.

"You can take a second to breathe you know," I said. "You're such a Neanderthal."

"Bite my ass. Damn, this is good. So when you gonna marry me, huh, Duke?"

"Nah, Duke's gonna marry me. Aren't you?" Mac winked and leaned over to pinch my ass.

The other ranch hands didn't blink an eye, since they were more than used to our goofing around, but I didn't know how Justin would take it. I'd been trying to avoid looking at him during this little exchange, but saw his eyes widen as Mac groped my ass. My heart sank, and I really hoped he wasn't going to turn out to be another homophobe. We'd seen a few of those around here, and they never worked out well. I batted Mac's hand away with a frown, figured there was no need to make the new guy nervous if being around a gay guy freaked him out.

Mac and Mike were as straight as the day is long. Both of them had been married for years and had five kids between them. Despite their own busy personal lives, it didn't stop them from ragging on me about my preferences twenty-four/seven.

You'd never know it to look at me. I guess I can be pretty intimidating to folks who don't know me. I'm over six-foot-four and carry a lot of muscle. Some people say I look like Wentworth Miller on steroids, only not quite as good looking. That figures.

Justin sat in silence, a concerned look on his face. I knew I should be trying to make him feel more comfortable, more at home. I sure didn't want to get in trouble with Bessie and the boys for scaring off the new employee. Crossing over to his side of the table, I gestured down at his empty plate. "Want some more?"

His eyes flicked up to mine and hovered uncertainly. "Er... no... thanks."

A hint of his husky southern drawl came through in those three words. His voice was like honey dripping off warm buttered toast. I've always had a weakness for strong southern accents; they do something unmentionable to my insides and make me squirm. I held his gaze and considered trying to get him to talk more, but then changed my mind. I nodded and turned away quickly, clearing my throat, not wanting to be caught staring again.

Mike and Mac nudged each other with a grin as I picked up the first empty pie dish and strode back into the kitchen. I had a feeling that those two would read me like a book.

Bessie was standing next to the sink as I dunked the dish in the water for her. "Everything okay out there, Duke?" she asked me.

"Yeah." I leaned on the counter, staring out the window at the sun setting over the far distant horizon, trying to gather my thoughts as Bessie fluttered around me.

Bessie had known I was gay from around the same time that I started to work it out for myself. She insisted that she just picked up a vibe from me one day, but I'm not so sure I believed that. I figured she must've found my compromising collection of pictures featuring Johnny Depp. A half-naked Johnny Depp.

A heavy hand on my shoulder made me jump.

Mac leaned in close and whispered in my ear. "I spy someone with a crush."

I smacked him in the gut with the back of my hand. "Don't be stupid," I scoffed.

"Uh-huh." Mac gave me a knowing look. He cocked his head back at the dining room. "You should go talk to the new boy out there. He might bat for your team. Stranger things have happened."

"Oh please. Just drop it. No way would someone like that want a fuck-up like me."

I saw Bessie twist her towel around, ready to strike. I held my hands up in defense. "Sorry! Slip of the tongue."

"Yeah, I know exactly where you'd like to slip your tongue," Mac said, grabbing the spare dish towel out of my hands.

"Shut the f... just shut up, okay?"

Mac flicked the towel over his shoulder and backed towards the dining room. "Let's go test the water, shall we?"

"Mac... What are you gonna do?" I asked warily.

Mac grinned and winked. "Just leave it up to me."

Yeah, like that always worked so well in the past. Mac, Mike and I had all gone to school together, back in the day. I'd had several relationships on and off over the years, but the boys always seemed to feel that I could use a little help in that department. Sometimes they were right, but usually they were more hindrance than help and I feared that this would be one of those occasions.

"Justin!"

I cringed as I heard Mac bellow as he re-entered the dining room.

"Rookies have to dry up the dishes before dessert. Ranch rule. Get your scrawny ass in there now!"

I heard the scrape of a chair as Justin obeyed without comment. I shot a concerned glance at Bessie, who gave me a reassuring smile. It did nothing to settle the slight churning in my guts. I wanted to find more out about Justin, sure, but I didn't want my friends trying to fix me up again. It was getting way beyond embarrassing.

Justin appeared in the doorway leaning his shoulder against the door frame. "You need help, ma'am?"

He was taller than I'd imagined, probably just over six feet with long, lean legs and a narrow waist. He looked in good shape, which was nothing unusual with all the physical work ranch hands did, but something about Justin pressed all my buttons. I couldn't stop looking at him, and I hoped that it wasn't creeping him out.

"Over here, honey," Bessie called.

He gave me a quick glance and moved to stand next to Bessie, picking up a wet pot to dry.

"You settling in okay?" Bessie asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," Justin replied. "Everyone's been real helpful."

"Ah, that's good to hear. Sometimes the boys can be a little hard on you new folk."

"No, they've been good. So far, at least."

I started to gather together the cherry cake I had made for dessert, trying not to listen in on the conversation, but who was I kidding? I wanted to join in, to say something, but I sensed that Justin was somewhat nervous around me.

"And how about our Duke here? He been feeding you well?" Bessie glanced over her shoulder and winked at me. I glared back.

"Uh... sure, ma'am," Justin said, not quite meeting my eyes.

"Good, good. He really is the most marvelous cook. Don't know what we'd do without him. And he doesn't just cook, you know—he takes care of all the trucks too. There's not one thing with wheels that our Duke can't fix. 'Course he's useless with the animals, but you can't have everything, can you?"

"Uh... no, ma'am," Justin replied, looking a little shell shocked.

I wondered how soon I could get him out of here, then strangle Bessie with her own apron.

“So how about you, honey? You’re from Alabama, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Montgomery.”

“So what brings you to our little part of the world?”

“I... needed to work. The friend of a friend of a cousin knows Mike. They heard y’all were looking for some help over the summer.”

I closed my eyes and let his sexy drawl just wash over me. If ever there was a voice to turn me on, that southern accent did it to me in spades.

“Duke. You okay?” Bessie asked sharply.

I jumped as I realized I had been standing still, holding the cake, eyes shut. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I looked down at the cake. “Better get this in there before there’s a mutiny.”

Bessie nodded and turned back to the task at hand, which was interrogating Justin. “So did you leave anyone behind in Montgomery? Wife? Girlfriend? Sweetheart?”

I slowed my stride as I left the kitchen so I could hear his response.

“No ma’am. No one.”

I didn’t get the chance to talk to Justin until later that evening. Once all of the nighttime chores had been done, several of the hands would relax on the front porch with a beer or a cigarette and chat about life, the universe and whatever random farm gossip came to mind.

I sat on one of the steps, leaning against the railing post. I drew deeply on my cigarette, watching the smoke spiral away into the night sky as I exhaled. I loved nighttime in Texas, everything so quiet and still with the vast nothingness of huge landscapes stretching out before us. I didn’t usually talk much, just listened to the general chit-chat. I enjoyed the company of the others, but never felt like I had much to contribute.

As new blood, Justin was clearly the main topic of conversation, the guys wanting to know everything about him—dirt and all. He answered their questions happily, but I couldn’t help feeling that he was being deliberately vague sometimes. I had to wonder why. I did learn that he was an only child, had no girlfriend and loved horses. A ‘country boy from the city’ he called himself, loving nothing more than riding out in the middle of nowhere for miles and miles.

I couldn't help but grimace and shake my head at the last comment.

Mike caught my gesture and laughed. "Yeah, our Duke here doesn't even ride, do you, Duke? Scared of horses."

I narrowed my eyes at Mike, but he carried on regardless. "Probably a good thing too, look at the size of him! You'd have to pity the poor filly he tried to mount, but then you don't mount many fillies these days, do you, Duke?"

The rest of the guys chuckled, and I rolled my eyes at Mike's lousy joke, more than used to the jibes.

Justin seemed to miss the double meaning, but looked at me oddly all the same. "Really? You live on a ranch and don't ride?"

I blinked. "Uh... yeah. Haven't for years. Got thrown when I was sixteen and busted my arm up pretty bad." I held out my right arm and showed him how I couldn't fully straighten it. "Shoulder's fucked up too. Only muscle holding it together."

"Wow, that sucks," Justin said.

"Yeah and that's why he looks like Rambo too, or so he tells us," Mac said with a grin.

He was partially right. I had to keep in shape to stop my shoulder from popping out, but Rambo I wasn't. Not quite, anyway. I shrugged. "It's life. I fix the food, I fix the trucks. Pays my way and at least the damn trucks go where I tell them."

Justin took a swallow from the bottle of beer he was holding, a ghost of a smile on his face. "Sure 'nuff."

I nodded and looked away, tapping some ash off my cigarette. When I turned back, Justin was still watching me, his gray eyes gleaming in the dark. I was curious as to why he hadn't questioned the filly remark from before. He didn't seem comfortable around me, lacking the easy conversation he had with the others. So I could only assume that the hints at my personal preferences made him uncomfortable. At least he was good eye candy, and that would have to be enough.

I didn't see much of Justin for the next few days, and when we crossed paths we barely spoke a word to each other. He was busy learning the ropes on

the ranch and was usually off in the fields or the barns. On the rare occasions when the hands had some free time, they disappeared off into the nearest town, taking Justin with them. I was usually invited to go along too, but never felt the need. There were always chores to be done on the ranch, and I preferred to be busy. Mike and Mac tried to persuade me to hit the bars, but to be honest I was tired of the local scene. Beer was cheaper from the liquor store and I couldn't dance, so what was the point?

A few mornings later, I was out in the garages, working on an old pickup that had decided to start belching out brake fluid. It was a hot and dusty day in early June, and I stripped down to my oldest wife-beater and dirtiest pair of jeans.

I was lying on the floor, underneath the pickup when I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see a pair of denim clad legs framed in the garage doorway. From the strange tension in the air, I thought I knew exactly who the unexpected visitor was.

“Duke?”

Fuck, even the way he said my name sounded sexy.

“Gimme a sec.” I blew out a calming breath and finished tightening the bolt above me. Job done, I slid out from under the pickup, looking up at Justin as he came into view. I couldn't see him too well as he was silhouetted against the bright sunshine behind him, but I could tell that he was wearing a cowboy hat.

He stepped forward and looked down at me lying on my back on the dirty floor. Our eyes met briefly, and neither of us said a word as I scrambled to my feet, brushing the dust from my ass. I could see his eyes trailing over my bare arms and shoulders, which were no doubt disgustingly filthy and covered in oil and other truck muck.

“Hey,” I said.

Justin cleared his throat before speaking. “Howdy.”

“Can I... help you?”

“Uh, yeah.” Justin took off his hat and combed his fingers through his dark hair, once again avoiding my face. “I may need some help with my Chevy. Gets stuck in second gear sometimes and I can't figure out why. D'you think you might look at it for me—if you got time?”

Justin stuck his thumbs into his front pockets, hands framing his groin. I struggled to drag my eyes away from such an alluring sight.

“Duke?”

I realized I had been staring at him again and hadn't answered his question. Chevy. Second gear. Fuck. I nodded quickly. “Sure. I can check it out after lunch. This thing shouldn't take long.” I tipped my head back at the rusty old pickup.

“Great. Thanks.” Justin started to back away.

I tried to think of something to say to keep him there for longer, but I failed as usual. “Yup,” I said as he turned and left, disappearing back into the Texas sun.

Once the pickup was fixed, I took a quick shower and went back to the main house to help Bessie with lunch.

Lunch was always a scrappy affair at the M&M. Bessie and I usually just threw a load of food on the table and the hands who were within riding range popped in as and when they could get there. I would line up giant hunks of fresh bread, cheese and ham slices alongside a huge potato salad and whatever else I could manage to rustle up. Jars of pickles and jellies helped to fill the old wooden table. Sometimes there would be some left-over cake or pie from the previous night, and when I was feeling generous, or had the time, I'd whip up a batch of fresh-baked cookies.

That day, the sound of heavy footfalls outside announced the first arrivals just before noon, Justin and Mac among them. All the cowboys removed their hats as they walked in, hanging them on pegs next to the door. No hats at the table. That was one of Bessie's few rules in the house. And no swearing—in her company at least.

The hands swarmed around the table and immediately began to argue over seats and who would be sitting on the squeaky chair with the wobbly leg. I watched Justin take a calculated look around the table.

“Hey! Do I spy some left over apple pie?” Mac said happily.

Quick as a flash, Justin sat down on the chair nearest said pie. He grabbed the biggest slice and forked a huge piece into his mouth, eyes closed, moaning in pleasure.

The other hands snickered as Mac narrowed his eyes and pointed a finger at Justin. "You're walking on thin ice, Rookie."

Justin looked at him in amusement and winked.

I hid a grin behind my hand. It took a brave man to get between Mac and pie.

Mac simply rolled his eyes with a sigh and sat heavily in the seat directly opposite Justin. He started to pile his plate high with food. "Looks like I'm gonna have to up my game," he muttered, shooting a stern look at Justin. "No respect in this damn place anymore."

I could barely keep the smile off my face as I watched Justin eat. "You like pie, huh?" I asked him.

"Mmm hmm," Justin murmured, mouth full. "Reminds me of home."

Mac glanced over at where I was still lingering in the doorway. "You should put an order in with Duke over there. He makes some pretty damn fine pies. He'll whip up something especially for you... if you ask nice," he added with a grin. "Right, Duke?"

I nodded slowly. "Guess I could. What's your favorite?"

Justin picked some of the pastry off the top of his remaining pie before replying, not looking at me. "Don't really mind. I eat most things."

"Oh come on," Mac said. "You gotta have a favorite! Everyone has a favorite."

Justin hesitated for a moment longer, then said, "Uh... pecan pie I suppose. If I had to pick."

"Mmm, yeah." Mac smacked his lips. "Haven't had one of them for a while, have we, Duke?"

I tore my eyes away from the sight of Justin eating, throat moving as he swallowed. Damn he was luscious. I wanted to lick him all over.

"Duke?" Mac repeated, eyes darting between me and Justin with a pointed look.

Pecan pie. I could do that. I nodded. "I'll check the stores, see what I can do."

After lunch, Bessie and I washed up, and the cowboys all disappeared out onto the ranch. I changed back into my dirty work clothes and headed towards the barns where the cars and trucks were parked. I hadn't told Justin a specific time, but I figured I could probably work out which truck was his by a simple process of elimination. I could have a quick look over it before Justin got there. I wondered how much his truck would reveal about him. Some people painted their personalities all over their vehicles, whereas others didn't even hang up an air freshener.

As expected, I found Justin's truck easily as it was the only Chevy—the only truck in fact—with an Alabama plate. It was an old C10 pickup, not in bad condition, but I had seen better. A quick look around revealed an Auburn University bumper sticker, plus a few team stickers in the back window—including one for the Baltimore Ravens and another for the LA Kings. Interesting. I checked the door, as vehicles were rarely locked on the ranch. Sure enough, it was open, so I popped the hood and leaned into the depths of the truck to take a closer look.

“Hey.”

I jerked in surprise as I heard Justin's voice behind me, narrowly avoiding bumping my head on the hood.

“Hey.” I stood up and swung around to face him, but not before I'd caught his eyes lingering on my ass. I doubted he was checking me out, but I brushed my ass self-consciously anyway.

“You found it then?” Justin said, gesturing at his truck.

“Yeah, the plates kinda gave it away.”

Justin nodded, not smiling and still not quite meeting my eye. I had to wonder what the hell that was all about. He seemed so... awkward. Detached almost. I couldn't think why he wouldn't like me. I wanted to make him smile, have him joke around with me the way he did with Mac and the others, but I didn't know how. Maybe helping him with the Chevy was a way to find out what was going on in his head. Build bridges, so to speak.

“You, uh, want to show me the problem?” I asked.

“Sure. Thanks.” Justin stepped forward, and we both leaned under the hood. It was the closest we had ever been. I could feel the heat and nervous energy.

“Uh... Probably best if you drive it for me, so I can hear what’s going on. Can you bring it over to the garage?” I asked Justin as I pulled a rag from my pocket to wipe my hands on.

“Yeah, okay. No problem.”

He opened the passenger door for me, and I slid in. Justin climbed in on the driver’s side, closed the door and finally looked over at me, I mean *properly* looked. Our eyes met and held for the first time since chicken pot pie night. Being in such a confined space with him was definitely having a funny effect on my insides. I felt something sizzle between us as we locked gazes, but wasn’t entirely sure what it was. Lust and attraction on my side, sure, but Justin? He was hard to read. Fear? Attraction? Loathing? Who knew. I’d never been great at reading other people and often had to have things spelled out for me, which was probably why my relationship history had been so dismal and why Mac, Mike, and Bessie felt the need to help me out so often.

Justin drove us carefully to my garage, while I listened to the creaks and grinds of the transmission. I got him to back the truck in so I’d have the benefit of sunlight on the engine.

“Thanks for this,” Justin said, removing his cowboy hat to thread his fingers through his hair. “I’d better get back to work.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll try to get it done in the next few hours. Supper time maybe.”

He touched his hand to the brim of his hat, then left. Once again, I was alone. Alone and confused.

I didn’t expect to see Justin again until the end of the day, so I was surprised when he appeared in the garage shortly after four o’clock.

The afternoon had gotten so hot, and my T-shirt was so filthy, that I’d flung it off. I was dressed only in my dusty old jeans and boots. I stood up from under the hood to greet him.

“Hey. Think I’m nearly finished here,” I said.

Justin smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes, which were skimming over my bare torso. “Great, thanks. Appreciate it.” He took off his hat and cradled it to his chest.

“Wanna test her out?” I said, turning to grab the keys off the work bench. I dangled them in front of Justin, encouraging him to take them. Our fingers brushed as he held out his hand, and the keys fell to the floor with a dull thud.

“Oh! Sorry...” I said.

“I’ll get them...” said Justin at the same time.

And just like a cheap comedy act, we bumped heads as both of us reached to pick up the keys.

“Shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Dammit. Sorry,” I said again, reaching down to finally grab the keys, my other hand rubbing the bump on my forehead.

Justin looked a bit dazed and was prodding a red spot on his temple.

“Hey, you okay?” Before I could stop myself, I’d reached out to smooth my fingers over his skin.

Justin jerked back, eyes wide. “What’re you doing?” he snapped. He grabbed my wrist with a strong, work-weathered hand.

“I... uh... sorry.”

“Are you messing with me?” Justin growled, his eyes hard, a frown creasing his brow. His hat dropped, forgotten, to the floor as his other hand formed a fist. For a split second, I thought he was going to punch me.

“What? Messing? What do you mean?” Now I was even more confused. I’d never seen him like this before.

Justin glared at me for a moment, then shut his eyes. He gave a deep sigh and dropped my hand. The tension visibly drained from him. “Oh fuck, I’m sorry,” he said, face full of concern. “Here you are, doing me a big favor and I...” He shook his head again.

“What?” I asked, realizing that this was more than just some little thing. “Is everything okay?” There was a story here, maybe even a novel. I would bet one of Bessie’s turkey dinners on it.

“Yeah. It’s fine. You just... remind me of someone. That’s all.” His face darkened, and he stepped back from me.

Even I could sense that that wasn’t a good thing. I propped my hip against the workbench and folded my arms, wishing I had my shirt back on, knowing

that being half dressed probably wasn't helping anything. I had to wonder what had happened in Justin's past to make him so wary of me—or of the person who looked like me.

Justin stooped to retrieve his hat and ducked his head. "It's not your fault," he said. "It happened years ago. I shoulda gotten over it by now."

Not knowing what else to do, I opened the small fridge I kept in the corner of the garage and pulled out two cans of cold soda. I popped the tops and held one out to him. He took it and tipped his head back, draining half in one go. I did the same and caught him watching me, a wry smile on his face. "You know, you look like that dude in the Diet Coke ad."

I snorted; soda fizzed up my nose and dribbled down my bare chest. I coughed, eyes watering, and brushed at my chest with my hand, no doubt making the mess even worse.

Justin laughed, those fabulous dimples flashing in his cheeks, his dark mood clearly having disappeared as fast as it had come on. "Wanna take a quick walk?" he drawled, inclining his head at the door. "I figure I owe you an explanation as well as an apology, and it's as hot as fuck in here."

"Sure," I said, following him outside curiously. I wondered where he was taking me and what he needed to say.

We didn't go far, just to a small tree-lined corral behind the barns. Justin sat on a shady patch of ground and leaned against a tree. I leaned against the other side, the bark biting into the bare skin of my back, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I took another swallow of my drink and waited for him to speak.

Justin stared off into the distance and drank the remains of his soda, crushing the can between his hands and dropping it on the grass. "It was about six or seven years ago, I hadn't been out of college long. I'd gone to a club with a couple of friends back in my home town. I'd forgotten how small-minded some people could be. We were messing around, probably making more noise than we should and definitely drank more than we should. So, this one guy decides that I was looking at him a bit funny, I wasn't, but y'all know how some folks can get once they get an idea in their heads. Told me to stop eyeballing his ass or he would 'teach me a lesson'. We tried to ignore him but he was being such a dick, getting up in my face and calling us all sorts of shit. We decided we'd had enough and left, but we got jumped. They'd waited for us."

Justin undid the top two buttons of his shirt and pulled it apart to reveal his left pectoral. The edge of a tattoo came into view. "See this?" His finger dragged over a rough scar in the middle of the ink.

I inhaled sharply and moved in closer, wanting to touch his skin myself, but it wasn't the time or place. "Is that...?"

"A knife wound? Yeah. Fucker stabbed me. Missed my heart by an inch."

"Jesus."

Justin nodded. "Got another on my arm too, only that one didn't nearly kill me. Hurt like a bitch though."

"Did they catch him?" I asked. "The guy who did this?"

Justin laughed bitterly. "Hardly. No other witnesses. No one saw him again. Funny how that happens."

"And this guy, I remind you of him?"

His eyes flickered over me. "Sorry, but yeah. Same height, same short hair and pale blue eyes. When I first saw you in the dining room, took me a couple of seconds to realize you *weren't* him."

"No wonder you looked at me funny," I said.

Justin shrugged. "I know. Sorry." He buttoned up his shirt again and pushed off his hat so he could lean more comfortably against the tree. He flung an arm over his eyes against the sun. "Needed to get out of town after that. Get away from everything. Needed a change of scene."

"Where'd you go?"

He lifted his arm and squinted at me through one eye. "California."

That would explain one of the bumper stickers on the Chevy, at least. "And now you're here?"

"Uh-huh. Here is good. Love the open space, the sky, the animals. People aren't too bad either," he drawled. He turned to me again and shielded his eyes. "So what's your story, Duke?"

I scooted forward from the tree to lie down, rolling onto my side to prop my head on my hand so I could watch him. "Me? Not much to tell really. It's kinda boring. Dropped out of school in tenth grade 'cause of my busted arm and shoulder and been here ever since."

“You never finished school?”

“Nah. I was out for weeks. Got so far behind with not being able to write, I never caught up again. Didn't see the point. I was never book smart.”

“And you don't ride?”

“Hell no. Horses are too damn unpredictable.”

“And what about the cooking? Never met a guy who could cook as well as you.”

I bit my lip, feeling absurdly pleased. I picked at the dried grass in front of me, shredding it in my fingers. “I dunno, guess it's a kinda like fixing a car in a weird way. You don't need much imagination. Follow the rules and you get the results. Simple.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Justin said, looking down at me, his eyes soft and his face relaxed.

He made a beautiful sight at that moment. The sunlight dappling though the trees onto his face, the sultry summer breeze ruffling his hair. I wished I could stay there all afternoon, watching him, talking about random nonsense, but when I looked at my watch I realized I needed to get back to the house to start prepping supper. I sighed reluctantly, “I gotta go. Duty calls. You ranch boys take a lot of feeding.” I stood slowly, looking down at him lounging at my feet. Justin's eyes followed me as I towered above him.

“Yeah, I should go too,” he said, pushing himself up and brushing the dirt off his ass. “Thanks again for fixing Dolly.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Dolly? You call your truck Dolly?”

Justin winked. “Yep. She's my girl.”

I shook my head and stooped down to pick up the abandoned soda cans. “Whatever. See you at supper.”

“You can count on it.” His eyes flicked over my bare chest and arms once more. “Hope you're gonna clean up first...” He gave me one last smile and turned to stride away, hands in his pockets.

I watched him until he disappeared round the corner of the barn. It had been great to spend a bit of time with him and talk, but I realized that I still didn't know if he liked me. Or if he was even gay.

That night I made pecan pie. Lots of pecan pies. Yes, I'd done it for Justin because I wanted him to think well of me, and I didn't care what the others made of it.

"Well what do we have here?" Mike said as I put the pie on the table in front of them all. "Do I spy what I think I spy?" He cocked his head at me with a grin.

"You made this?" Justin looked up at me, a small smile on his face.

"Yup."

"Wow, thanks. Looks amazing."

Mike leaned over and handed him the knife with a flourish. "Guess you'll be calling first dibs, huh?"

"Damn right. It's mine, all mine." Justin grabbed the plate and pulled it in front of him, arms wrapped around the dish.

"Hey!" Mac smacked his arm. "Step away from the pie."

Justin flipped him the finger.

I watched in amusement as they bickered like school kids, happy for Justin, that he seemed so comfortable with the others.

"Duke," Justin said. My eyes caught his, and he smiled at me. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Justin cut a big slice of pie and then reluctantly passed the dish on to Mac, who dove in with relish.

"You gonna sit? Eat with us?" Justin nodded at a spare chair opposite him.

"Nah." I shook my head. I never ate with the others, usually grabbing a bite to eat with Bessie as we cooked the meal. I didn't feel it was my place somehow. "I'll have some later, if there's any left."

"Don't count on it," Mac said, voice muffled by the pie in his mouth.

"I'll take my chances."

"You sure?" Justin said.

"Yeah. Thanks."

I gathered a few empty plates up and stacked them, ready to take back to the kitchen. Justin watched me as I moved away, a small smile on his face but his eyes a little sad.

Bessie glared at me as I entered the kitchen and dropped the plates in the bowl. "What you playing at, Duke?"

"What?"

"In there."

"What? Playing? Who's playing?"

"Not you, clearly. Why didn't you sit with him and eat some pie?" Bessie put her hands on her hips and looked at me like I was still twelve years old.

"Huh?"

"Oh Duke, you're so clueless. You shoulda stayed in there with that boy. He wanted you to."

"He was just being nice... hang on, were you listening?" I pointed at her accusingly.

"Course I was. I know you made the pie for him. And he wasn't just being nice, he likes you."

"I don't think so. He just feels bad 'cause of something that happened earlier, that's all."

"Oh! Y'all have a lovers' quarrel?" She grinned wickedly.

"Bessie!" I said in exasperation. "No. Just a misunderstanding is all."

"Well, get your butt back out there!"

I grabbed a towel and started to dry some of the wet dishes stacked up next to the sink. "No. It would be too weird. I never eat with the guys."

Bessie threw her hands up in frustration. "Oh for heaven's sake, Duke. You really can't see it, can you? I worry for you, I really do." She continued to mutter to herself as she rolled up her sleeves and viciously scrubbed at the dirty pots.

Later that night some of the hands gathered on the porch as usual. I sat in my regular spot on the steps, blowing smoke rings up into the inky black sky, listening to the crickets chirping and the low murmuring of voices around me. Justin wasn't there. I figured maybe he had other plans or needed some time alone. Funny how on a ranch this size, getting time alone always felt like a struggle.

I closed my eyes and just let my mind wander. It drifted back to that afternoon, when we sat under the trees. The things we'd talked about and the way Justin looked at me, all relaxed and content. Had there been more to it than I'd first imagined? He was so gorgeous and clearly a smart guy, I struggled to believe he would be interested in someone like me. Especially considering what had happened to him. The odds were definitely not stacked in my favor, and I'd never been a big risk taker.

But maybe Justin was worth taking a risk over. There was just *something* about him that drew me to him constantly. Maybe I just needed to get him alone again and talk things over, preferably away from the ranch. Perhaps go out for a beer or something. I'd have to think how to word it so it didn't sound like I was asking him out on a date or anything.

I saw a shadow move towards the porch and realized Justin was coming over from the bunk house. He'd clearly showered and changed since supper and was still looking a little damp around the edges. And as sexy as hell. My pulse increased just from seeing him walk, with that long, easy stride. Fuck, he made me nervous. I couldn't think, and I needed to clear my head. I ground out my cigarette and disappeared back into the house before he got within speaking distance of the porch.

A few days passed before I got the opportunity that would change my life forever. If I'd known it at the time, I would have planned it much better.

The hands had all been away on a round-up which took them out to the cattle in some of the most distant pastures. I hadn't seen several of them, Justin included, for three days. It was always a riot when they came back, with all the constant clamoring for decent food, hot water, and proper showers to wash away the days of dirt, grime, and other filth.

Bessie was preparing one of her famous turkey dinners. I decided to bake the biggest pile of chocolate fudge brownies ever seen. They smelled delicious and it was all I could do not to scoop one up and eat it straight out of the pan. I couldn't resist a little taste of the fudge frosting though. I ran my finger around the edge of the jar and sucked it clean, before putting it back on the table. With a little time to spare while the brownies cooled, I decided to track down Justin.

I'd been acutely aware of his absence over the past few days, something that had never happened to me before. I'd never missed any of the other guys like

this. I'd thought about him a great deal, mostly late at night when I was hunkered down under my blankets, alone in the dark with only my imagination and my hand for company. I had started to wonder if he would stay on here after the summer was over. He seemed to belong here, like he'd always been here, and I would sure miss him if he left. The three days had given me time to think and I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to say to him.

It was just a shame I never got to actually say it.

I left the house and headed towards the craziness of the bunkhouse, but as I walked around the corner of the barn I came to an abrupt halt.

Holy fuck. There, all naked and soapy, was Justin.

He was standing in a large bucket, washing himself down. The late afternoon sun made his wet skin gleam like burnished gold. My eyes devoured his body, lingering on the hard contours of his torso, the tattoos on his chest and shoulder. And his cock, oh man, I couldn't look away. He pulled on it as he washed, soaping himself between his legs and around his balls. Justin had his eyes closed so he didn't see me watching him. He had me drooling like a fool and he didn't even know it. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and my mind went numb. What the hell was I doing there again?

I palmed my own cock through the front of my jeans. I was as hard as a rock, and I knew that I would be jerking off to this image for the next few weeks. I could just imagine that perfect cock sliding into me, filling me up.

It took me a moment to realize that Justin had stopped moving, and my heart stuttered when I noticed his eyes locked onto me. Oh crap. I didn't know what to do; I had been caught fair and square. It was pretty damn obvious what I'd been doing.

He smiled slowly, and my stomach dropped into my boots as Justin lowered his eyes to take note of the hands covering my crotch.

"Enjoying the show?" he asked, raising an eyebrow and slowly soaping his cock again. A sensuous slide up and down, up and down.

I panicked and quickly slipped back around the barn, out of sight. Fuck. I couldn't believe I had been so obvious. He probably thought I was a complete pervert. I sighed and hit my head against the barn with a clunk. How was I going to get out of this one?

"Duke."

I cracked open an eye to see him standing in front of me, a towel wrapped hastily around his waist.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Wait... what?

“You’re sorry?” I asked in surprise.

Justin dropped his eyes. “I shouldn’t have baited you like that. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no. That’s fine. You’re very fine. I mean, it’s fine. Whatever.” My mouth was dry, and I stumbled over my words, trying to think of anything other than mauling him to within an inch of his life.

Justin grinned, a dimple flashing in his right cheek. “You think I’m fine?”

I caught my breath, not wanting to believe what he was implying. I had to assume he was just messing with me.

“No... Yes! Uh... no, not really... kinda. Fuck! I don’t know what I’m saying.” I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head away from him. “It’s good to see you back... Look, I’ll leave you alone. I didn’t mean to watch you, I’m sorry.” I pushed away from the barn wall and started to move away from him.

Justin’s hand shot out and grabbed my bicep, spinning me back around to face him. “Where are you going? And why have you been avoiding me?”

“I haven’t.”

“Yes you have.”

“I haven’t, not really. I just thought you needed some... space.”

Justin stepped a little closer so that our bodies were almost touching. His hand was still firmly holding onto my arm. “I do need something, but I wouldn’t necessarily call it... space.”

I licked my lips and watched as his eyes followed every movement. “What would you call it?” I asked in a whisper. Hoping, longing. I wanted to believe that this was real and he was as attracted to me as I was to him.

Justin ran his hand up my arm to cup my jaw, stroking his thumb over the stubble on my cheek. His eyes glowed as he leaned forward and finally, finally, touched his lips to mine. My whole body tensed and shivered as he kissed me. His lips were soft and warm, moving slowly, coaxing me to respond. I couldn’t

help myself and I groaned as he licked across my lower lip. My hands snaked around him to grab at his towel-covered ass, hauling him tight against me.

“Mmm, you taste like chocolate,” Justin murmured against my lips. I felt him caress my bare arms, grabbing at my muscles. His hands dipped under the short sleeves of my T-shirt to knead my shoulders. “Oh your arms... Fuck, Duke,” he moaned.

I grunted and pushed away from the wall to swing him back around, shoving him against the wooden slats before diving in for another kiss. This time I didn't hold back, plunging deep into his mouth, devouring him. He tasted dark and sweet and highly addictive. I couldn't get enough. He gave as good as he got, squeezing my arms, attacking my mouth, breaking for a desperate breath before diving back in again. We writhed against each other, panting and gasping. No way was he messing with me; I could feel his hard erection under the towel and felt his fingers pulling at my belt buckle. This was very real and getting out of control fast. I wrenched my mouth away with a moan, leaning my forehead against his. “We can't do this here.”

“I know,” Justin rasped. His gray eyes were as dark as storm clouds, and I could feel the lust pouring off him.

“Come with me.” I grabbed the front of his towel and dragged him to the garage where I had worked on his truck. I knew that there was a strong work bench in there, which I was hoping would come in more than handy.

It was hot and dusty inside the garage, but I didn't care. Dust be damned. As soon as we were inside, Justin ripped his towel off and grabbed my hand, shoving it against his throbbing dick. “Touch me, goddamn it,” he growled, attacking my mouth again.

I grasped his cock tightly, stroking the head with my thumb, savoring the feel of his hot and beautiful flesh. Justin bucked into my hand and slammed me back against the wall, scrabbling at my jeans. He pulled them down roughly, and my own erection popped free, straight into his hands. I groaned as he started to stroke me, each movement sending delicious shivers through me. “Wait, wait!” I gasped.

“Can't wait,” Justin moaned, reaching further to stroke under my balls. “Been thinking about this for far too long.” His fingers inched a little further back, tantalizingly close to my opening.

I shivered again, wanting him in me, like all the nights I had fantasized about him. "I want you to fuck me," I murmured against his mouth. "Right now."

Justin shuddered and pushed me against the work bench. "You got condoms?"

"No," I said with a deflated sigh. It wasn't like I had expected this when I'd left the kitchen.

"We'll have to compromise," Justin said. He pushed me to sit on the work bench and stepped in close, spreading my knees with his thighs and bringing our naked groins deliciously close. My jeans gathered by my ankles so my feet were trapped together. I couldn't wrap my legs around him, but I quite liked the feeling of being a little vulnerable, spread open, at his mercy.

He rubbed himself against me, and we both moaned, the bumping and sliding driving me crazy. Justin squeezed both of our dicks together, and I had to brace my arms behind me to stop myself from toppling over.

"Kiss me again," he demanded. His other hand cupped the back of my head, and he leaned his weight into me as I struggled to hold us both up.

Justin growled in frustration as I started to slip down away from him, so with a quick sweep of my arm, I cleared a space behind me on the work bench. Boxes and tools flew through the air and clattered onto the floor. I collapsed back heavily onto the hard wooden surface, Justin falling down on top of me. My hands squeezed his perfect ass as he rutted against me. "You feel so good," I grunted.

"Not half as good as you," he breathed, sliding his hands down my arms, pulling them up and pinning them above my head. He shifted back a little to look down at me. "Fuck, look at you." He licked a trail across my chest, up to my shoulder and then bit into my bicep. "You have the sexiest goddamn arms I've ever seen. I can't stop touching them."

I closed my eyes and let him do what he wanted to do, that voice just washing over me. It was all good with me. More than good. "Please don't stop."

He didn't. He continued to rut against me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge until I couldn't hold back any more, pleasure exploding out of me and pulsing over my stomach. A sharp curse from Justin told me he had reached his own peak too.

We both needed a thorough wash down after that. Justin retrieved the bucket from outside the barn, and we soaped each other down slowly, lingering over each ridge and dip of muscle, washing away the spunk from our bellies and the dirt and grease from my back. Justin's eyes sparkled as I paid extra attention to his softening cock, running my hands gently down over his lower stomach and between his thighs.

"Why don't you eat with us?" he said suddenly.

"Huh?"

"At meal times. You never eat with us. You always disappear back to the kitchen."

I shrugged and sat back on my heels. "I don't know. I never have. Guess there's always something to prepare, or chop up or something, so I never feel I can. Doesn't feel right, somehow."

Justin brushed his hand over my short hair. "You should, you know. Bessie too."

"Maybe," I said.

"No maybe. We're all family here."

A smile pulled at my mouth. "And the family that eats together, stays together?"

Justin laughed and put a finger under my chin, pulling me to stand. "Yeah. Something like that."

"You still see your family? Your real family, I mean?"

Justin slid his damp arms over my shoulders. "Sometimes. My folks are older and kind of old-fashioned I guess. Lived in the same house for forty years. Rarely go out of state. They don't understand why I've chosen to do what I do."

"What, ranching—or men?"

"Both." He leaned in to kiss me. "Or ranch men. Double win."

"I'm no ranch man."

"Are too. You live on a ranch and you're a man." He smoothed a hand down my torso to grab my cock. "Well, you definitely feel like one to me."

I grinned and slid my hands around behind him, squeezing his ass. "Guess what you feel like."

“See! I knew there was a sense of humor in there somewhere.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but Justin paid no attention to my glare, pulling me close to bury his face into my shoulder. “You should smile more often.”

“I do smile,” I said into his hair.

“Not enough.”

“I’m too busy to smile.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“I know.”

Justin pulled me closer, and I could feel him sniff my skin. “We’re having brownies tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought so. You gonna eat with us this time?” His lips tickled my neck as he spoke, his breath caressing my ear.

“Maybe.”

“What you doing after?”

“Cleaning up.”

“I’ll help. And after that you’re coming out with us to hit the bar. I’ll buy you a drink. Okay?”

I sighed and pulled back so I could look at him. I couldn’t deny him anything right then. Plus part of me really wanted to go out with him. “Okay.”

That night, I finally went to the local bar with the other ranch hands. We all piled into one of the pickups, several of us hunkering down in the back. Justin sat across from me, and I watched him out of the corner of my eye as we bounced along the rocky track. His cowboy hat was obscuring most of his face, but I could tell from the set of his jaw that he was smiling to himself. He looked happy. That thought made me happy too, and I found myself grinning like an idiot. I loved that we had a secret and no one knew about us. Although, I had no doubts that our hook-up wouldn’t be a secret for long. It was hard to keep anything a secret on the M&M with Bessie and the boys around.

Justin must have felt my eyes on him, as he lifted his head and caught me watching. He gave me a quick wink which made me grin even wider and shift

where I sat on the truck bed. I wondered how long it would be before I could get him alone again.

The Cactus Cantina was only about three miles from the ranch. Close enough to walk back should the designated driver decide that he didn't want to be designated after all, which happened more often than it probably should. It was typical of so many bars in Texas, simple and basic, but did good beer.

Mac, Mike and a few of the others grabbed some beers and headed for the pool tables at the back. I sat on a stool at the end of the bar and raised my finger to get the attention of the bartender. He came over with a smile.

"Howdy, Duke," he said, leaning across the bar to shake my hand. "Don't see you in here often. How you been?"

"Good. You?" I was embarrassed that I couldn't even remember his name when he so clearly knew me. Tim, Ted, or something similar... In my defense it had probably been at least a month since my last visit.

"Yeah, so-so. Your fellas drink well, so always good to see them."

I nodded. "Good." I was useless at small talk. I never knew what to say. "Uh... can I get a Bud please?"

"Make that two. On me." Justin slid onto the stool next to me, his knee brushing against mine. "Howdy Todd, how's it going?" he said to the bartender.

Todd grinned wide and popped the caps off two bottles of Bud. "Better now you and the boys are here. Takings will be up tonight."

"Glad we could help." Justin took the bottles and passed one to me, saluting Todd with it. "Cheers."

Todd chuckled and moved away to serve another customer. Justin turned to me and raised his beer. I watched his mouth around the top of the bottle, knowing what that mouth felt and tasted like. I couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like wrapped around another part of me. I watched his throat move as he swallowed.

Justin had to know damn well what I was thinking as he held my eyes the whole time, downing half the bottle in one long, slow move. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth when he broke for a breath, a sly grin creeping across his face.

I swallowed, having not taken a single sip of my beer. I wriggled on my stool and rubbed my sweaty palms over my thighs.

“Put your tongue back in, Duke,” Justin murmured, his eyes sparkling. “You’re dribbling on the bar.”

I blinked and actually looked down at the bar to check. Justin laughed.

“Fucker,” I said with a frown.

“Yep. I am,” Justin said, his eyes dropping to my crotch. “And don’t you forget it.”

A rush of heat made my cheeks go warm. I punched him on the leg, which just made him laugh again. He swung around on his stool to watch the growing crowd of cowboys at the pool tables.

“Do they know?” he asked quietly, inclining his head at the others.

“Know about what?”

“You. Liking guys.”

I twisted my bottle on the bar, making wet circles with the bottom of the glass. “Yeah. Never talk about it much, but it’s kinda obvious I guess. Mike and Mac have known for years—since school. Rest of the guys? Yeah, they know I hook up with a guy sometimes.”

“And they’re all okay with it?” Justin looked surprised.

I nodded. “Sure. I know some folks might take objection, but not the guys who work with us right now. They’re good. I mean, none of their business who I fuck, right? No more than it’s my business who they fuck.” I paused before taking a small sip of beer. “Some of them have real shitty taste, though.”

Justin snorted and wiped his mouth with his hand again.

I smiled and risked leaning in a little closer. “What about you? They know about you?”

Justin shrugged. “Maybe. Like you, I don’t talk about it much. Past experience tells me that most people are fine, but you do run across the occasional asshole who feels they need to make a point. With or without a knife... You never know how people will react, so I figure it’s usually better to play it cool for a while. The twins have figured me out though. It’s not like I’ve been subtle with them. Plus I’ve asked way too many questions about you.”

“Me?”

Justin’s eyes roamed my face. “Oh yeah.”

Heat flooded my cheeks again, and I dropped my eyes as I struggled to look at him. "What did they say?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Justin drawled and leaned even closer to push against me with his shoulder.

I enjoyed the contact for a moment before he pulled away, watching me. Our eyes locked and I saw heat flare in his. I was overwhelmed with the desire to kiss him, to feel those warm lips on mine again. My eyes dropped to his mouth, and I bit my lower lip as I imagined leaning in and pressing against him.

"Don't look at me like that," Justin murmured.

I dragged my eyes away from his mouth and found him staring at me, desire written all over his face. I cleared my throat and turned away. *Later*, I promised myself, we could do that later. For now, I would enjoy the sweet torture of sitting close but not touching.

We drank in silence for a few minutes until a loud cheer pulled our attention to the pool tables at the back.

"You play?" Justin asked, gesturing with his bottle.

"Occasionally." I shrugged.

"Well come on then!" He grabbed my bicep, but I resisted.

"No, it's okay. You go, I'll watch."

"Duke, come on!" He tried to push me off the stool, but I still had the weight advantage.

"No, really. I'd rather stay here."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Duke?"

"Honest. I'm happy here with my beer." I raised my bottle at him. "You go play."

Justin sighed in resignation. "Fine. But I'll be back." He deliberately grazed his knee against my thigh as he slid off the stool and went to join the others. I settled back to watch and relax with my beer.

I didn't notice anything amiss until the first glass broke.

I spun around from where I had been leaning on the bar, lost in my thoughts. I stood up quickly when people started to shout and instinctively hurried towards the noise.

“What the...” Todd moved from behind the bar in a flash and followed me over.

“Shut the fuck up!”

I heard Justin's furious voice before I saw him. His fist was raised and he was struggling against the restraining arms of Mike and Mac. “Let me go,” he growled at them.

“Nuh-uh,” Mike said. “Calm it down. Right now.” Justin tried to thrash against him, but Mike held him tight.

“He's a fucking idiot,” Justin snarled. “He deserves it.”

“Yeah maybe he does, but he's not getting it from you. You wanna end up in a cell?” Mac said evenly.

Justin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he spotted me through the crowd. Our eyes locked and held. After a couple of seconds, I could see the fight drain out of him. I nodded at Mac who dropped his arms from around Justin, who instantly pulled away, shaking his hands to release the tension.

It took me a moment to notice the other guy being restrained. He was someone I vaguely recognized as working at another local ranch. Shorter than Justin, he was heavily built and probably outweighed him by a few pounds. The guy was snarling at Justin, the veins standing out on his neck. He spat at Justin, missing by a mile, but it spurred Todd into action.

“You. Out now,” he said, pointing at the man who was still spitting and fuming. “Not having that behavior in my bar. Boys?” he added, gesturing at the door. “Y'all care to assist?”

The cowboys holding the other man nodded and dragged him towards the door. He didn't go without a fight, his feet scrabbling on the floor as he tried to stand, cursing all the way as he spewed all kinds of names at Justin.

Once the man had been evicted, I turned back to look at Justin. He was leaning against the pool table watching me, his hand in a fist pressed to his mouth. He still looked angry, but also seemed somewhat awkward—embarrassed almost.

I moved closer and stood in front of him, hands on my hips. “What the hell was that all about?” I asked in a low voice.

Justin didn't say anything, just shook his head and broke eye contact to look down at the floor.

I noticed several of the hands eyeing me curiously, but didn't think much of it until Mac came over and clapped me on the shoulder. "You okay, Duke?"

"Me?" I asked in surprise. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why shouldn't I be? Nothing to do with me."

Mac chuckled. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Drama and excitement over for the time being, the hands moved to resume their game of pool. Justin pushed away from the table and strode across the room to pick his drink up from the window ledge. He shoved a hand into the back pocket of his jeans and raised the bottle of Bud to his lips with the other. Mac watched him for a moment before leaning in close to my ear. "You might wanna have a word with your boy about this later," he said.

I dragged my eyes away from Justin to look at Mac. "What? He's not my boy."

Mac gave a quick laugh and patted my shoulder again. "You play your cards right, Duke, he damn well will be."

I watched as Justin finished the game of pool he was playing and headed to the bathroom. I downed the last of my beer quickly and followed him, waiting outside the door of the bathroom until he reappeared.

"Justin."

He spun around at the sound of my voice, clearly still a little on edge.

"Everything okay?" I asked, touching him gently on the arm. "What happened in there?"

Justin speared his fingers through his hair and looked at me somewhat sheepishly. "Think I made us public is what happened."

"What? How? Why?"

"Three very good questions." Justin looked around at the people moving back and forth, then grabbed me by the arm. "Let's go outside. I could use a smoke."

I nodded, leading him down a dark corridor and through a side door into the parking lot. Once outside, I put one of my cigarettes in my mouth, lit it and passed it over to him. "Thanks," he said, sucking in deep before blowing smoke up into the night sky.

I lit one for myself and leaned against the wall next to him. "So?" I encouraged.

"Guy was a jerk."

I laughed. "Yeah, I gathered that. But you were acting crazy."

"Maybe a little. You sure you wanna hear this, Duke? It's not nice stuff."

"I can handle it. I'm a big boy," I said. "So come on. What'd he do?"

Justin leaned his head back and shut his eyes. "Nothing... yet. But he'd said plenty. Saw him watching you at the bar. Heard him say he was surprised they let you in here. 'Fags and queers taking over the world', he said. Went on a rant about some other shit too, calling you all sorts 'a names, saying you were some dumb hick freak whose Mama probably dropped you on your head. Mac told him to shut his mouth, but the guy didn't give a shit. Guess I saw red." He grimaced and took another draw on his cigarette.

"So you decided to defend my honor?" I asked with a smile. The insults didn't bother me. I'd heard worse.

Justin huffed out a laugh. "Yeah. S'pose I did." He rolled his head to the side and looked at me, his dark eyes twinkling, reflecting the light from the neon bar sign above. "Said a few choice words back at him too. Hope you don't mind."

"Nah. You defend away," I said, a warm fuzzy feeling growing in my stomach.

"Good," he said, tapping ash off the end of the cigarette, before shifting to look at me again. His throat moved as he swallowed, watching me. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat. You don't deserve that shit. Told him as much too."

My breath caught at the look in his eyes. He cared about me. This gorgeous cowboy with the sexy dimples and killer smile cared about me. I dropped my barely smoked cigarette and ground it out under my boot before leaning in and cupping his face in both hands. Eyes on his lips, I lowered my head and kissed him long and slow, trying to put all my emotions into that kiss. I felt Justin flick his own cigarette away before running his hands up my arms to grab at my shoulders. I lost track of time as we stood there, making out in the semi-darkness like teenagers, mouths moving across jaws, nipping at lips and sucking at necks. The world disappeared and it was just me and him, me and Justin. My hands dropped away from his face to grab at his ass, pulling him

tight against me. Justin's arms wound around my neck and our kisses deepened, turning wet and messy as our breathing started to get more labored. I groaned and broke the kiss reluctantly before we did anything too indecent or clothes started falling off. Justin buried his face into my neck and pulled me even closer, rocking his hard crotch against mine. "Can we go home now?" he murmured against my skin. "Please?"

I was about to respond when the heavy slam of a door, followed by whistles and catcalls, pulled my attention away from the man in my arms.

"Well, what do I spy here?" I heard Mike say in a sing-song voice.

"I knew it!" another voice said. "You owe me fifty bucks, pal."

"Ew, Duke. Put him down!"

"Ignore them, Justin. You get yourself some tail."

"Guys, bus to the Loveshack leaves in two minutes!" That was Mac.

The good-natured heckling made me smile. To say we had been outed was an understatement. I cracked open an eye to see the guys from the M&M all heading back to the pickup, laughing and shoving each other, the sight of Justin and I together clearly not bothering them in the slightest. At that moment, I couldn't have loved my extended family any more. I pulled away from Justin to see him biting his lip to hide a smile. "You okay?" I said.

"Yep," he replied. "Haven't been more okay for a long time."

"Great." I ran my hand down his arm to entwine our fingers together. "Come on then," I said, walking backward, pulling on his hand. "Let's go home."

The slide of hands over my backside made me jump. I hadn't seen or heard anyone come into the kitchen, but I would've recognized those hands in a blindfolded lineup.

"Mmm," Justin murmured, his arms encircling my waist from behind as he pulled me tight against him. "Something smells good. What is it?"

I leaned back into him, enjoying his touch while keeping my sticky hands away from his shirt. "Pumpkin pie."

"Oh yeah. Love me some pumpkin pie." Justin said, leaning around to poke at some of the ingredients on the counter. "What's this thing?"

I elbowed him in the ribs. "It's a nutmeg. And keep your damn hands off it!"

"Fine. Jesus." Justin jerked his arm back and pulled me close again, sliding one hand under the front of my T-shirt to caress my lower belly.

"And what the hell are you doing here? Shouldn't you be off wrestling bulls or something?"

Justin laughed and rested his head on my shoulder, watching me mix up the ingredients in the bowl in front of me. "Yeah, but I'm on a break."

I scoffed. "Break? Ain't no such thing this time of year."

It was branding and castrating season at the M&M, one of the busiest times of the year—a time when the work got even dirtier and more strenuous than usual. The days were still hot and dusty and everyone got somewhat agitated. But not me. Not this year. Solely due to the fact that it was late fall, Justin was still on the ranch and showed no signs of leaving in the near future.

"Okay, so I'm running a quick errand for Mac. Thought I'd drop in and say 'hi' on my way through." Justin leaned in closer and kissed me under my ear.

I closed my eyes and felt myself melt under his touch. Even after several months, he still had the ability to make me weak at the knees with a single kiss.

"Afternoon, boys!" Bessie's bright voice made us both jump guiltily, even though our relationship was common knowledge on the ranch. Shirking duties was a different matter though. Bessie busied herself tying her apron around her waist and started clattering amongst the pots and pans.

Justin pulled away from me reluctantly and turned to lean on the counter, giving me a wink as he did so. "Hi Bess. What's for supper?"

Bessie gave him a stern look. "Nothing, if you keep distracting my boy here."

"I think you'll find he's actually *my* boy," Justin said with a grin.

Bessie's face softened as she looked over at us. She shook her head, chuckling. "Well, guess that's true enough. But much as I love you boys, get your cute tush out of my kitchen, Justin. We got work to do. So do you."

"Anything you say, ma'am." Justin saluted her and pushed off the counter. "Later, Duke. Looking forward to that pie. And the rest..." And with a sharp slap to my ass, he was gone. Fucker.

“You look happy.” Bessie said a few moments later.

Her words made me start, and I realized I had been staring at the door after Justin. I looked at her and smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Good,” she nodded. “It’s about time. He looks happy too. You look happy together. Warms this cynical old heart of mine.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh please, you’re no more cynical than I am straight.”

Bessie giggled. “Hush your mouth, Duke, and make your damn pie.”

I took a sharp breath and swung around to point at her accusingly. “Damn! You said ‘damn’!”

“Oops. So I did. Silly me.” Bessie gave me an impish smile and moved away to open the fridge, carrying on with her food preparations in silence.

I turned back to my bowl and continued mixing everything together. Bessie was right, we were happy together. Justin had a way of making me feel good about myself again, and I guess I gave him the support and stability he never felt he had before. And the smoking hot sex didn’t hurt either. We worked, it was that simple.

And besides, I did make the best damn pie in town.

The End

Author Bio

Anna Birmingham lives in the UK with two young children and an ever-despairing husband (“are you reading about buff gay guys again??”). She loves all things American and has a soft spot for southern accents and cowboys. She has written stories for two previous ‘Don’t Read in the Closet’ events on Goodreads and has also had a couple of short stories published by Dreamspinner Press. The plan is to write more, but the problem is finding the time between family commitments and all the reading about buff gay guys...

Contact & Media Info

You can contact Anna on annabirm@gmail.com.