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WHILE THE COMMOTION settled down after the boy's panicky mother hurried onstage to collect her son, Colton glanced up to find Ashley Ozark—his pseudo girlfriend—staring at him, her camera pulled close to her chest like she was protecting it from stampeding hooves. He beckoned her closer.

Hesitantly, she moved forward, hunkering down at the front of the stage. “Yes?”

He grabbed the front of her shirt and pulled her in for a kiss. Possessing her mouth. The little gasp she made was rather satisfying, he had to admit.

“What was that for?” she whispered breathlessly.

His gaze flicked to the left side of the stage, where her friend was watching. “Just putting on a show, as commanded.”

“Is that what all of this was?” She indicated the ring and the crying child with a sweep of her hand. “A show?”

Colton frowned. “No. The kid was about to be trampled, that was instinct. The kiss was for show.” Though he'd be a liar if he said there wasn't a certain amount of instinct involved in wanting to kiss the uptight Ozark sister, as well. Though she was looking a little less uptight in her short shorts and tiny top.

“Okay.” She pulled back, smiling awkwardly. “That should do it.”

“Really? See, I'm not so sure.”

“What do you—”

He yanked her down for another kiss. It was fun shutting her up with kisses. Partly because he wanted to teach her a lesson for thinking she had control of him, but mostly because the second their lips met, hers gave in: softening right up and parting for his tongue. Her lips meshed with his in a deliciously juicy way.

“Okay, okay,” she panted against his mouth.

Colton grinned.

This time he let her pull away. She stood, crossing her arms in front of her belly, which was too bad because the little shirt she was wearing showed off her tummy, all nice and trim with the cutest little belly button. He wouldn't mind tracing that sweet little navel with his tongue later...

Whoa. Where had that come from?

"What time is your ride?"

"Three."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." Colton rubbed the back of his head. Maybe he was taking this fake boyfriend thing too far. "You gonna watch?"

She raised the camera. "I'm paid to watch."

"What time are you done?"

"Five."

"Okay. Meet me by the gate to the stockyard at five-fifteen." He stretched his back. "Then you can show me how much you appreciate me."

Her gaze narrowed.

He saluted. "Later, babe." Colton said the last part extra loud so that the friend would hear.

There. He'd done his part. Now he could go concentrate on his ride. Later he'd see if the Ozark girl would make good on her end of the bargain.

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OF ALL THE harebrained schemes, this one had to be the worst. Colton Cross had just made sure everyone in Half Moon Creek saw them making out. At the announcer's stage, no less. And he'd done it after heroically saving a kid from being trampled by horses. Though whether he'd done it to be a good man or whether he'd done it to make himself look good, Ashley couldn't decide.

Probably the latter.

"Thank God for Colton," Jasmine said from behind her.

Ash didn't turn. Instead she watched as Colton leisurely jogged back to his horse. He grabbed the reins before gracefully swinging up onto the animal's back, and as he rode past, he tipped his hat to her.

Heat climbed from the pit of her stomach and up her throat. A fake boyfriend was not supposed to have such an effect on her. She stumbled to her seat beside her father and sat down, pretending to fiddle with her camera.

“So, you and Cross?” he asked, gruffly.

She mumbled something that was somewhat of an assertion.

“You could do worse.”

Out of the corner of her eyes, she snuck a glance at her father. Was it possible he was actually in favor of a relationship with Colton?

Nah.

The opening ceremonies came to a close, and the first event—barrel racing—began. Ashley turned her attention from Colton and focused on the task at hand, capturing as many images as she could. Time operated on a different wavelength when she was behind the camera, so she was barely aware of the fact that Jasmine had stayed as long as she had, watching the show.

When there was a break between events, Jasmine explained—with a knowing smirk—that she wanted to see the riding events, the bull riding in particular. Just the mention of it brought Colton to mind and had Ashley’s stomach in knots because, well...

She wasn’t exactly sure why.

It was probably the unknown payment for services rendered.

The man had gone above and beyond to act like her boyfriend. What exactly would he expect for it?

Time both seemed to inch by and simultaneously move at warp speed, and before Ash knew it, the bull-riding event was next on the schedule. Colt was the fifth rider, and the queasiness in her stomach intensified, culminating in a nauseous feeling when Hal called Colton’s name as the next contestant

He’s just like all the rest. Just take pictures like he’s everyone else.

Bolstering herself with a deep breath, Ash focused on the gate, snapping shots of the cowboy in question as he wrapped the rope around his right hand in preparation for the ride. The bull he sat astride was a massive yellowish beast, so ready to buck it was slamming against the gate before it even opened.

The horn sounded. The gate opened. The bull took off, jumping and spinning, kicking and bucking in a way that was completely unnatural for an animal its size.

Click. Click. Click.

Ash followed the movement of man and beast as they danced violently around the ring for what seemed like an eternity.

The eight-second horn blew, an outrider rode up, divesting the animal of the flank strap, and Colton hopped off. Even without the strap, the bull was angry, and, seeing Colton in the ring—the man who'd been foolish enough to try to ride him—enraged the bull even more. At least, that's what it looked like to Ash. Her thoughts were confirmed when the thing charged, and Colton ran for the gate.

The audience gave out a collective gasp as Colton narrowly avoided the bull's horns before climbing the rungs of the gate to safety. Together, the rodeo clown and outriders corralled the bull back to the stockyard, resulting in a cheer from the crowd and a hat wave from Colton.

"My, my," Jazz whispered in her ear. "That man must get your juices flowing."

Ash turned to her friend. "Colton knows how to put on a show."

"Yeah." Jasmine's eyes were aglow with admiration. "He's something else."

Really?

So now Jazz was seduced by Colton's manly displays? Because, that's what it was, right? A display. An egotistical need for attention. Why else would someone willingly climb on to the back of an angry animal and risk their life for all and sundry to witness?

"Listen," Jazz said. "I know you've got to stick around and take pictures, and I overheard you've got plans with Colton, so I'm going to head back to the fairgrounds and visit with some people. Catch up at the saloon tonight?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Jasmine reached for her hands and squeezed. "You are one lucky girl."

"Thanks," Ash said softly.

Lucky? Ashley didn't feel lucky.

More like one of the calves in the roping contest. In way over her head and about to be taken down and humiliated for all to see.

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ASHLEY LEANED AGAINST the gate wishing she hadn't cut off her jeans, so that she could wipe her damp palms down the front. She gave herself a mental shake. This was stupid. Why did she feel nervous?

Because you have no idea what Colton wants from you.

True.

So, what would it be? A challenge? A dare? Something menial? Something sexual...

Her tummy tightened at the thought.

And not in a bad way.

Shit!

“Heya, Ashley.”

Ash spun around. Colton was there with the sun at his back, his hat pulled low so that his face was left in shadow.

“Colton.” She cleared her throat. “Good ride today.”

“Thanks. Ol’ Yeller was sufficiently ornery.”

“That the bull?”

“Yep. That was a lucky draw on my part.”

“Why’s that?”

“The tougher the bull, the higher the score if you make it to eight.”

Ashley nodded. Being one of five sisters who lived in town meant she really didn’t know all that much about the rules of the rodeo.

“So, what do I owe you for that overt display of affection by the announcer’s stage?”

“Wow. Right down to business, huh?” He pushed his hat back, so she could see his face. His eyes sparkled irreverently.

Good God.

“It’s a busy weekend.” Ash indicated her camera. “So, the quicker we figure it out, the quicker I can get back to work.”

Colton’s lips twisted. “All right. Show me your hands.”

“Huh?”

He reached halfway across, holding his hands palms up. “Let’s see them.”

Hesitantly, Ash placed her hands in his. She was amazed by how small they looked. He rubbed his thumbs over her knuckles and then turned them over, palms up.

“They’re nice. Are you strong?”

Snatching her hands away, she formed a fist and punched him on the shoulder. It was total instinct, and it took her a moment to realize what she’d done.

He chuckled. “Nice jab. Okay, let’s go.” He held his hand out as if to shake. “Take my hand.”

“Why?”

“Thumb war, darlin’.”

“What? You mean, if I beat you in a thumb war, we’re square?”

“No,” he scoffed. “It’s a test. You ready? Set...”

“What kind of—”

He didn’t let her finish. Before saying “go,” Colton twisted her hand, captured her thumb with his and pinned it down.

“You cheated.”

“So?”

She squinted up at him, her thumb still trapped beneath his. “One more.”

“Fine.” He released her thumb but still held her hand in ready position, though his pinky finger tickled the inside of her wrist, distracting her. “Ready...”

“Go.” She dodged his big thumb with quick movements before managing to get on top of him. “Gotcha!”

So what if it was only for, like, a millisecond? She dropped his hand before he could slip out and beat her.

“Best of three,” he said, his voice low, though his dark eyes twinkled dangerously.

The third time was an all-out battle, not just between hands and thumbs but their whole bodies. Ash tried to block him with her back so he couldn’t see what he was doing, which only resulted in him tripping her—gently—and lowering her to the grass.

“What the...”

He settled his weight on top of her, holding her hand above her head, continuing to wrestle with her thumb while she attempted—unsuccessfully—to wrestle him off her body. What she did manage to do, however, was experience the wonderful weight of Colton on top of her: his legs twining between hers, his pelvis flush with hers.

Wait.

What was that?

Was he aroused?

The idea that Colton Cross had a hard-on because he was wrestling with her had the opposite effect of what she would have thought. There was *not one* part of her that felt incensed. On the contrary, Ashley fought an instinctual need to grind her pelvis up into him. More, to spread her legs and let him settle that steely part of him right along the seam of her shorts. She was so taken

by surprise by her body's response to his arousal, she forgot completely about what was happening between their hands.

"That does it."

Colton claimed his victory by slowly pushing himself to his feet and extending his hand to help her up.

Of course she ignored it. Dusting herself off, Ashley steadied her features, determined not to show how much she'd enjoyed the impromptu wrestling match.

"You going to tell me what that was all about?" she asked, hand propped on her hip, gaze avoiding his.

"I just needed to make sure you're strong enough."

"Strong enough for what?"

"You'll find out. Come on."

Colton strode toward the parking lot on the other side of the stockyard, forcing Ashley to run to keep up.

"Strong enough for what?" she repeated as she raced after him. "And, where the hell are we going?" He wasn't going to make her ride a bull or something, was he?

No. Maybe a cow. That would be appropriately humiliating.

Colton didn't stop until he reached his Dodge Ram 4x4, which Ashley knew was his by the sound of the doors being unlocked by a fob.

Turning, he waited for her, resting his fists on his hips. "See, after a ride, I'm always sore. I usually go to Lucy down at the clinic for a massage." Then he pushed his pelvis forward and stretched backwards, groaning as he straightened again. "But I figure I'll save myself a hundred bucks by letting you give me one instead."

"You want me to give you a what?" Ashley sputtered. She looked Colton up and down. Then up and down once more.

"You heard me. C'mon. Get in."

She shook her head. Oh, no. This would not be good. "I can't. I've got to be at work by seven."

"Plenty of time. It's just a massage. That's all."

Sure, but last time she'd given a massage to a man, that wasn't all. That was only the beginning.

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AFTER HIS RIDE, Colton had gone to the trailer to see how well it was set up. He'd gotten the whole massage idea quite by accident. It was when Angus, one of the hands who helped out as an outrider, was rubbing down his horse's legs. It made him realize that he'd forgotten to book an appointment with Lucy. Quickly following that thought was the realization that Ms. Feisty in the short-shorts owed him.

A + B = C.

Simple.

Then he'd come back to the trailer to see if it would work for said appointment. All he'd had to do was hook up the electrical outlet and the water hose, and she was good to go. He'd picked up a few groceries and some beer from the corner store down the block from where the trailer was parked on the end of Elm and then had come back to meet Ashley.

He'd had no intention of making this about anything other than a massage, until they started wrestling.

Goddamn.

She may be tiny, but she was strong, and feeling her writhe beneath him with those long, bare legs and that taut tummy? Well, fuck it all, he'd gotten the stiffest Johnson he could remember having in a long time.

"So, where are we going to do this?" She eyed the couch and the bunk near the front of the trailer.

There was a slide-out bedroom in the back, and Colton indicated that direction with a swing of his head. "Bedroom in the back." He'd already made the bed with clean sheets from the cupboard.

"Do you have any lotion or anything?"

Shit. He knew he'd forgotten something. Reaching overhead he opened a cupboard searching for something. There was a bottle of olive oil and some coconut oil. He passed them to her.

"Do you want to taste like olives or coconut?"

"And who might be doing the tasting?"

Her eyes went large before quickly narrowing.

"Seeing as you're my girlfriend and all..."

"Cool it, Colton."

"I'm just teasing." He leaned over her and plucked a blade of grass out of her mussed hair, a reminder of the wrestling match.

Bam.

Just like that, blood pounded toward his cock.

What was wrong with him? It must be the ride. Adrenaline always made him horny. That had to be it.

He flicked the grass toward the sink and reached for the tub of coconut oil, unscrewed the top and sniffed.

“Is it still good?”

He passed it to her so she could do the same. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and took another. When she looked up, there was a guilty expression on her face. What was that about? She passed the tub back to him. “It needs to be heated.”

With a raised brow, he took it and popped it into the small microwave oven. “How long?”

“Not too long. Thirty seconds should do it.”

He set the timer and then grinned at her. “You’ve done this before, I take it?”

“Of course. I’m not a prude, you know.”

“Never said you were.”

Thirty seconds felt like three hours as Ashley avoided his gaze while they waited. She looked at the ceiling, the floor, the table, her fingernails, anywhere but at him. Finally, the bell rang, and he pulled the tub out of the oven and passed it to her. The scent of coconut pervaded the small space, and if he wasn’t mistaken, Ashley’s eyes fluttered closed as she took in another deep breath.

Interesting.

He eased past her and headed toward the back of the trailer and the door to the bedroom. It was a decent size for a trailer: queen-sized bed with cupboards overhead and a built-in wardrobe in the corner. Dillon had used it while traveling the circuit, and Colton could see how it would be more comfortable than staying in crummy hotel rooms, town after town.

“So, ah...” Ashley stood behind him, looking apprehensive.

“You get comfortable, I’ll go change.”

“Right.”

“Good.” He moved past her, grazing her bare arms as he went. Sure the room was a decent size—for a trailer—but still close quarters with a woman you barely knew.

Pausing by the door, he said, “Unless, of course, you care to help.”

She shot him a cool look. “I’m good, thanks.”

Colton didn't realize he was smiling until he got to the tiny bathroom and saw his reflection in the mirror. Scrubbing a hand across his jaw did not remove his grin. Ah, hell. So he enjoyed teasing the woman. It wasn't a crime to enjoy teasing the person who was using him as a gigolo. He was pretty sure in such situations teasing was mandatory.

After hanging his hat on the back of the door, Colton stripped out of his shirt and jeans, hesitating for only a second before stepping out of his boxers, too. If this was a legit massage—which it was—then he'd be going in naked, like always.

Wrapping the only towel in sight around his waist—a threadbare thing—Colton squeezed out of the bathroom and returned to the bedroom. Ashley was sitting primly on the edge of the bed, her hands folded in her lap, the tub of coconut oil open beside the bed.

Her gaze flicked to his midsection and then up to his face. A tiny muscle twitched beside her mouth. "This is not professional."

"What do you mean?"

Her gaze flicked down again.

Colton glanced at himself.

Jesus Christ.

The thin towel did nothing to hide his raging hard-on.