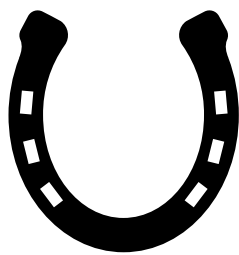


*Skittish Hearts*





*Skittish Hearts*  
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## *Acknowledgments:*

The inspiration for this book and more importantly this family, came from my very own Kingsford family. I was lucky enough to be born into a family that was fiercely led by a strong matriarch named Mary Ella. She would make sure that you never left her house with an empty belly, or a heart that wasn't warmed with the experience of being with her. I dedicate this book to the family that she and my grandfather Dean built, loved, and nourished.



## Chapter 1

Lacey pressed her fingertips against the cold pink meat, shaking her head in disgust.

*Another one wasted!*

*How many were they up to tonight?*

She didn't even want to think about what the count for this month has been.

“Miguel, re-fire table 27. The salmon is stone cold.” Lacey raised her voice to be heard over the noises of the busy kitchen.

“Again?” Miguel asked, she shot him a glare over her shoulder, for questioning her. “I mean, yes chef.”

“I want it yesterday, Miguel” Lacey knew she demanded the impossible from her line cook.

“Heard, chef.” Replied Miguel.

She was not to be trifled with in the kitchen, a fact that all of the kitchen staff was learning. Maybe some a little slower than others. She really didn't have a choice in the matter. It was a man's world, being a woman head chef in a very busy

French restaurant meant she had to be hard as nails. At least when it came to the kitchen.

She was only two years out of culinary school. She had spent those two years scraping her way into the position she now held. Head chef at Le Cerisette, in Denver, Colorado, it was a prestigious five-star French restaurant. She had only held the position for three months.

The three months had been an uphill battle. She had been barely keeping her head above water, between trying to earn the respect of the staff and the constant need to fend off her boss' inappropriate overtures. Lacey felt much more frazzled than she usually did in the kitchen. The kitchen was normally her place of solace, the only place in the world she felt like herself. The minute she walked out of the kitchen her commanding bravado melted off her like hot butter, replaced with a shy shell of a woman.

When she had first interviewed for the position, Lacey had known that the chances of her getting the job were slim to none. She had sat in the small office and answered all the usual questions. All the while the look that Mike Tolley had given her had made her skin crawl. He had made it clear that he appreciated her for more than just her culinary skills. Mike told her that while her resume was not impressive, he found aspects about her that intrigued him.

Lacey had walked out of the interview feeling gross, her first instinct was to head to the shower. To wash off the man's barely veiled comments and insinuation, that if she got the job, it wouldn't be because of her cooking skills. Mike's attention had made her second guess whether she even wanted the position, but it was a huge opportunity. One that she would have been a fool to pass it up. So, when Mike called her three days later to offer her the position, she took it with only the slightest hesitation.

On top of the nerves of having her first head chef position, she has had to deal with Mike leering during dinner service for the last three months. To say the least, the situation had not been ideal, but the food that she was producing was immaculate.

This evening after dinner service she was going to meet with Mike for her three-month evaluation. Lacey was dreading being in the same small space with the leper of a man. She tried to tell herself that there was nothing that he could complain about. It had been fairly smooth sailing with her takeover of the kitchen. Sure, there was the occasional miscommunication between the serving staff and the kitchen, resulting in wasted food. Food that had gone past the point of serving. The standard that she upheld as far as the food she produced was of the highest possible level. She expected excellence from herself and of course from those around her.



Revenue that was lost from the occasional cold salmon was nothing, compared to revenue that would be lost from bad word of mouth from a patron that received sub-par food.

Hopefully, Mike Tolley agreed with that sentiment. If he didn't, she feared that her first head chef position would be short lived.

"Salmon is up chef." Miguel said, interrupting her thoughts.

"That is perfect Miguel." Lacey complimented the talented cook.

She knew that it was just as important to give good feedback as it was to be strict with errors.

"Thank you, chef." Miguel said, his eyes not quite meeting her own. He had been the toughest nut to crack. A natural born chauvinist, he made his opinion clear that he not only had a problem with her being a woman head chef, but he also considered himself to be the better cook.

As Todd the head waiter took the last of the entrees out of the kitchen, she couldn't help but let out a small sigh. Another successful dinner service under her belt, every night she felt a renewed sense of accomplishment at a job well done. Now she would need to leave dessert in the capable hands of her kitchen staff, because her meeting with Mike could not be put off any longer.

"Okay everyone, all the entrees are out. I have a meeting with Mr. Tolley tonight, so you are in charge of desserts. Miguel, I'm putting you in charge when I'm gone. If there are any problems,

please don't hesitate to come and get me. Heard?" Lacey spoke in her most confident voice, a voice that none of her staff would ever realize did not come naturally to her. She saw Miguel's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, at her giving him the responsibility of dessert service. Sure, he was somewhat of a problem child, but he was also extremely talented.

A resounding "Yes, chef." And "Heard, chef." Were the responses that she received from the kitchen staff.

She slipped off her chefs' coat and hung it on one of the hooks, that were in the hall. The hall that led from the kitchen to Mike's small office in the back of the building. Lacey had worn loose fitting black pants and a white button up shirt. While she did not want to appear sloppy for her evaluation, she worked extra hard to cover up her curves. She was trying to send Mike the message that this meeting was strictly business. The fact that Mike ogled her almost daily in her chef's attire, left her little hope that the outfit would be off putting to him.

The casual attire wasn't that much different from the clothing she wore on a daily basis. Growing up in foster care she learned at an early age to try not to draw any attention to her femininity. It wasn't the other foster children, so much as it was the unsavory foster fathers. They hadn't all been bad, lord knew she had been one of the lucky ones.

Over the years she had heard more horror stories from other children in the system, than ones of forever homes and loving parents.

Sally Monroe her guardian angel social worker had watched over her since she was eight years old. The age when her parents were both killed in a tragic car accident. Lacey had, by some miracle, come out of the incident unscathed. Lacey had stared up at Sally with tear filled eyes and ever since that day the older woman had been her only confidant. Whenever Lacey had found herself in an unsavory situation, she had turned to Sally for help. On several occasions Sally had saved her from potentially dire situations. Lacey knew that most children in foster care were not so lucky.

She wasn't a helpless child any longer, there was no one to fight life's battles for her. She needed to deal with Mike Tolley on her own, she prayed that he would just behave himself.

She knocked on the door of his office.

"Come in." Came Mike's nasally voice through the door.

She turned the knob, and with a sigh walked into his office.

Mike was married with three children, but you wouldn't know it by his office space. There were no trophies from little league games, or photos of family vacations. This tiny room screamed out to anyone that entered that Mike loved himself first and foremost. He had pictures of himself fishing on his desk, on the wall hung a picture of a beautiful

Hawaiian woman placing a lei around his neck. She assumed that the rest of his family had gone on the vacation with him, but with Mike you never knew. She wouldn't put it past him to go on a vacation solo, leaving his family at home.

“I thought that you would be done a little earlier, I have plans tonight.” Mike said, criticizing her.

“I'm sorry Mike, do you want to re-schedule the evaluation?” Lacey still felt weird addressing Mike by his first name only, she would prefer to keep it more professional, but he had insisted.

“No, I have been looking forward to our meeting. I don't want to put it off.” Mike answered with a smile, sending a feeling similar to crawling ants running down her body.

“Please sit down, would you like anything to drink?” Mike asked trying to look sympathetic. “I know you have been working hard all evening. It would do you good to relax a little, there is no reason to make this overly formal.” While saying this Mike leaned back in his chair and put his legs up onto his desk.

She should be astounded by his inappropriate question, but after dealing with him for the last three months she knew this behavior was par for the course. Lacey would have to deal with this man with kid gloves.

“No thank you Mike, if you don't mind, I would rather just stick to the evaluation. Like you

said it has been a hard day and I would like to get this done with.” Lacey replied, hoping that she sounded exhausted from work and not from the constant disturbance that this man created for her.

She watched as his slimy smile fell into a disappointed line, her stomach started to turn.

*Had she said something wrong?*

“Right, have it your way.” Mike paused as he formed a steeple with his hands over his chest, seeming to be contemplating how to proceed. “I won’t lie to you Lacey, there are some concerns regarding your performance.”

She could not keep the shock from her face, even if she tried.

*What kind of concerns? Had someone complained about her? A customer? A fellow employee?*

The questions ran through her mind at a mile a minute, but before she could speak Mike continued.

“I can see you are surprised by that. I don’t know how you could be. I have had several complaints about your style of running the kitchen. Plus, there is the bottom line of food cost. It seems like the food waste has gone up since you have been in charge. These are things that I can no longer keep from the owner.” Mike spat the words out in a threatening manner.

“So, does that mean that you are letting me go?” Lacey asked, her hands trembling with anxiety.

“I don’t want to Lacey.” Mike said sliding his gaze down her body.

The look in his eyes made her want to vomit, she had seen it on others faces before. Always unwanted and wildly inappropriate, the look usually ended with her switching foster families. She wasn’t a child anymore and this wasn’t some fake family. This was her dream and her lively hood. She had to stand up for herself, even if every fiber of her being screamed to run and hide.

“Tell me the bottom line, Mike. What do I need to improve, in order to keep my job?” Lacey asked, dreading the answer.

Mike straightened in his chair, plastering a smile back onto his face, as he pushed himself out of his chair. He was not a tall man, Lacey was 5’8” and if anything, Mike was an inch or two shorter. From her personal experience, being shorter than a woman was rarely something that men handled well. So far, Mike had not proven to be an exception.

Other than his height, she assumed that most people would consider Mike a good-looking man. He had bleached blond hair, that he wore spiked with enough gel to make it look stiff. She mused that even a gale force wind, would not be able to budge the stiffly styled hair. His eyes were a cool blue, that she felt lacked the emotion to appear truly striking. All in all, she got the idea that Mike usually got what he wanted, when it came to women.

He walked over to her side of the desk in a very predatory way, making her swallow down the bile that was threatening to make its' way to her mouth.

Each step that brought him closer to her, made her want to leap up and bolt through the door.

*Stay calm, you can handle this slime ball!*

He walked past her to stand behind her chair, she was holding her breath, anticipating the worst. He placed his hand on her shoulder, she tensed immediately in an attempt to ward off his touch. He started to knead her shoulder, none to gently. Then she felt his hot breath on her ear, as he bent over to whisper to her. She felt her body tighten like a spring ready to burst.

Lacey could smell the alcohol on his breath, he had obviously enjoyed a little liquid courage before she had arrived.

*Run! Run! Just get away from this creep!*

Lacey forced herself to quiet the self-preserving voice in her head that was screaming for her to protect herself.

“Lacey the bottom line is that things could be very different for you here.” Mike said next to her ear, his breath was hot and heavy on her neck. “I could make it very nice for you, if you wanted to make it nice for me.”

*Enough! No job is worth this shit!*

This time her inner voice won out. She jumped to her feet, at the same time pushing Mike away from her chair and more importantly her body.

“How dare you! Do you think that I am going to just take that from you?” Lacey asked Mike, his eyes widening in surprise at her outburst. “I think that Mr. Delveaux would be very interested in hearing what I need to do to keep my job.”

Lacey could not help but swell with pride, it did not come easily for her to stand up for herself. But she had done it, she had put Mike Tolley in his place.

Her feeling of satisfaction did not last long, as she watched the look in Mike’s eyes shift from surprise to anger.

*Okay maybe the threat to tell the owner was too much.*

In a rush, faster than she could realize what was happening, he was on her. She felt her back slam against the wall, hard enough to momentarily knock the air from her lungs. One of his hands flew to her neck, while the other ripped her shirt up to take a firm grip on her bra covered breast. He pinned her hips to the wall with his own, she was overcome with shock.

*How had he gone from sleaze ball to this in a blink of an eye?*

“You listen to me, you bitch. Mr. Delveaux will not hear a fucking word out of your pretty little mouth.” Mike threatened her, while bringing his hand from her neck, and placing it over her mouth to run his thumb over her lips roughly. “You have been running around here for three months, teasing me. You have made me want you, do you really



think that I'm going to let you walk out of here without first sampling a little piece of your tight little chef's ass?"

Tears sprang to her eyes, she never cried. Not sense her parent's death had she shed a tear. All she could think of was that after all the years, all the times that she had avoided abuse at other's hands. Was Mike going to get away with this? How far would he take it? She tried to struggle out of his grip, only succeeding in making him laugh.

*God he is so much stronger than me, she felt helpless in his grip.*

Knock! Knock!

Hope sprang inside her chest, as the sound of someone knocking on the door cut through the terror she had been feeling.

Mike let her go as quickly as he had grabbed her, returning to his side of the desk with a vehement curse. He shot her a look, that clearly meant to communicate that she should keep her mouth shut.

"Come in." Mike said, she was completely taken aback at how normal he sounded.

His regular nasal voice replacing the threatening one that he had spoken in only moments before.

She had thought previously that he was nothing more than an annoying ass, now she knew him for what he was, a monster.

Miguel opened the door, peaking only his head into the room. His eyes widened slightly when

he looked at her tear-streaked face. She had never been more relieved to see anyone in her life.

“I just wanted to let you know that dessert service is complete, and the kitchen is wiped down. So, if you don’t need anything else, we are going to head out.” Miguel spoke to her, but he seemed to be keeping a wary eye on Mike.

“You interrupted us for that?” Mike asked him, clearly agitated.

She knew that she needed to act, she needed to get out of the room before Miguel closed the door again. If she didn’t speak up, she had no doubt that Mike would try to finish what he had started.

“It’s fine Mike, I think we were done here anyway.” Lacey said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’m sorry that I got emotional, but I think you understand why I have to resign from my position.”

A thin veil of confusion fell over Mike’s eyes, but he seemed to clear it away with a blink. His mouth tightened in agitation, he looked mad enough to spit nails.

“I trust that you understand why I won’t be able to write you any kind of reference.” Mike said, his blue eyes were as cold as ice.

She nodded her head in acceptance, not trusting in her voice to form the words without breaking down.

Miguel had watched the exchange from the doorway, a frown formed on his handsome face. He

looked at her, then back at Mike and seemed to make a decision.

“Lacey, since you’re leaving too, can I walk you to your car?” Miguel asked her with a reassuring smile.

She couldn’t remember Miguel ever smiling at her before, but she did not let that distract her from the fact that he was offering her an escort out of the building. Something that she desperately needed.

“Thank you, Miguel, that would be nice.” She responded.

Lacey turned and followed Miguel out of Mike’s office without a single glance behind her. She didn’t need to look to know the anger that had transformed Mike’s features, from slimeball to possible rapist. She could feel the heated hatred burn into her backside as she walked away. She shivered at how close she had come to being the man’s victim.

After she grabbed her coat and her knives from the kitchen, she took a quick look around the kitchen.

Saying goodbye to her first and possibly her last head chef job. Mike would do his best to tarnish her reputation, of that she had no doubt.

Miguel, true to his word, waited for her, so they could walk out together.

Once they were in the parking lot, Miguel turned to her and asked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” She replied, sharper than she had meant to.

With a nod of his head Miguel got into his car, she followed suit and hopped into her own small Ford Focus. She quickly locked the doors and pulled out of the parking lot. Needing to put as much distance between herself, and the man that almost stole from her something very precious.

Instead of heading home, she guided the car to the only place that she truly felt safe. Lacey headed to the comforting arms of Sally Monroe, more than ever before she needed advice and the love of the only person that she could rely on.



## Chapter 2

“Shit!” Grant cursed, as he walked into the kitchen of his ranch home. He let the backdoor swing shut behind him, it slammed unceremoniously against the older than dirt door frame. The sound of the forgotten door almost made him curse again. Usually, they all yelled at each other to hold the door and not let it shut on its own. In feeble hopes of preserving the door that predated anyone that still lived on the ranch.

As he glared down at the pile of black crumbs that used to resemble bacon, he decided he had bigger problems than the ancient house.

Like what on God's green earth he was going to be serving the hands for breakfast, now that he had turned the bacon from delectable to detestable.

He had been distracted by Penny, the ranches resident pet pot-bellied pig streaking across the yard.

She was a master escape artist, that had been known to march herself on several different occasions almost into town. Luckily all of the neighbors would recognize her curly tail from a mile away, and when they spotted her trotting down the road, they scooped her up and brought her home. He had dashed out the door to try and wrangle the stubborn porker back into her pen.

Now as he stood staring at their ruined breakfast, the irony that his pig had spoiled the bacon was not lost on him.

Shaking his head, Grant scraped the black residue into the trash can.

He would hear about this from the hands, it was the not the first time he had ruined a meal since the passing of his mother.

He could hardly enter the kitchen, or anywhere really on the sprawling ranch without envisioning his mother. She had been a firecracker of a woman; Mary had had to be strong to deal with the rough cowboys that lived on the ranch. She had dark brown hair, streaked unapologetically with silver, that she always wore in a braid. Pleasantly plump is how she used to describe herself. Grant

always found that amusing, because she had only started to fill out towards the end of her life. Before that he always remembered her being a small package of a woman. Exactly like dynamite, small in size, but not to underestimated.

Thinking of his mother had the tendency to make his heart clench with pain, Mary had been taken from them much too soon.

“Please, tell me. I don’t have to eat whatever the hell that smell is.” His Foreman’s growl of a voice interrupted his thoughts of his mother. “Do I?”

It was just as well. The loss was still so fresh. If he allowed himself, he felt like he could drown in the pool of pain that his mother’s absence created.

He turned to glare at the older man, Buck Wilder had been the foreman of the Double K ranch since before Grant had drawn a breath. Each year he dreaded having Buck retire, knowing that filling his shoes would be a next to impossible task. Yet each year Buck refused to even talk about stopping, heck he wouldn’t even consider slowing down. Grant worried for the man. A man who had acted the part of a surrogate father for him ever since his own father left, when Grant was only two years old.

After losing his mother six months ago to a severe heart attack, his closest living relative was the stubborn mule of a man that was currently returning his glare.

“You eat what I cook and like it.” Grant said, knowingly quoting his mother’s all too familiar words.

The quote brought a sad smile to the old man’s face, that quickly dissipated into his usual tight-lipped frown.

“Oh, I eat it, when of course it is edible, but I promise that I haven’t once liked it.” Buck explained dryly.

“Fair enough.” He conceded with a small smile.

“Where is everyone? Is it just the smell of my cooking that has driven them away or was it a late-night last night?” Grant asked his foreman.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I know that some of the boys were talking about driving into Cody early. They wanted to grab a breakfast that wouldn’t wreck-havoc on their stomachs by noon time. I told them that you would be none too pleased about it.” Buck explained.

None too pleased, did not begin to describe Grant’s feelings. The fact that it was a twenty-mile drive to town, meant that all of his hands would be late getting their work started.

Sure, it was Sunday, but that really didn’t mean diddly-squat on a ranch the size of the Double K. He tried to be a little more lenient on Sunday’s, giving most of the hands time off, some for church and some just wanted a day of rest. For himself he couldn’t remember the last day he took off. He



knew that until he found someone to take care of all the responsibilities that his mother had shouldered, he would be running himself ragged.

It was not a responsibility that he would share with any of the men that worked for him. This ranch is his life, for the others it is just a job.

The only possible exception to that was the man seated at the kitchen table nursing a cup of coffee.

“No, that does not make me happy.” He admitted with a sigh. “I understand though, lord knows I would give my left leg for a helping of Ma’s biscuits with sausage gravy.”

Buck groaned at the mention of his mother’s cooking, the woman was a bona fide magician in the kitchen.

“That woman could cook like an angel and had a temper as fiery as the devil himself.” Buck reminisced.

Grant chuckled at the older man’s description of his mother, every word of it rang true to his ears.

“No one knows that better than you Buck, it seems to me that you were on the receiving end of her temper more often than not.” Grant said while giving up on breakfast, grabbing a cup of coffee, and pulling up a chair at the table with Buck.

Buck looked up at him with a chagrined smirk on his weathered face, while his piercing blue eyes danced with humor.

“No breakfast?” Buck guessed.

Grant nodded in the affirmative. “I have high hopes for dinner.”

At his comment, Buck’s brow raised in surprise. “Really? You plan on taking a cooking class this afternoon? Or, are we putting all our money on a miracle?” Buck said, barely holding back his laughter.

“Find yourself amusing, do you?” Grant asked, the smile on his face betraying that he also found the man amusing.

“Spending all my time around the likes of you, a man has to be able to keep himself amused.” Buck barely made it through his sentence before his laughter burst forth. “I can hardly rely on you to entertain me.”

His tall willowy frame rumbled with his mirth, Grant looked at the man that was a quasi-father to him and marveled at the incredible strength that he knew the man possessed. Someone might look at Buck and at first think him tall and thin, lacking the strength that life on a ranch required. But Grant knew the type of hard-won lean muscle that the older man earned over the years. He could only hope that he is Buck’s age, he will be half as strong as the tough old goat.

“Well, that is surprising to hear, considering Ma always told me that I got my sense of humor from you.” Grant said, smiling to himself as Buck’s laughter stopped.

“Is that right?” Buck asked with skepticism, clearly not convinced that Grant’s comment was the truth.

“Yes, sir. She used to say that the only two people on the planet that find the us funny, are you and I.” Grant informed Buck, his smile widening at the old man’s grimace.

“Well, far be it for me to disrespect the deceased by arguing.” Buck concluded. A sad tint shaded his vibrant blue eyes.

Grant was trying to tease the old man, banter with him how they always had. The sadness that he saw on Buck’s face made him feel like he had kicked a puppy. All be it, the world’s oldest puppy, but still. Making the old man sad had not been his intention, they had both had enough sadness lately.

“Anyway, we are getting a cook this afternoon. So, if she is as good as Sally says she is, well maybe the fasting can come to an end.” Grant said hopefully.

“What are we up to now? Is this the third cook that we have tried?” At Buck’s question Grant winced. Before Grant could answer the old man’s eyes lit in recognition. “Did you say Sally recommended this cook? What happened to the agency you were using?”

“Well like you said, after three failed attempts, I figured it was time to try and approach our problem from a different angle.” Grant said, taking all the credit for the idea.

When in fact it had been all Sally's idea, he had been on his weekly call with her. At his wits end over not being able to find someone capable to feed his hands, not to mention himself. When Sally had recommended one of the foster kids she had looked out for. Sally relocated the occasional foster child to his ranch during the summer. It had worked out well, the kids earned a little money for their hard work, and he got the extra help that any ranch could use. She had been one of his Ma's best friends, and since she passed away Sally had tried her best to be there for him.

He appreciated Sally's attempts at comfort over the past six months, but nothing could begin to fill the hole that losing his mother had created.

His first response to her suggestion, was to decline immediately. Thinking that she wanted to send some young kid to the ranch that liked to cook. The workload of having to feed this many people on a daily basis was not something for the faint of heart. He knew, he had been doing a horrible job of it, in between the three cooks that had failed so far.

"Three? Are you sure? I remember the fiery red head, who had set her sights on becoming the first Mrs. Grant Kingsford. We all knew that she had no chance, and not to mention the fact that the woman couldn't cook her way out of a paper bag. Then there was the cute little blond, now that woman could cook. It was a shame that she found the ranch a bit too secluded for her liking. I will be

darned if I can bring to mind a third though.” Grant grimaced at Buck’s run down of all his failed hires.

“You never met the last one, she came and went in a blink of an eye. You were out mending a fence. She pulled up in her car, took one look at Lane. Said some choice words, alluding to the fact that she doubted Lane knew who his father was. Jumped back into her car and drove off before the original dust cloud had settled. Didn’t even catch her name, but by her reaction to Lane, I reckon he caught a lot more of her than that.” Grant said smiling at the old man’s expression, as he described an obvious ex of his son Lane’s, one that had clearly not ended well to say the least.

“Okay, so who is this new one?” Buck asked, trying to change the subject from his son’s failed romances, back to Grant’s failed cooks.

“Her name is Lacey Robertson, from what Sally told me she has known her since she was eight. She went to culinary school, and for whatever reason is willing to try her hand at ranch life.” Grant managed to sound far more confident than he felt.

“Poor kid, in foster care since she was eight. That is a long haul for a kid to make in the system, I imagine that she got mighty lonely. She went to culinary school, probably from some place bigger than Cody, Wyoming. So, she is coming from life in the big city, to waste away her time between the horses and cows. I hate to say it but, sounds like she is running from something, at least that is what it

seems like to me.” Buck managed to surmise all Grant’s concerns in a handful of words.

“She might be running, that’s not really any of our business. But I must hope that if Sally thinks she will work, she will.” Grant said hopefully.

If Lacey Robertson didn’t turn out to be the answer to his prayers, he didn’t know what he would do. Day by day he was sinking further into desperation mode. Truth be told, the service he had been using out of Cody, told him that they didn’t have any more recommendations at this time. So, if Lacey wasn’t a fit, then Grant’s last resort might have to be taking cooking classes. He had no idea where in world he would find time for that, and he groaned internally at the prospect of being tied by the apron strings to the kitchen.

He was by no means a man that thought that cooking was woman’s work. They had Netflix, and he had gone through a period that he would binge watch the cooking shows trying to get some idea of how to feed so many people. Late at night when he couldn’t sleep through his worry and grief he would dive into the culinary world. On those shows it seemed like there were by far more men chefs than women, something that had surprised him at first.

*Okay, so maybe I am a little archaic.* He admitted to himself.

If his current efforts at breakfast were any indication, the cooking shows had not helped at all. He needed real, tangible help.

“Where does this Lacey woman come from?” Buck asked, obviously in a rather talkative mood this morning.

“Denver.” Grant cringed inside at even the mention of the city he loathed.

Buck let out a low whistle, “Well I guess that makes sense, since Sally works with kids from that area. Still with your father living in Denver, that is bound to be a little awkward.” Buck mused.

Grant’s “father”, if you relied on DNA alone to determine what makes a father, left when he was only two years old. Grant never referred to him as his father, hell, he never talked about him period. His mother had met George Halloway, when he had come to the ranch to help her father with a small legal problem. It had not taken long, and they had fallen hard and fast in love with each other. Mary would go to visit him in the city, and he would come to the ranch any chance he got. Eventually, the two married, suspiciously around the time that his mother realized she was pregnant.

Grant still wondered if it hadn’t been for his mother becoming pregnant, if they would have ended up together.

He leaned towards the negative, because after only two years on the secluded quarter-horse ranch his father had given up. He had made no secret of the fact that he missed the city, always complaining about the lack of variety in the food and entertainment. Buck had told him that if George spent as much time working on the ranch as he did