

Nowhere, WY

Dead flies cluttered the windowsill, killed by their own failures. Aria stared past them, out the dirt-flecked glass, and into the nothingness beyond. Land stretched in every direction, flat and unremarkable. No trees, no buildings. Absolutely nothing challenged the broad expanse of boredom. Aria's father would tell her she was projecting her feelings onto the landscape. He was always telling her shit like that, going all psychiatric on her. Especially since the divorce. Like he didn't trust himself with relationships, so he treated Aria like one of his crazy patients. But Aria wasn't the crazy one. Her father had sold his clinic and bought a ranch in eastern Wyoming. Like a few rotting fences and a stagnant pond were going to make everything better. Aria hated the way he pretended to fit in. He bought wranglers and a Stetson. He'd even bought chaps and spurs, like that would make him a rancher. He'd never even been on a horse before. But he bought one of those too. A palomino named Trigger, which as far as Aria was concerned, was as pathetic as it got. She could see Trigger now, leaning on the paddock fence, half asleep in the summer heat.

Something buzzed, and Aria looked down. A fly, one wing missing, spun in circles. Aria pressed her thumb over the small body, feeling it crumble beneath her touch with grim satisfaction. She wandered over to the fridge, opening its avocado doors. She stared at the empty metal shelves for a while, as if she stared long enough, something edible might materialize. She checked the freezer, pretty sure it would be empty as well. Damn it was hot. Slowly, she pulled on her shoes and went out the kitchen door, not exactly sure where she was going, but glad to be going somewhere.

The moment she stepped outside, Aria regretted the move. She could feel the sun focused on her back, a knuckle of heat pressed between her shoulder blades. She crossed the dead lawn, making for the swollen shelter of the barn. Inside, everything was wrapped in damp and cool. A ladder on her left rose through the ceiling and into the hayloft. It creaked as Aria stepped onto the first rung and sagged in towards the wall. She kept climbing, however, and emerged into an even deeper darkness. A single square of sunlight shone at the far end. It

drew her like a primitive beacon to the edge of the barn and presented her with a view of the landscape, the main road twisting through it like a scratch on an old photo.

Transfixed by the unexpected beauty of the nothingness, Aria stared out, trying to take in the panoramic view all at once. If she squinted, she imagined she could see mountains, far off, darker lines against the tan and blue of land and sky. Little black dots, cows perhaps, rose and fell on the tempestuous sea of heat that warped the horizon. A plume of dust appeared at the edges of Aria's vision. It rose, rolling in on itself, advancing down the road. Her father was coming. Another plume arose, chasing down the first. He had brought someone else.

Aria turned from her window and made her way down the length of the hayloft. She hopped down the ladder and returned to the yellowed kitchen. From the pine cabinet she pulled a box of Applejacks. She carried them into the living room, planning to eat them dry, not willing to risk using the milk that had been in the avocado fridge for God knows how long. She dropped onto the couch and turned on the TV, picking at her Applejacks and surfing the few channels that trickled in through the mangled bunny-ears. Over a commercial for toothpaste, she heard the back door open.

"Aria?" It was her father. "Why don't you come out here."

Because I don't want to, she thought. Still, she pushed herself off the couch, unsettling a few green O's that had spilled onto her stomach. Tugging down her T-shirt, she met her father in the kitchen. He was wearing his Stetson.

"Oh." He stared pointedly at her pajama bottoms.

"What?"

"I didn't realize you'd be in your pajamas. I have someone I'd like you to meet. Why don't you get dressed." He always phrased things like that, like he was merely suggesting she do something. But he always meant it, and she always did it; it was an unchallenged tradition.

In her room, she pulled on a pair of dusty jeans and a green T-shirt. She threw her hair into a messy ponytail and climbed back up stairs to the kitchen. Her dad was seated at the small table, along with another man. Aria stood in the doorway, counting the floor tiles.

“Aria, this is Hank. He and some of the boys from town are going to be staying here for a while. They’re going to help us fix up the ranch.” *You mean you.*

“Fine.” Aria went to the back door and looked out the window, shoving the lace curtains aside. There were four men and a horse trailer sitting in the driveway. It was a huge trailer, sleek and fat like a whale. Aria could see four horses they’d already unloaded. They were thick and sturdy, built like the cows it was their job to work. The men looked like the horses, all ropy muscle and short limbs. The last horse was backing out of the trailer. She watched as it was birthed. The color of a wet dirt road, the horse loomed huge and beautiful, all smutty brown with bold white legs and face. It rolled one blue eye in her direction. A man came out of the trailer after the horse, dusting off his hands on his jeans. He looked up, and winked at Aria. Not wanting to be accused of staring, she turned from the window. Her father and Hank were still at the table, deep in conversation. She was heading back to the living room when the back door opened, and the men came in. Her father looked around.

“About time boys. This is my daughter Aria.” Aria paused at the doorway. She turned and offered a stiff wave. Four hats dipped simultaneously.

“Aria, this is Jake, Tom, Al, and Hank Jr.” The back door opened again, and the winking man came in. “And this is Curtis.” Another stiff wave, another dipped hat.

Back in the living room, Aria gathered up her Applejacks and lay back, sinking into the soft couch. She’d been hoping he’d just outgrow this cowboy thing.

• • •

All that summer Aria watched as, bit by bit, the ranch expanded. Broken fences were mended, the barn was painted, the pastures and paddocks were filled with horses and cows and people and vehicles. The T-Bar ranch had arrived. As a celebratory gift, Aria’s father had bought the big brown horse for her. The men had called him ‘Old Blue Eyes,’ and she didn’t have the heart to change it. She called him Blue for short. She supposed she owed her father a little credit, for doing all he’d done. But he embarrassed her. He stuck out plainly in the middle of all the men who’d been doing this for years. Men like Curtis. Aria

could watch Curtis for hours. She loved the way he dug fence-post holes, and how he bucked hay, and how he handled horses. She imagined all the things he whispered to them as he brought them in for branding, or turned them out to pasture. She'd memorized the line of his back as he bent to pick hooves. He'd kept an eye on her her first day out on Blue. He'd fix her reins if they twisted, or shorten up her stirrups. He never spoke though, just tightened straps that she missed and kept right on working. As she and Blue got accustomed to each other, she rode out with Curtis as he checked the fences or the cows. They had cows now. About eight hundred of them. They stunk up the property as they stood in their own filth and let it bake dry in the sun.

One night, late in August, a knock sounded at the back door. Aria had been cleaning up from her dinner. She always tried to keep the house clean when her father was out of town. He was at some Cattleman's meeting, or something, in Laramie. Aria went to the back door and pulled it open.

"Hey," he said "thought I'd just check in on you. Hank told me you were all alone up here." Rain dripped from his hat brim and ran down his shoulders to pool on the floor.

"Yeah. I'm fine." She rinsed out her glass and tucked it away the cupboard. "Do you want something? Like, coffee?"

"Sure." She crossed the kitchen and filled the kettle, then dropped it onto the stove. The click of the starter was loud in the silent kitchen. Aria didn't hear him come over, didn't realize he was behind her until he put one arm around her waist.

"You've been watching me," he whispered. Aria nodded. He reached around her with his free arm and turned the stove off. Aria let him. She let him guide her through the kitchen, and into her father's room. He ran his hands down her sides, and she shivered. She'd watched those same hands mend barbed wire not four hours earlier. And when he grabbed her upper arms in those hands, and when he pressed her to the wall, and when he kissed her, she let him. She let him push her onto the bed, too. She knew now why the horses were so still, so well behaved around him. You just didn't say no to Curtis Williams. And all the while he was touching her, Aria's dreams were crumbling. His hands on her body were rough, unyielding. They lacked the magic touch she'd imagined he'd have.

He never spoke a word. He never whispered in her ear, or told her he loved her, and always had, since the day they'd met. And when he'd finished, he left. Just like that. She stared dully out the window at the blackness of night, and watched as it gave way to grey.

She roused herself to sit when it became too bright to feign sleep. The world wavered momentarily, and Aria leaned off the bed, her stomach emptying itself. Numbly, she got herself up, got herself dressed, and cleaned the floor. She wandered into the kitchen. A thin puddle on the linoleum was all that remained from last night.

Her father came home around noon. He pulled up in the expensive extended cab he'd purchased, honking brazenly. Aria met him in the kitchen.

"I brought you something," he said proudly. He set a tooled leather belt on the table. It had a silver scrolled buckle the size of a coaster, engraved with a rustic scene of a branding. Aria picked it up and found her name had been stamped into the back of it. Damned if she was going to be his little cowgirl. She dropped the belt.

"I don't want it. I don't want any of this!" Her anger rose in her throat, coming out with rasping force. "This is just a big game to you! It's like fucking Monopoly for you, isn't it! You think if you just show up all dressed up like some gay-ass Hollywood cowboy that you can just slide right in. You can't!" She was crying now, screaming at the top of her lungs, choking on her anger. "You don't even know what you're doing! You just sit back and pay some guys to play along with you. And they do. They work their asses off for your little charade! And all the time you're pretending you're Roy fucking Rogers!" Aria watched her father's face fold into dismay. Before he could speak, she stormed out the back door, slamming it hard enough to rattle the spice rack.

Outside, it was as hot as ever. Aria ran to the barn, to the shelter and solace of its moldy beams. She hurled herself up the sagging ladder and crumpled onto the floor by the window. She lay there, in the square of sunlight, staring out over the empty expanse. Aria strained her eyes towards the horizon, searching for an end to the lifeless, flat landscape. But it went on forever.