

An excerpt from *Ride It Out*, Desert Dogs book four,
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Jeremiah leaned back, welcoming the late August sun to warm his face, his closed eyelids. Welcoming the rough wood of a fence post against one palm and the whisper of long, soft hair against the other. The wet heat of a woman's mouth around his cock. Welcoming this brief escape from reality, above all.

He felt his jeans slipping and let the girl's hair go to clutch his belt to his hip. Release was close, its tension licking down his spine and gathering hot in his belly.

"God, don't stop." He urged her head gently, needing that speed, that pressure. "Just like that. Please."

Please, give him this relief. A few minutes' peace. A few minutes of forgetting.

She took him deep as he came, then swallowed with a shy smile as he helped her up. She was beautiful, really. Near-black hair, blue eyes. Clear, creamy skin.

But far too young—nearly fifteen years his junior.

And worse than that, his employee.

In no time the relief was ebbing, reality intruding with a side of embarrassment. It was the third time this week they'd wound up out here behind the stables, the third time they'd done exactly this. Jesus Christ, what was wrong with him? He buckled his belt,

feeling awkward and ashamed. This wasn't like him, using a woman this way. Giving nothing back aside from the attention she seemed to relish. She dusted off her knees and he pulled her close, more out of guilt than true affection. He kissed her temple, stroked that soft hair. Gave her a pale imitation of what she surely wanted from him.

He murmured, "Thank you," and he meant it. He felt her fist his shirt at either side of his ribs. *You're wasting your attachment. I don't deserve it. Can't return it.*

A smile warmed her voice. "You're welcome."

"You can do better than this, you know." He said it without meaning to, but with the dam cracked, honesty spilled out. "Better than this . . . what we've been doing."

An airy giggle as she stepped away. "I like what we've been doing, Miah."

"I do, too," he fibbed. In truth he only liked it for as long as the promise lasted, as long as it took to come. Once that spell wore off? Nothing but the stress and grief and anger he'd been trying to forget. "But I'm your boss. It's not okay."

"Feels more than okay."

Shit. He thought he knew that tone. The voice of a woman who cared for a man, of one who hoped for more.

It was the tone he'd once waited to hear in Raina Harper's voice, the one that had never come. He was in danger of getting this girl's hopes up. A girl who wanted more than an empty man like Miah could ever hope to give.

"I've gotta get back, Den. Thank you, for . . . this." They'd need to have a serious talk about *this*, and soon, but not just now. Just now he was being one hell of a shitty host.

Denny gave his arm a squeeze then shot him a final mischievous smirk over her

shoulder as she started walking back toward the hands' bunkhouse. Not walking, actually—sauntering.

“Goddamn.” He took off his old Stetson, ran a hand through his hair and felt his stomach fold in on itself. Far from an unfamiliar sensation these past few months.

From the distance came a boisterous whoop, the sound of a party passing him by. He hiked back toward the farmhouse feeling about eighty.

He kept his eyes on the white marquee tent erected on the lawn, avoiding the spot to his left where the old barn had stood until that hateful afternoon at the close of winter when it had burned to the ground. With his father inside it.

It was you they wanted.

He shook his head, gritted his teeth, and shoved those sickening words from his mind with the force of a bull.

Up the hill, guests milled and laughed, chatting and dancing to music playing through the speakers perched on Miah's open truck bed. Though the song was a fast one, the bride and groom were meandering in lazy circles, faces close, smiles wide. Miah mustered a smile of his own, feeling about half as happy as he wished he was.

He'd thought the wedding would be a welcome distraction. He'd thought he was ready for a little fun, six months on from the tragedy and the confusion and the stress that the fire had unleashed, but he wasn't. Melodramatic as it sounded, his heart felt dead. The parts that were still pink and pulsing had just enough strength to be there for his mother, but the rest had gone cold. Hard like leather, black as charred wood.

“Miah!”

He turned at his mother's voice, finding her making her way with overloaded arms

from the farmhouse and across the lawn toward the party. He hurried over.

“Here, give me those.” He wrestled two six-packs of soda away, leaving her with just plastic-wrapped stacks of paper plates and napkins to carry.

“I was managing.” And she was—she was strong, always had been. Her long black hair might sport more gray than it had in recent years, or indeed recent months, but her tall, athletic frame was still the envy of plenty of women even half her age. Nevertheless, widowhood had aged her. It had slowed her, and brought a melancholy to her dark eyes that Miah had never seen there before.

“I’ll get these in a cooler,” he said. “You need me for something?”

“I was only going to ask if we’re low on anything else.”

Miah felt his face heat. “I’m not sure—I had to step away for a bit. One of the hands needed something.” His stomach lurched anew. “I’ll do a sweep, see how we are for cups and condiments.”

“Thanks. Dishes are under control inside.”

“Make sure you take some time out to have fun,” he said.

“I will. The groom himself reserved a dance with me, in fact.” Her smile was warm but weak, and Miah couldn’t help but think the same thing she must be thinking—that it was his late father, her own groom once upon a time, that she ought to be looking forward to a dance with. Anger bloomed inside him, a familiar sensation, hot as lava and just as slow to cool. He willed it away, failing as usual.

Miah found homes for the warm sodas in a dwindling cooler. He went inside for a fresh bag of ice, then filled himself a cup from the keg, hoping it might cool the fire inside him, but also knowing full well that it stood no more chance at giving him true

peace than Denny's fleeting attentions.

He spotted his best friend standing at the edge of the crowd, nursing a beer of his own, eyes on the festivities. Vince's girlfriend Kim was busy with her camera, photographing the reception. She was dressed for the occasion, in a sundress and fancy sandals, while Vince looked like he'd just hopped off his motorcycle. Which he had.

At least he shaved. Miah couldn't say as much. He probably hadn't shaved in three months, though he'd tidied his beard after he'd wrapped his ranch duties for the afternoon, and he'd changed, if only into clean jeans and a button-up shirt. He picked his way through the crowd to Vince.

"Not bad, as weddings go," Miah said, sidling up.

"Too fucking soon."

Miah smiled and nodded, took a sip of his beer. "Maybe. But when has your brother ever waited when he had his heart set on something?"

"Too fucking true."

Casey and Abilene had been together for six months, maybe not even that long. She had a baby from a previous relationship to boot, and Casey had always been the poster boy for flighty self-interest. But Miah was hopeful. The guy had grown up a lot since he'd come home to Fortuity.

"Whatever you think of the timing, this is how I'd go," Miah said, nodding at the scene. Picnic tables and hay bales, white Christmas lights strung from trees and the corners of the marquee, guests dressed however they liked, dancing on the grass in cowboy boots and bare feet. "No tuxes, no thousand-dollar florist bills. No pretense."

"BYOB," Vince added, smirking.

“Hey, I paid for the keg.” True, though—the reception *was* basically a potluck, plus some good roadside barbecue from the restaurant Casey co-owned. “This how you picture you and Kim’s big day?” Miah asked.

Vince snorted. “Cool your jets.”

“Kim dropped any hints since Case put a ring on Abilene’s finger?”

“Not a one. She’s in no more of a hurry than I am.”

Miah scanned the lawn, finding his mother now talking with a couple of her friends by the buffet tables. He tried to conjure images from old photo albums, to remember what his parents’ wedding had looked like. He’d never been interested in those pictures when he’d been a kid, way more preoccupied with the old shots of the ranch and the animals. Now he was half tempted to jog inside and dig them out, lay his eyes on the man his father had been in his midtwenties.

Shit, midtwenties. By twenty-eight, Miah’s dad had been running Three C, and was a husband and father to boot. Miah was thirty-five, and though he was in charge of the ranch’s daily operations, he felt like an imposter. He was no closer to getting married and starting a family than he had been ten years ago, and he wasn’t gun-shy about settling down. Or hadn’t been, before his heart had gone so hard and cold.

He wished his dad were here. He wished he’d had a chance to grill him about how to be a boss and a father and a husband before he’d gone. Every time somebody told Miah he was strong and resilient and a good boss and citizen and son, all he felt like was a paler and paler shadow of the man he wished was still here with him. The man he’d always looked up to like a god. The one he knew now he could never replace.

His eyes kept wandering, settling on his ex, Raina Harper. She was dancing with one

of the ranch hands. Her boyfriend, Duncan, was apparently occupied elsewhere and probably not much on dancing, besides.

“Hey, now.”

Miah snapped out of his fog at Vince’s words, and craned his neck to see what his friend was looking at.

A cruiser. A Brush County Sheriff’s Department cruiser pulling up along the front fence, not bothering with the packed lot. The driver’s door popped open and a slim woman clad in BCSD khaki stepped out. Even without the uniform, Deputy Ritchey was impossible to mistake—she had to be one of only a dozen black folks in all of Brush County, and the only one working for the sheriff’s department. She stood with her hands on her hips, studying the festivities as though debating whether or not to intrude.

Miah handed Vince his cup without a word. It had been at least two weeks since Deputy Ritchey had come by—two weeks without any updates on the ongoing murder case. An eternity. He crossed the front lawn at a run, just as the deputy was climbing back inside her car.

“Hey! Deputy, wait!”

She turned at his shout and straightened up, slammed her door. Miah trotted to a halt on the opposite side of the fence.

“Afternoon, Miah.”

“Deputy Ritchey.” He dipped his hat. “Saw you pull up.”

“Looks like quite a party.”

“My best friend’s brother got married this afternoon. Casey Grossier.”

She nodded, brows rising at the name. “Ah, the infamous Grossiers. This is the

younger one, right?"

"Yeah. Red hair, beard? He owns Benji's now. Anyhow, that's their reception, back there."

"That's nice. Well, don't let me keep you."

"Did you have any news?" Any clues, any breakthroughs regarding who'd hired a former employee of Three C, Chris Bean, to shoot Miah's father and then try to make it look like an accident by burning the barn down with him inside it.

Miah had hunted the arsonist down, shot him in the leg, and probably tipped him over the edge into methamphetamine-induced shock. Bean had died in the ambulance before he'd had a chance to spill anything more than the fact that he'd been hired for the job. And that Miah, not his father, had been his intended target. So far there'd been no real leads, not a single scrap to go on in pursuit of whoever had given the orders.

And as Deputy Ritchey shook her head, Miah felt his body slump.

"Nothing?" He had to wonder, was the continued drought of progress down to slick conspirators or incompetent investigators?

"Sorry," she said. "Trust me, I've been asking the detectives about it every chance I get, but . . . nothing. I'm sorry, Miah."

"Not your fault, Deputy."

"Nicki," she reminded him, for probably the thousandth time.

"Nicki. Sorry, I was raised to respect a lawman. Lawwoman. Lawperson." His face grew warm.

"Every time I call you Mr. Church, I get corrected," she said with a little smile, a flash of white teeth. "I really wish you'd extend me the same discourtesy."

“I’ll try, Nicki.” It was a nice name, after all. It fit her—a perky name that went with that smile and the burst of tight curls pulled back by her hair elastic.

He leaned on the fence, dead tired and nowhere close to as drunk as he wished he could get today. “Can I ask what brought you by?”

“I just wanted to see how you guys are doing. It’s been a while.” She’d been coming by at least once a week until recently, at first to check up on Miah and his mom in the wake of the murder and offer any news from the BCSD, and then just as a friend. She and Miah had about as much in common as a former Chicago beat cop and a fifth-generation cattle rancher could hope to. Both had followed in their father’s professional footsteps, and both had lost those fathers to a bullet. He liked her. Respected her. It couldn’t be easy, being a young black woman doing her job around here.

“We’re holding up,” Miah said, not even sure if it was true. “Finally got a new foreman hired, at least.” That freed Miah up to take his father’s reins officially, though they still felt leaden in his hands.

“That’s good.”

“How about you?” he asked. “How’s your boy?”

“Good,” she said, nodding, then frowning. Rolled her eyes. “Okay,” she corrected. “He’s not looking forward to school starting back up, but that’s life.”

“Must be hard. I got enough shit just being half Native. He the only black kid in his class?”

“In his *school*.” Her smile was grim. “Plus Matty’s young—he doesn’t turn eleven until October. He’s tough, though.”

“He have a good summer?”

“He was bored out of his skull, to be honest. He’s been back in Chicago with my ex for the past week, drinking his fill of city life. I’m picking him and my mom up from the airport on Wednesday, first thing. School starts Thursday.”

Miah couldn’t imagine any kid being bored out loose in Fortuity, but then again he’d never been a city person. He’d grown up with thousands of acres to run free in, animals to train, and endless chores to keep him busy.

“All Matty’s going to want to do is play video games once he’s back,” Nicki said, “and I’m half tempted to let him. My mom’ll order him outside and tell him to play basketball, but honestly, I think it only reminds him he hasn’t really made any friends yet. I mean, the kid plays Horse by himself. I’m his mother and even *I* think that’s pretty damn sad.”

Miah frowned, thinking. “He like animals?”

“He’s good with our dog.”

“Think he’d want to come by here? Help the ranch hands with animals?”

“Probably not his scene. Plus I’d hate for him to get in the way. Thanks, though.”

“Open invitation.”

“That’s kind . . . Well, I ought to let you get back to your party.”

“You’re welcome to join us,” Miah said, and as the words came out they felt nearly like a prayer. *Please join us.* “If you’re not on duty, that is.” He glanced at her car, but the windows were tinted so he couldn’t spot a partner who might be waiting in the passenger seat.

He craved her company, her understanding. She knew what he was feeling as no one else did. Vince and Casey’s father was absent but not dead, and not sorely missed, either.

Raina had lost her dad to cancer a few years back, but Miah couldn't talk to her about his grief, at least not the way he needed to. She'd been there for him the first month or so, happy to listen but never one to share her own feelings. But Deputy Ritchey—Nicki—had let him know she understood the very first time they spoke.

Maybe it was the party, making his emptiness feel all the more stark. He wasn't allowed to miss his dad today, to feel sad about it when everyone was here for a break from all that heavy shit. Miah must be a selfish sad sack that he wanted nothing more than to run from it all. To be alone.

Or to talk to this woman.

"I'm off duty," she said. "But I better pass, I think. Nothing changes the tone of a party *quite* like the arrival of law enforcement." She smiled.

"Yeah, fair point." Already Miah felt his face heating anew, feeling stupid and desperate for having thought it was a good idea.

"Sweet of you to offer, though. I'll let you know if I hear anything about the investigation, of course, but I'll be honest . . ."

"Don't hold my breath?"

She shook her head, frowning her apology.

He nodded, and a familiar feeling grew in his chest, a hot, black fist squeezing his heart, pumping thick hate through his veins. He'd been good so far, focusing on the ranch, on his mother, letting the pros handle the investigation. But if accepting that there were no leads, allowing this to become just another cold case, if those were the only options . . . Well, they weren't. They couldn't be. He wasn't about to roll over. All these months he'd felt like a dog on a leash, holding himself back from getting involved. But

the longer this went on with no new developments, the more tempting it became to imagine severing that tether.

Nicki's brows rose, her weary smirk cutting through the fog of his thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"I know the waiting game sucks, Miah. But don't go looking for trouble."

"I wouldn't."

"I know that face. I have a son—and an ex-husband, for that matter. I know mischief in all its male guises."

Miah mustered a smile at that, but the deputy only scowled. "This is serious shit. I don't have to tell you that."

"No, you don't."

"There are leads out there waiting to be found, but if you go looking for them yourself, you risk compromising any evidence you might find."

He nodded stiffly, feeling castrated.

She must have caught the change in his posture, as her own softened along with her tone. "I promise nobody's giving up on this. These things take time. Same as grief."

His heart loosened some at that. "It's hard. It's *fucking* hard."

"I know."

"If I didn't have a business to keep afloat, I don't think I'd be able to stand it. The waiting." He was a man who *did*, not a man who sat and deferred. He depended on people, sure, but he was used to being in charge, used to delegating, not deferring. All that waiting, it was turning him into an insomniac; a nervous wreck; a snappy, shitty boss and the sort of selfish lover he'd condemn any other man for being. "It's eating me away

from the inside out.”

“The waiting and grief both,” Nicki said. “Trust me, I know.”

“The guy who shot your dad . . . Was he ever caught?”

She shook her head, and though the notion broke his already shattered heart, it also made Miah want to bury his face against her skin and breathe her in—whatever she smelled of. Whatever solace smelled like, surely.

“How do you even go on?” he asked.

“You just do. Because the alternative is to let my son down, or for you to let your mom and your friends and your employees down. You go on because there’s no going back, and there’s no standing still.”

He nodded.

“You do it because there’s no other choice, provided you’ve got something or someone worth living for.”

She was right. Goddamn it, she was right and she was wise, and patient, and he was some kind of grasping, sad mess, spraying his grief and uncertainty all over her each time they met, like a needy skunk.

She kept coming back, though, kept on caring. It only made him sad she’d never met the old Miah. The one he could recognize as himself, instead of this weak, hate-filled man who never stopped hurting . . . except for the fleeting moments when he was busy treating a valued employee like a whore.

“Thanks for checking in,” he said, disgusted with himself, ashamed to even be standing before someone this good and strong. “I’ll let my mom know you came by.”

“She hanging in there?”

Miah nodded. “She’s leaning hard on her sister, keeping busy.”

“And I’m sure you’re a huge support to her as well.”

“I don’t feel like much use to anybody lately, but I’m trying. I’m still trying.”

“And that’s all anybody should expect of you right now.” She touched his arm, a little up-and-down rubbing motion, then squeezed his shoulder. “Take care of yourself. Call if you need anything. Anything at all.”

He pictured her card, with her cell number jotted in pen on the back, stuck to their fridge with a Brush County Wholesale Feed magnet. He hadn’t used the number yet, and he doubted he ever would. His pride was as low as it ever had been, but it wasn’t gone. Not completely.

And he really ought to wrest a bit more of it back by ending his affair with Denny. Might not help him sleep at night, but it’d make looking in the mirror a little less painful.

He thanked the deputy a final time and watched her climb back inside her cruiser and slam the door. He raised a hand as she started it up, and kept it there until she eased onto the highway, making a U-turn to aim herself back toward town.

Too nice for this place. Too kind and too patient. Then again, she’d been tough enough for downtown Chicago.

He only hoped he’d look back in a year and feel even half as tough as that woman.