

## Chapter One

My name is Monroe Davis, and this is the story of how I found home.

Once, home was Algona, Iowa. Growing up, everybody couldn't wait to leave it, but I could have stayed forever. I still miss it sometimes. I miss the way the trees are thick and leafy, and the way the fields of corn and soybeans ripple in the wind as you drive through the countryside. I miss the way the earth bakes in August, moist and rich and full of life. I miss going to potlucks in the church basement, miss the annual Fourth of July parade full of people I've known since birth. But there came a point where I had to leave, because it wasn't home, not anymore.

It started when my mom found my porn. She was cleaning my room, and for whatever reason she decided to clean out my bedside drawer too, all the way to the bottom, and she stumbled onto my stash. She gave it to my dad, who came straight out to me in the field. When I saw him coming, I turned off the tractor and ran to meet him because I thought something had happened, that someone had been hurt.

But he didn't say anything. He just held up those magazines and DVDs and looked at me, waiting for me to explain. Except it was exactly what he'd already figured out, so I lowered my head and stared at the alfalfa under my boots as my breathing got funny. The blood rushed around in my head, and sweat ran down my neck.

After a long, painful silence, Dad turned around and headed to the house.

I got on the tractor and finished raking the hay because I didn't know what else to do.

They sent the pastor of our church to talk to me. He told me about hell and how *my lifestyle* would send me there. He explained how my choices were an abomination to God and an insult to the good name of my family. My dad wouldn't look me in the eye, and my mom cried all the time. My brother, Bill, acted like I'd punched him in the gut.

You would have thought I'd murdered somebody's baby. I guess to them, I did. Except I was the same Roe they'd always known. They just hadn't known about the part I'd kept quiet.

Bill was the first to finally talk to me. He said after praying, and with Pastor's help, the family came to a decision. It would be okay if I stayed, but I needed to get counseling from Pastor Tim. Bill also told me about some nice girls I should think about dating. He hinted he knew a few who would be okay for just sex, though I couldn't tell Mom about that. But I had to do the counseling, and there could be no more gay porn and no more gay, period. It was either this or leave the farm.

Well, I left.

I didn't leave town, though, and mostly I ran around getting into trouble. It took me little more than half a year to end up in prison because of a really bad bar fight. This was after lots of times in lockup and a half a dozen random charges, all about drinking and fighting. They gave me three years, which turned into one, and then they let me out at eight months because of overcrowding. I wore my ankle bracelet, kept my head down and was good to my probation officer.

When they turned me loose for good, I got out of Algona.

I was tired of it. Tired of letting other people make me feel like shit. Tired of people treating me as if I had the plague. Tired of alternating between blaming everybody else for my problems and thinking if I acted guilty enough they might forgive me.

I got tired of waiting for home to come to me. So I made damn sure I never needed home again.

As you can imagine, life eventually got the better of me.

I met Travis Loving when I went to work at Nowhere Ranch. I'd been shuffling around ranches throughout the Midwest, doing time in Kansas and the Dakotas. Nowhere, in northwestern Nebraska, was the farthest west I'd yet gone. I will admit I answered the ad because of the name. Also because if I went through one more fucking North Dakota winter, I was going to hang myself. I'd heard it wasn't quite as bad in Nebraska. So after a few good days of partying in Omaha, I contacted the ranch manager, who said he'd give me a try, and off I went.

The other thing I liked about Nowhere Ranch was it was a hobby ranch, almost as small as a larger farm. I know everybody's all about the sexy Southern cowboys and big

ranches and tumbleweeds blowing by you, but I grew up on a farm, and it's what I know. Ranches usually feel too big. It's the wrong culture or something.

Nowhere Ranch was smaller, and it was way out in the boondocks—hence, the name. Apparently when Loving bought it, he kept talking about how he was moving out to the middle of nowhere, and the name stuck. It was a good, solid operation, especially considering the owner was still pretty green. The feed was all organic, and he had about as many sheep as he did cattle. We only had sheep a short while at Dad's farm, but I knew enough about them to understand what I was getting into.

None of the other hands lived on site, which worried me at first. But the manager said it really was a small operation, and they rotated through a set of local guys when they needed them. He also said if I wasn't fussy, there was an apartment above the stable I was welcome to. It wouldn't cost me anything if I was willing to be on standby to do work off the clock, like help round up steers that got out. So it would only be me and the owner at the ranch, with the manager and his family down the road.

As soon as I heard about having my own apartment, not a bunk with other guys, I was ready to do about anything to get there. I was careful about anybody finding out I was queer, but I still couldn't shake the feeling something I didn't expect would trip me up. I was pretty sure handling sheep and calves wasn't going to give me away, but in my own place I could jerk off without watching to make sure nobody noticed there was nothing but dick in the mags and vids I had.

Except the apartment was a real fucking dive. It was about twelve by twelve, and I think the carpet had been there since 1972 without once making the acquaintance of a vacuum. It was furnished, with a bed and a table and a recliner and a nightstand, but I took one look at the bedding and headed to Walmart to replace it. While I was there I picked up a bottle of bleach too. But I was still overall pleased with the place. After a little cleaning and replacement parts, it was a palace to me.

The only problem was there really wasn't a kitchen to speak of, just a dorm-sized fridge and a hot plate. I'm not any kind of fancy chef, but eating out all the time is expensive, and I get tired of sandwiches. It was enough of a hitch in my get-along that I thought about asking for a proper stove, but in the end I decided I could limp along to

start. I'd lobby for a moderate kitchen upgrade once I had a better lay of the land. If I even stayed long enough to bother with it.

The first two weeks I only saw Loving in passing, usually in the mornings as he stood with the manager, Tory Parrish, at the fence rail. Tory would nod while Loving spoke quietly, his tan cowboy hat bobbing as he turned this way and that, gesturing to fields and barns and equipment. Occasionally I also saw Loving head out on his horse a couple hours after the last of the hands had gone home and he'd had his evening meeting with Tory. Sometimes I would watch him ride out, because it was a nice vista, man on horse, silhouetted against the sunset.

Loving was tall and broad, a few inches shorter than my six-two. Handsome in a way I appreciated, but he was significantly older than me. By this time I was almost twenty-five, and Loving had to be pushing forty. He seemed more like my dad than somebody to ogle. Also, he's the boss. I knew he used to be a professor in Omaha and he was divorced with no kids, and I knew he'd only owned this ranch for about three years. Mostly I didn't pay him much attention outside of noting when he was around so I could work harder at not being a dick. Because I did like the job, and outside of the mediocre kitchen, I enjoyed the apartment.

One Saturday night there was a knock on my door, and when I opened it, by God if it wasn't Loving standing there. He gave me a curt nod as a greeting. "We got trouble on the north ridge. Can I get you to lend a hand?"

I said sure. After hustling into my boots, I grabbed my hat and followed him down the stairs.

Tory was already on a four-wheeler, rifle stowed in the back. Loving had his own ride waiting beside Tory's, but I noticed there wasn't a third, so I climbed on behind Tory and held on to the rack as we rode.

When I saw the ewe bobbing around in the field, bumping into the other sheep and acting like she was drunk, I knew what we were in for.

"It looks neurological." Loving sounded uncertain though, and Tory shrugged.

"It's neurological all right," I said. "That ewe has rabies."

They both turned to me, surprised. "How can you tell?" Tory asked.

I motioned to the ewe. “She’s acting all crazed. It’s eating her brain right now. We’ve got to put her down and get her the hell out of here. Need to isolate the rest of this herd right quick. Groups as small as you can get. You don’t know how many she’s bit.”

“I’ll call the vet.” Loving reached for his phone.

I shook my head. “Ain’t no point.”

“But there’s a treatment,” Loving pressed. “They give it to people.”

“Yeah. And it’s several thousand dollars a pop. This is thirty head of sheep. You’d do better to slaughter them and get new.” I gestured to the huddled herd. “Partition them off as best you can and wait it out, is my advice. Either they been infected or not. All you can do is wait and see.” I tugged on the brim of my hat. “What you *do* need to do is call all the hands and make sure none of them’s been bit. You only got so many hours between exposure and death.”

Loving reached for his phone again, but Tory already had his out and waved him off.

“I’ll call the boys. You two get her put down and figure out how the fuck we’re going to isolate them.”

Loving grabbed the rifle, nodding at me as he loaded the cartridges. “You’re sure about this?”

Hell yes, I was sure. “They get it from skunks, see. Anyway, it’s the sort of thing you don’t mess around with. She could infect half the herd tonight. Better to kill her and find out I’m wrong than wait and lose them all. The only positive test is to examine her brain. Which kind of requires her to be dead.”

Loving grimaced and nudged his hat higher on his head with his knuckle. “And here I thought foot rot was hell.”

“Oh, everything about sheep is hell. We never cussed more than the years we raised them.”

Loving sighed and raised the rifle, only to lower it again. “Would you mind trying to separate her a little? But don’t expose yourself.”

Heading for the main body of the herd, I clapped my hands and called, “*Hee-yah*,” until they started to bleat and stumble over each other trying to get away. The rabid ewe

followed them for a second before she fell. She got up pretty quickly, and when she did, she came for me.

Sheep don't exactly set land-speed records, but I hustled out of the way because I wasn't interested in catching any stray gunshot. Turns out I needn't have worried, as Loving could shoot a single hair off your head at half a mile. He put the bullet right between her eyes, and she went down like a ton of bricks.

Tory tucked his phone back into his pocket. "I got hold of everybody. All the boys are coming in to help sort them out. I thought probably in the stalls in the horse barn. Chaucer and the boys won't hurt to be out in the pasture a few days, and we can whip up temporary pens in the south field."

That's what we did. We ended up only losing two more sheep total, which was good. But I didn't talk to Loving for the rest of the week. On Friday, he took off. Tory said he'd be gone through the weekend.

I thought maybe this would be a good time to get away myself. I was starting to get itchy. I headed into town to the public library, where an online search for nearby gay bars informed me I would be going three hours north to Rapid City to get laid. I know they have them fancy apps on smartphones to hook up, but I can't abide putting that kind of money down for a piece of plastic.

I worried Tory would say I couldn't leave the ranch unattended, but he said not to bother about it, as he always kept an eye out when Loving was gone. He said I was to go on and have a nice time.

The drive was okay. Mostly I didn't notice anything around me, too busy thinking about how I could spend the next forty-eight hours fucking and getting fucked. I checked into my hotel, showered, and fussed with my clothes before heading over at nine.

The bar was small and sad, nothing like the flashy stuff I'd gotten used to in Omaha and Kansas City. In North Dakota I had gone to Fargo, which hadn't been bad. This place was a different story. There was hardly anybody there, and most of them had already hooked up. But I saw one lone cowboy sitting at the bar, and I bee-lined to him, determined to spread my legs even if he looked like Ethel Merman.

You probably saw this coming, but I have to tell you, you could have knocked me over with a feather when the cowboy turned around and he was Travis Loving.



## Chapter Two

For a second we gaped at each other, and yeah, I was flipping out. I mean, the one guy at a ranch you work *really* hard to make sure doesn't find out you're gay is the fucking boss. So I stood there and tried not to piss myself. Then it occurred to me there was only one reason he would be there, same as me.

He touched the tip of his hat, nodding at the stool beside him. "Buy you a drink?"

I sat down, still dazed. The bartender asked for my order twice before I could stutter I'd take a beer, please. He gave me a draw, and I clung to the glass once it was in front of me, staring at it so I didn't have to look at Loving. Loving, who was queer.

"So," Loving said at last.

"Yeah," I agreed, and drank my beer.

We sat in heavily awkward silence for a few minutes.

"Usually busier in here." Loving swiped a gulp from his Michelob bottle. "Hell of a drive for a drink."

I gave a sort of nervous laugh and took off my hat to rub at my hair, which was getting sweaty. "Three hours is quite a trip." I bit off *for a fuck* at the last second.

"Well, there is the Internet."

I snorted into my glass. "Yeah, I tried that. Once."

When Loving offered me a second round, I insisted it was my turn, and I bought his next Michelob. We sat there hunched over our stools without saying a word.

People had started coming in, but hooking up was not on my radar now. A few guys caught my eye, but I didn't know what Loving would make of my favorite kind of fuck. I'm not exactly leather, but I never say no if somebody from that scene looks my way.

To be honest, I kind of like the guys who make it clear they're there for your ass, end of discussion. When I was fourteen and seriously wanting to be fucked, I used to pray to God to send me aliens to fuck me and then leave. Anal probe: bring it on. Just don't park your boots by my bed. Once I hooked up with a guy who kept me all weekend at his house, but I swear we only said about twenty words to each other the whole time.

I worried what Loving would think of how my preferences ran, and he might find them out because sometimes the game began in the bar. I have a fondness for getting felt up in a booth, trying to look as if I'm not. I'm also not averse to ignoring those signs on the bathroom door and bending over the toilet, bracing my hands on the wall while I get it from behind.

Obviously I wasn't going to do that when my boss could walk in to drain the hose.

I wanted to be somebody's slut for the night, to stop standing straight and impressing everybody. Instead I'd driven three hours to feel like I was still at work.

"I wish," Loving said after a half hour of more silence, "you could go up to them and say what you wanted. Better yet, we should have little cards to hand each other, listing preferences and pet peeves. Goddamn, but I hate driving all this way only to find out I'm taking home a cross between a parrot and a squealing piglet."

That made me snort my beer. Loving passed me a napkin, deadpan, but there was a light in his eye that eased me.

"I've had guys come up and tell me what they want." I found it hot when they did.

Loving grunted. "When you're forty-two, that tactic doesn't work as well. I have a hard enough time picking out the ones who won't call me Grandpa when they brush me off."

"What are you after? Maybe I can help you weed through."

It was, I realized, a fucking forward thing to offer, and I retreated into my beer. But he seemed unfazed, only leaning on the bar and contemplating for another few minutes.

"Age isn't so much of an issue, but the space between Tired Old Horse and Flighty Young Colt does seem to work out best." He sipped at his beer. "I really don't care much for talking. I don't want to know their history outside of whether or not we need to double the condom, and I don't want to give my story either. Tonight, they need to be somebody willing to take a rough ride." He glanced at me, rueful. "See any of those out there?"

*Yeah. You're sitting next to him.*

I took a long drink and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "Nope."

"I see plenty I think have my same agenda too. I don't stand a chance." Loving sighed. "What about you, Davis? What's on your menu?"

Oh, fuck. I searched desperately for something to say, but nothing would land in my head. I drained my beer and hoped he would get distracted and give up.

No dice.

“Shy boy, are you?” he teased.

“Around my boss, I am,” I said, adding a silent prayer this conversation would end now.

“Here now.” Loving turned on his stool to frown at me, his fingers tightening on his bottle of beer. “You think I’m going to hold this against you? Fire you to keep you quiet or something?”

Well, yeah, it had crossed my mind, though clearly he was offended by the idea. “To be honest, sir, I don’t know what to think.”

“I’ll tell you what you’re gonna think. That I’m not some dickhead who’ll fire you to protect my secrets. Which I don’t have. I’m out, but I don’t advertise.” He tipped his hat back, and when the bartender brought me my beer, Loving held out a twenty before I could reach for my wallet. “I’m not your fucking boss tonight.”

I took hold of the glass and anchored myself against it. “But you will be on Monday.”

He grunted and smiled wryly. “Tell me what the fuck you’re after, Davis. I told you my list. Let’s hear yours.”

I didn’t have enough focused brain cells left to make up a lie, so I gave him the truth. “Let’s just say there’s *one* guy here who fits your bill. But he doesn’t go to bed with the boss.”

I kept my eyes on my beer, but I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He was still for a second, then motioned to the bartender for another drink. It wasn’t until I was half through my beer I realized he had switched to soda.

“Tory says you’re from Iowa.”

I nodded. “Algona. It’s a small town in the northwest-central area.”

“I’m from Kansas City originally,” Loving offered. “Married and moved to Omaha.”

“Heard some of the hands say you were a professor.”

“Mathematics. But shortly after my divorce, they cut my position.” He grimaced. “Once I came out, it turns out they didn’t need as many math professors. So I cashed in my savings and bought Nowhere.”

I didn’t know what to say. This was an awful lot of chatting for two guys who had said they didn’t want any.

Of course, it was that or think about how we could be fucking each other.

I cleared my throat. “It’s a nice spread.”

Loving shrugged. “We had a rough go when we got started, but it’s coming along. Thanks for picking up on the rabies so fast.”

“It’s why you hired me.”

We ran out of conversation again, but I didn’t get up, and even when a few guys were cruising me, I kept my head down. No matter what Loving said, it was weird to do a pick-up around him. Especially when I’d admitted if circumstances were different, *he* could have picked me up.

There was an easiness about him I really liked. We’d said next to nothing all night long, and yeah, it was awkward, but now that he’d established I wasn’t going to get fired, I was starting to relax. I still wanted to get fucked, but this wasn’t bad either. I told myself I’d go find a bed partner as soon as Loving got up to get his. In the meantime, I kept drinking, knowing I’d had too much, but Loving kept putting them in front of me.

Eventually I had to piss, though, so I excused myself and headed to the john. I figured by the time I got back, somebody else would have my seat, so I tipped my hat to Loving as I left and gave him a little smile too. I made a mental note of prospects on the way to the toilet, trying not to be disappointed in my options. I pissed and came out ready to go on the hunt.

Loving had left the bar and now sat in a booth in the back with two drinks in front of him. When he saw me, he motioned me over.

“They’re starting music in a few minutes,” he said. “We can see better from here.”

I didn’t want to sit and watch musicians. I wanted to find somebody to fuck me. But I couldn’t say that, so I nodded, got my beer and headed for the other side of the booth.

He shook his head. “No. You won’t be able to see from there.” Scooting down, he indicated the space beside him. “Sit here.”

As soon as the music started, his knee kept bumping mine, and after a few minutes his arm was behind me on the booth. It made me nervous, so I leaned forward to keep away from accidental touches. Except when he put his hand on my lower back, I knew it wasn't accidental.

When his fingers brushed against the patch of skin above my underwear, I jumped. But when his other hand landed on my thigh, I went still.

"This has nothing to do with your job," he whispered into my ear. "If you aren't interested because of me, say so now. But if your only objection is that I'm your boss—" He sighed. "Well, I'm going to make you say it a few more times, and I'm going to try and convince you otherwise." His hand gripped my thigh. "Think of it as a trial run. If we both like how it works out, we could save ourselves a lot of gas mileage."

My head was spinning. I held on to the table. "I don't know."

"If I weren't your boss," Loving dogged, "would I be barking up the right tree?"

His fingers were burning my skin, and I thought my jeans were on fire under his hand.

"Yes." I closed my eyes as he flirted with the elastic of my waistband.

"Good." I felt his fingertips against the patch of skin above my crack. "This bother you, being groped in public, or does it turn you on?"

"Second one."

His hands ran up and down my skin, setting off an erotic symphony inside me. "I was serious about wanting it rough. You all right with the occasional swat on your backside?"

*Jesus.* "That's fine."

He was stroking me openly now. Normally I wear a belt with my pants because they tend to slip down my ass, but I don't when I'm cruising because of the hopes someone will do exactly what Loving was doing, which was cupping his palm over the globe of my butt. His other hand fondled my cock through my jeans. "Anything specific you want me to do, or avoid?"

I bit my lip as his pinky finger dipped into my crack. I wanted this, but it was freaking me out. I had never, ever fucked anyone I knew before, let alone someone who

employed me. I knew I should force the issue, should tell him no. But it was as if I were paralyzed.

His hands stilled. “You need to take a pass on my offer?” he asked. Gently. Almost kindly.

I opened my mouth to say yes, but I couldn't. *Jesus, what a headcase.* Taking a deep breath, I went for fucking broke. “I like rough.” My voice got stronger as I went on. “I like it when I'm told what to do. If you want me ass up on the bed, you say so. Trash talking is good. You want to tell me I'm your pony or your dog you're fucking, that's okay. I think hotel carpets are gross, so I'd rather not do puppy play on the floor. But in bed's okay. You can tie me up or gag me, but I don't care for both at once. I don't do shower blowjobs because it makes me feel as if I'm drowning. I have done watersports, but I don't mind skipping that. Slapping is fine. So is biting as long as you don't draw blood. Pinching is good. Especially my nipples and my ass. Hickeys are okay, but I prefer to keep them where I can hide them.”

I had started talking really fast by the end, and when I finished, I let out a breath and waited. After a few seconds, Loving's hand cupped my cock. “Public exposure?”

His fingers were already on my zipper. I shuddered and pushed my hips forward into his grip. “As long as I don't get arrested.”

“Fair enough.” He pinched my ass hard enough to make me jump. “Unbutton your fly and put your hands on the table.”