

Friday, May 4, 2068, 6:30 p.m. local time, north of Cody, Wyoming

"Come and get it!" shouted Naomi Killdeer, one of the caretakers of the Tracy's Wyoming ranch. She rang the large triangle with enthusiasm and people started to arrive back at the main house.

"Dinner!" Alex shouted as he rubbed the mud off his cowboy boots. He did it as quickly, yet as carefully as he could. He knew that Naomi didn't like dirt in the house, and neither did his mother or his grandmother for that matter.

Jeff, Dianne, Lisa, Cherie and Cherie's five friends had arrived around 4:30, just about the time they had left Greenville. The flight from south to northwest took roughly an hour at Mach 2, and then there was an hour's drive from the Yellowstone Regional Jetport to the ranch itself. Cherie had been anxious to go riding, but first settled in with her friends and spent an hour or more talking and catching up so that by the time they were through, it was too late to ride that day. It didn't stop the girls from going down to the barn to moon over 16-year-old David Killdeer, who was brushing the horses and helping Alex and Tyler take the tack off their mounts from their trail ride with Alan and John. But once the girls set their eyes on the blond Tracy brothers, that was it. David couldn't hold a candle to the older men, and both brothers' faces turned pink at hearing these adolescent girls giggling over them.

Dom was there with Joshua, who was fascinated by the horses. His father encouraged the toddler to say, "Horsey," a word he was sure his son would learn by the end of the trip. Jeff had gone off to talk with Quentin Killdeer, the foreman of the ranch, while Dianne and Lisa had offered to help Naomi and her 12-year-old daughter, Miranda, prepare dinner. Not one to turn down help, the Shoshone woman put her employer's wife and mother-in-law to work and soon the kitchen was filled with happy chatter.

The girls had been there the year before, and knew something of the layout of the ranch. They also knew the rules: no riding after dark and no riding without an adult. So they knew they'd have to wait for the next morning to fulfill their hearts' desire.

"So, Fruitcake," skinny, bespectacled Erika asked Cherry. "Who's the guy with the baby?"

"That's Dominic Kelly and his little boy, Joshua," Cherry explained. "My mom hired him on as a nurse for when we get sick."

"Are you going to introduce me to that cute brother of yours?" tall, gangly Ellen asked.

"Which one?" Cherry replied. "Alex? Tyler?" She got a playful shove from Ellen for her pains, and a bunch of groans from the other girls.

"No, the tall, blond one," Ellen clarified.

"Oh, John!" Cherry said as if it had just occurred to her. "Yeah, I suppose so. I'll introduce you

all... at dinner."

"Where's Scott this year? I thought he'd be here," petite and garrulous Maggie remarked. It had been very embarrassing to Scott to be the center of Maggie's attention the year before, especially considering that the girl had worn braces. Now the braces were off, but Cherry supposed that Maggie's attentions would probably be as well-received this year as the previous.

"Scott, Virgil, and Gordon went on Alex's party in February, so they stayed home this time," Cherry said.

"Is Gordon the redhaired one?" Lorena asked. "He was cute." Lorena's Eastern European accent wasn't as strong as it had been, but it was still noticable.

"Yeah, he is," Cherry responded as she and her friends entered the dining room. "Come on. Enough about my brothers. Let's eat!"

From: Tikatu Sent: 8/25/2005

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